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Towards a Model for Integrating Management and Communications Theory in Sustainability/CSR Research

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Abstract

To answer the question of how organisations should communicate effectively their sustainability and CSR claims, this paper adopts a broadened integrative approach. It proposes a model to identify and assess the linkages and relationships between the management of sustainability/CSR – in particular, the stage of a firm's adoption of sustainability/CSR principles and practice – and the type and approach of marketing and corporate communications most appropriate and efficacious for this stage.

The paper identifies the substantial body of work currently available on the management *and* communication of sustainability/CSR. Further, it highlights the importance of understanding the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of the various types and levels of embrace, and promotion, of sustainability/CSR. Thinking holistically becomes key in finding a solution.

Keywords

Sustainability, corporate social responsibility, sustainability/CSR adoption models, marketing and corporate communications.

1 Introduction

This paper seeks to address a dilemma that challenges practitioner and scholar alike. Put simply, how, to what extent, and to whom should firms and organisations promote their sustainability and corporate social responsibility strategies and actions. Should there be a strident and broad promotion of aspirations or a more low key and focused approach to such claim making? What role does the company's level of sustainability/CSR adoption or readiness play in this process? What are the challenges in communicating to different types of stakeholders whether senior management, employees, customers, suppliers or NGOs. There are no easy answers to these questions, and current scholarly insight and practitioner knowledge offer limited understanding of this dilemma (Mejri & Wolf, 2012; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008; Signitzer & Prexl, 2008).

Yet these are questions businesses, PR practitioners and academics are asking themselves and which make the relationship between sustainability/CSR and communications a timely research topic. Such decisions clearly impact on the fortunes of the firm or organisation. But they also impact on the 'reputation' of sustainability/CSR itself. A signal failure to achieve certain outputs may prejudice stakeholders outside the firm against the broad project of sustainability/CSR (Assadourian, 2010). In contradistinction, significant success on the part of the firm may provide a useful societal and educational endorsement.

2 Why Sustainability/CSR

It is widely acknowledged by scholars and practitioners that the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is “vaguely defined and widely applied” (Crane et al. 2013:66). Carroll (1994) describes CSR as an area that is “an eclectic field with loose boundaries, multiple memberships, and differing training/perspectives; broadly rather than focused, multidisciplinary; wide breadth, brings in a wider range of literature; and interdisciplinary”(Carroll, 1994). This thinking is shared by many academics (Crane et al., 2013; van Marrewijk & Werre, 2003; Votaw, 1973). Consequently several attempts have been made to classify existing definitions of the concept (Dahlsrud, 2008; Hopkins, 2007) but a common consensus has yet to emerge.

Due to the blurred definition of the concept of CSR, it is considered necessary to briefly elaborate on the use of the terminology in this paper. In this paper the term sustainability/CSR is used to capture the reality that two lines of scholarly and practice-driven contributions, sustainability thinking and corporate social responsibility (CSR), have developed with a different provenance. Sustainability focuses on issues of global warming, resource depletion, and the ‘green’ opportunities arising (Belz & Peattie, 2009; Lubin & Esty, 2010) CSR traditionally concentrates on issues such as business ethics, corporate social responsibility, and philanthropic endeavour (Carroll, 2001; Smith & Lenssen, 2009).

However, both lines of thinking essentially focus on the same outcomes. Business researchers now speak of a ‘triple’ bottom line – economic, societal, and environmental (Elkington, 1999). In other words, firms and organisations must sustain themselves in a profitable or cost effective way, must exhibit a broader societal responsibility, and respect ecological and resource-scarcity considerations.

3 Sustainability/CSR Management Theory

The practice of sustainability/CSR has undoubtedly changed and evolved over the years. Traditional sustainability/CSR is defined by a focus on risk management, is of a reactive nature, and considered as value distribution rather than value creation. However, a more contemporary manifestation focuses on reaping rewards (such as cost efficiency and competitive

advantage) and is motivated by increased performance. It is of a proactive nature, that sees sustainability/CSR as value creation (Crane et al., 2013; Porter & Kramer, 2006). In order to classify these evolutionary shifts within the practice of sustainability/CSR, stages, or levels of adoption models, are commonly used (Benn & Bolton, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates such a generic model of sustainability/CSR adoption. The figure deliberately uses a spiral-like representation rather than a linear continuum to emphasise the iterative, learning process involved in the take-up stages.

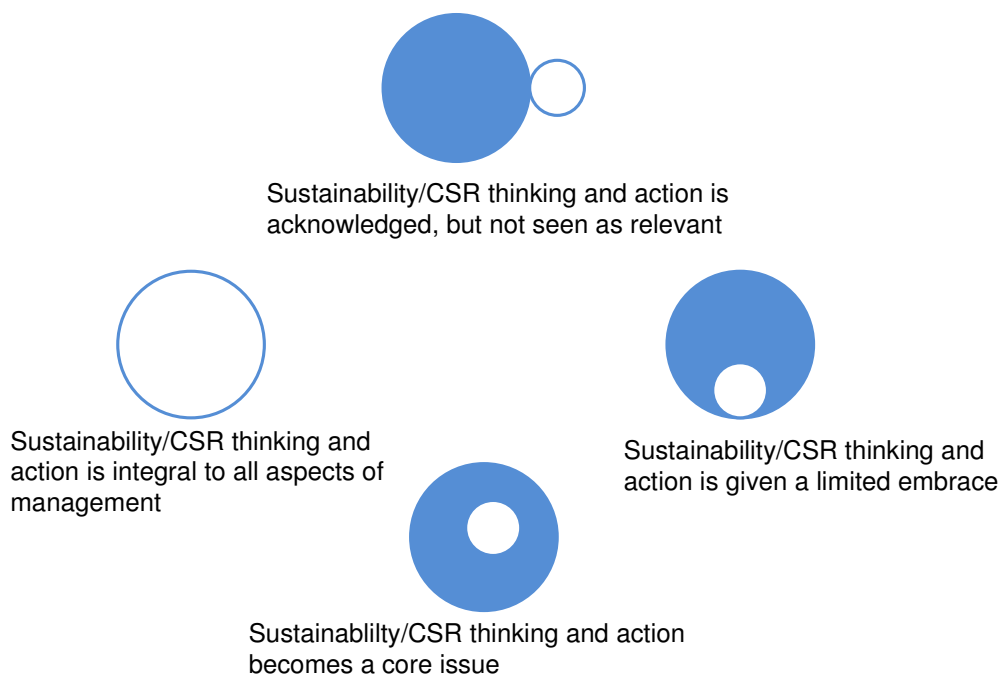


Figure 1: Sustainability/CSR Adoption Model

Authors that have sought to analyse conceptual shifts of sustainability/CSR in management theory include Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010; Bowd et al., 2006; Carroll, 1979, 1991, 2001; Lee, 2008; McElhaney, 2008; Schwartz & Carroll, 2003; Shrivastava, 1995; van Marrewijk, 2003. At one level, this is a very impressive scale of contribution. But in order to understand the variables and factors impacting on the management of sustainability/CSR, and the various stages of embrace at which organisations may be positioned, it is important to gain an insight into the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of various approaches.

To help conceptualise these different sustainability/CSR approaches, several academics have attempted to categorise them. Melé carried out a detailed review of sustainability/CSR classification theories

(Melé, 2008). In this review three main classification theories by three different authors are outlined (Garriga & Melé, 2004; Klonoski, 1991; Windsor, 2006). Klonoski (1991) separates sustainability/CSR theories into three groups: fundamentalism (businesses' only obligation is to increase profits), moral personhood/moral agency (businesses are morally responsible for their actions), and social institutions (businesses are social institutions with social responsibilities). Klonoski's categorisation is based on the organisations' role within society, but does not directly address the motivations for engaging in sustainability/CSR per se.

Garriga & Melé's (2004) classification approach differs in that it groups sustainability/CSR theories according to the focus of the aspects of social reality. As a result theories are split into four groups: instrumental (business seen purely as instrument for wealth creation, e.g. shareholder value approach), political (business has social power and responsibility, e.g. corporate citizenship), integrative (e.g. stakeholder approach) and ethical theories (e.g. normative stakeholder theory).

Windsor (2006) divides sustainability/CSR theories according to the motivations and conceptions that underlie the practice of sustainability/CSR: ethical (based on altruism and moral reflection), economic (based on wealth creation) and corporate citizenship (based on economic and ethical arguments).

However, the individual theories contained in classification models for the most part examine the motivation, organisation and management of sustainability/CSR, with limited discussion of the communications dimension. There is a manifest need to further develop these models (McDonagh, 1998) and, in particular, discover how communications should be effectively executed at different stages in the adoption cycle.

4 Sustainability/CSR Communications Theory

There has been a growing interest in sustainability/CSR in the marketing and communications disciplines (Podnar, 2008). This research interest is reflected in the number of journal articles published in the marketing and corporate communications arenas. Sustainability/CSR communication is now understood as a new sub-field within corporate communications (Cornelissen, 2011).

This interest in sustainability/CSR communication within academia has also been strengthened by the business case for it. Without effectively communicating about sustainability/CSR activities companies are missing out on some of the associated benefits of engaging in it, such as creating favourable stakeholder attitudes, positive corporate image and reputation (Du et al., 2010). However, market research indicates many organisations simply use sustainability/CSR as PR and media relations exercise (McKinsey, 2006) and that they fail to embed the practice in other ways, illustrating the need to define and outline effective sustainability/CSR communication.

Podnar defines sustainability/CSR communication as a “process of anticipating stakeholders’ expectations, articulation of sustainability/CSR policy and managing of different organization communication tools designed to provide true and transparent information about a company’s or a brand’s integration of its business operations, social and environmental concerns and interaction with stakeholders” (Podnar, 2008:75).

Sustainability/CSR communication is rooted in communications theory including particular ways of conceptualising communication. For instance communication can be viewed as information transmission (Shannon & Weaver, 1948), as information processing (Maletzke, 1998), as dialogue (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981) or as social action (Fairclough, 1992). In recent years the field of sustainability/CSR communication has been defined by a shift from ‘traditional’ to ‘alternative’ underpinning, where sustainability/CSR communication is not simply considered a process to inform and persuade about CSR objectives and activities, but is viewed as a way of constructing sustainability/CSR and negotiating its meaning (Christensen & Cheney, 2011; Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010).

Nielsen & Thomsen (2012) and Golob et al. (2013) provide detailed systematic reviews of research streams and themes in sustainability/CSR communication. Whilst the first review divides the research landscape into the management communication and marketing communication approach to CSR communication (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2012), the second review categorises academic sustainability/CSR communication contributions into three main research clusters: process oriented, disclosure/accountability oriented, and outcome/consequence oriented research (Urša Golob et al., 2013).

Whilst all of the conceptual models that are covered in the systematic reviews provide good insights into the sustainability/CSR communication process and the various factors impacting on the practice, they do not provide any guidelines of how to best communicate about sustainability/CSR activities dependent on the level of sustainability/CSR embrace. This is further supported by calls for research to be carried out in relation to the impact of mediating mechanisms on the effectiveness of sustainability/CSR communication (Du et al., 2010).

5 Integrating Management Theory and Corporate Communications Theory in Sustainability/CSR Research

Management literature continues to influence sustainability/CSR and its communication. The communication of sustainability/CSR depends on how it is defined and which perspective is adopted (Bartlett & Devin, 2011), meaning that some organisations will adopt a more instrumental viewpoint on CSR whilst others will have more societal goals in mind, shaping the way they choose to communicate about it. This strengthens the premise that a detailed understanding of the ethical and philosophical context surrounding both the management and communication of sustainability/CSR is required.

The review of existing theories in the fields of management and corporate communications has highlighted a number of parallels in the way sustainability/CSR and its communication is ethically and philosophically conceptualised. Theories in both disciplines are found to be divided into either 'financially' or 'societally' motivated. The overview of common classifications of both sustainability/CSR adoption and communication theories below (Figure 2) highlights how theories in both disciplines are classified along a sliding continuum with either a financial or societal focus, highlighting the different epistemological orientations of the models.

Figure 2: Classification of Management and Communications Theory in Sustainability/CSR

CSR Management Theory			CSR Communication Theory				
Konoski (1991)	Garriga & Melé (2004) & Melé (2008)	Windsor (2006)	FOCUS	Golob (2004)	Morsing, Schultz & Nielsen (2008)	Schultz, Castello, & Morsing (2013)	Golob, Podnar, Eving, Nielsen, Thomsen & Schultz (2013)
<p>Fundamentalism: business has no social responsibility, focus on</p> <p>Moral agency: corporation can be held morally responsible</p> <p>Social institutions: corporations seen as social institution with social responsibilities</p>	<p>Instrumental: corporation for wealth creation (shareholder value approach. Friedman)</p> <p>Integrative: corporations should integrate social demands as business depends on society for continuity (stakeholder approach, corporate social performance)</p> <p>Ethical: businesses should accept social responsibilities as ethical obligation above any other consideration (normative stakeholder theory, sustainable development concept)</p> <p>Political: corporation has social power and thus has responsibilities (Corporate citizenship)</p>	<p>Economic Conception</p> <p>Ethical Conception</p> <p>Corporate Citizenship</p>	<p>financial performance</p> <p>↑</p> <p>↓</p> <p>focus on societal process</p>	<p>Marketing as management approach</p> <p>Marketing continuum</p> <p>Marketing as societal process (demarketing, countermarketing)</p>	<p>Stakeholder information strategy (one-way public information, communication, sense giving)</p> <p>Stakeholder response strategy (two-way asymmetric communication, sense making → sense giving)</p> <p>Stakeholder involvement strategy (two-way symmetric communication, sense making ↔ sense giving, iterative progressive processes)</p>	<p>Management view: strategic, reputation can be managed</p> <p>Instrumental view: rhetoric, persuasion as transmission to improve brand awareness, credibility & awareness</p> <p>Marketing view: tool to lead to higher brand awareness, increased purchases & brand credibility</p> <p>PR view: CSR as protection shield against reputational damage, based around stakeholder dialogue</p> <p>Political normative view: consensus, dialogue, discourse, collective morale, integrative</p>	<p>functionalistic, strategic, instrumental, using promotional techniques used to influence stakeholder perception</p> <p>alternative, constructivist understanding, CSR as a communicative challenge</p>

These similarities are also mirrored in definitions of the various sustainability/CSR communication perspectives. In their commentary on sustainability/CSR from a corporate marketing perspective, Hildrand, Sen & Bhattacharya highlight the parallels between the practice of corporate marketing and the motivations and objectives of sustainability/CSR (Hildebrand et al., 2011). These authors draw on Balmer's definition of corporate marketing (Balmer, 1998) and conclude that it is a process that seeks value creation rather than just profit maximisation, and that seeks to address issues of business survival and satisfaction of present and future societal needs.

Despite the growing body of knowledge on the topic of sustainability/CSR adoption and communication, a model linking both the level of sustainability adoption, communication intensity and effectiveness has not been conceptualised. Fassin & Buelens (2011) contribute a model that links sustainability/CSR intent and drivers, and adoption with communication. However, this model focuses on the sincerity/hypocrisy content of the communication and does not address the effectiveness of outcome.

In sum, there is substantial and growing literature available about the management and adoption of sustainability, about the challenge of its communication, and about the importance of the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of different approaches. However, thinking appears very bunkered, with very little overlap between the constituent parts.

In order to address this research gap the authors seek to connect two important streams of literature on sustainability/CSR: firstly, the management of sustainability/CSR, in the sense of its evolution, organisation and delivery in the firm, and secondly, communications about these activities to various 'stakeholders' outside the firm. While there is a substantial and growing body of knowledge within these two streams, there have been limited attempts to explore the interconnections and relationships between the two. A number of scholars have called for a more holistic and integrated approach in this regard (Dhanesh, 2012; McElhaney, 2008; Signitzer & Prexl, 2008).

Figure 3 sets out an early stage, parsimonious model (Leonard-Barton, 1992) to analyse these interconnections drawing on current relevant literature. It comprehends the interrelationships between the firm's organisational readiness and particular configuration to sustainability/CSR

principles (the 'management theory' dimension) *and* the most effective way to communicate these intentions and actions to various stakeholders (the 'communications theory' dimension). For example, it may be hypothesised that where a firm has medium level of sustainability/CSR adoption, allied to a strong motivation to become more sustainable, then a high internal and medium external intensity of communications to selected stakeholders may be expected to be effective. The model also tries to reflect the role of the ethical and philosophical context, which as already mentioned will heavily influence decisions and actions in relation to both the management and communication of sustainability/CSR.

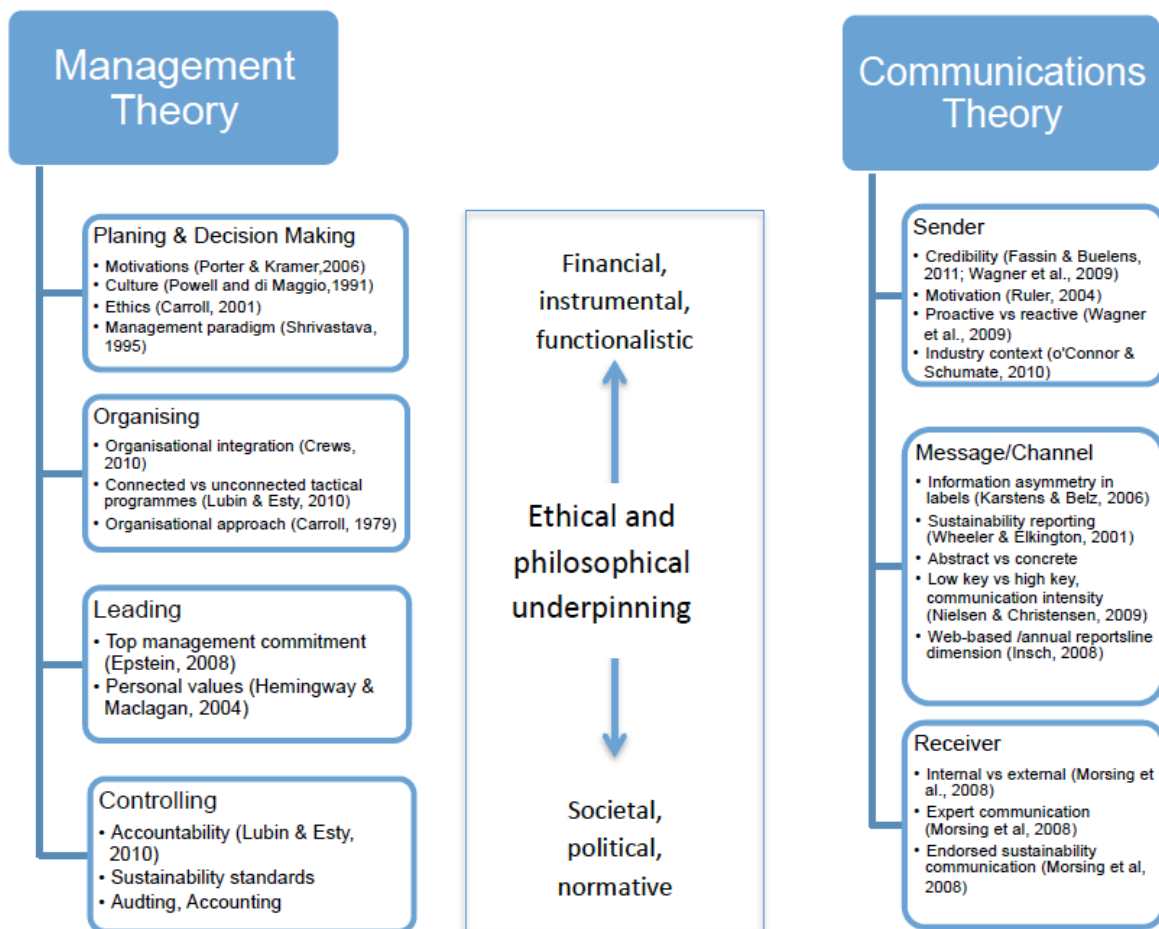


Figure 3: Parsimonious Model Linking Management Theory and Communications Theory in Sustainability/CSR

The caselets below of four global firms in regard to their communication approach illustrate in a practical way the kind of dilemmic issues that must be addressed in communicating sustainability/CSR claims. In each case the company has embraced sustainability/CSR principles and practice to a varying extent. The discussion highlights the

complexity of choosing how, to what extent and to whom to communicate, and confirms the calls of the scholars above for more research on this topic.

illycaffé: illycaffé has a long established top management commitment to sustainability/CSR and runs a number of social and environmental programmes to promote sustainability/CSR. illycaffé's business strategy is centred on producing a high quality product and the company feels maximum quality can be achieved by focusing on sustainable coffee growing practices. illycaffé has been awarded the Responsible Supply Chain Process certification. Despite its high level of commitment to sustainability/CSR, the intensity of communication is very low key and centred on quality rather than sustainability/CSR of itself.

Should illycaffé communicate more loudly about its sustainability/CSR practices? Are its sustainability/CSR programmes a by-product created by its focus on a quality coffee?

Innocent Drinks: Innocent Drinks has fully embraced sustainability/CSR since the company was founded in 1998. Its business strategy is to bring fresh, healthy and sustainable products to market. Since its start, Innocent Drinks has focused on promoting healthy nutrition, high quality, sustainably grown, non-air freighted ingredients, innovative packaging made of nearly 100% recyclable materials, and has set up the Innocent Foundation. Innocent Drinks have always incorporated sustainability/CSR in their advertising and communication campaigns and employ a high intensity approach to communication.

Is Innocent Drinks' communication campaign too intense? Is it vulnerable to outsider criticism in case of any sustainability/CSR conflicts?

Ryanair: Ryanair has a low level of sustainability/CSR adoption. Whilst in terms of environmental impact due to fuel consumption, Ryanair is ranked in the top 5, this fact should be mainly attributed to Ryanair's business strategy of efficiency, cost minimisation and up to date fleet aircraft. Ryanair has no known record of implementing any social programmes to promote sustainability/CSR and has received negative press due to its employee and customer relations. Ryanair's sustainability/CSR communication intensity is minimal as the communication focus is on offering low cost, no frills air travel.

Is it fair to say that Ryanair is not sustainable because sustainability is a by-product of efficiency? Should the firm communicate more intensely? Is it a good strategy not to have a dedicated, proactive sustainability/CSR programme?

Walmart: Walmart is involved in a number sustainability/CSR programmes ranging from waste reduction, adoption of renewable energies, to selling sustainable products. Its business strategy is focused on capturing a high market share and maximizing profits. In order to achieve this, Walmart recognizes the need to be perceived as a sustainable company. However, on-going exposures of unethical business practices in Mexico and in regard to female employees in the US challenge just how sustainable Walmart's practices are. They employ a high intensity communication strategy with regards to their sustainability/CSR programmes.

Can Walmart's credibility issues with regard to its sustainability/CSR efforts be attributed to its loud communications campaign? Should Walmart be considered a sustainable or unsustainable company? Is it guilty of greenwashing? To what extent are sustainability/CSR programmes communicated internally?

The matrix below illustrates four major combinations between levels of sustainability/CSR adoption and intensity of communication, and positions each company in a particular cell. Information based on which the authors loosely positioned the companies on the matrix was gathered during an initial brief review of publically available company data such as company reports, websites and press releases and newspaper articles. The depiction of the companies on the matrix is the authors' first cut to position the companies. However, the positioning is open to query and shows the complexity of classifying companies according to sustainability/CSR adoption and communication. Furthermore, the matrix does not indicate which combinations are effective and successful, and suggests that these dilemmas can only be fully answered by combining management and communication theory in the context of sustainability/CSR, research work that has been so far underdeveloped.

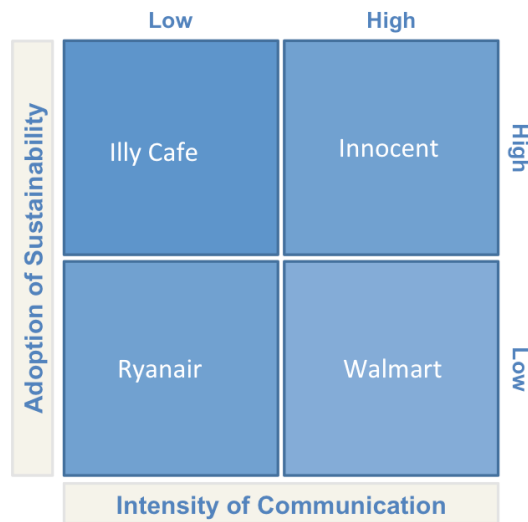


Figure 4: Matrix Classifying Sustainability/CSR Adoption and Communication Intensity

The discussion highlights the complexity, and need, of choosing how, to what extent and to whom to communicate on issues of sustainability/CSR. These decisions clearly impact on the profits, performance and competitive standing of the firm or organisation. But as has been argued earlier, they also impact on the reputation of sustainability/CSR itself. The failure to achieve certain targets may prejudice stakeholders outside the firm against the broad project of sustainability/CSR (Assadourian, 2010). In contrast, significant success will illuminate a path forward.

Based on the parsimonious model and the type of dilemma and thinking in the caselets, the authors have developed a number of hypotheses taking into account the level of sustainability adoption and communication intensity suggesting various possible outcomes (see Figure 5).

Sustainability/ CSR Adoption and Communication Continuum - Hypotheses

Sustainability adoption	Communication intensity	Possible outcome	
low sustainability/CR has been acknowledged, but not seen as relevant	high	high external communication intensity via company reports and website, as well as marketing	may be perceived greenwashing if not backed up by action and implementation
low sustainability/CR has been acknowledged but not yet implemented	high	high internal communication to get employees onboard	may be effective to create a positive setting to get the sustainability/CR project off the ground
low sustainability/CR has been acknowledged but not yet implemented	low	minimal communication with stakeholders in relation to organisations sustainability	may be considered lack of externally demonstrated aspirational commitment
high sustainability/CR has been fully integrated into the business model and culture	low	minimal communication with stakeholders in relation to organisations sustainability	competitive advantage may not be fully leveraged/ minimal educational benefits about sustainability/CR
high sustainability/CR has been fully integrated into the business model and culture	high	high internal and external communication	maximum benefits in relation to achieving business success and advancing the overall sustainability/CR project through educating

Figure 5: Sustainability/CSR Adoption and Communication Continuum – Hypotheses

The research is taking place in the food and retailing sector where issues of sustainability/CR must address a multitude of issues, ranging from transport, packaging waste, farming practice, food traceability, ethical sourcing, and electricity consumption to worker’s rights.

The reasons for embracing sustainability in food are compelling. With the global population set to increase by more than 2 billion by 2050, the world will need to produce 70% more food from limited resources in terms of water and land. Fears surrounding food sustainability, and indeed global warming, are leading to significant actions by food manufacturers and retailers (Board Bia, 2012; Killeen, 2000; Maughan & O’Driscoll, 2012).

An enterprise partner in this research project is Bord Bia (Irish Food Board), the government agency charged with developing Ireland’s food and drink exports. Bord Bia is committed to Ireland becoming a world leader in sustainably produced food and drink with its newly launched Origin Green campaign. Currently over 200 major Irish food producers have signed up for this programme.

Further, retailers have an important role to play within sustainable development as they can initiate more sustainable supply chains (Lai, Cheng, & Tang, 2010; Weybrecht, 2010) and amplify the sustainability message throughout the entire supply chain (<http://plana.marksandspencer.com/>).

The research is currently in the early stages and it will embrace both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. To-date the authors have employed early stage qualitative research methods, in a discovery-driven mode (Gummesson, 2000), in particular, case studies and interviews. Case studies, based on both secondary and primary sources (Yin, 2009), helps to examine the management and communications of sustainability/corporate responsibility, at the level of the firm and industry sector, in both a national and international context. Interviews are currently taking place contemporaneously (Yeung, 1995) with industry, communications and sustainability/corporate responsibility experts and leaders. These case studies and interviews will shed light on current best, and less than best, practice, and provide a tangible body of evidence, in an area where there is considerable practitioner and scholarly disagreement.

The case study and interview data will enable a deepened understanding of the dynamics of the early stage model. The model will thus be further refined and developed, facilitating a quantitative approach to the research question. The connections and interrelationships between the management and organisational preparedness for sustainability/CR *and* the subsequent communications of such actions to various stakeholders within and beyond the firm, will be hypothesised. Relevant constructs and scale items will be developed, enabling the model to be tested and validated. This will be achieved through a comprehensive survey of stakeholders in the process, i.e. senior management, employees, customers, and suppliers. By mid 2014, the researchers will be in a position to report on initial qualitative evidence and present the refined conceptual model and its hypotheses.

6 Conclusion

The review of sustainability/CSR adoption and communication models has mapped the field in both the management and communications discipline. The review has also highlighted a gap in current research in relation to the effective communication of sustainability/CSR claims dependent on the

level of sustainability adoption. It is manifest that there is much thinking and research in the area. However, what is lacking is a connectedness between the individual parts. More joined-up thinking and integrated frameworks are needed.

To address this research gap the authors propose a very early-stage model that seeks to link elements from both the strategic management and communications discipline. Illustrative caselets are used to highlight the issues that are associated with sustainability/CSR communication. Early hypotheses, or speculations, in relation to the effectiveness of sustainability/CSR communication are offered based on different combinations of sustainability adoption and communication intensity.

The proposed early stage model aids to comprehend the types of interconnections and relationships between organising/managing sustainability efforts in the firm *and* the communications of these efforts to various stakeholders. Managerially, this provides valuable insights into how firms can effectively communicate sustainability/CSR depending on the stage of sustainability/CSR transformation they are at. Further, mindful that business and corporate communications can be an important driver in educating stakeholders, in particular consumers, in relation to sustainability/CSR, the successful communications of sustainability/CSR claims will also help the overall sustainability project in society.

7 Literature

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