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Achieving organizational identification and employee commitment through CSR communication

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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication is nowadays an important constituent of the dialogue between firms and their stakeholders. Nonetheless, there is still little guidance regarding its returns and impacts on both primary and secondary stakeholders. Through a single case study in a French firm in the gas industry, which is based on in-depth interviews of top and middle managers, we investigate to what extent CSR communication can serve as a means to achieve organizational identification and employee commitment. Based on our findings, we propose a conceptual framework for effective CSR communication.

INTRODUCTION

Even though firm's social concerns have been under the examination of scholars for many years , it is only recently that academics have directed substantial attention to the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (henceforth, CSR) and its strategic implications (Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009). In this paper, we use McWilliams and Siegel's (2011) definition of CSR as the actions that aim to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by the law. Hence, to in order to take benefits of CSR strategies, for not only the firm, but also its stakeholders and the boarder society, it is important to find effective communication strategies that help avoid potential tension between stakeholders so as to create interest and collaboration from all involved parties (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010).

In this sense, the importance of CSR communication can be explained by the fact that stake holders are becoming the nucleus of firm's successful functioning and at the center their strategies. CSR communication is part of the corporate communication process, which is defined as 'strategic integrated communication related to the task of coordinating internal and external communication from a strategic to an operational level, with the ambition of building and maintaining firm's relationship with its stakeholders' (Cornelissen & Harris, 2004, p. 2). Besides, creating stakeholder awareness of and managing their attributions towards a

firm's CSR activities are the main prerequisites for managers in order to retrieve CSR's strategic benefits and acquire a profounder understanding of key issues related to CSR communication. That's why, Murray and Vogel (1997) noted that 'stakeholders acting either formally or informally, individually or collectively are a key element in firm's external environment that can positively or negatively affect the organization' (Murray & Vogel, 1997, p. 142). In fact, the stakeholder approach is closely intertwined with the concept of CSR because firms that have a certain CSR reputation don't only practice CSR with their stakeholders, but also formally and informally communicate about their CSR actions to these stakeholders (Schultz, Yun, & Csaba, 2005). Furthermore, numerous studies have scrutinized the effectiveness of CSR communication toward different types of stakeholders, in terms of its effects on both attitudes and loyalty. These authors (e.g. (Arvidsson, 2010; Du et al., 2010) have concluded that CSR communication has an overall positive impact on stakeholder attitudes and behaviors. Nevertheless, they didn't examine if the independence of the source via which CSR is communicated – company controlled versus third-party controlled – influences the credibility of the communication, and thus its effectiveness in regard to the change in stakeholders' attitudes and behaviors (Arvidsson, 2010).

In this sense, this paper contributes to the theory by exploring the gap regarding the impact and the value of the source via which CSR is communicated and how it influences its effectiveness in regard to stakeholder's organizational identification and employee commitment. Drawing upon the stakeholder theory, we aim to better understand how CSR communication (in a specific form potentially) is enhanced by organizational identification and employee commitment. Our aim is to contribute to the growing body of literature revolving around the effectiveness of CSR communications and its impact on today's corporate world; in addition to its implications regarding stakeholders. Indeed, we seek to demonstrate that taking into account and directing CSR communication toward not only employees but also other stakeholders will enhance the general knowledge of the CSR phenomenon. Besides, we contribute to advancing the knowledge about the relationship between CSR, organizational identification and employee commitment, leading to a better understand not only CSR but also human and relational capital, which are two main components of firm's intellectual capital (Martín-de-Castro, Delgado-Verde, López-Sáez, & Navas-López, 2011). Concerning the managerial contributions, we propose a conceptual framework for with the needed components to have an effective CSR communication, capable of enhancing organizational

identification and employee commitment. In doing so, we respond to Du et al.(2010) call for research to explore the mediating mechanisms that account for the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of CSR communication and investigate how a firm can best communicate its CSR actions to different target audiences; since different stakeholders imply different expectations of business and different information needs.

We conducted a single case study of a large firm in France that operates in the regulated sector of gas distribution with actions that are considered to be visible, as they have direct impacts on both the environment and the society. Through individual interviews with different stakeholders, we focus on the individual level of analysis as the study of stakeholders beyond consumers or clients deserves special consideration (Xie, Bagozzi, & Grønhaug, 2015). Additionally, the vast majority of previous research examines CSR at the institutional and organizational levels, while there is very little research that adopts the individual or multilevel approach (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012).

This paper has been constructed as follows. In the next section, we conduct a brief literature review of CSR communication, stakeholder's specificity, organizational identification and employee commitment. Afterwards, we present the methodology underlying this study. Next, we present our findings with transcripts from the interviews. Then, we discuss the findings and present our conceptual framework for effective CSR communication. Finally, we conclude with some remarks that expose the limitations of our research and share some suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Emergence of CSR Communication

In the recent decades, the interest of society toward environmental, social and ethical issues has increased at a great pace due to the alarming reports and the catastrophic events induced by multinational companies (e.g. Volkswagen, Nestlé, British Petroleum, etc.). Now, the activities of the corporate world are scrutinized meticulously by the public eye and evaluated by different stakeholders through different lenses since they generated a widespread mistrust against management teams (Arvidsson, 2010). Thus, communicating about CSR has become a delicate issue and a strategic challenge for firms since it represents the means that will enable to minimize stakeholder skepticism and to deliver the favorable motives surrounding firm's CSR activities (Du et al., 2010). According to Du et al. (2010), CSR communication usually

emphasizes on firm's involvement in different social causes through various factors that convey its message: its commitment to a cause, its impact on the cause, why it engages in a specific social cause and the congruity between the cause and the firm's business. The latest is known as "CSR fit" and can be manifested through associations with corporate image, product dimensions or affinity with specific target segments (Menon & Kahn, 2003). In this paper, we focus on CSR fit, which represents the perceived congruity between the cause and the firm's core business because stakeholders usually expect firms to sponsor only issues that have a good fit or a rational association with their core activities (Du et al., 2010). Therefore, a firm should put into light the CSR fit of its actions and initiatives to show the congruence of a chosen social issue with its core activity (Du et al., 2010).

In general terms, a firm can communicate about its CSR activities through official documents such as official reports (e.g. CSR reports, annual reports, etc.), corporate websites and brochures; which are known as formal means controlled by the company (Du et al., 2010). On the other hand, there is an emergence of a new kind of external communicators of CSR that are not entirely controlled by the firm, are third-party controlled and are considered to be informal such as CSR communication by firm's value chain members or word-of-mouth (henceforth, WOM) by stakeholders (Du et al., 2010). According to Du et al. (2010), there is a likelihood of a trade-off between the controllability and the credibility of CSR communication, pursuant to the degree of controllability of the communicator: the less controllable the communicator, the more credible the message since stakeholders will probably identify the firm as self-interested, compared to other non-corporate sources. Actually, communication problems appear when determining which and how CSR information should be communicated to respond to stakeholder's needs in terms of information, so that it legitimates the firm's behavior (Du et al., 2010). In this paper, we focus on informal CSR communication that is not company-controlled since Du et al. (2010) underlined the idea that firms should encourage informal yet credible and authentic communication channels such as WOM by stakeholders.

CSR Communication and Stakeholder Specificity

CSR by definition takes into account the relationships with other human beings such as customers and communities (Glavas & Kelley, 2014). Indeed, it is often said that CSR is a means to increase trust in and in support of firms; with scholars encouraging the integration of stakeholders in the study of CSR (Hillenbrand, Money, & Ghobadian, 2013). In fact, CSR fosters

positive social relationships, both within and between organizations and communities, making relational needs highly relevant (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007). Besides, even though CSR happens at the organizational level of analysis, individual actors are those who in reality strategize, make decisions, execute and perceive these CSR initiatives, and take actions as a result (Aguilera et al., 2007). Hence, developing better relationships with stakeholders can enable firms to develop intangible but valuable assets that can be resources of competitive advantage (Cantrell, Kyriazis, & Noble, 2015).

According to Freeman (1984), the stakeholders of an organization are the set of individuals and groups that affect or are affected by the accomplishment of its objectives. Stakeholders can be categorized as primary or secondary stakeholders according to Clarkson (1995). Primary stakeholders are constituted of groups that are vital for its survival such as clients, employees, shareholders and suppliers, while secondary stakeholders are groups influence or affect the firm but are not essential for its survival, even though they have become in the recent years more and more powerful (Clarkson, 1995). This categorization posits the question revolving around stakeholder's salience which has the potential to explain how organizations may best manage different stakeholder relationships (Neville et al., 2011). In a nutshell, stakeholder's motivations – to process CSR information impacts communication effectiveness (MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991). Indeed, both stakeholder's low awareness and skepticism toward firm's CSR activities play a role in firm's efforts to maximize business benefits from the CSR investments, which points out the need for academicians and practitioners to get a deeper understanding of how to communicate CSR more effectively to stakeholders (Du et al., 2010). In this paper, we follow the classification that encompasses primary (employees and clients) and secondary (regulators and government representatives) stakeholders who are either internal or external to the firm.

Organizational Identification of Stakeholders

Recently, a large number of firms understood that in order to stay competitive, they must manage the identification of their stakeholders (Cardador, 2006). Conceptualized as the cognitive link between the definition of the organization and the definition of the self, organizational identification is portrayed as the perceived oneness with an organization and the experience of the organization's ups and downs as one's own (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). It is a portrait of how the individual portrays him or herself as being part of the group – the firm

– and as being a typical member of it (Tajfel, 1982, p. 24). In fact, organizational identification is affected by the constructed external image that is known as the "Perceived External Prestige", which is the representation of how stakeholders think outsiders view the firm (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). This perception can result from different sources of information, among which WOM (Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001). Indeed, organizational identification is a mechanism that aligns individual interests and behaviors with interests and behaviors that benefit the organization (Dutton et al., 1994).

Moreover, it engenders a feeling of pride that is the product of the sense of belonging to an organization that is believed to have socially responsible characteristics (Dutton et al., 1994). For some scholars in the field of organizational identification, CSR could be considered just as another factor that will enhance the image of the corporation. Nonetheless, they noted a number of key issues that underline the importance of studying CSR under the scope of organizational identification, as because of "green washing" effects, there are large discrepancies regarding perceived internal and external images of the firm that can be offset by using CSR as a measure to explore the differences between internal and external perceived image of the firm (Glavas & Godwin, 2013).

Employee Commitment as a CSR Communication Channel

Human capital is considered to be a primary driver of competitiveness, prosperity, and economic wealth of firms (Martín-de-Castro et al., 2011). It entails an important characteristic in the sense that the firm cannot own it; which makes its strategic and managerial implications remarkable for managers (Edvinsson & Malone, 1997). Surprisingly, the impacts of firm's CSR actions on its employees has been understudied to some extent, but there is clear evidence that firm's CSR actions affect significantly employees within the firm (Glavas & Godwin, 2013). Actually, the very idea of working for a socially responsible firm that goes beyond just its legal obligations can be attractive to different degrees to employees since they have different values and attitudes toward work and work ethics (Glavas & Godwin, 2013). According to Folger et al. (2005), employees will seek to work for, remain in, and get attached to organizations, whose organizational strategies are consistent with the employees' moral or ethical frameworks, and this preference may at times supersede employee's instrumental and relational motives. Thus, committed employees can serve as CSR communicators as showed by Dawkin's (2004) research on the subject of employee advocacy and which concluded that

a third of the studied employees advised someone to use their firm because it was acting responsibly (Du et al., 2010).

Added to this, employees have the possibility to reach a wide specter of other stakeholder groups because of the exiting social ties outside the corporate sphere and are most of the times viewed as a source of credible information (Du et al., 2010). Consequently, an open climate in which employee's participation is appreciated and valued will increase feelings of identification (Smidts et al., 2001). Hence, firms must enhance their CSR internal communication strategy and develop innovative ways to engage employees and convert them into CSR advocates and CSR communicators for the firm (Du et al., 2010). The role played by employees in CSR activities should not be limited to mere execution of CSR activities, as they should also be part of the process making of the CSR strategy (Kim, Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to better understand CSR communication is enhanced by employee commitment and organizational identification, with the aim of constructing a framework that can help managers design effective CSR communication agendas. Thus, our approach to the research design answers the ongoing call for both more qualitative studies and individual level research in the field of CSR (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). At the same time, our research question calls for a qualitative methodology since case studies are recognized as the most adapted method for exploratory questions (Yin, 1994). The studied firm is a large firm according to the French law since it has more than 5000 employees and has branches in more than 20 different locations in France. The choice of the firm is motivated by the fact that it is an independent operator in the gas industry specialized in the distribution of gas and gaseous fuels. The firm is governed by a board of directors composed of three distinct committees, each in charge of a different competency: investments, auditing, accounts and salaries. The firm considers 'public interest' to be one of its main values and missions that is communicated through its mission to preserve the environment and the development of the territories where it operates via an economic and social equilibrium, since they are aware of the that they have an impacting activity, both on the environment and the social territories in which they operate. Hence, the chosen firm represent an intense case that expresses the studied question with intensity but not extremity since it deployed a CSR communication strategy toward both primary and secondary stakeholders, with secondary stakeholders that

are not company-controlled. To our knowledge, no firm with the same characteristic has been studied in the field of CSR communication.

The first step of our research starts by analyzing the firm's internal documents that ranged from external and internal CSR communication materials to sustainable development strategy reports, and compared their content with the firm's six CSR engagements that are at the center of its CSR strategies (see. Appendix A). We understood that different stakeholders could interpret the content differently and produce different views or meanings, based on their function and location. Thus, it was of momentous importance to interview both primary and secondary stakeholders, both internal and external to the firm. That's why, our sample represents stakeholders from top and middle management in different hierarchical positions, and whose job requirements are in relation or are impacted by firm's CSR strategy to different extents. In such case, Gubrium and Holstein (2012) recommend the use of interviews as the most adapted method to obtain experiential information from different individuals.

In this regard, we selected both primary and secondary stakeholders that are either internal or external to the firm and who are based in different geographical locations and have different functions in various departments and with diverse hierarchical positions (see. Appendix B). We constructed a coding framework with a set of items that conceptualize to different extent the studied components. For instance, under 'employee commitment', the items include: employee's motivation to talk about firm's CSR strategy, understanding the firm's values, employee's actions in favor of communicating about CSR, etc. The coding framework was constituted from previous research works in the field (Arvidsson, 2010; Baumann-Pauly, Wickert, Spence, & Scherer, 2013; Baumann-Pauly & Scherer, 2013; Du et al., 2010; R. Freeman, Martin, & Parmar, 2007; Glavas & Kelley, 2014; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Maignan, Hillebrand, & Kok, 2002; Porter & Kramer, 2006) upon which we relied in the process of designing our interview guide (Appendix. C) and coding our interviews as this article is based on qualitative coding. Qualitative coding is defined as: "the process by which segments of data are identified as relating to, or being an example of a more general idea, instance, theme or category" (Lewins & Silver, 2007, p. 81). The components of our coding framework were derived from our literature review of the research in line with the components of our research questions. Nonetheless, it is important to note that some of the components of the coding framework emerged during the coding process when the two researchers felt the need for a new item to conceptualize the sayings of the interviewed stakeholders.

The interviews were conducted by phone based on two distinct interview guides adapted to primary and secondary stakeholders (see. Appendix D and Appendix E). The interview's duration ranged from 40 to 60 minutes with a total of 19 stakeholders: 14 primary and 5 secondary stakeholders. This is general as anonymity was a general condition of the interviews. Our sample size is an accepted average as cited by Kuzel (1999) who noted that the sample size in a qualitative study ranges from 5 to 20 units. Similarly, Bauer and Gaskell (2000) proposes that there is a practical limit to data management in qualitative studies that ranges from 15 to 25 interviews, while Miles and Huberman (1994) find that 12 to be an adequate number and Cantrel et al. (2015) used a total number of 26 interviews for their study on developing CSR giving as a dynamic capability. The style and the nature of the questions of the interview guides were designed and asked in line with semi-structured interview techniques. The questions were designed to enable the respondents to carry the interview with no bias, with the researcher probing ideas that required further explanation or clarification. Hence, through the content analysis of fi rm's documents and the coding of the interviews using Nvivo 10 software, new concepts, associations and key ideas emerged.

FINDINGS

We divide our findings into two main blocks with transcripts from the interviews that reflect the result of our coding sequences.

Stakeholder's perception of CSR communication

An interesting finding that we noted through the interviews is that CSR needs to be linked to some extent to the stakeholder's job requirements. That's why, their vision of CSR communication differed according to their function and hierarchical position. For instance, primary stakeholders such as employees who are in direct interaction on a day-to-day basis with other stakeholders are more focused on the importance of the practical and "application" side of the CSR actions and the extent to which it can help them respond to some of their job requirements regarding CSR and at the same time communicate about firm's CSR effort in an easy and credible way:

> *"Since I directly work with clients on a daily basis, I need actions that are practical, easy to put into light and that can be applied, not there just for publicity." – Territorial coordinator.*

"I talk to people I work with about actions that are 'living' actions if I can say. There are some CSR actions that we do that don't benefit us, like the basketball partnership. We are a gas company; a basketball partnership is not coherent with what we do. I am not convinced of its value, so I don't talk about it at all." – Territorial coordinator.

Hence, for a majority of the interviewed stakeholders, it is of momentous importance that the firm undertakes CSR actions that are in line with its core activity and that are not far away from its core competencies and area of expertise. In this sense, it will be easier for them to speak and relate these actions to the work they undertake in the field:

"Today, we have a number of actions that I have some issues relating to our core business activity. I think that CSR actions should be integrated, in the sense that it shouldn't be a set of actions outside the firm's core competency. Otherwise, it is just doing it to do like others and because everyone else is doing it too." – Management controller.

"The CSR actions we undertake need to fit our business competency in order to have an operational impact on the environment we are acting in and with the stakeholders we are communicating to." – Environmental delegate.

"I think that CSR communication to secondary stakeholders is more effective when we can easily and directly relate it to our activity. When there is a clear link, it is logical that it will be easier to talk about it to others." – Director of communications.

On the other hand, the fact that the firm designs and implements CSR actions that are in line with its activities sends a signal to other stakeholders such as the regulatory entities and the special interest groups that the firm doesn't do CSR just for the sake of doing the same as the others or for advertising purposes, but that it engages in CSR actions worth communicating about because they are salient and of an added value to the community and the public at large:

"Our CSR actions are at the center of the interest of the people we are interacting with. These actions reflect what they value as being important in their sense." – Territorial director.

"There is always a need to communicate about our CSR activities, because it is what enables us to be anchored in the territories where we are operational." – Territorial coordinator.

"Nowadays, if a firm is just here to make money or spend money on every non profit initiative, it will disappear. The firms that will survive will be those that take into consideration CSR aspects that fit their mission, vision and business model." – Communications coordinator.

"It is the overall activities and actions of the firm that will make it or not socially responsible. We have to do it all in a logic of sustainable and responsible economic development." – Head director of strategy.

Additionally, the findings that we drew from our interviews show the importance of collaborative partnerships between the firm and its stakeholders. In fact, both primary and secondary stakeholders value the collaborative actions that they undertake together and are willing to communicate about these actions instead of the actions they initiate individually:

"We are happy when they come (the firm) and ask us if we want to participate in one of their actions to compensate damages to 'bee habitat' or to make a presentation about climate change to the students in our middle schools. It is always better when it is a joint effort." – Deputy mayor in East of France.

"It is always better to be a team player and to partner with stakeholders but we all know that it is not easy to make everyone happy without making concessions." – Strategy director.

The interviewees see these actions as a set of collaborative work aiming at being socially responsible in partnership with their stakeholders toward whom CSR actions are directed.

Besides, working hand in hand engenders a sense of identification to firm's CSR strategies from stakeholders since they are an integral part of the design and the implementation of these actions:

> *"We try to include as much as possible our stakeholders in the actions we do in their territories or their communities. That way, we communicate about what we do together and it is beneficial and credible for both parties." – Communications coordinator.*

> *"When we want to tackle issues about the society, we need to work with people who represent the society and tell the large public about what we do in partnership, in order to be more credible. People know that firms lie and we are no exception."- Head of energy politics department.*

> *"We expect them (the firm) to be open to collaborate with other players in the energy field so as to enhance sustainability because one hand can't clap alone, especially when it is the earth and the communities that are at stake." – Coordinator of networks, National Commission of Energy Regulation.*

In a nutshell, we can deduce that there are two main ideas that abridge the perception of stakeholders about CSR communication and that can be summarized in the fact that they all value actions that fit the firm's business competency and at the same time are salient to the communities where they operate. Secondly, working together and communicating about the outcomes, seem to present an aspect that is highly important for both primary and secondary stakeholders.

Behind the scenes of organizational identification and employee commitment

During the interviews, the stakeholders conveyed their thoughts about the CSR actions of the firm based on their daily interactions, which are limited by the scope of their job requirements and relationship with the firm. The communication about these CSR actions reflect to different degrees their identification with the issues tackled by the firm as a part of their CSR strategy. In order to identify with firm's CSR actions, stakeholders convey the idea that they need to be

part of the process of making and implementing the strategy. This CSR strategy needs to be rooted in firm's overall strategy and business model:

> *"I know that our firm doesn't do CSR because it must do it or because everyone else is doing it. We do it because each one of us knows that we are a firm with a sense of public service and public interest. We care about the territories we are working in and the people we are working with. It is who we are." – Concessions coordinator.*

> *"If employees are not convinced with their firm's CSR strategy, they will not convince us that they are a socially responsible actor." – Chief of the infrastructure department, Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development.*

The interviewees also emphasized on the fact that their managers play an important role in their commitment to the CSR actions and the communication emanating from it. Their manager's commitment is a sign that they are aware of what is happening and that they give the needed attention to promote the actions of the firm and organizational change within their teams:

> *"I like to participate in the different CSR actions we do around here, because I see that everyone is included, even our director is always present when we brainstorm actions for the New Year CSR Plan. She always tells us to share our ideas because if it doesn't come from us, it won't reflect the firm." – HR Diversity coordinator.*

> *"In here (the firm), employees undertake some CSR actions in addition to what we tell them to do. They do it because they want to and because they consider themselves as being socially responsible individuals. That's why, they talk about it easily with no formal materials or events most of the time." – Strategy coordinator.*

> *"My manager is always open to my ideas to collaborate with our clients on sustainable actions. It is nice to see that he has this vision of driving social change. It gives me the needed motivation." – Territorial coordinator.*

Furthermore, through the interviews of primary stakeholders, the ease in communicating about CSR because it is deep rooted in the firm's strategy and there exists an identification of

employees who are committed to serve the public interest, shows that WOM is the communication channel that is used the most:

> *"I don't have to do something formal and spend a lot of money when I want to talk about the actions we do in favor of biodiversity compensation. I know that we have to compensate the damages we are incurring. So, I just talk about what we do because I was part of it." – Chief of damage prevention.*

> *"Their employees know what they talk about. We see that they adhere and identify with what they do in terms of environmental actions and also social actions that benefit a large specter of the public." – CEO, Energy management firm (external partner).*

All in all, the existence of a WOM between different stakeholders shows that the firm enjoys an image of credibility because the means of communication is not company-controlled. In this sense, the fact that WOM represents a channel of communication that is informal points out the idea that it is mainly generated through committed employees and stakeholders who identify with the firm, and its logic in designing and implementing CSR actions:

> *"I think that they are exemplary in their social and environmental actions even if sometimes the actions don't fit who they are. I use them as a reference and as an example when I talk about these issues. They are good because everyone is included." – Deputy mayor in South of France.*

> *"I know that they are very good (the firm) in acting as a responsible firm because I hear from my colleagues about their actions even if they are not in direct interaction with them." – Chief of the infrastructure department, Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development.*

DISCUSSION

After the analysis of internal documents and the coding of stakeholder's interviews, news concepts and ideas emerged. Consequently, it enabled us to construct a conceptual framework for effective CSR communication (see. Diagram 1). This framework is constituted of three parts. The first part represents the four characteristics of CSR actions necessary to

construct an effective CSR communication. Each of this characteristics concerns a certain type of stakeholders as follows:

1. ***CSR fit*** is defined as the perceived congruity between the cause and the firm's core business, since stakeholders usually expect firms to sponsor only issues that have a good fit or a rational association with their core activities (Du et al., 2010). CSR fit is important for both primary stakeholders especially employees and secondary stakeholders such as clients and government entities who might have a certain control on firm's CSR actions. In fact, through our study, we note that CSR fit is perceived to exist in two cases. In agreement with previous research, it exists when CSR actions and initiatives are in line with the business's core activity and competency. Firms are supposed to develop CSR actions that fit their business model and core activities. In this sense, our research shows that in the absence of CSR fit makes it a hard task to participate in the CSR communication process when they don't see how a CSR action is related to their job or the firm's core activity.

On the other hand, we found that the salience of social issues to the society and the public at large. Indeed, a firm should not only have a CSR strategy that fits its activity and core competency but also that fits the expectations of the society and the large public, as being an issue that should be included in the firm's CSR strategy. Thus, the salience of social issues is determined by the society, meaning then community in which the firm operates and is in interaction. It is the society that determines the social issues that the fir should put forward in its CSR actions and communications. Hence, the firm should be aware and up to date about the issues that interest the society. To our knowledge, we contribute to theory by underlining the fact that CSR fit is a "double-faced" construct that should go in two directions, not only a fit with the business' core activity and competency, but also a fit in terms of salience of the issues to the general public. In this regard, CSR communication needs to be supplemented by a CSR fit that goes both ways: an "internal business" fit and "external social" fit.

To sum up, we put forward the idea that CSR fit fills two conditions and can be used as a tool to legitimize firm's CSR actions, leading to a decrease in green-washing effects and limiting CSR communication strategies that only have as a goal to join the corporate frenzy around social and environmental responsibility. It is a characteristic of the CSR actions that will support the idea that CSR is not only a marketing or

advertising tool. Our research addresses one of the major critics directed to strategic CSR as a business case. The business case of CSR focuses on the notion of enlightened self-interest of firms (Branco & Rodrigues, 2006) since it assures that a CSR fit a CSR fit that goes both ways will certainly decrease this so called self-interest of firms.

2. **Collaborative partnerships** are a characteristic of CSR actions that pertains mostly to external stakeholders. It is a new vision of a channel that can serve as an effective means to enhance stakeholder's organizational identification. We define collaborative partnerships as the set of partnerships that engender a collaborative work of both primary and secondary stakeholders together. Actually, we posit that for an effective CSR communication that leads to organizational identification and employee commitment, there is a need to communicate only about the actions undertaken by the firm independently but also focus more on collaborative partnerships with different types of stakeholders that aim at implementing CSR actions that not only fit both the firm's core activity and are represented by firm-controlled stakeholders, but also actions that are salient to the society and at the center of the interests of third-party stakeholders. In fact, collaborative partnerships that open the door for synergetic work can decrease the probabilities of potential green-washing messages since both parties are involved and communicate on a common ground about the actions undertaken together to integrate social and environmental consideration into the corporate side.

3. **Role modeling of management** has been for a long time discussed as a major driver behind the implementation of CSR practices (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014). As a matter of fact, the active support of managers is a momentous precondition of organizational change (Pedersen, 2009). Hence, this characteristic impacts mostly internal employees and their commitment. Indeed, there is evidence that employee's judgment and behaviors can be shaped by their manager's attitudinal and reactional behaviors (Vlachos, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2014). From our findings, we noted that the role modeling of management needs to have a dimension of seeding responsible human resource practices. Giving that nowadays the workplace is much more "sweet-talking" and companies can enjoy a valuable set of contributions from different levels of

employees in different locations, role modeling management is of great importance. Our findings complement the social information processing mechanism of influence across hierarchal levels that underlines the idea that employees view their superiors as important social referents and tend to form judgments and exhibit behaviors that mimic those of their superiors (Vlachos et al., 2014). In this regard, management awareness and commitment to advancing and promoting CSR actions is a necessary component in creating both social and environmental improvements (Pedersen, 2009).

4. ***Deep-rooted CSR strategy*** implies a strategy that is line with the firm's values and, culture and that has its roots in the firm's overall strategy and business model. This characteristic is important for both primary and secondary stakeholders, either internal or external. In fact, according to our findings, a deep rooted CSR strategy can generate higher degrees of employee commitment. We posit that one major characteristic of a deep rooted CSR strategy is its alignment with employee's values as they are a cornerstone type of stakeholders. That's why, employees should be part of the different steps and design of the CSR strategy. They should participate in the process of the conception, the adaptation and the application of the CSR strategy. On the other hand, a deep rooted CSR strategy sends a message of alignment and fit to external stakeholders, whose skepticism has augmented due to the recent scandals and green washings affairs.

The fours CSR actions characteristics we identified act as drivers that will generate two main cognitive and behavioral concepts that are: organizational identification and employee commitment that represent the second part of Figure 1. These concepts reflect our perception that firms can only function at their full capacity, in terms of communicating about their CSR efforts, if their stake holders are looking for the best interest of the firm, and are not just motivated by their own selfish reasons. In line with this perception, organizational identification and employee commitment create the ground of an important behavioral communication channel that we conceptualize as Word-of-Mount (WOM). This WOM is generated by both types of stakeholders, not only those in direct and daily interaction with the firm but also from other stakeholders that are secondary, yet vital to the effective

implementation and communication of CSR actions. WOM represent the third part of Figure 1.

In fact, WOM has been until recently the affair of the marketing research area. In the literature, WOM is defined as oral person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceive as non-commercial, regarding a brand, a product or a service (Arndt, 1967) and can be either positive or negative. WOM is a complex construct that represents a communication channel that is more behavioral than cognitive. Indeed, WOM doesn't need to be a brand, product or service focused, it can also be organization focused (Buttle, 1998). Drawing from the findings of our study, we propose a definition of WOM as being an informal communication channel from stakeholder to stakeholder that is not company controlled and that reflects high degrees of organizational identification and/or employee commitment. The WOM generated by these stakeholders can be used as a means to communicate credible and authentic messages regarding firm's CSR strategy. In this regard, we join Du et al. (2010) in encouraging firms to try to advocate informal and yet credible and communication channels such as WOM by stakeholders and to avoid the underestimation of the power and the extent to which employees act as effective CSR communicators. Firms should include their stakeholders in the process of designing their CSR strategy and find adapted ways so as to engage and convert them into CSR communicators. Furthermore, WOM from stakeholders can reduce potential skepticism of their stakeholders and the large public that can be to some extent distant from direct interactions with the firm.

In a nutshell, in order to benefit from the added value of WOM, managers should construct their CSR actions based on the 4 four characteristics that we presented. These CSR action characteristics will enable the firm to benefit from the enhancement of the two cognitive and affective concepts that are: organizational identification and employee commitment and take advantages from the generated behavioral communication channel that is WOM. Organizational identification can be considered as an external channel while employee commitment as an internal channel.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for effective CSR communication
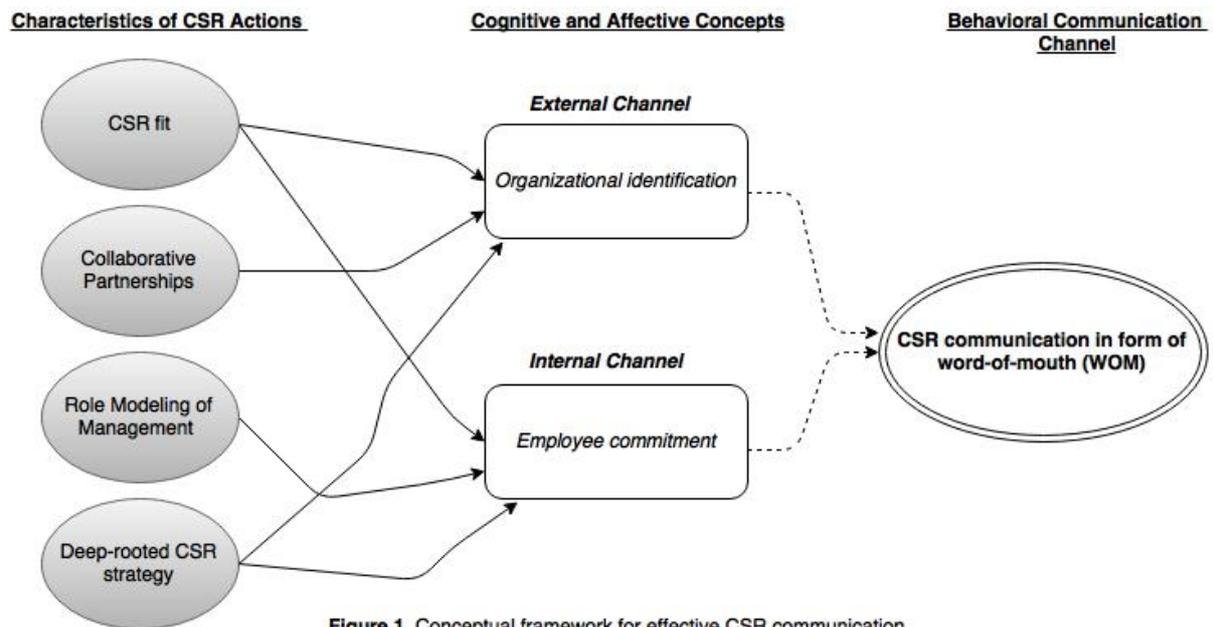
CONCLUSION & RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Our study aimed to better understand how CSR communication is enhanced by employee commitment and organizational identification. Our methodological process and our findings enabled us to answer this research question with a conceptual framework that gathers the four necessary characteristics of CSR actions that will enable the firm to benefit from the enhancement of employee commitment and organizational identification, in addition to taking advantage from an authentic and credible behavioral communication channel that is WOM. Our methodological process based on semi-directed interviews with both primary and secondary stakeholders enabled in a French firm in the gas industry enabled us to collect data from both sides.

→ Implications for managers and theory.

As with any research work, some limitations are present. One of the limitations of our study lies in the fact that it has been conducted in a single sector and in one country, which bounds to some extent the scope of our findings. Hence, we encourage future research to test our conceptual framework empirically or through case studies of firms in different countries and/or different sectors. Besides, future research can study our research question in the scope of a multi-case analysis with the inclusion of contingent factors such as size, age of stakeholders, organizational culture, etc. On the other hand, researchers can also test the positive or negative connection between organizational identification and employee

commitment through a hypothetical-deductive study. In this sense, we join Aguinis and Glavas (2012) and advice forthcoming studies to explore whether employees find greater degrees of alignment with firms that pay attention to the well-being of stakeholders. On the other hand, academics can also seek to test the linkages between employee's perception of CSR and results such as participation in CSR efforts, as well as commitment to performance both in CSR and employee's overall job, as suggested by Aguilera et al., 2007). Furthermore, it is also important to advance research regarding what and how firms communicate about their CSR actions, since it seems that even when we think that they are acting as socially and environmentally responsible entities, they are not in reality (e.g. Volkswagen, Nestlé, British Petroleum, etc.). Meanwhile, stakeholders are adopting a conscious capitalism mindset that is about more than simply making money but also about integrating and supporting firms that aim for something that matters to them and that also has a great impact on society and the world at large.

APPENDIX

Appendix A. Inventory of documentary data

Type of document	Description	Authors	Date	Diffusion	Pages/Slides
Poster	One-page poster about the new geographic information system	Communication Department	January 2014	External	1
Powerpoint	Sustainable purchasing strategy	Purchase Department	November 2010	Internal	23
Trombinoscope	Hierarchical organization of the firm and its departments	HR Department	June 2015	Internal	5
Powerpoint	General Sustainable development plan	Strategic Business Department & Sustainable Dev. Dep.	January 2013	Internal	14

Word	Sustainable development 2 years politics	Strategic Business Unit & Sustainable Dev. Dep.	January 2013	External	10
Word	The 6 CSR engagements of the firm	Strategic Business Department & Sustainable Dev. Dep.	October 2014	External	2
Powerpoint	We Are Engaged: a presentation of the engagements of the firm in CSR	Communication Department	September 2014	External	8
Powerpoint	Toward a sustainable economy	Strategic Business Department & Sustainable Dev. Dep.	October 2015	Internal & external	10
Word	CSR plan for diversity	Strategic Business Department & Sustainable Dev. Dep.	January 2015	Internal	6

Appendix B. Stakeholders' classification and hierarchical position

Function	Classification	Hierarchical position	Duration
Strategy coordinator	Primary	Top management	54 minutes
Head director of strategy	Primary	Top management	1h 07 minutes
Territorial coordinator	Primary	Middle management	52 minutes
Territorial coordinator	Primary	Top management	1h 21 minutes
Chief of damage prevention	Primary	Top management	54 minutes
Environment delegate	Primary	Middle management	49 minutes
Management controller	Primary	Top management	1h 24 minutes
Territorial director	Primary	Top management	55 minutes
HR Diversity coordinator	Primary	Middle management	52 minutes
Director of communications	Primary	Top Management	1h 11 minutes
Territorial coordinator	Primary	Middle management	1h 02 minutes
Head of energy politics department	Primary	Top management	56 minutes
Communications coordinator	Primary	Middle management	1h 01 minutes
Concessions coordinator	Primary	Middle management	53 minutes
CEO of partner energy firm	Secondary	Top management	51 minutes
Deputy mayor - East France	Secondary	Middle management	1h 10 minutes
Coordinator of networks – National Commission of Energy Regulation	Secondary	Middle management	58 minutes
Chief of infrastructure department – Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development	Secondary	Top management	57 minutes
Deputy mayor – South France	Secondary	Middle management	1h 04 minutes

Appendix C. Coding framework used for coding on Nvivo 10

1. Organizational identification:

- Awareness of CSR guidelines

- CSR used as a strategy and recognized as a corporate competency

- Attractiveness to corporate identity through CSR: stakeholders identify with the firm, whose identity they find attractive

- Engaged stakeholders who identify with firm's CSR strategy

- Interactive CSR: stakeholders are willing to interact/comment/respond to CSR actions of the firm

- Positive interactions with the firm on CSR subjects

- CSR strategy used and transmitted through corporate policy

2. Employee commitment:

- Employee's motivation to talk about firm's CSR strategy

- Employee's engagement in business strategy consultations about the firm's CSR strategy

- Employee's participation in activities and events related to firm's CSR strategy

- Sustainability ambassadors network

- Effective information exchange with other stakeholders on CSR strategy

- Understanding firm's values

- Employee representatives in CSR strategy

- Employee actions in favor of communicating CSR strategy of the firm

- Employee's reactions toward the criticism of external sources of firm's CSR strategy

3. Role modeling of management:

- Dedicated CSR managers

- Manager's emphasis on CSR identity: a shared set of beliefs between to managers and stakeholders

- Commitment from supervisors

- Commitment of manager's decision to firm's CSR guidelines and/or strategy

- Manager's perception of firm's CSR

- Alignment of manager's personal values with firm's CSR strategy

- Alignment of manager's personal agenda with firm's CSR strategy

- Manager's participation in launching CSR dialogue

- Manager's implication in communicating about the firm's CSR strategy and actions

- Manager's consideration of stakeholders separately: depending on the type of their relationship with the firm and the degree of their implication in firm's CSR

4. *Internal communication usage:*
   - Integrated CSR communications with other corporate communications

   - Awards and benefits to assist employee retention, recruitment and better internal stakeholders relations

   - CSR communication accepted as raison d'être, institutionalized, and enduring through the firm

   - Positive relational dialogue between employees on firm's CSR strategy

   - Experience transmission: passing along views on previous experiences within and with the firm

   - Expressing feedback to other stakeholders on previous experiences within the firm

   - Stakeholders more inclined to pass information to others

5. *External communication congruence:*
   - CSR communication accepted as sincere by salient stakeholders

   - Community awareness of firm's CSR actions

   - Public or media relations around firm's CSR actions

   - Sophisticated reporting structures and dissemination of activity

   - CSR communication as a substantive outcome (rather than symbolic)

   - Perceived credibility of the CSR message

   - Influence of firm's CSR message content on stakeholders

   - Relevancy of communicated CSR to relevant stakeholders

   - Credible use of media channels to communicate about firm's CSR strategy

   - Intend to say positive/negative things about firm's CSR strategy to others

   - Intend to recommend the firm to others because of its CSR strategy

- Intend to speak well of the firm to the public because of its CSR strategy

- Passing along positive/negative feelings to others through talks

Appendix D. Interview guide for primary stakeholders

Introduction and presentation of the stakeholder:

1. What is your function? Can you present us your positioning in the hierarchal diagram?

2. What are the departments you interact with inside the firm?

3. Who are the external stakeholders you interact with?

Role in the CSR strategy of the firm:

1. According to you, what is CSR? What are the domains that the concept of CSR covers?

2. What is the place that CSR occupies in your job?

3. What is/was your role in developing the CSR strategy of the firm, if you have one?

4. What do you use CSR for in the exercise of your job?

5. Do you diffuse the firm's CSR actions and initiatives in your department? In your region? If yes, how?

6. Do you sense a need to be more informed about CSR in order to integrate it more effectively to your missions?

State of the art of firm's current CSR strategy:

1. Can you summarize your firm's CSR strategy?

2. According to you, is your firm an active firm in terms of CSR actions and initiatives or not?

3. Can you cite some examples of CSR actions either regionally or nationally?

4. Can you say that CSR is a strategic subject to the firm? To what extent?

5. According to you, who are the stakeholders that are the most concerned with the firm's CSR strategy?

6. What is the maturity level of your firm in terms of CSR actions?

CSR communication:

1. What are the communication axes that the firm should prioritize?

2. What are the subjects that the firm should communicate about? Who are the stakeholders that the firm should communicate to?

3. What are the communication channels or tools that are used in order to transmit the messages about CSR actions?

4. What is the role of employees in designing and implementing the CSR communication strategy?

5. According to you, what are the main components of an effective CSR communication strategy?

6. Do you think that there exist some barriers that hinder the effective communication and diffusion of firm's CSR actions?

To conclude:

1. What are your recommendations for the tools and channels that should be used in order to effectively include each stakeholder in the process of communication about CSR?

Appendix E. Interview guide for secondary stakeholders

Introduction and presentation of the stakeholder:

1. What is your function? Can you present us your positioning in the hierarchal diagram?

2. With which of the firm's department are you in relation and interact with?

Perception of CSR:

1. According to you, what is CSR? What are the domains that the concept of CSR covers?

2. What is the place that CSR occupies in your job?

3. What do you use CSR for in the exercise of your job?

State of the art of the firm's CSR strategy:

1. If we say "the firm and CSR", what do you think of? What are the main ideas that come to your mind?

2. Do you know the CSR strategy of the firm? Or some of it?

3. What are the main domains that the firm should act in as a socially responsible entity?

CSR communication:

1. Do you have in mind any examples of the firm's CSR actions?

2. Are you well aware of the firm's CSR actions? Who communicate to you these actions and how?

3. According to you, is the firm being socially responsible or not? Why?

4. Do you have in mind any subject that the firm should include in its CSR strategy and communicate about?

5. Do you interact with the firm regularly? Do you talk about the firm in a CSR context?

To conclude:

1. Do you have any recommendations for the firm to enhance its CSR strategy and its CSR communication?

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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