64. Corporate online communication

Keywords: Corporate online communication Corporate digital communication; Corporate social media; Corporate online channels

64.1   Definitions

Corporate online communication has been defined as corporations' communication via the Internet, in which digital channels are used to initiate such actions as posting company messages, initiating campaigns, and replying to consumer complaints, all of which is to help businesses achieve their strategic goals (du Plessis et al., 2006; García et al., 2017). This sort of communication includes using the digital media channels of websites, blogs, and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Content that corporations post on digital channels include their basic information, product or service information, and annual reports. A growing number of corporations are deploying through their digital media channels information concerning their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities/reports and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reports (Kim & Rader, 2010). According to a recent study (Smith & Alexander, 2013), nearly 98 percent of Fortune 500 corporations addressed CSR issues on their websites. Scholars have suggested that, by making use of the interactive and open features of digital channels, corporate online communication has the potential to enhance stakeholder engagement and organization-public relationships (OPR; Santos et al., 2016; Tudor, 2015). Through strategic online communication in various digital channels, corporations can reach out to a broader range of stakeholders, sustain or improve favorable corporate reputations, and nurture better relationships with their stakeholders. This work next focuses on explicating the main digital channels of corporate online communication and their essential roles.

The first major digital channel for corporations to communicate and promote their activities and performances is the corporate website (Insch, 2008; Pan & Xu, 2009; Weder et al., 2019). Traditional media channels have gatekeepers, are devoid of interaction and feedback from stakeholders, and thus are predominantly unidirectional (Argyris & Monu, 2015). In contrast, corporate websites enable more direct and interactive communication between corporations and their stakeholders. Due to the absence of gatekeepers and more interactive features on websites, corporate online communication on websites can facilitate flexible and timely corporate responses and actions that are especially critical and beneficial in times of corporate crisis (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2010). Thus, corporate websites have become the most commonly used online channel for corporate online communication to promote corporate-centric information and address issues from corporate perspectives without being interrupted by third-party traditional media (Santos et al., 2016; Weder et al., 2019). However, scholars argue that the corporate website is still a relatively one-way communication channel as the information posted on websites is mostly created and designed by corporations (Waters et al., 2014). Kim and colleagues (2010) suggested that as companies tend to highlight or prioritize the interests and needs of one specific stakeholder group—that is, powerful shareholders—corporate websites provide insufficient information for other stakeholder groups and are thus still limited to meet other stakeholder groups' needs. This imbalance of available information on websites suggests corporations tend to ignore or neglect, on their websites, those stakeholders with high information-seeking needs. Other studies suggest that some layouts and designs of corporate websites do not really facilitate stakeholders' feedback or a dialogical loop (e.g., Nel & Esterhuyse, 2019).

Another digital channel that has often been used and discussed for corporate online communication is the corporate blog. Compared to corporate websites, corporate blogs are considered as a more informal and personal tool (Colton & Poploski, 2019; Mukherjee, 2013). There are different types of corporate blogs such as blogs targeting internal (e.g., internal newsletter blogs) and/or external stakeholders (e.g., promotional blogs) and posted by various groups (e.g., employee blogs, CEO blogs; Baxter & Connolly, 2013; Colton & Poploski, 2019). The two-way nature of blogs makes them a more conversational communication tool for corporations. One study showed that blog pages of Fortune 500 companies enable dialogic features and

increase interactivity—for example, opportunities to send private messages, to vote for an issue, to make contact with leaders, to receive feedback from corporations (Waters et al., 2014). Moreover, blogs facilitate organizational learning and knowledge sharing within organizations for internal communication (Baxter & Connolly, 2013). For instance, Kaiser and his colleagues (2007) suggest that blogs help to build a sense of community and connection among employees, which in turn facilitates mutual understandings within corporations and to some extent challenges traditional hierarchies. Blogs can also be useful for external communication. The openness and interactivity features of blogs can lead to more positive relationship building with stakeholders (Tudor, 2015).

The third type of digital channels that corporations have increasingly used for their online communication and that has gained considerable academic attention in recent years is social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Twitter can be regarded as a micro-type of corporate blog. However, it is categorized as part of social media because it shares more similar features with social media than blogs such as openness, interactivity, and networked communication infrastructure. These features are clearly distinctive from traditional corporate blogs and challenge corporate blogs' relatively one-way communication characteristics (Mukherjee, 2013). Scholars have considered social media to have greater potential for achieving better corporate communication processes and outcomes due to these features. First, the more symmetrical and interactive features of social media allow corporate users to promote themselves with dialogical loops than any other form of digital media (e.g., websites and blogs; Waters et al., 2014). Social media enable back and forth and timely communication between corporations and various stakeholders. Social media functions like "@" support more direct interactions between corporations and their stakeholders, as well as within different stakeholder groups (Krüger et al., 2012). The networked feature of social media also facilitates information diffusion among stakeholders and enables the quicker transmission of word-of-mouth and public opinion climate (Barreto, 2014). Moreover, the interpersonal use of social media enhances the

social presence of corporations through other users' likes, retweets, or sharing of corporate messages (Han et al., 2016). As social media are largely designed and used for social interactions, users are more likely to encounter corporate messages through their friends and acquaintances' likes, posts, and retweets. This nature of social interaction tends to facilitate the humanization of corporate online communication. Through adopting more humanized, affective tones and interactive communication strategies in their online communication on social media, companies attempt to enhance stronger organization-public relationships and affective attachment (Fuoli et al., 2021; Han et al., 2016; Park & Lee, 2013). As such, social media platforms have the power to enhance stakeholder engagement and achieve more two-way and interactive communication (Han & Cho, 2013).

64.2   Key findings

Digital channels of online communication are not merely tools for corporate communication, but also important strategic approaches to achieve corporate objectives and goals such as enhancing corporate reputation, stakeholder engagement, and organization-public relationships. Accordingly, many extant studies regard corporate online communication as an indispensable public relations tool (Kelleher, 2009), and the main outcome variables investigated in such studies are related concepts such as credibility, trust, OPR, and reputation (Colton & Poploski, 2019; du Plessis et al., 2006; Han et al., 2016). Existing research on corporate online communication can be categorized into three research streams or themes—research focusing on (1) the descriptive status of corporate online communication (e.g., Esrock & Leichty, 1999), (2) how to achieve and/or testing effective corporate online communication (e.g., Capozzi & Berlin, 2012; Yuan, 2019), and (3) stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in corporate online communication (e.g., Carim & Warwick, 2013; Chu et al., 2020).

The first research stream for the descriptive status of corporate online communication focuses on investigating "to whom, what content, and with which kind of strategies" corporations communicate online. As to communication targets, studies have investigated primary target stakeholders on cor-

porate online channels. Esrock and Leichty's (1999, 2000) series of work found that the contents on Fortune 500 corporations' web-pages tended to mainly serve the interests of investors, customers, and news media. Back in the late 1990s, only one-third of the companies designed their websites to com-municate with multiple stakeholder groups. Other research investigating Fortune 500's webpages found that shareholders' needs were still most primarily addressed on their websites, indicating the expectation gaps between the stakeholders' and the corpora-tions' efforts (Kim & Rader, 2010; Kim et al., 2010). In recent years though, there seems to be a slight shift in the targeting audiences of corporate websites and social media plat-forms. McCorkindale and Morgoch (2013) suggested that the content of Fortune 500 corporations' mobile websites have become more diverse and catered to meet more various stakeholders' needs, not just those of one or two primary ones. However, the diversity of information provided has largely been constrained when converted to mobile webpages. A study on corporate Facebook communication indicated that Fortune 100 companies' Facebook pages prioritize the needs of customers over those of sharehold-ers, suggesting a different tendency between corporate websites and Facebook pages (Kim et al., 2010). According to the study, the tendency of prioritizing shareholders' needs has indeed decreased on corporate Facebook communication, yet other stakeholders' needs are still neglected to some extent. All these findings suggest that the shift from shareholder-centric to stakeholder-centric is still evolving. We can anticipate this shift being further enhanced with social media platforms and new technological affordances.

As for content, it is to be expected that the essential message on corporate webpages is information that appeals to shareholders and news media (e.g., financial reports, corporate news, investor section; Esrock & Leichty, 1999, 2000). Similarly, Park and colleagues (2016) reported that the dominant topic on Fortune 500 websites was content promoting corporations' abilities to perform businesses and achieve economic interests. Corporate communication on social media such as Twitter also shows a similar pattern. As rep-resentatives of corporations, CEOs' tweets highlight more corporate-centric information and presentation, paying less attention to dia-logical communication with varying stake-holders (Grafström & Falkman, 2017).

CSR activities and reports have also begun to increasingly appear. Studies have suggested that the inclusion of CSR-related information on websites and social media has positive effects on brand favorability, corporate reputation, and stakeholder engage-ment (Dutot et al., 2016; Gupta et al., 2021; Kucukusta et al., 2019). Yet some research has also argued that CSR communication on corporate social media faces challenges and induces much skepticism among consumers (Adi, 2018; Colleoni, 2013). Indeed, people have a tendency to believe that the CSR initi-atives of corporations are profit-oriented and self-serving.

Another aspect of research emphasized in this descriptive status-focused research stream is the corporate practice of adopting varying online communication strategies. Research has identified three prominent corporate communication strategies that are often used on corporate websites and social media platforms—corporate ability (CA), CSR, and hybrid strategies (i.e., a mix of CA and CSR message strategies; Fraustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Kim & Rader, 2010; Kim et al., 2014; Tao & Wilson, 2015, 2016). The CA strategy emphasizes enhancing the CA-related dimension of consumers' corpo-rate reputation perceptions such as corporate reputation of producing high-quality products and services, being highly innovative, leading the industry, and so forth. The CSR strategy focuses on building and improving the CSR dimension of corporate reputation percep-tions such as being socially responsible and having social impacts on local communities, societies, and the global community at large. The hybrid strategy is a combination of both CA and CSR strategies trying to enhance both the CA and CSR dimensions of corporate reputation. Studies have shown that among the top-listed corporations' social media pages, CA strategies are used predominantly more than CSR communication strategies (Fraustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Kim et al., 2014). However, on corporate websites, top Fortune 100 companies tend to adopt CSR communication strategies more often than CA strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010). Because big companies are more likely to be under public scrutiny and pressure, it is not surprising that this would be their focus. According to previous research (Fraustino

& Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Kim et al., 2014), however, on social media platforms, even big corporations tend to use the CA strategy more than the CSR one. This may be explained by the fact that the corporate presence on social media platforms was still early at the time of the earlier studies, and thus corporations had to focus more on common ground which could be products or service-related dimension, that is, CA-related aspects. And in order to attract more fans and followers on their social media platforms, they may have to use more CA strategies than CSR ones, such as providing product/service-related promotional messages.

Other researchers categorize corporate communication strategies based on communication styles. For instance, Johann and his colleagues (2021) identified three main strategies for corporations to build and maintain OPRs on Facebook—dialogic communication, transparent communication, and informal communication. Their study results suggested that dialogic communication is the most effective strategy in achieving relational online outcomes such as numbers of shares, likes, and comments. Similarly, Floreddu and Cabiddu (2016) categorized corporate communication strategies based on communication features. Based on the Facebook accounts of 22 corporations, the authors identified six online communication strategies—for example, egocentric, conversational, selective, openness, secretive and supportive strategies. They found that corporations with varying reputation levels tended to use different communication strategies; corporations with less favorable reputations tended to use more egocentric strategies.

The second research stream of corporate online communication has focused on investigating the effectiveness of corporate online communication. Digital channels of social media platforms indeed have great potential to achieve dialogical communication between corporations and their stakeholders as well as preferable communication outcomes using the technological affordance of being more interactive, open, and timely (Capozzi & Berlin, 2012; Yuan, 2019). Yet existing empirical findings are not straightforward. Prior research focusing on the effectiveness of corporate communication strategies of CA and CSR has suggested that both strategies have positive effects on corporate reputation and evaluation (Dutot et al., 2016; Tao & Wilson, 2016). More specifically, on social media platforms CA strategies tend to bring about better e-reputations than do CSR strategies (Dutot et al., 2016). Similarly, other research suggests that people tend to consider corporations' CSR communication efforts on social media such as Twitter as part of marketing practice, and thus even when those companies attempt to engage with stakeholders in a dialogical manner and tone, people perceive such efforts to be corporate-centric and self-serving (Colleoni, 2013). As a result, neither the current practice of corporate engagement efforts nor communication strategies on social media can fully achieve mutual understanding and support from stakeholders. This could be partly explained by consumer skepticism (Colleoni, 2013). Moreover, Tao and Wilson (2016) find an ordering effect of a hybrid strategy (i.e., adopting both CA and CSR strategies) on consumer evaluations. Their results indicate that when using a hybrid strategy, its positive effects on corporate evaluations were greater when the CSR message was presented after the CA message rather than before.

When it comes to affecting other online responses such as stakeholder engagement, studies suggest that CSR messages generate more positive stakeholder responses (i.e., likes, shares, and comments) than do CA ones (Kucukusta et al., 2019). Research also suggests that for building better corporate-stakeholder relationships, a corporate online communication strategy that emphasizes "empathy, integrity, and warmth" is more efficient than a CA-focused strategy (Men & Tsai, 2015). In this regard, scholars have paid much attention to the role of humanization of corporate communication in enhancing OPRs and stakeholder engagement. Han and colleagues (2016) suggested that machine interactivity, person interactivity, and self-disclosure all contribute to the social presence of corporations, and all of these are essential to perceived usefulness of the information and trust in the corporations.

Prior research has also investigated specific antecedents or dimensions of effective corporate online communication. Using Q-methodology, du Plessis et al. (2006) identified that both communicators and receivers of corporate online communication expect the presence of four factors—trust,

responsibility, efficiency, and meaningful relationships. Researchers have also identified other components of effective online corporate communication—communication style, social context cues, affiliation, source credibility, and interpersonal communication (Willi et al., 2014; Willi et al., 2019). Others have paid more attention to how the textual or functional entities of web content can better meet the expectations of stakeholders and nurture better OPRs. Pollach (2005), for instance, suggested that messages with a first-person narrative have greater potential to enhance the relationships between corporations and their stakeholders. For functional designs and cues, Koenig and Schlaegel (2014) claimed that usability (i.e., quality of user experience) is key to the design of corporate online communication channels, along with content value and management. All of these contribute to the perceived usefulness of online channels. Similarly, García and colleagues (2017) suggested that usability, particularly dynamic elements and URLs are important to strategic corporate web-based communication.

The third research stream, which has attracted relatively less attention from scholars, highlights different stakeholders' attitudes, beliefs, and reactions toward corporate online communication. Some researchers have examined employee motivations for using blogs and social media and the manner in which they use them. Managers generally hold positive attitudes toward digital communication tools and believe that they are useful for promoting visibility, creating dialogues, building communities, and reaching out to other stakeholders (Carim & Warwick, 2013). Meanwhile, managers tend to also realize that social media bring more risks and liability to their companies and themselves (Mohd-Sulaiman & Hingun, 2020). As a result, some managers who prioritize social media risks tend to purposely choose the one-way model of communication online (van den Berg & Verhoeven, 2017).

Indeed, online channels, particularly social media platforms, are not only strategic tools for corporations but also enable and speed up the transmission of negative user-generated content and word-of-mouth within stakeholder groups (Byrum, 2019). Thus, in corporate online communication, they function as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the interpersonal communication within stakeholders on social media is found to be positive as far as influencing the online community's impression and evaluation about corporations (Willi et al., 2019). Positive consumer-to-consumer communication on social media also has stronger influences on purchase intention than corporations' self-promotion (Byrum, 2019). On the other hand, active stakeholders may use social media as tools to make their voices heard and tactically fight back or argue with corporations through online consumer boycotts (Neumayer et al., 2016).

Additionally, to provide a quick overview of the methodological frameworks used in corporate online communication research, we identified 100 published related articles through the search of keywords such as "corporate online communication," "corporate website communication," and "corporate social media communication" on two research databases (i.e., Communication Source and Business Source Complete). According to our search and analysis, quantitative methods (48 percent) such as quantitative content analysis and survey are more likely to be employed in existing corporate online communication research than qualitative (28 percent) or mixed methods (12 percent). Specifically, in the last two decades concerning this research topic, the most widely used method is quantitative content analysis (accounting for 38 percent of the collected research articles). Most of the studies that focus on the first research stream—for example, describing the status of what and how corporations communicate online through corporate websites, blogs, and social media—employ the quantitative content analysis method. The largest number of publications (56 percent) in corporate online communication belong to this first research theme and stream which indicates that existing literature has been paying more attention to investigating the status quo of corporate online communication.

64.3 Outlook

Extant studies have mapped out what, with whom, and how corporations communicate online nowadays, as well as how to achieve effective corporate online communication and how stakeholders use corporate online communication channels. They provide theoretical and practical implications to corporate online communication, and especially con-

tribute to our understanding of how corporations face new challenges and adjust to the new environments brought about by digital technology. Despite the great advancement in this area of research, there are still several questions to be addressed and investigated in future research.

First, from a public relations perspective, it is desirable that future studies continue to investigate how to better apply dialogic principles to corporate online communication. The consensus now is that corporate online communication has yet to fully utilize the interactive features and dialogic principles (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010) in varying channels of websites (Kent et al., 2003; Park & Reber, 2008), blogs (Waters et al., 2014), and social media like Twitter and Facebook (Colleoni, 2013; Kieling et al., 2021). Content and tone of corporate communication on digital channels are still designed for one-way communication and do not properly aim to create two-way, interactive dialogues and mutual understandings. Future studies are encouraged to investigate how to make the content, functions, and designs of corporate online communication more aligned with the dialogic principles (Kent & Taylor, 2002), as these may further enhance stakeholder engagement and interactivity.

Moreover, the current literature has predominantly focused on investigating and understanding the status quo of corporate online communication practice. This stream of research has been useful in providing us with the overarching understanding of corporate online communication landscape. However, future research might focus more on how stakeholders perceive, feel, respond to, and interact with corporate online communication through more diverse research methods of surveys, experiments, and interviews other than content analysis methods. This would enhance our existing knowledge and help us better understand how stakeholders expect, perceive, and understand the communication messages; we could also better identify the existing gaps between corporate messages and the expectations of stakeholders.

From a strategic perspective, another cluster of questions lies in how corporations could achieve their strategic goals when using multiple digital channels or platforms. One key question is how the technical affordance of various digital platforms affects stakeholders' usage and expectations of corporate online communication. Varying digital channels have different functions and technical affordance characteristics. Facebook, for instance, provides a "Fan page" for corporations to communicate with their communities (Goh et al., 2013), whereas Twitter provides only an official account page. Although a handful of studies have investigated the different technical affordances of several social media platforms (Argyris & Monu, 2015), our understanding of how these differences may influence and facilitate corporate communication activities is still limited. Future studies might explore if there are any differences in stakeholders' expectations in seeking information on varying platforms. If so, how do these different technological affordances and features of digital channels relate to the selection of optimal corporate online communication strategies? Moreover, given the importance of keeping consistent messages and communication strategies across multiple channels, how can corporations achieve consistency and synergistic outcomes through using their multiple online corporate communication channels (Gurău, 2008)? Another question that could be addressed is how corporations can convey an established reputation and level of trust, not to mention strong relationships from offline to online and social media. Addressing these questions could help corporations better position themselves and enhance the effectiveness of their online communication.

Finally, in the area of corporate online communication research there still exist insufficient cultural considerations. In the last decade (e.g., Chu et al., 2020), there have in fact been more comparative studies that focus on investigating the difference between the western and eastern corporate online communication practice. Nonetheless, a majority of existing studies still focus on western contexts and employ western-based theories and concepts. Yet, different cultures tend to have varying communication styles, understandings of cultural marks, and preferences for web designs and layouts. All these cultural differences may influence the effectiveness of corporate online communication and stakeholder perceptions and reactions toward companies. Given that, future studies are encouraged to include more diverse cultural

contexts of corporate online communication. Such cultural considerations can more than benefit the process of multinational corporations' online communication practice; they can also provide more culturally sensitive insights into the current knowledge of corporate online communication.

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See also: Communication management; Two-way communication; Social influencer marketing; Corporate influencers

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