

CSR Communication in retail using QR codes

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Abstract

The current context is characterized by the increasing impact generated by business activities. For this reason pursuing a CSR strategy can allow to achieve better results. The term CSR indicates a series of voluntary actions undertaken by a company in order to consider ethical, social and environmental impacts generated by its business. Among CSR activities the communication strategy plays a crucial role. Indeed, many of the activities undertaken by the retailer if not adequately communicated may not be understood or even misinterpreted. In order to implement an adequate communication process, retailers must focus on the communication tools they can use. Among these tools, the use of digital media is growing enormously. Accordingly, this study focuses on the use of QR codes by retailers for CSR communication. Although retailers are increasing the use of QR codes in the CSR communication, literature on QR code is still lacking. Thus, this paper aims to fill this gap by exploring how QR codes are used in the CSR communication of retailers and the impact of different types of communication on the retailer brand credibility and reputation. In order to achieve this goal this research project will adopt a mixed- method design. **Keywords:** CSR communication, digital marketing, QR codes, in-store communication

1. Introduction

The first step of strategic planning concerns the identification of the main goals and objectives that the company must try to achieve by carrying out its business. Among these objectives, the adoption of a CSR policy is undoubtedly an element of extreme importance (Mohd Suki, 2016).

The term CSR means “Corporate Social Responsibility” and it concerns the integration of environmental, social and economic aspects within the business

strategies and activities carried out by the company (Mahrani, 2018), (Ajina, 2019). CSR is fundamental especially in the current context, due to the increasing consumers' interest toward this issue. Therefore, pursuing sustainability objectives and communicating them becomes fundamental for companies as in this way they could be able to obtain multiple benefits and reduce their impacts (Levy, Weitz, Grewal, 2019).

The importance of adopting a CSR strategy concerns all sectors including the retail sector. In fact, the retail sector is a global economic power that has an average annual growth rate of 3.8% since 2008 and a turnover of around 28 trillion dollars (BusinessWire, 2016). Given their growing importance in the global market, retailers direct huge resources towards CSR issues and on an adequate communication program. Thus, CSR communication is a crucial aspect in order to assure the success of huge investments in CSR. As well as the corporate communication is moving to digital, even CSR communication is moving to digital (Schoeneborn, Morsing, & Crane, 2020). The implementation of digital tools in the CSR communication is growing faster given their impact on society. Among digital communication tools, QR codes are used on products packaging and in the in-store communication to integrate information about CSR initiatives. Although retailers are increasing the use of QR codes in the CSR communication, literature on QR code is still lacking (Acuti et al. 2020). Thus, this paper aims to fill this gap by exploring how QR codes are used in the CSR communication of retailers and the impact of different types of communication on the retailer brand credibility and reputation.

2. CSR communication

The implementation of a CSR strategy allows to obtain numerous advantages both internal and external. First of all, it contributes to the reduction of the environmental impact generated by the business. In addition, it helps to achieve also economic benefits (Naidoo, 2018) and to improve the corporate

image that determines positive effects also on brand positioning (Sarkar, 2019).

In fact, the retailer's goal is to succeed in making the consumer able to distinguish their offer from that of their competitors and ensure that the consumer becomes progressively more sensitive to the efforts put into place within production methods and the adoption of more sustainable processes (Suki, 2016). In this way, the consumer, due to the increasing of their loyalty and satisfaction, will start to promote the retailer and their products to other potential consumers generating a virtuous circle (Bartels, 2015).

Among the possible activities that retailers can adopt for reaching consumers, communication is a crucial aspect of each CSR strategy. In fact, many of the activities undertaken by the retailer if not adequately communicated may not be understood or even misinterpreted. Communication is defined internal or external according to the type of recipients to which it is addressed: internal when it is directed to its employees and external when it is directed towards consumers, the society and to external stakeholders in general (Ferrero, 2013). The implementation of an adequate communication program by the company makes it possible to obtain multiple benefits: it helps avoiding misunderstandings by consumers and achieving better results (Levy, Weitz, Grewal, 2019); it positively influences consumption (Aertsens et al., 2011) and increase consumer's trust and loyalty. In addition, thanks to an appropriate CSR communication, retailers are able to increase the brand reputation and credibility that are two very important elements to focus on. The "reputation" is the estimation of the consistency over time of an attribute of an entity (Herbig & Milewicz, 1993) and is one of the primary contributors to perceived quality (Shapiro, 1983). It is the consideration a brand enjoys thanks to its ability to meet the expectations of the public over time. From the other side, "credibility" is defined as the believability of an entity's intentions at a specific time (Milewicz, 1994). The brand credibility is the believability of product

information contained in a brand, which has the ability and willingness to continuously deliver what has been promised.

3. CSR communication and QR codes

Focusing on CSR communication in the retail sector, in-store communication play a significant role. As underlined by the literature the points of sale are the "consumption junctions"(Lehner, 2015). The store, intended as a point of interaction between retailers and consumers, plays an important role in trying to increase a more sustainable consumption. Even if communication allows retailers to obtain many advantages and to respond to numerous needs, the communication activity needs a lot of attention. As Jones (2007, pp.20) states: "communicating corporate social responsibility is a delicate issue ". Therefore, to reach the efficacy of communication, retailers have to focus on the content and on the modalities of communication. From the content point of view, communication must be simple but also effective. In order to achieve this goal, communication, in addition to informing, must also be able to hit the emotional and sensorial sphere of the consumer. Moreover the choice of the communication tools is extremely relevant. For a correct choice of means of communication, retailers must keep up with technology and meet the needs of consumers. Looking at the current situation, digitalisation represents one of the most relevant ongoing transformations of contemporary society and this transformation is particularly important in the retail context, which is adapting to the use of digital technologies to satisfy new forms of consumption (Hagberg et al., 2016). The retail setting is characterised by the growing adoption of advanced and interactive smart technologies based on high connectivity and contactless systems that improve consumers' shopping experience (Pantano & Gandini, 2017). Thus, consumers are no longer passive receivers of company messages but they are an active part of the process and increasingly involved thanks to the new digital communication tools (Thakur,2016; Zhu et al., 2009). Therefore, managers and companies need to provide technology in the store to create value for consumers (Pantano, 2014).

Among the possible digital communication tools present within the store QR codes are very powerful instruments. QR codes are two-dimensional bar codes that can be converted to content, including URLs, phone numbers and text, when scanned by a camera-enabled smartphone with a QR reader (Dou & Li, 2008; Okazaki, 2009). The adoption of QR codes allow consumers to collect information and data about a product but also it adds an additional experiential value making the information-seeking experience more pleasant, thereby enhancing the perceived value of the product and fulfilling consumers' hedonic desires (Ryu, 2013).

4. Methodology

In order to explore the actual CSR communication of retailers and the impact of different types of communication on retailer brand credibility and reputation, this research project will adopt a mixed- method design (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2018) Particularly, the research project will be divided into 2 steps: in the first step, the research will apply a content analysis (Stemler, 2000) in order to explore the use of QR codes in the retail sector. A pool of retail brands using CSR communication through QR codes will be selected with the aim to analyse the content delivered. A conceptualization of different types of communication will be provided. In the second step, an experimental design (Bagozzi, 1977) will be tested in order to observe the causality link between the type of content delivered and the effect on retailer brand credibility and reputation.

5. Expected results

Results will contribute at filling the literature gap on the use of QR codes for CSR communication in the retail sector. On the one hand, the empirical case analysis will provide a conceptualization of types of CSR communication through QR codes. On the other hand, the experimental design based on previous content analysis will provide empirical evidence on the most effective type of communication on retailer brand credibility and reputation.

Reference are available upon request