

CSR Approach for Global Firms: Standardisation versus Adaptation

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This paper discusses the impact of the worldwide communication inter-stakeholders and inter-consumers on the choice of standardisation versus adaptation in the formulation of global CSR strategy. The paper suggests that for a global firm, the CSR approach must be multidimensional and multi-stakeholder, placing all dimensions of the CSR at the same level of importance. In the global context multinational firms cannot “select and prioritize” the dimensions of CSR, as is instead possible for those companies that only deal in a local context. The paper also provides the results of a first empirical analysis, providing a preliminary confirmation of the concepts.

JEL Codes: M14, M16, M31

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is more and more an important driver of corporate reputation and therefore of competitive advantage (Servaes & Tamayo 2013; van Gelder 2002). In current competitive contexts firms are called upon to take greater social responsibility in response to a growing demand for CSR by their stakeholders (Balmer & Greysner 2006; Balmer, Fukukawa & Gray 2007; Dawkins & Lewis 2003; Whitehouse 2006); they must define detailed CSR programs and clearly demonstrate how they actually operate regarding the various dimensions of CSR (Becker-Olsen et al. 2011).

This paper aims to contribute to the international business literature through a conceptual reflection on the formulation of a CSR strategy for a global firm in light of the global inter-stakeholder communication. The question posed in this paper is whether there are differences in the link between CSR strategy and corporate reputation when moving from a local to a global level, and which specific implications these differences have in the formulation of a CSR strategy for a global firm in the global communication era.

Although many scholars have analysed the role of global communication (especially via the Internet) regarding important brand-related issues (Christodoulides 2009; de Chernatony 2006; Godes et al. 2005; McAlister, Sonnier & Shively 2012), we find that there is a gap in the international business literature regarding the role of global communication on the transfer process of CSR programs on corporate reputation. Indeed, prior research highlights the fact that brand image is also the result of communications that take place online (Jolly, 2001; Jones, Temperley & Lima 2009); Erdem and Swait (1998) pointed out that one of the most important effects of the spread of the Internet and its related interactive technologies is that the information asymmetry between consumers and firms that traditionally worked in favour of brands has been dramatically reversed because of a many-to-many communication whereby consumers and stakeholders can interact not only with the firm but also with other consumers and stakeholders (Hoffman and Novak, 1996); Jones, Temperley & Lima (2009) claimed that

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the power of web networks has dramatically increased the speed and the reach of social communication, which can potentially damage company image and create the perception of corporate irresponsibility. However, what the study of international business has not yet analysed is the impact of communication among stakeholders and among consumers on building the CSR perceptions of a brand, especially a global brand. This topic lacks of pilot studies as well.

As we will analyse in greater detail later in this paper, in the Internet era, information spreads all over the world at an incredible speed, and new media and their related technologies allow everyone to find out about what is happening anywhere in the world with the result that every action or behaviour by a firm becomes an element to be judged and evaluated worldwide (Jones, Temperley & Lima 2009; Russell & Russell 2010; Torres et al. 2012).

We contend that global communication “renders global what starts out local”. Consequently, consumers of global brands know – and therefore judge – the social behaviour of a company not only in the local contexts in which those consumers live but also in very different and geographically distant contexts.

Furthermore: a) according to Russell and Russell (2010, p. 66), “consumers’ identity as global citizens and consumers’ environmental consciousness are moderators of their generally egocentric tendencies”; b) and as noted by Maignan and Ferrel (2004, p. 7), stakeholders’ expectations “concern not only for issues that affect their own welfare but also for issues that do not affect them directly”.

The main goal of this paper is to increase the understanding of the CSR approach for a global firm in light of the global communication. We formulate our research questions as follows: 1. Does the relationship between CSR strategy and corporate reputation observe the same principles in the local context as in the global context? 2. How does global communication impact the construction of a corporate reputation through CSR strategy? 3. What implications are produced by the formulation of a CSR strategy for a global firm?

Methodologically, the paper is primarily conceptual, based on the literature on corporate social responsibility; it also shows the results of a first empirical analysis, carried out in the year 2014, providing a preliminary confirmation of the concepts.

This paper is organized as follows: section 2 analyses the theoretical frameworks about CSR strategy, highlighting how it represents, in today’s competitive contexts, one of the main drivers in the construction of corporate reputation; section 3 deals with the central theme of this paper, i.e. the impact of the global communication on CSR approach for a global firm; section 4 and 5 provides the results of a first empirical analysis from which we receive a preliminary confirmation of the considerations proposed in this paper; finally, the concluding section of the paper also indicates further research directions, especially from an empirical perspective.

2. Conceptual Background

The meanings that Corporate Social Responsibility can assume are numerous and varied, and they concern all aspects of the firm’s activity which produce effects of a social and environmental nature (Dahlsrud 2008; Hahn 2013; Montiel 2008; Whitehouse 2006): the working conditions of the employees and the employment policies; the quality of the products and services and the characteristics of the production processes; the publication of reports and all information which is delivered to third parties; relations with political, administrative and social institutions of the community in which the firm operates; the choice of location of the

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production activities; the fiscal policies and methods of use of the resources which investors entrust to the firm in the form of shares and bonds; the relations between products, services and production technologies with the external natural environment.

The varying nature of expectations of stakeholders in the context of social responsibility of the firm creates a complex framework of *multidimensional social responsibility factors*, which are linked to economic, environmental and social issues. It follows on from this that CSR expectations are not localized in precise points (for example, shareholders and investors, suppliers or customers, public administration or no-profit organisations, etc.) but are found within every type of stakeholder (Peloza & Shang 2011; Taghian, D'Souza & Polonsky 2015; Surroca, Tribó & Zahra 2014; Torres et al. 2012).

Furthermore, according to the *stakeholder theory* (Carroll 1989; Clarkson 1995; Donaldson & Dunfee 1994; Frederick, Davis & Post 1988; Freeman 1984; Freeman & Reed 1993; Jawahar & McLaughlin 2001; Mitroff 1983), the firm is at the center of a complex network of relations with the external environment, and expresses its capacity to obtain both economic and social legitimacy through satisfaction of expectations and pressures which it receives from all its stakeholders.

From this point of view, the stakeholder theory reflects a view of the firm which can be observed not only in the firm-market and firm-State relations (according to the liberal economy rationale) but in the context of the market-State-civil society triad (Velo 1998). In other words, the firm no longer communicates only with the market and the State, but with a civil society which is asking the firm to fulfil a functional role in the enhancement of well-being of the society in which the firm operates.

In conclusion, according to Porter and Kramer (2006), “CSR can be much more than a cost, a constraint or a charitable deed – it can be a source of opportunity, innovation, and competitive advantage” (2006, p. 80). They also affirm that “the success of the company and the success of the community become mutually reinforcing. Typically, the more closely tied a social issue is to the company’s business, the greater the opportunity to leverage the firm’s resources and capabilities, and benefit society” (2006, p. 89).

3. The impact of the global communication on CSR approach for global firms

Our thesis is that the relation between CSR strategy and corporate reputation does not present the same dynamics in the global context compared with the local context. Specifically, in a local context, the action of a firm in its interaction with the external environment foresees, in our opinion, the chance to achieve a “selection” and a “hierarchy” of expectations and pressures that come from stakeholders depending on their relevance to the business strategies. Regarding social responsibility, the result is a discretionary evaluation and selection of the responses to be offered to the request for social responsibility by local stakeholders and in how they are classified in a system of prioritisation and hierarchical importance (Engle 2007; Islam & Siwar 2013; Wu & Wang 2014). For example, a specific local context might attribute high importance in the realm of the various meanings of “social responsibility” to the need to safeguard workers’ rights; on the other hand, another local context might attribute high priority to the need to safeguard environmental protection with a lower priority for issues of workers’ rights because it is felt that the legal system in place appropriately addresses the matter. Faced with this priority in a specific local context, the firm defines its local CSR strategy to respond to the demands expressed by its stakeholders.

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We contend that the criteria of selection and hierarchy of CSR expectations cannot be used in the global context. Although the CSR expectations are specific and can be prioritised in local contexts, they form a multidimensional framework on a global level, and this framework includes all of them. Even if local contexts express a different order of priority to the various aspects of CSR, for a global firm, the overall evaluation by stakeholders is formed by observing its total social behaviour adopted all over the world (Popoli 2011).

The underlying reason why the firm must show itself to be capable of satisfying CSR expectations on a multidimensional and multi-stakeholder level is that the impact of its social behaviour on corporate reputation is both amplified and conditioned by the very rapid flow of communications in the inter-stakeholder global context. Currently, the world communicates through many means: newspaper and magazine articles, television and radio broadcasts, Internet content, books, films, music, art, and advertising and marketing communications (Godes et al. 2005; Haas Dornas, Carvalho de Mesquita & Patrocinio 2014; McAlister, Sonnier & Shively 2012). In addition, the incredible development of Internet marketing has greatly accelerated the development of global communication. The speed at which news currently travels in the global context means that what a firm does in one geographical context is heard about all over the world in a very short lapse of time, amplifying the role played by the media in the construction of brand image and corporate reputation (Mark-Herbert & von Shantz 2007; van Gelder 2002).

Therefore, in the age of the Internet and global communications, what a firm does in one country becomes a factor of evaluation worldwide and goes beyond the boundaries of the local context (Mason & Simmons 2014; Russell & Russell 2010). As Dimofte, Johansson and Ronkainen (2008, p. 115) affirm, “a brand’s globality could imply worldwide success and, thus, the seal of approval of a wide marketplace audience”.

A global firm is judged on the basis of what it does anywhere in the world; the social responsibility a firm demonstrates in one country becomes a factor of evaluation for stakeholders worldwide, not only for those operating in the specific country in which the firm has adopted that particular social behaviour. For instance, the negative evaluation that Nike received a few years ago when the company used child labour in production processes in Cambodia spread all over the world and affected consumer and stakeholder judgments on a world level. Indeed, the disapproval of this behaviour was far greater in other parts of the world than in Cambodia itself.

A concrete example of this vision of stakeholders on a global rather than local level is provided by the Sony Group, which has eliminated some chemical substances from its products all over the world even though those specific substances are banned only in Europe (Sony CSR Report 2006). In our opinion, this demonstrates the full awareness of Sony that the firm is judged everywhere in the world in light of a behaviour adopted in every single country in which it operates, thereby rejecting a “selective” approach in the formulation of a CSR strategy. In fact, Sony could also have limited itself to eliminating from its products the substances that are banned only in Europe and could have continued to use them for products destined for markets outside Europe: however, by doing so, the firm would have run the risk of criticism from European stakeholders despite the fact that Sony fully abides by the legal requirements of the countries in which it operates.

We place emphasis on the fact that *global communication* means “*what starts out local becomes global*” and hold firms and their strategies and behaviours to worldwide evaluation. Consequently, we contend that the impossibility of selecting and prioritising CSR expectations expressed by global stakeholders is the consequence of the fact that the expectations of

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global stakeholders are formed through a process that has a two-fold nature, *additive and compensative*: *additive* because the expectations of stakeholders that the global firm must take into account are the sum of the expectations in the different local contexts in which the firm is present; *compensative* because all of these expectations and the powers of incidence and conditioning of stakeholders compensate each other reciprocally and must be considered on a level of equal importance. Referring to a previous example, the diversity of local stakeholders' expectations regarding the contents of social responsibility (working conditions, the environment, the transparency and truthfulness of information, and so on), tend to cancel each other out as a result of their overlapping effects in the global context, and consequently, the response of a firm cannot be based on the selection and prioritisation that is used locally.

Therefore, it becomes necessary in a global context to have an overall strategic plan that the firm must be able to define in a multidimensional and multi-stakeholder logic (Bondy, Moon & Matten 2012; Govindan, Kannan & Shankar 2014; Kumari 2014). It is indeed necessary to consider the relations that the various categories of stakeholders maintain with each other and the consequent reciprocal conditioning in positive and negative evaluations of the behaviour of the firm.

4. An Empirical Analysis

We developed an initial empirical analysis to verify the validity of our conceptual arguments. For this, we submitted a questionnaire on the approaches to standardisation or adaptation in corporate CSR strategies to a sample of 326 Italian-based multinational companies that operate in highly varied fields. The sample was chosen from a list of 711 companies provided by the Think and Make Communications Group (Asti, Italy), which selects only publicly traded companies with permanent production or distribution facilities abroad. The aim of this analysis was to obtain a preliminary indication of the validity of our conceptual considerations prior to potential attempts at broader empirical confirmation. The most important objective was to understand to what extent the survey participants would agree with our basic affirmations. Particular attention was given to eliciting the degree of standardisation or adaptation applied by the company in addressing the different geographical contexts in which they operate.

The questionnaire was submitted by e-mail and was composed of fourteen questions that were intended to reveal both the degree of incorporation of CSR in the company's business activities and the approach followed in formulating a CSR strategy. In the current paper, we present only the findings concerning our research question of whether companies follow standardisation or adaptation approaches in the formulation of their CSR strategies. This area was examined by seven out of the total 14 questions. However, this paper does not deal with the incorporation grade of CSR in the business; it only presents the second part of the questionnaire, the one on the standardisation *versus* adaptation approach used by firms. For this reason, we will only present the answers given to the seven questions related to this issue.

The number of replies received from the multinationals was low relative to the mail-out, with only 40 companies returning a fully completed questionnaire. In spite of this low rate of participation, the responses give a preliminary indication that the thesis proposed in our paper can be confirmed at the empirical level and is worthy of more ample inquiry for further and more in-depth verification. Table 1 presents a summary of the data received from the questionnaires.

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Table 1: Answers to CSR questionnaire

Question 1	% of answers
Is your company's approach to CSR primarily one of:	
• Standardisation	45%
• Adaptation to different local contexts	50%
• Both	5%
Question 2	
Overall, what percentage of your company's CSR strategy shows standardisation and what percentage shows adaptation?	
• 100% Standardisation – 0% Adaptation	0%
• 90% Standardisation – 10% Adaptation	5.5%
• 80% Standardisation – 20% Adaptation	16.6%
• 70% Standardisation – 30% Adaptation	16.6%
• 60% Standardisation – 40% Adaptation	5.5%
• 50% Standardisation – 50% Adaptation	22.2%
• 40% Standardisation – 60% Adaptation	0%
• 30% Standardisation – 70% Adaptation	27.7%
• 20% Standardisation – 80% Adaptation	0%
• 10% Standardisation – 90% Adaptation	0%
• 0% Standardisation – 100% Adaptation	0%
• No answer	5.5%
Question 3	
In your company's experience, universal principles such as environmental protection, community development, education, health and well-being, and security:	
• Cannot be varied according to local circumstances	67%
• Can be adapted to the different cultures and expectations of local stakeholders	33%
Question 4	
The local concerns of the different countries in which your company has permanent facilities:	
• Are taken into consideration prior to formulating CSR strategy and contribute to the definition of an integrated CSR strategy	61%
• Require the definition of specific CSR strategies for each nation	39%
Question 5	
To what extent do local managers participate in the definition of company CSR strategy?	
• Very much	27.7%
• Moderately	55%
• Somewhat	11%
• Little	0%
• No answer	1%
Question 6	
To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "Social responsibility or irresponsibility is evaluated by a stakeholder not only on the basis of what a company does in its own country but also on the basis of what it does in all the countries where it operates."	
• Very much	39%
• Moderately	50%
• Little	11%
• Not at all	0%
Question 7	
To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "In a world of ever-greater globalisation and communications, the expectancies for CSR tend towards uniformity in the different countries; thus, in CSR strategies, there will also be a trend towards	

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<i>the standardisation of elements and a simultaneous reduction of adaptation to the different countries.”</i>	
• Very much	22.2%
• Moderately	55.5%
• Little	22.2%
• Not at all	0%

In response to the generic question, “Is your company’s approach to CSR primarily one of: a) standardisation; b) adaptation to different local contexts”, 50% of the companies that participated in the survey replied “adaptation”, 45% answered “standardisation”, and 5% reported that they adopt a mixed approach. Nevertheless, when they were asked to specify what percentage of their CSR strategy is standardised and what percentage is adapted, the answers contradicted the answer to the first question. In fact, only 27% of respondents declared a ratio in which adaptation outweighed standardisation. The specific balance identified by these respondents was in all cases 70% adaptation/30% standardisation, with no other ratios indicated. On the other hand, 44% declared a prevalence of elements of standardisation in their CSR as follows: 5.5% indicated 90% standardisation/10% adaptation; 16.6% indicated 80% standardisation/20% adaptation; the same percentage of 16.6% indicated 70% standardisation/30% adaptation; 22.2% indicated 60% standardisation/40% adaptation. Finally, 5.5% of respondents indicated 50% standardisation/50% adaptation. The data thus indicate that in general, the aspects of standardisation prevail over strategies that are adapted from one nation to the next in global CSR strategies.

This affirmation is confirmed and seems justified by the answers to question 3, which asked about the feasibility of adjusting the universal principles of CSR, such as environmental protection, development, education, security, health and well-being, to the different cultures and expectations of local stakeholders. A full 67% of participants in the survey held that universal principles “cannot be varied according to local circumstances”, while only 33% believe that they can be “adapted to the different cultures and expectations of the local stakeholders”.

Questions 4 and 5 were designed to analyse the means through which local issues are taken into consideration in designing a multinational company’s CSR strategy. Our aim was to discern whether the companies respond to such issues by developing specific CSR strategies for each country of operation as well as the degree of involvement and participation of local managers in defining the overall strategy.

On the means of considering local issues (question 4), 61% of participants in the survey affirmed that local questions are taken into consideration prior to formulating CSR strategy and contribute to the definition of an integrated CSR strategy”, while 39% hold that local questions “require the definition of specific CSR strategies for each nation”.

On involvement from the subsidiary nations (question 5), the majority of participants affirmed that local managers participate “moderately” in the definition of CSR strategies, while only 27% replied that they participate “very much”, and indeed, 11% answered that local management participates “little”. Regarding these data, we believe that the following considerations hold:

1. If our sample had revealed an approach among the population of multinationals in which adaptation was prevalent, in our opinion, the percentages of the two answers “moderately” and “very much” would have been roughly inverted. In other words, we would expect a majority of “very much” involvement of local managers and not the contrary situation that we actually observe in which the larger share of local managers

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participate only moderately (and 11% little) among multinationals that apparently take a standardised approach.

2. If we connect this question to the preceding one, while we observe that companies assert that in 77.7% of cases (the sum of “moderately” and “very much”), local managers participate actively in the definition of the CSR strategy of the global company, from the answers to question 4, we can observe that this management of local managers is for the purposes of defining a single integrated CSR strategy and not for strategies distinguished for each country in which the company operates.

Questions 6 and 7 are directly connected to the central idea of the current paper. Our primary purpose has been to analyse the impact of global communications, which have now been available for some time and which promise to become still more intense, on the formulation of CSR strategies by multinational companies. Question 6 is a preliminary inquiry as to whether globally operating companies share our reasoning that CSR strategy must be multidimensional and multi-stakeholder on the perception that “The social responsibility or irresponsibility of a company is evaluated by a stakeholder on the basis of what it does in all the countries in which it operates”. As for the question of whether the companies agree with this notion, the responses were: 39% of survey participants agree “very much” and 50% agree “moderately”, while 11% agree “little”.

Finally, question 7 concerns the logical effect of the progressive increase in the intensity of global communications on the formulation of a multinational company’s CSR strategy. We have argued that such an increase serves as an amplifier of the impact of the company’s behaviour at the global level, thereby continuously reinforcing the mechanisms of evaluation and judgement described in question 6. Thus, the answers to question 7 (for which almost 78% of the companies agree with this logic) strongly confirm the phenomenon of the homogenisation of the worldwide stakeholders’ demand for CSR. In particular, we hold such homogenisation to be largely the result of the relatively new and rapid diffusion of information on the Internet. In our opinion, the response of multinationals to the steadily equalising demand for CSR will necessarily be a trend towards the standardisation of CSR strategy, which will then be addressed to an overall global market.

5. Results and Discussion

The answers provided by the companies participating in this first empirical analysis appear to provide confirmation that in the current global context, companies that operate in a number of countries increasingly tend to standardise their CSR strategies due to the interdependencies that now exist between their stakeholders. Companies operate in an environment that is becoming increasingly global and more harmonised in terms of the expectations that the stakeholders have for corporate social behaviour. Thus, it is logical that the approach of “national adaptation” in the formulation of CSR strategies will not appear to be satisfactory in the eyes of the company’s stakeholders, who currently judge the company on the basis of its behaviour on a global scale and no longer on the local scale alone.

However, the response to the research questions of this paper is that the relationship between CSR strategy and corporate reputation does not present the same dynamics in the global context as it does in the local context; in particular, while operating in a local context offers the opportunity to “select and prioritise” CSR expectations as an effect of the selection and prioritisation of stakeholders that the action of a firm must handle, operating in a global context imposes a more complex consideration of CSR expectations, given the interdependencies that

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are performance created amongst stakeholders who, while scattered over diverse contexts, are increasingly in direct communication with each other (question n. 1).

Therefore, in the global context, the different weights that are represented by the various dimensions of CSR tend to cancel each other out, given that the judgment of a global firm by stakeholders concerns everything the firm does anywhere in the world (question n. 2). Consequently, we argue that a global firm should adopt a multidimensional and multi-stakeholder approach to CSR strategy by defining a standardised CSR strategy that does not change in the various countries in which the firm operates (question n. 3).

6. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to contribute to the international business literature through a conceptual reflection on the formulation of a CSR strategy for a global firm in light of global inter-stakeholder communication; it has considered the fact that the evaluation of the social behaviour of a global firm is applied to everything the firm does in the different countries in which it operates and is not limited to the considerations of local CSR demand. If a greater “communicative isolation” and the separation between different countries once justified the adoption of a decentralised local CSR strategy, this is no longer true in a world of global communications that put everything a firm does in the process of conducting its business on display in a global shop window.

As we underlined in the introduction, this paper is primarily conceptual, based on the literature on corporate social responsibility; however, it also shows the results of a first empirical analysis, providing a preliminary confirmation of the concepts. The main limitation is the reduced number of global companies of our sample that answered to our questionnaire. For this reason, a future research should take into consideration in its empirical study more companies.

Moreover, we suggest two other primary needs for future research, and both of which require empirical analysis: first, a further analysis of the phenomenon of isomorphism in the formulation of the demand for CSR in different countries and, consequently, the isomorphism of the CSR programs of a global firm in the different countries in which it operates; second, a measurement of the extent to which the evaluation of the social behaviour of a firm in a given country is influenced by the evaluation of the behaviour adopted by the same firm in other countries whose values and culture and therefore local CSR expectations are different.

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