Reviewing corporate social responsibility communication: a legitimacy perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to answer the call for CSR communication research to develop and substantiate outcomes that may better explain CSR communication strategies and practices. The paper takes the research a step further, exploring the role of legitimacy in CSR communication research.

Design/methodology/approach – A literature collection methodology, combined with directed content analysis, was used to identify central themes in the literature.

Findings – The following categories of studies were identified: perception, impact and promotion studies; image and reputation studies; performance studies; and conceptual/rhetorical studies. Addressed from a legitimacy perspective, the study found that the most important types of legitimizing communicative practices articulated in the four types of studies were related to: seeking knowledge about stakeholders through perception, impact and promotion activities; monitoring and controlling the environment through image and reputation activities; creating stakeholder value through collaboration and engagement; and persuading and convincing stakeholders through rhetorics, CSR models and concepts. The study also found that practices and activities related to perceiving stakeholders' expectations, needs and requirements are assumed to be most effective for corporations aiming at building or maintaining legitimacy.

Originality/value – The key contribution of the paper lies in exploring how corporate legitimacy is anticipated and extrapolated in the CSR communication literature, including which pinpointed CSR communication strategies and practices are assumed to be more effective than others in bridging stakeholders' perceptions of corporations' social and environmental actions. Until date, no reviews exist of the role of legitimacy in CSR communication research.

Keywords Legitimacy, Corporate social responsibility, Corporate communications, Content analysis

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Many corporations are concerned with gaining legitimacy through integrating the expectations of their stakeholders into the overall company strategy. For decades, for example, the Danish pharmaceutical corporation Novo Nordisk has engaged systematically with multiple stakeholders in order to address key areas of their business. The company recognizes that "it is essential to establish a positive interaction not merely between management and investors, but also in relation to other stakeholders" (Novo Nordisk, 2015). Another example is Shell. Shell focuses, for example, "on the environmental and social challenges that matter most to our key stakeholders. A thorough process was used to identify the sustainability topics for our reporting based on information from internal and external sources" (Shell, 2015).

The growing expectations of stakeholders are connected to the process of globalization. In this context, social and environmental disasters due to a lack of corporate self-regulation have challenged corporate legitimacy (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007).

As a result of this, stakeholders are increasingly requiring that corporations justify their social and environmental actions. Corporate legitimacy has been defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Thus, obtaining legitimacy by aligning corporate behavior with stakeholder expectations is necessary to guarantee the corporation's continued existence (Dawkins, 2004). This has created an increased emphasis on effective stakeholder communication and issues that can be grouped under the headline of CSR. CSR has been defined as "a practice which corporations undertake to integrate social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders" (European Commission, 2011, p. 681). In line with this, CSR communication is defined in this study as a communicative practice, which corporations undertake to integrate social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders. Judging by the number of case studies in academic literature, at conferences, seminars, etc., there is an increasing interest in the communicative practice of CSR. Yet, despite the recognition of the importance of legitimacy in CSR communication, this topic has only recently been investigated (e.g. Du *et al.*, 2010; Du and Vieira, 2012; Golob *et al.*, 2013; Ihlen *et al.*, 2011; Morsing *et al.,* 2008; Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Schultz, Castelló and Morsing, 2013; Schultz, Morsing and Castello, 2013). However, in most cases, the focus has been on isolated factors, e.g. message content, communication approach, process and channel, that influence outcomes broadly defined as reputation, legitimacy and effectiveness. It is not until recently that reviews of CSR communication literature have emerged that address on a more general-level CSR communication streams, themes, challenges and opportunities or outcomes (Crane and Glozer, 2016; Elving *et al.*, 2015; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012).

Until date, no reviews exist of the role of legitimacy in CSR communication research, which is the purpose of this paper. The question raised is:

RQ1. How can corporate social responsibility communication create legitimacy?

In order to answer this research question, the international research was reviewed, the argument being that the way CSR scholars conceptualize CSR communication demonstrates how CSR communication may lead to gaining and/or losing legitimacy. The key contribution of the paper lies in exploring how corporate legitimacy is anticipated and extrapolated in CSR communication literature, including which pinpointed CSR communication strategies and practices are assumed to be more effective than others in bridging stakeholders' perceptions of corporations' social and environmental actions and the corporate CSR agenda.

Theoretical framework: CSR, corporate communication and legitimacy

CSR is increasingly seen as an integrated part of corporate communication (e.g. Cornelissen, 2011/2014; Pollach *et al.*, 2012; Van Riel, 1995). The uniqueness of CSR communication research can be highlighted by considering how it pursues the four prevailing justifications for CSR in strategic management research: moral obligation, sustainability, license to operate and reputation (Porter and Kramer, 2006, p. 81; see also Secchi, 2007; Wood, 2010). In a strict moral perspective, CSR communication research needs to focus on communication initiatives whereby corporations "achieve commercial success in ways that honor ethical values and respect people, communities, and the natural environment" (Porter and Kramer, 2006, p. 81). In a sustainability perspective, CSR communication research needs to focus on communication initiatives supporting corporations in their efforts to meet "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Porter and Kramer, 2006, p. 81). The underlying assumption behind the notion of "license to operate" is

that every company needs tacit or explicit permission (legitimacy) from governments, communities and numerous other stakeholders to do business. Thus, CSR communication research needs to focus on communication initiatives related to obtaining and maintaining this permission. Finally, in a reputation perspective, CSR communication research needs to focus on communication initiatives that will "improve a company's image, strengthen its brand, enliven morale, and even raise the value of its stock" (Porter and Kramer, 2006, p. 82).

Corporate legitimacy

Legitimacy is considered vital for the survival of organizations and a prerequisite for the flow of resources and stakeholder support (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006, p. 71). Accordingly, legitimacy is seen as "a process whereby organizations seek approval for their acts from groups in society" (Kaplan and Ruland, 1991, p. 320). Following Suchman (1995), legitimacy is a socially constructed concept based on how organizations' actions are perceived or assumed within a "socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Suchman's definition of legitimacy as pragmatic, moral and cognitive is widely used as a point of reference for scholars dealing with legitimacy and institutionalization processes. Pragmatic legitimacy is connected to instrumental CSR and framed as the exchange between an organization and its stakeholders according to self-interested benefits. Moral legitimacy is value based, and approaches CSR through the context of ethics. It is based on judgments about whether the organization's activities result in societal benefits that adhere to the socially constructed value system of the stakeholders. Finally, cognitive legitimacy is what organizations may acquire by conforming to what is regarded as mainstream in business life and taken for granted by the public (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Suchman, 1995). With the general expansion of CSR, CSR legitimacy strategies and practices are increasingly routinized and institutionalized, whereby the stage of cognitive legitimacy is gradually reached (Suchman, 1995, p. 585). In recent years, however, moral legitimacy has achieved a more intense position with the general move toward corporate self-regulation. As a result, the pressure on global interaction and networking between political actors and corporate leaders to discuss and deliberate CSR challenges, standards, goals and processes is growing, setting higher expectations of corporate moral legitimacy act and consequently on the role played by CSR communication (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Castello and Lozano, 2011; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Seele and Lock, 2015; Wagner and Seele, 2017).

Strategies aimed at gaining legitimacy are multiple. They may range from conforming to demands, ideals or models to selecting markets, domains, labels or advertising to persuading or institutionalizing. Strategies for maintaining or repairing legitimacy may take a more protectionist, monitoring, denying, excusing or explaining shape across the three basic types of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995, p. 600). Communication plays a crucial role in the conceptualization and practice of these strategies in which both corporate dissemination and deliberation serve the process of building corporate legitimacy.

The pursuit of legitimacy via CSR communication is primarily anchored in the "self-promoter paradox" establishing a clash between corporate promises and public expectations of whether these promises are lofty or actually met (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990, p. 186). Communication researchers have framed this paradox as "the CSR Promotional Dilemma" (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). The dilemma is embedded in much CSR communication and often takes the form of conscientious, codified strategy practice. Navigating the balance between framing CSR activities as, on the one hand, an ethical urge to do "good" and, on the other hand, a best practice of organizational self-interest has thus proved to be a double-edged sword for many businesses (Carroll and Shabana, 2010).

Communicatively, the paradox above has a considerable impact on the understanding of CSR as a means to gain corporate legitimacy. On the one hand CSR communication is addressed as a "documentation" discipline, on the other hand as a "rhetorical device." While documenting via CSR communication responds to the growing demand for transparency and accountability in corporations' CSR activities, the negative understanding of CSR as a rhetorical device refers to the condescension expressed toward CSR communication by critical voices who view CSR as nothing but "window dressing," "green/blue/pink washing," "a PR invention," etc. (e.g. Frankental, 2001; Dubbink *et al.*, 2008; Amazeen, 2011). In the political sense of CSR as self-regulation, CSR communication is framed as a deliberative rather than a rhetorical device based on how to give "credit to the interests and arguments of a wide range of constituencies that are affected by the activities of (multinational) corporations" (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011, p. 916). From a legitimacy perspective, the tension between the embedded understandings and framings above articulates how organizations seek approval for their acts in different ways from multiple stakeholder groups, which will be demonstrated below.

With the above concepts and theories in mind, and in order to examine the potential for CSR communication to create corporate legitimacy, it is argued that a range of determinants of CSR communication anchored in the strategic positioning of the organization contribute to position the company *vis-à-vis* its competitors in the marketplace. Furthermore, it is assumed that the effect of the considered determinants on corporate legitimacy are monitored by three moderators (Suchman, 1995): (1) conforming to stakeholder demands, ideals or models; (2) selecting markets, domains, labels or advertising; and (3) persuading (e.g. informing, explaining, monitoring, denying and excusing). In the analysis below, this argument is substantiated.

Method
To gain a comprehensive view of how CSR communication is conceptualized in the literature, a systematic review was conducted (Peloza and Shang, 2011). Systematic reviews "summarize in an explicit way what is known and not known about a specific practice-related question" (Briner *et al.*, 2009, p. 19). Search words were selected within the fields and disciplines considered particularly relevant in a CSR communication perspective: marketing communication, public relations and stakeholder communication as a broader category. These approaches basically reflect key targets of the communication: consumers and customers (CSR marketing communication); publics (CSR public relations); and stakeholders in general including employees and NGOs (CSR corporate communication).

A literature collection methodology, combined with directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), was used to identify central themes in the literature. The following selection criteria were adopted:

- Two-step search process: "CSR" combined with "communication"; "CSR communication"; "CSR" combined with: "marketing communication," "advertising," "management communication,"public relations," "corporate communication," "organizational communication" and "dialogue"; and "CSR communication" combined with "stakeholder" and "legitimacy."

- International peer-reviewed articles in academic journals (full text, references available, English language and more than four pages).

- Date of publication in the period 2000–2017.

The search was undertaken using the citation search facility of the ABI/INFORM, EBSCO's Business Source Complete, Communication and Mass Media Complete (CMMC) and JSTOR, and through reference list searching. The databases selected cover social sciences, broadly

defined, including communication, the Business Source Complete and the CMMC databases being regarded as the dominant databases within business/economics and communication research, respectively.

A total of 207 references were generated in the first broad search for "CSR" combined with "communication," whereas the search for "CSR communication" resulted in fewer references, all of which also came up in the first broad search for "CSR" combined with "communication." Interestingly, 53 out of the 207 references were from 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017, demonstrating that CSR communication is a growing field. Our narrow search for "CSR" combined with "marketing communication," "advertising," "management communication," "public relations," "corporate communication," "organizational communication" and "dialogue," as well as "CSR communication" combined with "stakeholder," confirmed our first broad search, and only a few additional articles were added to our list. There was extensive overlap between articles from the two databases used, BSC and CMMC. However, a number of articles on CSR public relations and CSR corporate communication were found in CMMC which had not come up in our BSC search, and which were consequently added.

Out of the total number of references, 151 were selected for review with the help of content analysis framed within CSR and corporate communication, the selection criteria being: exclusion of references classified as proceedings, use of the word "CSR" in keywords, title and abstract, and framing within CSR and communication.

Directed content analysis was used to interpret meaning from the content of our text data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Each of the selected 151 articles was analyzed for CSR communication content based on the definition of CSR (communication) and occurrences of key concepts and notions such as, e.g., "attitude," "belief," "perception," "impact," "sense-making," "promotion," "message," "skepticism," etc., supporting particular communicative perspectives and understandings of CSR communication.

Findings
In the following, the most important types of framings and themes registered for how scholars anticipate CSR communication as a means to create, maintain and enhance corporate legitimacy are presented.

Perception, impact and promotion studies
The first group of studies investigates how especially consumers evaluate specific CSR efforts and how they affect their relationship with brands (perception) with regard to their attitude toward or likeliness to purchase brands (impact). These studies thus first and foremost buy into the idea of CSR as a promotional tool (promotion), reflecting a particular urge to investigate consumers' but also other stakeholders' attitudes toward CSR communication. Consumers' reactions, in particular, to CSR initiatives in terms of awareness, attitude, behavior and expectations, etc., have been subject to several studies (e.g. Golob et al., 2008; Pérez and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013; Pomering and Dolnicar, 2009; Stanalan et al., 2011). Some studies focused on the relationship between consumer perception of CSR communication and purchase intention (Dutta and Singh, 2013; Sora, 2011; Wang and Anderson, 2011) and others addressed issues such as the corporate perception of stakeholder pressure (Vazquez-Brust et al., 2010) or financial analysts' perception of CSR strategies (Fieseler, 2011).

In a similar vein, a group of studies addressed the impact of CSR communication on brands/reputation/CSR perception. They may be categorized as effect and impact studies providing insight into the extent to which CSR communication does, or is likely to, affect brand equity, reputation and consumer skepticism (e.g. Becker-Olsen et al., 2011; Bilowol and Doan, 2015; Elving, 2013; Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009; Parquel et al., 2011).

Both perception and impact studies were particularly important in marketing-oriented studies of CSR communication. A general characteristic of this research is its focus on the development and use of methods and mechanisms that may explain and measure the effect of corporations' CSR initiatives and communication on stakeholders' brand perception and identification as well as brand reputation. One example is a study demonstrating that consumer perception is enhanced when a brand is viewed as global (Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2011). Another perception-related study demonstrates that the level of awareness of businesses' CSR operations among consumers in the banking sector is low and, accordingly, that businesses should adopt more active communication strategies, target their CSR messages more effectively and educate consumers to contextualize CSR communication in order to gain benefits from their CSR initiatives (Pomering and Dolnicar, 2009). Other more recent studies seem to replicate a similar format correlating consumers' perception of CSR activities in particular contexts and industries with, e.g. sponsor-sincerity (Scheinbaum *et al.*, 2017), or CSR pricing with perceived CSR sacrifice by consumers (Sungsook, 2015). A study that stands out from this format adopted a more critical analytical approach to examining and discussing the effect of CSR communication on consumers and vice versa, arguing that a backlash against brands seems to be provoked by consumer criticism of CSR marketing and unsolved problems in the supply chains of large corporations, e.g. working conditions in sweatshops and downstream marketing (Smith *et al.*, 2010). This type of study pioneers a recent emergence of critical research that challenges the use of CSR as a marketing and branding instrument without taking further notice of consumer activism, stakeholder involvement and the global context in which companies operate. Overlooking these elements is partly the result of the strong anchoring of instrumental CSR in the classical marketing paradigm (see also Crane and Glozer, 2016).

This taps perfectly into a third group of studies considering the potential of promoting and branding the corporation through CSR. These studies address how specific CSR communication tactics and techniques can help to build brand citizenship and brand equity (e.g. Banytė and Gadeikienė, 2008; Demetriou and Aristotelous, 2011; Maggio-Muller and Evans, 2008). Very few of these seem to address CSR communication as a strategic issue, i.e. setting out to establish a conceptual framework for how CSR can be integrated more strategically into the marketing discipline (e.g. Maignan and Ferrell, 2004).

Perception, impact and promotion studies are primarily anchored in a classical conceptualization of communication, in which instrumental measures such as "documenting" in the form of "more information about CSR" and/or "rhetorical devices" in the form of "alternative messaging and contents" are expected to result in changed stakeholder perception of the corporate image and/or CSR stance of a company. None – or very few – of the studies seem to challenge the classical behavioral pattern. Consequently, CSR communication is mostly addressed as one-way communication, i.e. as an instrumental add-on tool rather than two-way communication or invitation to community building, networking and co-creating CSR with stakeholders (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012, p. 60), a conclusion also drawn by Crane and Glozer (2016, p. 24).

Image and reputation studies, a fourth important group of studies, articulated the role of CSR communication as a means to enhance corporations' image/reputation/relationship management potential. These studies typically emerge from public relations and corporate communication in which CSR communication is conceptualized to build, maintain and/or restore a company's image and reputation (Benn *et al.*, 2010; Demetriou *et al.*, 2010; György and Oravecz, 2009; Kim and Park, 2011; Komodromos and Melanthiou, 2014; Middlemiss, 2003; Núñez Ladevéze *et al.*, 2015; Steurer, 2010; Yong *et al.*, 2012).

Not surprisingly, these studies were particularly dominating in public relations-oriented studies. As argued by Clark, CSR and public relations have very similar objectives in that they are both basically seeking to enhance the quality of the relationship of organizations

with their key stakeholders (Clark, 2000, p. 376). CSR communication, therefore, overlaps with public relations, i.e. in terms of playing a key role in addressing stakeholders, focusing on communicative affordances, either externally, e.g. corporate mission slogans (Verboven, 2011), media coverage of CSR (Middlemiss, 2003), public policy operations (Steurer, 2010), or internally, e.g. through employee commitment (György and Oravecz, 2009) organizational leadership (Benn *et al.*, 2010).

A fifth group of studies was approached from the similar yet opposite perspective of anticipating conflicts/avoiding bad publicity through CSR communication. The scope of this group of studies is to use CSR communication as a driver for creating trust and credibility by preempting or anticipating negative perception and conflicts, hence accomplishing the role of "issues management" (Cho and Kim, 2012; Hughes and Demetrious, 2006; Nwagbara and Brown, 2014; Waller and Conaway, 2011). Accordingly, most of the studies came up in searches with "public relations." Specific CSR communication techniques and strategies are thus typically suggested to avoid negative CSR perception (Waller and Conaway, 2011), incongruence between perceived and desired image (Tata and Prasad, 2015), negative legitimacy (Vanhamme and Grobben, 2009; Arvidsson, 2010), PR spin (Hughes and Demetrious, 2006) or as a general buffer for negative issues (Cho and Kim, 2012).

These findings allowed us to conclude so far that major issues addressed in the image and reputation studies above focus on how to protect a company's corporate image, reputation and legitimacy against negative publicity and activism (see e.g. Lawton *et al.,* 2013). With the rise of social media as the paramount channel for engaging consumers, partners, journalists, NGOs, etc., in CSR processes, the pressure on organizations to disclose their CSR performances is stronger than ever. As a consequence, they are also more fragile and exposed to public criticism and attack (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). The protective role that public relations (and issues management in particular) traditionally assume through scanning and monitoring the corporate environment of organizations thus seems to call for a reactivation with the growing pressure on corporations to gain corporate legitimacy from stakeholders through their CSR efforts and communication hereof.

Performance studies
A sixth group of studies was framed from the perspective of how companies do or can capitalize on CSR communication. They first and foremost appeared in corporate communication-oriented studies demonstrating that the use of particular strategic or tactical CSR operations has led or may lead to better CSR outcomes for the corporation and/or its stakeholders. CSR outcomes imply assets such as corporate reputation (Ferns *et al.*, 2008; Ingenhoff and Koelling, 2012; Morsing *et al.*, 2008), corporate identity and identification (Bravo *et al.*, 2012; Chong, 2009; Morsing, 2006), competitive advantage (Vilanova *et al.*, 2009), higher credibility (Gruber *et al.*, 2017), stakeholder benefits (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2009; Du *et al.*, 2010) and corporate legitimacy (Du and Vieira, 2012).

A large group of these performance studies pitched into how to implement or promote stakeholder dialogue as a means of establishing stakeholder relationships in CSR processes of engagement, collaboration and participation. Stakeholder dialogue is typically introduced as a necessity for creating a foundation for public policy (Hristache *et al.*, 2013), being successful in large-scale CSR (Konrad *et al.*, 2008), CSR decision making and change (Muijen, 2004; O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2008; Uysal, 2014), organizational learning (Burchell and Cook, 2008; Golob *et al.*, 2014), translating CSR into practice (Pedersen, 2006), managing relationships with NGOs (Burchell and Cook, 2006; Valor and Merino de Diego, 2009) and for social reporting (Jackson and Bundgard, 2002; Reynolds and Yuthas, 2008). A related group of studies focused on the perspective of stakeholder dialogue, addressed from a social media perspective, and their ability to advance and nurture stakeholder engagement, participation and empowerment (Fieseler *et al.*, 2010; Fieseler and Fleck, 2013; Golob and Podnar, 2014;

Illia *et al.*, 2017; Nwagbara, 2013; Nwagbara and Reid, 2013), e.g. between employers and employees (Cortini, 2009; Stohl *et al.*, 2017).

The performance-oriented studies above primarily concentrate on the alignment of CSR communication to legitimacy variables such as reputation building, credibility, a competitive advantage, long lasting stakeholder relationships, employee and other stakeholder engagements, etc. (see, e.g., reviews by Chun, 2005; Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral, 2013; Miller *et al.*, 2014). This research thus provides insight into important general corporate communication legitimacy drivers such as the importance of having a "CSR history," the need to involve stakeholders, the importance of championship by senior management and of implementing credible CSR programs and communication platforms to document CSR activities (such as e.g. CSR reporting and auditing). In general, the importance of stakeholder dialogue is stressed. The fact that a company's consciousness of communication strategies and communicative purpose, ability, willingness and interests may affect the legitimacy attributed by stakeholders to CSR initiatives. In this connection, Andriof and Waddock (2002) argued that managers play an important role in the relationships that companies have with internal and external stakeholders (p. 19). In order to gain legitimacy, managers must embody CSR values and promote and support them through their own behavior and attitude. Consequently, leadership is required at more than one level in an organization, which suggests not only top executives but also middle managers and others must fully endorse the CSR values of the organization as a prerequisite for achieving and maintaining legitimacy (see also Du *et al.*, 2013; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009).

CSR communication conceptual and rhetorical studies
A final group of studies was framed within more conceptual and rhetorical issues such as understanding CSR models and concepts (Podnar, 2008; Fassin and Van Rossem, 2009; Schultz, Castelló and Morsing, 2013; Schultz, Morsing and Castello, 2013) or particular tactics, linguistic, textual or media and discourse framings of CSR. Their focus seems to be more on communication as a generic concept and its impact on communicating about CSR. Particular focus is on contexts, e.g. the marketplace, emergent economy countries, etc. (Bendell, 2010; Dobers and Delyse, 2010; Garre-Rubio *et al.*, 2012; Lielgaidina *et al.*, 2012; Rajandran and Taib, 2014; Roostalu and Kooskora 2010; Ziek, 2009) or on discussing their particularities, e.g. dialogism and power relations (Brennan *et al.*, 2013) especially media, e.g. releases (Reinig and Tilt, 2009), newsletters (Walker *et al.*, 2010) or their successfulness in terms of readability (Abu Bakar and Ameer, 2011). See also Skard and Thorbjørnsen (2014) regarding the source effect of CSR communication on brand reputation and Fraustino and Connolly-Ahern (2015) regarding message strategies in corporate online network communication.

Summing-up, our analysis shows that communicative practices anticipated by scholars for how CSR communication creates, maintains and enhances corporate legitimacy are based on multiple drivers – from perception over image and reputation to performance. However, they all share the focus on stakeholders and CSR activities, effects and outcomes aimed at obtaining their approval.

In the section below, a closer look is taken at how the anticipated and extrapolated legitimacy framings are distributed with regard to established strategies of legitimation.

Legitimacy forms and strategies in the CSR communication literature
The literature reviewed above centers around the role of CSR communication as a process whereby organizations seek approval for their acts from multiple stakeholder groups. From a legitimacy perspective, the pinpointed groups of studies constitute different instances in which CSR communication actions and strategies are expected to generate much/little corporate legitimacy by CSR scholars.

The perception, impact and promotion perspective of our findings is based on the assumption that corporate legitimacy is achieved through promoting and conforming to stakeholders' demands, requiring that businesses have detailed knowledge of these demands. Two legitimation strategies seem to be in play from this perspective. Pragmatic legitimacy is anticipated in the embedded eagerness to measure and optimize CSR strategies in alignment with selected stakeholders' interests and expectations, whereas cognitive legitimacy is anchored in the impetus to conform to perception models and methods belonging to classical instrumental conceptualizations of communication.

From an image and reputation perspective, corporate legitimacy is mainly linked to the extent to which companies are able to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders. More specifically, it is assumed that scanning and monitoring the environment, i.e. scrutinizing and keeping track of public reactions toward companies' and competitors' CSR practices, is a first prerequisite for achieving corporate legitimacy. This perspective on CSR communication preempts pragmatic legitimacy. With companies' strong interest in monitoring, controlling and managing issues, this perspective on CSR communication is first and foremost a pragmatic legitimacy concern. The impetus of exercising corporate control over CSR communication processes and outcomes is suggested as a way for companies to critically assess their own and their competitors' CSR performances, as well as to anticipate and handle potential dilemmas and conflicts emerging in their environment.

From a performance perspective, corporate legitimacy is expected to occur as a result of a company's ability to establish and maintain good relations with stakeholders through various stakeholder engagement practices. Engagement, participation, collaboration and empowerment are thus framed as drivers of legitimacy. Primary legitimation strategies from this perspective may be characterized as pragmatic and moral. Appealing to stakeholder engagement and involvement is instrumental for gaining social capital, and it also paves the way for collaborating and networking with stakeholders on collective ideals, values and agendas. In other words, the behavior, attitude and communicative role of managers, employees and non-corporate members are framed as crucial for gaining corporate legitimacy. Following this rationale, inviting employees and other stakeholders to interact and enter into dialogue about CSR agendas, initiatives, policies and programs is a means of opening for two-way communication. This two-way communication enjoys higher credibility and is considered to be more stimulating for stakeholder engagement than one-way communication. Accordingly, and not surprisingly, the interest in social media, with its interactive and co-creative character is suggested and anticipated as an appropriate persuasion strategy.

A conceptual and rhetorical perspective on corporate legitimacy is articulated through the use of appropriate discourses and narratives. As these are of a more general concern, this perspective is not restricted to a particular legitimation strategy. Not only is the use of precise CSR concepts and definitions key to reaching mutual understanding about CSR activities, programs and policies among stakeholders, but authenticity in messaging and stakeholder interactions concerning CSR efforts, promises and developments are also crucial for gaining and maintaining legitimacy, i.e. creating and disclosing an authentic organizational self by giving voice to employees and other stakeholders in strategy making processes through active participation (Liedtka, 2008; McShane and Cunningham, 2012). Following this argument, the crafting of messages, choosing the right media, channel and tone of voice, using valid arguments and contracting engagements in concordance with selected stakeholder target groups and communicative purposes are also important determinants for how much, or how little, legitimacy companies achieve with their CSR communication.

On the surface it appears that instances of anticipation of legitimacy through the above communication practices reflect a strong – or even dominating – emphasis on pragmatic

legitimacy, while elements of cognitive and moral legitimacy are limited. Pragmatic legitimacy lies, first and foremost, in the outcome-oriented, company-centric approach to using CSR communication for gaining, restoring or repairing legitimacy, while moral legitimacy is more aimed at achieving legitimacy as a result of ethical concern and reflection about the societal impact of CSR, hence the growing research interest in collaborative CSR and the role of CSR as deliberation and argumentation (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Cognitive legitimacy is anticipated as a result of institutionalized practices regarding CSR standards, norms and beliefs.

Based on the above, the analytical framework is presented highlighting major CSR communication practices and means that are assumed to generate or enhance corporate legitimacy (Figure 1).
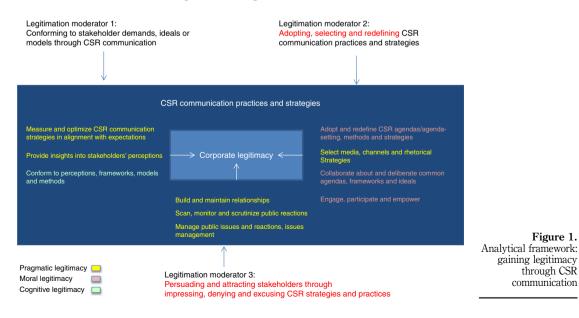
Three legitimation moderators (1), (2) and (3) translate into different CSR communication practices and strategies. Legitimation is, for example, gained by measuring and optimizing CSR communication strategies in alignment with expectations (legitimation moderator 1). Legitimation is also gained by adopting and selecting specific agendas, methods and strategies (legitimation moderator 2). Finally, legitimation is gained by building and maintaining relationships (legitimation moderator 3). The different practices and strategies relate to either pragmatic, moral or cognitive legitimacy.

Discussion and conclusion
Below our findings are discussed in terms of main findings, limitations and implications.

Main findings
Arguing that the way scholars conceptualize CSR communication affects their thinking on whether CSR communication may lead to gaining and/or losing legitimacy, this study examined how corporate legitimacy is anticipated and extrapolated in CSR communication literature. The study highlighted which CSR communication practices are assumed to be most effective when bridging stakeholders' perceptions of corporations' social and environmental actions and the corporate CSR agenda.

Figure 1.
Analytical framework: gaining legitimacy through CSR communication

To gain a comprehensive view of CSR communication literature, a systematic review was conducted resulting in the following categories of studies: perception, impact and promotion studies; image and reputation studies; performance studies; and conceptual/rhetorical studies. Addressed from a legitimacy perspective, it was found that the most important types of legitimizing communicative practices articulated in the four types of studies were related to:

(1) seeking knowledge about stakeholders through perception, impact and promotion activities;

(2) monitoring and controlling the environment through image and reputation activities;

(3) creating stakeholder value, collaboration and engagement; and

(4) persuading stakeholders through rhetorics, organizational authenticity, concepts and CSR models.

It was also found that practices and activities related to perceiving stakeholders' expectations, needs and requirements are assumed to be most appropriate for corporations aiming at building or maintaining legitimacy.

Our findings confirmed previous research articulating legitimacy as "a process whereby organizations seek approval for their acts from groups in society" (Kaplan and Ruland, 1991, p. 320). They add to the literature by identifying communicative practices and activities which are more effective than others in bridging stakeholders' perceptions of corporations' social and environmental actions (e.g. Du *et al.,* 2010; Du and Vieira, 2012; Elving *et al.*, 2015; Golob *et al.*, 2013; Ihlen *et al.*, 2011). Overall, it was found that corporate legitimacy seems to be more easily acquired when employees and other stakeholders are co-creators or endorsers of CSR communication than if it originates from corporate management alone (Morsing *et al.*, 2008). In other words, two-way CSR communication with employees may affect a company's legitimacy positively, while one-way communication alone may challenge legitimacy. In a similar vein, it was found that CSR messages and communication strategies may influence corporations' acquisition of corporate legitimacy. Unless one-way CSR communication introduces and explains issues that are well supported and justified by factual information and organizational authenticity, there is a potential risk of misinterpretation by critical stakeholders who may decode CSR messages as "green," "blue" or "pink washing," rather than as expressions of substantiated, well-intentioned CSR acts.

Not surprisingly, it was also found that CSR communication is instrumentally rather than ethically, driven – in that the most prominent role attributed by scholars to CSR communication is its assumed capacity to increase businesses' market opportunities. Only in a very few and recent studies, such as, e.g., those addressing the expanding political role of CSR, CSR communication is framed as a platform for establishing collaborative deliberative networks and mutual understanding with stakeholders. This articulation of CSR communication is not entirely unexpected. It can be traced back to discourses and agendas initiated a decade ago by national governments and the international society, in which CSR is advanced as a win-win strategy that enables alignment of corporate and societal outcomes (Porter and Kramer, 2006; Prahalad and Hart, 2002). Following these agendas, scholars within strategic CSR management go as far as to suggest that CSR is a means of transforming social challenges into business opportunities by establishing processes of creating shared value (Porter and Kramer, 2011). Other more critical scholars contend that it is an illusion to assume that social and economic outcomes and benefits can go hand in hand, arguing that there is no evidence that CSR actually makes businesses more profitable (Crane *et al.*, 2014; Fleming and Jones, 2013). This CSR dilemma is transposed into CSR communication research, explaining why most CSR communication

literature is primarily based on traditional one-way transmission rather than a two-way dialogical perspective.

Importantly, it was found that the pursuit of pragmatic legitimacy seems to predominate in CSR communication. Originating in an instrumental management approach, the concern for gaining, restoring or repairing pragmatic legitimacy through CSR communication is part of our observations above. Addressing CSR instrumentally, i.e. as a business case, is first and foremost outcome driven. Whether the outcome achieved is addressed as increased profits or legitimacy does not change the strategic intent of the legitimacy act. Pragmatic legitimacy is regarded as a prerequisite for corporate self-benefit and, thus, profit maximization. The crucial point is the conscious intentionality driving the act of seeking pragmatic legitimacy vs the unconscious intentionality embedded in cognitive legitimacy, or the pure and simple lack of corporate intentionality embedded in moral legitimacy driven by more ethical management or political and collaborative approaches to CSR (Garriga and Melé, 2004; Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Suchman, 1995).

Communicatively, the dilemma outlined above is reflected in expectations of and pressure on corporations not only to launch concrete CSR initiatives, but also to communicate openly about these initiatives to and with their stakeholders. Hence, as demonstrated in our review, corporations are expected to submit information via corporate websites, CSR reports and codes of conduct, and to carefully pay attention to stakeholders' voices, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes regarding their CSR performances. However, as pointed out in our findings, a backlash occurs as a result of "the self-promoter paradox" embedded in CSR communication, when businesses try to hide their self-interested motivations behind an alleged ethical urge to "do good." A backlash may also occur when businesses fail to balance their words with their actions, disclosing signs of inauthenticity or evoking skepticism and cynicism leading to accusations of hypocrisy and window dressing from critical stakeholders (Christensen *et al.*, 2013; Wagner *et al.*, 2009). The pressure on legitimacy thus speaks for itself. However, under these circumstances the acts of gaining legitimacy are often transferred into acts of restoring or repairing legitimacy as a means for corporations to keep their "license to operate." CSR communication, then, tends to become an issue of risk management. Looking at this risk management scenario as a communication framework allows us to gain deeper insights into the dilemma from a legitimacy perspective. The result of the backlash in CSR communication is that its contribution to corporate legitimacy is challenged. Only in situations in which promotion and morality can be sufficiently aligned – e.g. when a corporation has a strong historical record of CSR, thanks to several years of CSR practices, and/or adopts a strategy of communication in which dialogue, interaction and collaboration overrule exaggerated promotion and lofty promises – does CSR communication have the potential to enhance corporate legitimacy, whereby CSR communication can turn into an issue of collaborative stakeholder management.

Limitations
As usual, this investigation may have a number of potential shortcomings restricting its validity.

First, our review of CSR communication is based on a sample of research articles published over the past 15 years, which is a limited period of time; i.e. it does not take into account CSR communication research published prior to 2000. Second, our adoption of a narrow set of keywords for our search, focusing on CSR communication, excluded publications that are more marginal in terms of dealing with communication problems and issues of CSR. Third, the fact that our sample is extracted from selected databases (ABI/INFORM, EBSCO's Business Source Complete, CMMC and JSTOR) means that it does not necessarily represent the totality of potential outlets and books that publish research within the field of CSR communication.

Implications for future research
CSR communication is an emerging field that helps to expand our understanding of how CSR is addressed communicatively by both strategic management and communication scholars and practitioners. As shown in our review, the communication vantage point is addressed as a narrow discipline, conceptualizing CSR communication as a set of isolated operations and practices that may increase businesses' market positions and the attitudes and beliefs of their stakeholders through CSR corporate messaging, channels and media monitored by managers. However, communication is also approached as a broad strategic discipline embracing CSR communication as a field of organizing, understanding, making sense of and collaborating about CSR. The broad approach to CSR communication is slowly emerging in step with new political global agendas followed by a holistic, critical and more societal trend that has appeared through the bridging of corporate and organizational communication (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011), and through an increasing reluctance to see new capitalism as a possible framework for future growth and for businesses in society (Fleming and Jones, 2013).

On the basis of this, we believe that studies within the following three areas or topics could take CSR communication research a step forward: studies that link CSR communication to a broader and more holistic concept of corporate communication and related fields (i.e. stakeholder interaction, corporate branding, public relations, etc.); empirical studies that provide more in-depth insights into the stakeholder benefits and legitimacy of CSR communication; and studies of message and media factors, e.g. the characteristics and appropriateness of channels and media for CSR messages/interaction and the appropriateness of rhetorical elements. Moreover, we believe that linking company-specific studies to the above three focus areas could increase our understanding of CSR communication as an international and intercultural issue.

From a practical perspective, our findings indicate that organizations could benefit from developing their CSR communication strategies and practices in collaboration with local and global actors and stakeholders if their aim is to increase their legitimacy. It might, for example, be a good decision for organizations which are primarily one-way oriented – be it in traditional or social media communication – to rethink their CSR communication strategies aligning them to more collaborative forms and co-creative processes with their stakeholders. In the same way, our study seems to indicate that creating stakeholder value and engagement requires a dialogical approach.

Finally, organizations could increase their opportunities to achieve corporate legitimacy by bonding in corporate activist processes to cope with global CSR issues and participate more proactively in joint CSR projects and solutions with the aim of enhancing the role of business in society.

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