

SUSTAINABILITY DISCLOSURES AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- The main purpose of this study is to understand companies' sustainability disclosures on social media from the perspectives of impression management tactics at organizational level.

Methodology- This study is theoretical to meet the requierements about call for studies of the corporate use of social media by looking at sustainability mechanism and organizational impression management. Also, it has a desire to make a preposition about further qualitative and quantitative studies in Turkish organizations by analyzing corporate social media accounts

Findings- Companies want to give the impression of being a sustainable actor by balancing the favorable and unfavorable information they give to their stakeholders. For this reason, organizations can use sustainability narratives as a way to formalize their stakeholders' expectations or manipulate their perceptions on social media. Social media are among the best ways to communicate with the stakeholders of companies. They allow organizations to engage in timely and direct contact at low cost and with higher levels of efficiency than traditional communication tools. Bu using impression management tactics as assertive and defensive, they can project a positive impression of their social and environmental performance on social media platform.

Conclusion- Our theoretical suggestions demonstrate that social media provides a favorable communication environment to the sustainable firms. Also by this way, this study makes a better understanding of corporate self-presentational behaviours on social media and the effect of stakeholder perception among social media users.

Keywords: Sustainability disclosures, impression management, assertive tactics, defensive tactics, social media

JEL Codes: M10, M14

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizational impression management is defined as "any action purposely designed and carried out to influence an audience's perceptions of an organization" (Tyler et al., 2012, 336). Organizations use impression management tactics to manage their reputation and enhance a positive image to their stakeholders (Terrell and Kwok, 2011). Organizations feel social pressures that may threaten their existences tend to use a variety of impression management strategies to influence their image and reputation positively (Talbot and Boiral, 2015). Impression management is used to make balance between the organizational image and social expectations or to provide legitimacy and build greater resilience (Bansal and Kistruck, 2006). Companies can also use their sustainability disclosures as a way to influence public perception and communicate with their stakeholders. Companies' sustainability information disclosure on social media can increase company's influence and reach. When compared to web based technologies, social media enables personalization and interaction. It has emerged as a useful tool for communicating sustainability information (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). We can assume that twitter can select for analyzing sustainability disclosures on social media because it has the highest corporate adoption rate among the largest firms in comparison with other social media platforms (Zhang, 2015). Focusing on selective media may provide an incomplete account of an organisation's communication with stakeholders in relation to its social and environmental issues. Social media based communication provides potential for engagement with stakeholders and therefore could change the dynamics of sustainability disclosures.

For this perspective, we first discuss the impression management at organizational level and sustainability disclosures on social media, then we make some suggestions for further studies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Impression management appears in social psychology and develops in organizational behavior from 1980s as a fundamental interpersonal process. As a concept, impression management also called self-presentation focuses on “how individuals present themselves to be perceived favorably by others (Merkl-Davies and Brennan, 2011). Therefore, people have ongoing interest about how other people think about him or her (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). By this way, people use self-presentation tactics to control the impressions. Some scholars and researchers think that impression management and self-presentation can be interchangeable or some of them think that these terms have different meanings (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Hence, self-presentation is a self-centered concept, impression management as the broader concept and it explains how individuals involved in activities to control or influence the perception of the public about themselves, other individuals, groups, or organizations (Schlenker, 1980).

Individuals have different impression management goals regarded as competent, reliable, successful and responsible (Guadagno and Cialdini, 2007). They have also motivation to present a self-serving view and try to control the impressions of other people (Melloni, et al., 2015). The behavior is achieved by exhibiting strategically to be seen as favorable for short or long term purposes (Chen and Fang, 2008). Impression management can be used in individual level and macro-organizational level as well. But organizational impression management can be complex, because many representatives and spokespeople of companies can behave on behalf of the organization (Lillqvist and Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). There is much interest on the individual impression management tactics but research on organizational impression management tactics has been scarce and scattered (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015). On the other hand, organizational impression management field is wide-open (Highhouse, et al., 2009). Literature points out various impression management tactics for companies to improve their public perception (Mohamed et al., 1999). Companies can use an assertive tactic to enhance or sustain a positive impression or a defensive tactic to defend from negative events.

In sustainability disclosures, organizations want to give impressions as sustainable actors by balancing between favorable and unfavorable information to their stakeholders (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015). For that reason, sustainability disclosures are criticized since disclosures are used by organizations to formalize their stakeholders’ expectations or manipulate their perceptions (Shabana and Ravlin, 2016). In other words, firms give priority to manage impression to create favorable image (Hooghiemstra, 2000). Especially, using sustainability as a public relation medium to support impression management become a current issue when an organization come across with unwanted event since the event threaten its legitimacy (Montecchia, et al., 2016). From the perspective, there is a growing interest in impression management tactics in organizations. Taking advantage of sustainability mechanism as an impression management tool is closely associated with legitimacy theory. According to legitimacy theory, organizations employ strategies to demonstrate that they are in compliance with society’s expectations (Montecchia, et al., 2016). In this context, sustainability information can play an important role in the communication between organizations and their stakeholders and shaping organizations’ impression. Companies have variety of reasons to use impression management activities to deal with customer complaints, enhance financial performance, control social media movements and as a result of maintaining a positive public perception (Conlon and Murray, 1996).

From this perspective, impression management- it is a purposive and goal-oriented behavior which is thought to be one of the political behaviors to obtain desired and better results. By this way, companies can protect their self-image and self-presentation, influence significant stakeholders’ perceptions about themselves (Chen and Fang, 2008). These impression management tactics have many types, especially from the perspectives of organizations; they can use defensive and assertive impression management strategies on their annual and/or sustainability reports and also on their web sites. Assertive strategies are used to establish a given desirable identity, on the other hand defensive strategies are tried to repair damaged identities (Terrell and Kwok, 2011).

Social media are ‘a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content’ (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media can be used as an efficient communication tool for building and enhancing reputation mechanism (Schultz et al., 2011). Both traditional media and social media have roles in corporate- stakeholder information flows. Social media is non-hierarchical, more accessible, dynamic, have rapid response, free or low-cost, create two-way communication (Lyon and Montgomery, 2013).

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study is theoretical to meet the requirements about call for studies of the corporate use of social media by looking at sustainability mechanism and organizational impression management. Also, it has a desire to make a preposition about further qualitative and quantitative studies in Turkish organizations by analyzing corporate social media accounts.

4. FINDINGS

According to theoretical explanations, it is proposed that

Proposition 1

Sustainable companies were more likely to discuss sustainability in their corporate communication and were measurably more active on social media platforms

Proposition 2

Sustainable companies engage in social media influence the public perceptions and thereby lead to use impression management tactics

5. CONCLUSION

The main empirical result of this study is that twitter is a rich platform to present sustainability information and provide a favorable communication environment to sustainable companies. Sustainable companies can engage impression management tactics that can be either defensive or assertive. Organizations use these impression management tactics and project their sustainability reputation and images through social media so as to be perceived by audiences as sustainable entities. sustainability disclosures can inform audiences about the organization's intentions to enhance social performance as well as influence audience expectations about corporate behavior. Therefore, This study can enhance impression management theory by combining sustainability disclosure and social media perspectives. Further studies can explain interactions between impression management theory and sustainability disclosures.

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