Creating Trust through Transparency?
A Special Issue

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Abstract

In an era of increasing public skepticism towards businesses and institutions, organizations are under growing pressure from stakeholders to be transparent and trustworthy in their disclosures. The ability to communicate openly and honestly with stakeholders has become vital for success. Transparency ensures that the information shared is accurate, comprehensive, and accessible, allowing stakeholders to make informed judgments about a company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts. Trust, meanwhile, is the cornerstone of effective communication; built through consistent and honest interactions, it is essential for maintaining stakeholder confidence and support.

This special issue delves into the pivotal roles of transparency and trust in corporate communication, shedding light on how these aspects contribute to corporate credibility. Transparency enables organizations to demonstrate accountability, creating a positive impact on organizational reputation and fostering stronger relationships with stakeholders. Additionally, trust helps in enhancing stakeholder engagement, ensuring they feel valued and informed. Together, transparency and trust form the bedrock of robust business communication strategies, enabling organizations to navigate the complexities of modern corporate environments effectively. By prioritizing clear and honest exchanges, companies can build a solid foundation for long-term success and sustainability. This issue explores various strategies and approaches for enhancing transparency and trust, highlighting their significance in shaping corporate communication practices that resonate with stakeholder expectations and promote organizational integrity.

1. Introduction

In the current context of growing public suspicion and distrust towards businesses and institutions, organizations have been under mounting pressure from stakeholders to commit to disclosing information in a way that is perceived as transparent and trustworthy. The ability to communicate openly and honestly with stakeholders has emerged as a critical determinant of success. Transparency ensures that the information shared is accurate, comprehensive, and accessible, thereby enabling stakeholders to make informed judgments about the company's CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) efforts. Trust, on the other hand, is the foundation upon

which effective communication is based: built through consistent and honest communication, trust is essential for maintaining stakeholder confidence and support. This special issue explores the pivotal role that transparency and trust play in corporate communication, highlighting how these elements contribute to corporate credibility, as they impact organizational reputation, stakeholder engagement, and overall business communication strategies.

Transparency in corporate communication is increasingly recognized as a dynamic process rather than a static quality: it is a multifaceted concept that goes beyond merely sharing information. It is intended as regular, clear and honest communication of information pertinent to decisions; "participation of stakeholders in identifying the information they need; and objective, balanced reporting of an organization's activities and policies that holds the organization accountable" (Rawlins 2009, 74). This multidimensional construct encompasses disclosure, clarity, and accuracy, ensuring that information is complete, comprehensible, and reflective of reality (Schnackenberg, Tomlinson and Coen 2021; Schnackenberg and Tomlinson 2016). By embracing transparency, companies are expected to adopt ethical practices and openly communicate their efforts in addressing CSR issues. They can thus effectively address public scepticism surrounding CSR motives and practices and reassure stakeholders that the company is committed to responsible and ethical behavior, thereby enhancing their credibility and fostering trust among stakeholders (Kim and Lee 2023).

Trust is fundamentally linked to transparency in corporate communication. Organizations that are transparent build strong reputations and gain the trust of stakeholders (Stacks, Dodd and Men 2013), whereas avoiding communication or providing incomplete or untruthful information can lead to a loss of trust and credibility (Fombrun and van Riel 2004). Trusting a company implies believing that they will act in the best interests of its stakeholders, further their interests, and intentionally cause no harm (Koskela and Crawford Camiciottoli 2020). Defined as an emotional bond based on the relationship, beliefs, and moral standing of the trustee (Wicks, Berman and Jones 1999), trust is often analyzed from the trustor's perspective, focusing on their perception, their willingness to see the actions of the trustee as based on correct behaviour and in the interest of stakeholders (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995). This perception is shaped by three characteristics of the trustee – ability, benevolence, and integrity. Ability encompasses the trustee's skills, benevolence reflects their positive orientation towards the trustor, and integrity indicates adherence to principles acceptable to the trustor (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995). This framework is useful for investigating how companies communicate and reinforce their trustworthy identity, especially when engaging with potential sources of distrust Fuoli and Paradis (2014) developed a trust-repair model framework that

highlights discursive strategies used by companies to achieve the desired effects of ability, benevolence, and integrity while demonstrating commitment to transparency and openness.

Special attention is paid in this special issue to transparency and trust in CSR communication – an integral aspect of modern business practices, reflecting an organization's commitment to ethical, social, and environmental responsibilities. Discourse and genre studies have paid great attention to CSR reports, whether looking at their generic structure (e.g., Yu and Bondi 2017; Catenaccio 2012) or their linguistic and discursive resources, with special attention to issues of legitimation and trust (Fuoli and Beelitz 2024; Bondi and Nocella 2023; Lin 2021; Fuoli 2018; 2012; Jaworska and Nanda 2018; Fuoli and Paradis 2014; Bhatia 2012; Breeze 2012).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication has a dual purpose: to transparently share information about a company's practices and results, and to highlight a positive image of the organization. To enhance these efforts, many companies are increasingly adopting the ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) framework. ESG provides a comprehensive approach by addressing not only environmental and social responsibilities but also critical governance and management practices. Essentially, ESG expands on CSR by integrating these key areas into a holistic strategy, helping organizations demonstrate their commitment to sustainable and responsible business conduct in a transparent and credible way. Effective CSR communication, therefore, is more than just a reporting tool; it is a strategic process that informs stakeholders about a company's initiatives, enhances reputation and trust, anticipates stakeholder expectations, and provides transparent information about a company's standing in the sphere of social and environmental concerns. As highlighted by Graafland, Eijffinger and Smid (2004, 137), transparency plays a major role in this process, contributing to fostering trust and strengthening stakeholder relationships (Lee and Chung 2023).

In this scenario, while great attention has been paid to transparency in management studies, sparse consideration has been given to the discursive construction of transparency in CSR disclosures, thus highlighting the need for linguistic research to understand how transparency is communicated and perceived. The aim of this special issue is to shed light on the way in which transparency is encoded in language and other multimodal resources, i.e. lexically, grammatically, discursively and multimodally constituted in organizational communication. The papers offer an overview of corporate discourse in a range of sectors and present analyses inspired by different aspects and different methodologies, though with a common interest in corpus-informed discourse perspectives.

To enhance this exploration, the papers are organized to reflect how transparency is managed in different sectors like the fashion industry and the transport sector, with the last two contributions specifically focusing on the realms of politics and pharmaceutical companies,

where transparency is especially crucial for maintaining public trust and upholding ethical standards. The inclusion of these contributions is important for several reasons.

Firstly, the political landscape often grapples with issues of accountability and public scrutiny, making transparency essential for maintaining democratic integrity. By examining transparency in politics, the paper sheds light on the complexities of governance and the impact of transparency – or its absence – on citizen engagement and policy effectiveness.

Secondly, the pharmaceutical industry operates in a highly regulated environment, where transparency is crucial for ensuring safety, efficacy, and ethical conduct in drug development and marketing. This industry has faced significant scrutiny regarding transparency in clinical trials and pricing, thus making it essential to analyze how transparency practices can mitigate public skepticism and enhance trust in health-related decisions.

By bringing together these diverse contributions, the papers provide a comprehensive view of how transparency functions as a cornerstone across different sectors, emphasizing its significance not only for public accountability but also for fostering trust in institutions that profoundly affect society. Such an arrangement underscores the multifaceted nature of transparency and the need for tailored approaches that consider the unique challenges and responsibilities of each sector.

Using semantic and lexical analysis with both quantitative and qualitative methods, Crawford's study compares sustainability reports from fashion brands to communications from a global fashion media company. The findings reveal that brands place more emphasis on environmental transparency linked to manufacturing, whereas fashion media focuses on social themes like diversity and inclusion, thereby suggesting varying priorities in transparency communication. Furthermore, Cacchiani's study examines the influence of business model, history, and corporate culture on sustainability communication and transparency in the fashion industry, specifically comparing Gap Inc. and Hermès. By utilizing discourse studies, corpus linguistics, and insights from webpage usability and multimodal studies, the author aims to identify similarities and differences in how sustainability information is presented online. Drawing on Wehmeier (2018), Rawlins (2009), Graafland and Nihof (2007), Graafland, Eijffinger and Smid (2004), Cacchiani concludes that both brands score highly on the Fashion Transparency Index 2020 (FTI 2020).

The FTI is at the center of Piotti and Cucchi's analysis too, which specifically investigates diachronically, how brands disclose their sustainability efforts. The findings underscore the need for collaboration between FTI authors and linguists, as previous observations regarding language have not been systematically examined. Furthermore, the analysis highlights that terms like "encourage" and "suggest" may hinder transparency when used in disclosures, emphasizing the necessity for clearer language in sustainability reporting. Similarly, Jimenez

and Ruffolo focus on CSR disclosures in the fast fashion sector, comparing Inditex and Gap Inc. through a corpus-based discourse analysis. This study identifies key stakeholders addressed and topics disclosed, thereby revealing a strategic use of language that emphasizes accountability and collaboration. Notably, topics such as ethical supply chains and employee well-being are highlighted, with careful balancing of promotional goals and transparency in CSR communications.

Following the initial focus on the fashion industry, the discussion expands to offer in-depth analyses of how transparency is constructed and perceived in another specific area, the transport sector, utilizing various methodologies. For example, Poppi conducts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Ryanair's 2021 Sustainability Report, incorporating Hallidayan linguistics. The findings reveal potential contradictions between the perceived and actual practices of transparency within the company, thereby suggesting that Ryanair's reporting may serve corporate interests rather than genuinely reflecting transparency. Likewise, Malavasi and Nocella investigate how language constructs transparency and trust in CSR reports of rail companies. This research emphasizes the necessity for firms to communicate ethically in response to public distrust. The analysis employs quantitative and qualitative methods to assess linguistic and discursive strategies, particularly regarding environmental topics, to understand how these firms strive for transparency.

Bondi and Sezzi's paper discusses transparency as a means of providing better access to information, emphasizing both informativity and accessibility as defined by previous works (Clark, Ardron, and Pendleton 2015; Ball 2009). Their analysis focuses on the use of exemplification in CSR reports, identifying Vague Category Identifiers (VCIs) and assessing how they affect transparency. They highlight that while exemplification can enhance accessibility, it may also vary in informativity and clarity for different audiences. Diani and Turnbull explore indicators of transparency in the context of cruise and ferry operators' safety communications. Using Schnackenberg and Tomlinson's dimensions of transparency (Disclosure, Clarity, and Accuracy), the study analyzes the linguistic features that enhance or hinder transparency, thus suggesting that vagueness and evaluating language can detract from effective communication.

In another area of focus, Zaupa examines the car rental and ride-sharing sectors, investigating how 'transparency' is communicated in CSR/ESG reports and news releases. This study combines quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis methods to reveal that transparency is presented as an ethical value and a tool for accountability, while commonly used vague expressions affect the clarity of this concept in disclosures. Additionally, Iori and Falcone investigate the use of figurative language on Transport for London (TfL)'s Instagram profile, applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory to assess its role in transparent communication. The

analysis demonstrates that while metaphors and metonymies promote TfL services, they primarily serve promotional purposes rather than providing clear information about those services.

Finally, the issue also tackles broader transparency themes, contributed to by Milizia and Olson, along with Fenice and Mocini. Milizia and Olson explore the concept of "climate transparency," examining communications by US political elites and public opinion on climate change policy through corpus analysis and public opinion data. Their findings reveal that public perception of transparency correlates with agreement on climate policy, particularly regarding the credibility of political leaders' statements on climate issues.

Fenice and Mocini utilize semio-linguistic analysis (Greimas and Courtés 2007) to apply it to the pharmaceutical industry, analyzing English-language Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reports to identify discursive strategies that create the impression of transparency and credibility. By distinguishing between the level of what is communicated (utterance) and the context of communication (enunciation), the research employs semio-linguistic analysis to explore various strategies utilized to foster an image of transparency and enhance stakeholder trust.

In summary, the studies collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of transparency across various industries, focusing on how it is communicated, perceived, and constructed through specific linguistic and discursive strategies. They emphasize the importance of clear, accessible language in achieving genuine transparency while also addressing the complexities and challenges that arise in corporate communications. Moreover, each study illustrates the interconnectedness of transparency-related research and its implications for stakeholder trust and corporate responsibility. The methodologies applied – including corpus-based analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, diachronic content analysis, and semio-linguistic approaches – underscore the diverse angles from which transparency can be understood and evaluated.

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Bionotes

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