Kalina Grzesiuk

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: grzesiuk@kul.pl

Communicating a Company's CSR Activities Through Social Networks: A Theoretical Framework

Abstract

Companies which decide on socially responsible activities usually take into consideration benefits including the marketing effects of CSR programmes. However, in order to achieve that, the information about the socially responsible activities of companies must be spread and reach the audience of the company. That includes stakeholders related to the company that might be interested in receiving information about the social initiatives undertaken by the company. These stakeholders are connected with the firm through the network of social ties (SN). The main goal of this article is to present a theoretical framework of roles that these networks of social ties play in the effective communication of CSR activities. This paper is divided into three parts. The first one concerns the problem of how to communicate the involvement of a company in social initiatives. The second one contains the description of possible communication processes and strategies. The last one presents the analysis of the social networks perspective and its main characteristics and, in conclusion, it summarizes the main benefits a company can gain by applying the SN concept to CSR communication in the area of attribution and information spread through various channels.

Keywords: CSR, communication strategies, social networks

JEL Classification: M14, Z13

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to present the potential benefits of applying the social network (SN) perspective to making CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) communication strategies more effective. This is a conceptual paper and the theses presented in it require further empirical research to confirm them. The article is based on a comprehensive review of the literature mostly concerning the communication of CSR activities but it also includes a synthesis of theoretical aspects of these social network characteristics that might be, in the author's opinion, important for designing CSR communication strategies.

The discussion about CSR communication should begin with the basic assumption concerning the role that a company's engagement in social initiatives plays in its entire activity. The communication process is just a tool for achieving benefits from being socially responsible, but if a company concentrates too much on the instrumental aspect of CSR, it may be perceived as if the CSR activity was just one of the firm's marketing strategies. And it should not be so. Involvement in socially responsible initiatives must be an important part of organizational identity and not just a marketing solution. It should be one of the values determining organizational culture.[1] The marketing benefits of these activities are, in my opinion, a by-product, a reward for doing the right thing.

Nevertheless, for these effects to appear, the information must be communicated to the audience that consists of the company's stakeholders. The way an organization is connected with its stakeholders is through networks of ties, in most cases social networks (SN).

2. CSR communication

Communicating CSR activities is a difficult and sensitive topic, as it may act as a 'double-edged sword'. It's supposed to bring certain benefits for the socially responsible company, but, in reality, it often leads to quite the opposite effect, for the stakeholders may perceive it as bragging or an activity that is motivated by wanting to achieve economic gains for the firm.

Morsing and Schultz present two phenomena that arise when managers start making decisions about communication strategies of CSR activities.[2] The first one is called the 'self-promoter's paradox'. The authors suggest that companies that overemphasize their corporate legitimacy run the risk of achieving the opposite effect. So overaccentuating their good deed might be a mistake. The communication must be subtle and include cultural differences and a careful choice of supported issues. The second phenomenon concerns the managers making decisions about the communication strategies. They tend to be

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[1] A. Chamorro, T.M. Bañegil, *Green Marketing Philosophy: a Study of Spanish Firms with Ecolabels,* "Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management" 2006, Vol. 13(1), p. 11.

[2] M. Morsing, M. Schultz, *Corporate Social Responsibility Communication: Stakeholder Information, Response and Involvement Strategies,* "Business Ethics: A European Review" 2006, Vol. 15, p. 332.

self-seduced and self-absorbed. Managers publish information that they believe is important and they are proud of. They think others will perceive it the same way and that might be a misleading assumption. Stakeholders might simply not be interested in the information communicated. Moreover, they may think it's not appropriate for an organisation to be communicating their own good deeds.

As many researchers show, communicating CSR is usually limited to large organizations.[3] Multinational corporations are very sensitive to any threats to their reputation,[4] and it is especially visible in consumer-facing brands. This reputational risk in the informational and network society may manifest itself as e.g. consumer boycotts. This phenomenon is usually seen in social media. Another contemporary trend in consumer behaviour is the so-called positive ethical consumption. Consumers become more aware of and more sensitive to the ethical sphere of companies' operations on the market. The information is usually received from various media and it increasingly influences the purchase decisions of consumers. There is also a global trend of the increasing importance of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and using them in building relationships with customers. Some companies have introduced projects that allow consumers to access information about the company behind the product directly on the firm's shopping website. Generally speaking, ICTs allow producers and consumers to communicate more directly.

The effectiveness of CSR communication depends on many factors, the most prominent of which are:

(1) the attribution of motives,
(2) the source of information/communication channels,
(3) the importance of the benefit to the cause,
(4) the company-cause fit,
(5) the message content and timing (reactive vs proactive).

Each of these factors will be described in the following part of this paper. Communication is a way for a company to build stakeholders' awareness of its involvement in social initiatives. However, their attitude will be influenced in a significant way by their perception of the motives behind the organisation's actions. This attribution of motives will likely influence the response to the company's communication about engagement in CSR activities. The dimensions of attribution and their classification will be discussed later on.

Another important factor is the source of information about the firm's social engagement. There are various channels that can be used for communicating the CSR activities of a company.[5] The general classification of communication channels includes company-controlled communication (official documents and reports, and traditional channels like advertisements and websites) and external communicators (media, customers, and

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[3] J.J. Graafland, B. van de Ven, N. Stoffele, *Strategies and Instruments for Organising CSR by Small and Large Businesses in the Netherlands*, "Journal of Business Ethics", 2003, Vol. 47(1), pp. 45–60; W. Chapple, J. Moon, *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Asia: A Seven Country Study of CSR Website Reporting,* "Business & Society" 2005, Vol. 44(4), pp. 415–441; S. Knox, S. Maklan, P. French, *Corporate Stakeholder Social Responsibility: Relationships Exploring and Programme Reporting across Leading FTSE Companies,* "Journal of Business Ethics" 2005, Vol. 61(1), pp. 7–28.

[4] V. Desai, R. Potter, *The Companion to Development Studies*, Routledge, New York 2014, pp. 197–198.

[5] P. Ziek, *Making sense of CSR Communication,* "Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management" 2009, Vol. 16, pp. 137–145.

employees) that the firm is unable to fully control. The most popular among them are annual and non-financial reports[6] and webpages.[7] There are many guidelines as to what these reports should look like, and the standards are usually set by various international and national government institutions. One of the important aspects in choosing a communication channel that any company should consider concerns the credibility of the source as perceived by the stakeholders. The less controlled and more neutral the source, the more trustworthy the information is to the public.

Becker-Olsen and Hill present three main factors influencing the beliefs, attitudes, and intentions of the stakeholders: fitness, motivation, and timing.[8] According to these authors, initiatives taken by a company should fit the main operations areas of a company. Any discrepancy in this fitness is usually negatively perceived by the customers. The second factor concerns the attribution of the company's motivation. Social initiatives may be perceived as internally or externally beneficial, so they may be aimed at increasing company's profits or solving some social problems. The third factor concerns timing of initiative. In most cases proactive actions are better perceived than reactive ones. Customers' perception usually are, according to Becker-Olsen and Hill, derivatives of these three factors.

Klein and Dawar describe an interesting effect of CSR.[9] The authors call it the spill-over effect and they perceive it as being similar to the 'halo effect', well-known in marketing, in which the reputation of a well-known person influences the perception of a product. According to the authors, CSR may benefit a company in a similar way. The perception of a socially responsible company may increase the evaluation of the products offered by the firm.

The effectiveness in shaping positive attitudes towards a social cause can be also determined by a company's basic activities. La Ferle, Kuber, and Edwards suggested that the type of company (national vs multinational) is one of the important factors.[10] The authors conducted their research in two different countries: India and USA. The interesting fact is that customers in these two countries perceived the cause-related activities of a com-

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[6] P. Cerin, *Communication in Corporate Environmental Reports,* "Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management" 2002, Vol. 9(1), pp. 46–65; R. Hooghiemstra, *Corporate Communication and Impression Management: New Perspectives Why Companies Engage in Corporate Social Reporting,* "Journal of Business Ethics" 2000, Vol. 27(1/2), pp. 55–68; A. Chatterji, D. Levine, *Breaking Down The Wall Of Codes: Evaluating Non-Financial Performance Measurement,* "California Management Review" 2005, Vol. 48(2), pp. 29–52; J. Haddock-Fraser, I. Fraser, *Assessing Corporate Environment Reporting Motivations: Differences Between "Close-to-Market" and "Business-to-Business" Companies*, "Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management" 2008, Vol. 15 (3), pp. 140–155.

[7] C. Coupland, *Corporate Social Responsibility as Argument on the Web Corporate as Argument Social Responsibility on the Web,* "Journal of Business Ethics" 2005, Vol. 62(4), pp. 355–366; N. Guimarães-Costa, M. Pina e Cunha, *The Atrium Effect of Website Openness on the Communication of Corporate Social Responsibility,* "Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management" 2008, Vol. 15(1), pp. 43–51.

[8] K.L. Becker-Olsen, A. Cudmore, R.P. Hill, *The Impact of Perceived Corporate Social Responsibility on Consumer Behavior,* "Journal of Business Research" 2006, Vol. 59 (1), pp. 46–53.

[9] J. Klein, N. Dawar, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Consumers' Attributions and Brand Evaluations in a Product–Harm Crisis,* "International Journal of Research in Marketing" 2004, Vol. 21.3, pp. 203–217.

[10] C. La Ferle, G. Kuber, S.M. Edwards, *Factors Impacting Responses to Cause-Related Marketing in India and the United States: Novelty, Altruistic Motives, and Company Origin,* "Journal of Business Research" 2013, Vol. 66.3, pp. 364–373.

pany in a totally different way. According to these authors, this factor may be influenced by cultural differences. The internal system of customers' values is also an important aspect of their perception of a company's social initiatives.[11]

CSR activities might breed public cynicism and suspicion.[12] The reason behind it is that there are many examples of firms involved in activities such as greenwashing. Recent corporate scandals and ethical lapses, like Volkswagen's misconduct in 2015 (sometimes called Dieselgate), broad cynicism, and anxiety about contemporary life lead consumers to be sceptical of firms' reasons for engaging in CSR.[13]

Forehard and Grier write about consumer scepticism toward a particular declaration of company's intention to undertake cause-related activities.[14] This scepticism may have two variations: situational or dispositional. The first one is defined as a momentary state of distrust, the other is an ongoing tendency. The authors claim that the main factor shaping customer perception of a company's actions is related to the motivation behind it. According to the authors, actions perceived as firm-serving may result in a negative attribution when they are inconsistent with the expressed motives. One of the important factors influencing customers' perceptions of the stated motives of the socially responsible actions undertaken by companies is the level of trust. Trust is important because it plays an important role in the attribution of a company's motives, and it directly influences consumer responses, such as purchase intentions.

According to Bergling and Nakata, some ethical issues of cause-related marketing might include difficult cooperation between commercial and non-profit organisations.[15] The main problem concerns the goals. The primary purpose for a firm is to increase value for its shareholders and that aim might be in conflict with a non-profit organisation's goals which include improving social conditions, educating, and caring about the environment. The second issue concerns the achieved benefits from the cooperation. It might be perceived as a firm advocating a social cause or a company seeking reputational effects which exploits a non-profit organisation. Sometimes problems with cause-related marketing might be in the lack of transparency and disclosure of information regarding the agreement between organisations that may mislead customers. For example, Enea, a Polish energy company, recently received a penalty for a message included in one of their marketing campaigns. It suggested that the company based its power production on green energy sources when the quota of the power produced from renewable energy sources was

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[11] G. Zasuwa, *Do the ends justify the means? How altruistic values moderate consumer responses to corporate social initiatives*, "Journal of Business Research" 2016, Vol. 69, pp. 3714–3719.

[12] M.E. Porter, M.R. Kramer, *The Link Between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility,* "Harvard Business Review" 2006, Vol. 78, pp. 78–92; X. Luo, C.B. Bhattacharya, *Corporate Social Responsibility, Customer and Satisfaction, and Market Value,* "Journal of Marketing" 2006, Vol. 70(4), pp. 1–18.

[13] A.M. Arumi, R. Wooden, J. Johnson, *The Charitable Impulse: Those who Give to Charities – and Those who Run Them – Talk about what's Needed to Keep the Public's Trust,* "Public Agenda" 2005, pp. 1–27; A. Helm, *Cynics and Skeptics: Consumer Dispositional Trust,* "Advances in Consumer Research" 2004, Vol. 31, pp. 345–351.

[14] M.R. Foreh, S. Grier, *When is Honesty the Best Policy? The Effect of Stated Company Intent on Consumer Skepticism*, "Journal of Consumer Psychology" 2003, Vol. 13.3, pp. 349–356.

[15] M. Berglind, C. Nakata, *Cause-Related Marketing: More Buck than Bang?*, "Business Horizons" 2005, Vol. 48(5), pp. 449–450.

just 5%. The last of the issues raised by the authors concerns financial equity, meaning the difference between the amount of money spent by companies on advertising social campaign and the amount of money generated for the social cause.

The last argument also seems to be supported by the research conducted by Yoon, Gürhan-Canli and Schwarz.[16] These authors determined the factors influencing customer perception of social actions of corporations with a bad reputation. They found that one of the most important factors is the sincerity of the motives attributed to the company's actions. That's why CSR activities might have either a positive or negative effect on the firm's reputation. This influence is also moderated by variables such as the salience of the cause, the source of information about CSR activities, and the ratio of CSR contributions and CSR campaign-related advertising costs.

The attribution of motives is one of the most important factors of consumers' perceptions of a company's CSR activities. According to Ellen, Webb and Mohr (2000), two of the most common attributed motives are self-centred and others-centred.[17] Kim and Lee include similar motives, calling them firm-serving or public-serving.[18] The names are different but the effect is similar. Companies achieve positive reputational effects when their actions are perceived as benefiting their stakeholders or beneficiaries, and negative effects when such initiatives are perceived as being company-centred. One of the exceptions is the situation when the actions, although benefiting mainly the company, are perceived as being part of implementing corporate strategy. That's true for cultures based on the assumption that something that is good for the company is also good for its employees and society as a whole. The other exception concerns the situation when an initiative is perceived negatively as serving others and the motive behind it is 'bribing' the customers.

Andreau, Casado-Diaz and Mattile based their research on two types of CSR initiatives: environment-related and employee-based ones.[19] They examined consumer perceptions of emotional and rational massage appeals of these actions in the case of hedonic and utilitarian service types. The results of their research showed that rational information based on facts and figures was more appealing in the case of environmental activities and for utilitarian services. Meanwhile, emotional messages were more effective in communicating employee-based initiatives. However, according to Williams and Aaker consumers are able to perceive communication in a more complex way when they are presented with a message provoking a positive or negative emotional reaction.[20]

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[16] Y. Yoon, Z. Gürhan-Canli, N. Schwarz, *The Effect of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Activities on Companies with Bad Reputations,* "Journal of Consumer Psychology", 2006, Vol. 16(4), pp. 377–390.

[17] P.S. Ellen, L.A. Mohr, D.J. Webb, *Charitable Programs and the Retailer: Do They Mix?*, "Journal of Retailing" 2000, Vol. 76(3), pp. 393–406.

[18] S. Kim, Y.J. Lee, *The Complex Attribution Process of CSR Motives*, "Public Relations Review" 2012, Vol. 38(1), pp. 168–170.

[19] L. Andreu, A.B. Casado-Díaz, A.S. Mattila, *Effects of Message Appeal and Service Type in CSR Communication Strategies,* "Journal of Business Research" 2015, Vol. 68.7, pp. 1488–1495.

[20] P. Williams, J.L. Aaker, *Can Mixed Emotions Peacefully Coexist?,* "Journal of Consumer Research" 2002, Vol. 28(4), pp. 636–649.

3. Communication strategies for CSR activities

There are three main factors influencing CSR communication strategies:
- (1) Location – national distinctiveness and range,[21] economic influence of political and social conditions of a country,[22]
- (2) Size of the company – differences between small, medium, and large companies,[23]
- (3) Departmental origin of the communication behaviour:
    - (a) CSR is real only if it changes the organization itself,[24]
    - (b) towards an interactive mode of communication with the investors,[25]
    - (c) the need for true corporate commitment,[26]
    - (d) combining maximum social benefits with gains for the company through adequate corporate strategy.[27]

A company's communication is directed at various stakeholders who have diverse expectations regarding the type of information they want to receive. That's why Morsing, Schultz and Nielsen introduced three main processes of communication: expert, endorsed, and inside-out.[28] Expert communication usually involves sending information to such stakeholders as the organisation's members, critical shareholders, NGOs, politicians, journalists, and the local authorities. The main channels of transferring messages in this type of communication are the company's websites, internal personnel magazines, sustainability reports, and face-to-face meetings. The content of such messages is usually based on facts and figures.

The endorsed communication process is usually directed at the employees and the media. Sometimes it also involves employees as intermediaries in relations between the company source and the media. This allows for the message to be perceived as more credible than when the information is sent by the company directly to the media.

Customers do not usually need or expect to be given formal reports of the company's social activities.[29] They build their assessment of a firm on their stakeholders' opinions. That is why, when a company wants to communicate its social actions, it should use dif-

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[21] W. Chapple, J. Moon, op. cit., pp. 415–441.

[22] C.C. Baughn, J.C. McIntosh, *Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility in Asian Countries and Other Geographical Regions*, "Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management" 2007, Vol. 14(4), pp. 189–205; R. Welford, C. Chan, M. Man, *Priorities for Corporate Social Responsibility: A Survey of Businesses and their Stakeholders*, "Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management" 2007, Vol. 62, pp. 52–62.

[23] L. Spence, R. Schmidpeter, A. Habisch, *Assessing Social Capital: Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in Germany and the U.K*, "Journal of Business Ethics" 2003, Vol. 47, pp. 17–29; J.J. Graafland, B. van de Ven, N. Stoffele, op. cit, pp. 45–60; S. Knox, S. Maklan, P. French, op. cit., pp. 7–28.

[24] P. Frankental, *Corporate Social Responsibility – a PR Invention?,* "Corporate Communications: An International Journal" 2001, Vol. 6(1), pp. 18–23.

[25] K. Hockerts, L. Moir, *Communicating Corporate Responsability to Investors: The Changing Role of the Investor Relations Function*, "Journal of Business Ethics" 2004, Vol. 52(1), pp. 85–98.

[26] A. Chamorro, T.M. Bañegil, op. cit.*,*

[27] M.E. Porter, M.R. Kramer, op. cit.*,*

[28] M. Morsing, M. Schultz, K.U. Nielsen, *The 'Catch 22' of communicating CSR: Findings from a Danish study,* "Journal of Marketing Communication" 2008, Vol. 14, pp. 105–108.

[29] Ibidem.

ferent strategies for different recipients. When addressing expert stakeholders, the expert communication process is the most effective. These institutions expect to be given facts and figures and understand the professional terminology used in the companies' reports. For the general public and customers, companies should use the endorsed communication process using simple language and very often an emotional message. A very credible way of communicating social initiatives to the general public is using the so called inside-out approach. That means involving and committing employees and making them the source of the information.

According to Morsing and Schultz, there are three main communication strategies that firms implement to spread the information about the company's social involvement (Table 1).[30] The most basic one is the stakeholder information strategy. It is based on a one-way information flow from the company to its stakeholders. The message sent usually consists of information about the company's activities that, according to managers, might make the customers perceive it in a more favourable way. The main challenge in this strategy is to design a message that is appealing to the public. The company takes into consideration e.g. whether the content of the message should be emotional or rational. The main tools include pamphlets, leaflets, brochures, etc.

The second strategy is the stakeholder response strategy. Here, the communication process is two-way but asymmetric, because in response to the company's message there is only feedback in the form of opinion polls, dialogue and partnering in implementing social initiatives. Still, the information flow from the customers is reactive and not proactive. Consumers may voice their ideas but it is still the company that decides which initiative is supported. The main challenge in this strategy is identifying the relevant stakeholders that should be invited to cooperate with the company.

The last of the strategies described by Morsing and Schultz is the stakeholder involvement strategy.[31] The communication process in this case is two-way and symmetric, because the stakeholders involved in it are active participants of actions implemented by the company. They are invited to the project at the stage of designing actions to be taken and have a real opportunity to suggest activities that are, in their opinion, the most important and beneficial for society or the environment. That is why initiatives undertaken by the company are broadly accepted and perceived in a favourable way by the stakeholders. After all, they are an important part of it. This strategy requires that a frequent and systematic dialogue with organisation's stakeholders is established. The main difference between this strategy and the one described earlier is the proactiveness of the actions, as partners are invited to be involved before the decision about the initiatives is taken. The main challenge in this strategy is building relationships with the stakeholders and this is the area in which the appropriate management of social networks becomes an important aspect of the company's actions.

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[30] M. Morsing, M. Schultz, op. cit., pp. 325–329.
[31] Ibidem.

Table 1. Communication strategies

Stakeholder information strategy	Stakeholder response strategy	Stakeholder involvement strategy
Public information – one way	Two-way asymmetric	Two-way symmetric
From company to stakeholder	Feedback – results of opinion polls, dialogue, partnerships	Stakeholders involved – participate and suggest actions
Information – favourable action		Frequent and systematic, proactive dialogue with e.g. opinion makers, corporate critics, the media
Challenge – designing an appealing message	Challenge – identifying relevant stakeholders	Challenge – building relationships
Press releases, brochures, pamphlets, magazines, facts, figures		

Source: M. Morsing, M. Schultz, *Corporate Social Responsibility Communication: Stakeholder Information, Response and Involvement Strategies,* "Business Ethics: A European Review" 2006, No. 15, p. 324.

4. SN and communicating CSR

One of the main assumptions this article is based on concerns the importance and benefits of managing ties which connect every organisation with its internal and external stakeholders. The idea of taking social networks into consideration is based on the concept of the social embeddedness of the economy introduced by American sociologist Mark Granovetter.[32] He claimed that all economic actions are influenced by social relations that actors have with others. Granovetter described two groups of factors describing the social network. These were structural and relational attributes. Structural features concern the structure of the network of ties and include many characteristics. For the purpose of this article, only selected ones were taken into consideration and they include structural holes, centrality, the density of ties, status, and the multiplexity of ties.[33]

The concept of structural holes was introduced by Ronald Burt.[34] This author stated that each network consists of many subnetworks that are connected with each other by a limited number of nodes. That is why there are structural holes between subnetworks, and the actors that connect them play a very important role as bridges between otherwise discon-

[32] M. Granovetter, *Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness,* "American Journal of Sociology" 1985, Vol. 91(3), pp. 481–510.

[33] M. Granovetter, *The Impact of Social Structure on Economic Outcomes*, "Journal of Economic Perspectives" 2005, Vol. 19(1), pp. 33–50.

[34] R.S. Burt, *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1992.

nected subnetworks. Centrality is the measure of the position in a certain network of ties. Actors with a central position can generally be described as having a large number of direct and indirect ties with others.[35] Network density is 'a measure of the incidence of direct relations among the possible pairs of a network'.[36] Status is a characteristic that can be seen in three dimensions: actual, desired, and perceived.[37] All of them can influence the structure of the social network as actors tend to be connected with those with a higher rather than an equal or lower status. Asymmetric information or conspicuous consumption are just two of the examples of benefits of high status and belonging to the elite of actors on the market.[38] The last of the characteristics selected for this paper is the multiplexity of ties. This phenomenon concerns the situation when two actors are simultaneously connected by multiple ties.[39] According to Provan, Fish and Sydow they are 'thought to be an indicator of the strength and durability of an organization's links because they enable the connection between an organization and its linkage partner to be sustained even if one type of link dissolves'.[40]

The relational characteristics concentrate on the content of ties between actors and usually concern their strength. Granovetter introduced the concept of strong and weak ties and the division was based on the frequency of contacts, emotional closeness and combining a professional relationship with a social one.[41] Strong ties allow for the creation of a consistent, homogenous group identity, they help build trust between its members, and they simplify the knowledge exchange between partners. However, weak ties are also important for organisations as they tend to form bridges across the subnetworks not connected in any other ways. So, they help in bridging the structural holes. In this way, weak ties allow access to new parts of the network and make it easier to spread the information throughout the whole network.

Brian Uzzi introduced a similar classification dividing ties into embedded and arm's length ones, where the first type included closely-knit groups of firms and the other loose connections of firms in the market.[42] There is also a classification of relational characteristics dividing the relations into instrumental and expressive (affective) ties. Generally speaking 'expressive ties are normative and affect based, whereas instrumental ties are information and cognition based'.[43]

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[35] G.R. Salancik, R.S. Burt, *WANTED: A Good Network Theory of Organization,* "Administrative Science Quarterly" 1995, Vol. 40(2), p. 345.

[36] N.E. Friedkin, *The Development of Structure in Random Networks: An Analysis of the Effects of Increasing Network Density on Five Measures Of Structure,* "Social Networks" 1981, Vol. 3(1), p. 41.

[37] J.C. Johnson, M.K. Orbach, *Perceiving the Political Landscape: Ego Biases in Cognitive Political Networks,* "Social Networks" 2002, Vol. 24(3), pp. 291–310.

[38] J.M. Podolny, *Networks as the Pipes and Prisms of the Market,* "American Journal of Sociology" 2001, Vol. 107(1), p. 39.

[39] M.A. Carpenter, M. Li, H. Jiang, *Social Network Research in Organizational Contexts: A Systematic Review of Methodological Issues and Choices,* "Journal of Management" 2012, Vol. 38(4), p. 1336.

[40] K.G. Provan, A. Fish, J. Sydow, *Interorganizational Networks at the Network Level: A Review of the Empirical Literature on Whole Networks,* "Journal of Management" 2007, Vol. 33(3), p. 484.

[41] M. Granovetter, *The Strength of Weak Ties,* "American Journal of Sociology" 1973, Vol. 36 (3), p. 1361.

[42] B. Uzzi*, The Sources and Consequences of Embeddedness for the Economic Performance of Organizations: The Network Effect, *"American Sociological Review" 1996, Vol. 61(4), p. 677.

[43] E.E. Umphress, G. Labianca, D.J. Brass, E. Kass, L. Scholten, *The Role of Instrumental and Expressive Social Ties in Employees' Perceptions of Organizational Justice,* "Organization Science" 2003, Vol. 14(6), p. 742.

For the purposes of this article, the analysis of possible benefits of applying the social network perspective to the CSR communication process was limited to its two main effects: the attribution process and the choice of communication channels. The social network perspective, in turn, was applied in two dimensions: structural and relational. The SN approach is often analysed in connection with the concept of social capital, which has three dimensions: structural, relational, and cognitive. However, for this article, the perspective was narrowed down to social networks analysis and the two areas mentioned above. The results of adopting this perspective are shown in the form of a matrix in Table 2.

Among the structural characteristics of social networks that influence stakeholders' perceptions of the CSR initiative are status, density of ties, and multiplexity. The high status of an actor in the network is usually achieved in time, and a company's long history of positive behaviour is the source of its credibility in the eyes of its stakeholders. As Ganley and Lampe state, high status breeds 'a higher assumption by other participants of veracity and authority'.[44] That is why actors with a higher status are perceived as being more trustworthy, and therefore their stakeholders are more willing to attribute positive motives for their involvement in social initiatives.

The denser the network is, the more ties an organisation has with its stakeholders. The degree of interconnectedness is higher and that usually leads to a more-closely knit network being created. As SN research shows, 'dense networks have been shown to provide social support and increase the affect. These are conditions conducive to the development of (…) trust'.[45] Another important influence of dense networks is the risk to reputational effects.[46] In closely-knit evaluator networks, the risk of spreading negative information is higher and that influences managerial decisions. It's simply not worthwhile acting in an unethical way and this fact is an important source of credibility of the company's motives of social engagement.

Multiplexity is a situation in which partners are connected by more than one type of tie. That usually means that apart from the professional, instrumental ties the company has with its partners, there are also relations that involve social content, like loyalty or friendship, and these lead to a feeling of identification with the company. As Dahlander and McFarland notice, 'multiplex ties afford greater certainty about and understanding of interaction partners'.[47] Acting in an unethical way when a company is connected with multiple ties is more costly because it means breaking more than one type of tie.

As for the influence of structural characteristics on the choice of communication channels, there are two important aspects a company should take into consideration. The first one concerns structural holes. Identifying the structure of existing networks may allow the company to bridge the existing gaps between subnetworks, and this may lead to gaining access to new stakeholders who had not previously been perceived as the com-

[44] D. Ganley, C. Lampe, *The Ties That Bind: Social Network Principles in Online Communities,* "Decision Support Systems" 2009, Vol. 47(3), p. 267.

[45] R.Y.J. Chua, P. Ingram, M.W. Morris, *From the Head and the Heart: Locating Cognition-and Affect-Based Trust in Managers' Professional Networks,* "Academy of Management Journal" 2008, Vol. 51(3), p. 441.

[46] M. Power, T. Scheytt, K. Soin, K. Sahlin, *Reputational Risk as a Logic of Organizing in Late Modernity,* "Organization Studies" 2009, Vol. 30(2–3), pp. 301–324.

[47] L. Dahlander, D.A. McFarland, *Ties That Last: Tie Formation and Persistence in Research Collaborations over Time*, "Administrative Science Quarterly" 2013, Vol. 58, p. 77.

pany's target audience and addressed. This, in turn, may allow the spread of the information about the company's social initiatives engagement to be broadened. The second structural characteristic is the centrality of the organisation's position in the network. As a result of having such a position, an organisation can spread the information about its engagement in a socially responsible activity quickly to a large number of nodes.[48]

The relational dimension of the matrix involves the importance of strong and weak ties for each of the analysed CSR areas. In order to influence the attribution of positive motives to company's actions by its stakeholders, an organisation can use its strong ties with its partners. As mentioned before, strong relations between partners usually lead to building trust, and the information sent by the company is perceived as more credible. However, weak ties may also help a firm to achieve some benefits. The public usually gets information through an intermediary, such as the company's employees or the media, not from the company itself. When the source of information is perceived as not having strong connections with the organisation itself, it is seen as neutral and therefore more credible, because there is no apparent gain for them to convey information beneficial for the company.

Table 2. The effects of social networks on CSR communication in the aspect of attribution and communication channels

Effects	Structural	Relational
Attribution	Higher **status** – higher credibility **Density** of ties – degree of interconnectedness, closely-knit network –trust building **Multiplexity** – partners interconnected by more than one type of relationship – high cost of breaking ties	**Strong ties** – Trust – credibility of information, **Weak ties** – Credibility – no evident connection with company – neutral
Communication channels	**Structural holes** – access to new networks **Centrality** – can reach others in a small number of direct and indirect links – range	**Strong ties** – Knowledge about partners – adequate information **Weak ties** – Effective spread of information in other networks

Source: author's own elaboration.

There is an extensive amount of research concerning the role of strong and weak ties in the spread of information throughout the social network. Having close relationships with other actors helps organisations make the information more appropriate to their needs. As mentioned before, close ties breed better knowledge between partners and, through that, they help in understanding their information needs. That's how a company can make better decisions about the type, amount, and the form of the message conveyed to its closely relat-

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[48] J. Tang, M. Musolesi, C. Mascolo, V. Latora, V. Nicosia, *Analysing Information Flows and Key Mediators through Temporal Centrality Metrics Categories and Subject Descriptors*, Proceedings of the 3rd Workshop on Social Network Systems, ACM 2010, pp. 1–6.

ed stakeholders. However, weak ties are just as important, if not more so, for the diffusion of information in the social network. They allow the company to reach the more remote parts of network and very often bridge the structural holes and, through that, send the information to many subnetworks of stakeholders that are not closely connected with it.

5. Conclusion

Choosing how a company communicates its socially responsible activities to its stakeholders is not easy. Too much and inappropriate information may lead to a negative perception of the firm. However, not sharing this information with the company's target audience deprives it of rewards in the form of various marketing effects, such as a positive image and reputation. That is why every company should choose their communication strategies wisely and include in their decisions those factors which can influence stakeholders' perceptions, including, among others, attribution effects and the choice of communication channels.

The main purpose of this article is to combine the knowledge about CSR communication with the SN perspective. In the author's opinion, an appropriate management of the ties each company has with its stakeholders may result in them achieving beneficial effects. The review of the literature presented in this article shows that, at least theoretically, choosing the right ties might influence the effects of CSR communication by affecting the attribution process. Stakeholders might evaluate the company's social initiative as a positive or a negative one, depending on the perceived credibility of information sent through the specific types of ties used to communicate it. Furthermore, organisations might increase the range of their informational campaign by using the structural characteristics of the network they operate in, such as structural holes. However, as this is a conceptual paper, the hypothesis stated in it should become the basis for empirical research to determine its validity.

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