



CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Harness the power of social media for communicating #CSR

Lausanne, August 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Businesses all around the world have welcomed the rise of social media as an interactive communication channel to engage with different target audiences. In recent years, **social media has started to be used as an additional channel to communicate Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).**

However, while this can be seen as a very interesting strategy, academic literature and industry evidence reveals the challenging nature of this specific type of communication. In fact, despite the initial enthusiasm of marketers about this new way of communicating CSR, some doubts about the effectiveness of such practice remain.

We studied the activity of **45 services companies** (Forbes 2000 – three product category airlines, hospitality, restaurants) on **social media from 2010 to 2019** and **interviewed some of their executives** to understand the nature of CSR communication on social media.

Results showed that there is a **paucity of CSR related** posts on official social media accounts of services companies: 4,81% of the total posts on Facebook.com have traces of CSR topics with this number decreasing for Instagram.com (1.71%) and Twitter.com (0,57%).

This is essentially because of the **sensitivity of the CSR topics**, with executives confirming that companies shy away from communicating CSR on social media for the **fear of greenwashing accusations.**

This report shed lights on these issues, presenting a quick guide on how to publish CSR related contents on social media minimizing backlashing threats.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic and business literature has praised the advent of social media as a **new interactive communication channel** to engage with current and perspective customers, as well as with different types of stakeholders.

Among popular themes, social media offered a digital platform for communicating Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives.

Thanks to its interactive nature, social media became a very interesting tool for engaging with a variety of different stakeholders including those audiences not familiar with CSR reports that are publicly disclosed on companies' websites.

Thus, social media can be seen as a complementary communication effort with respect to the more traditional CSR reports in use.

However, research on virtual CSR dialogue has proven to be challenging because it lies at the intersection of two largely separate literature streams: CSR & its reporting practices and social media communication.

This white paper aims to introduce you to the ever-changing world of Corporate Social Responsibility communication on social media by presenting quantitative data related to the activity of leading services firms on popular social media, along with interviews of CSR leaders in the service field. The clear goal is to generate a better understanding of winning communication practices.

RESEARCH DESIGN

01 Phase 1: Select Services Companies

45 service companies were selected from three leading service sectors according to the Forbes Global 2000. The companies belong to airlines, hospitality and restaurant.

02 Phase 2: Monitor Social Media Content

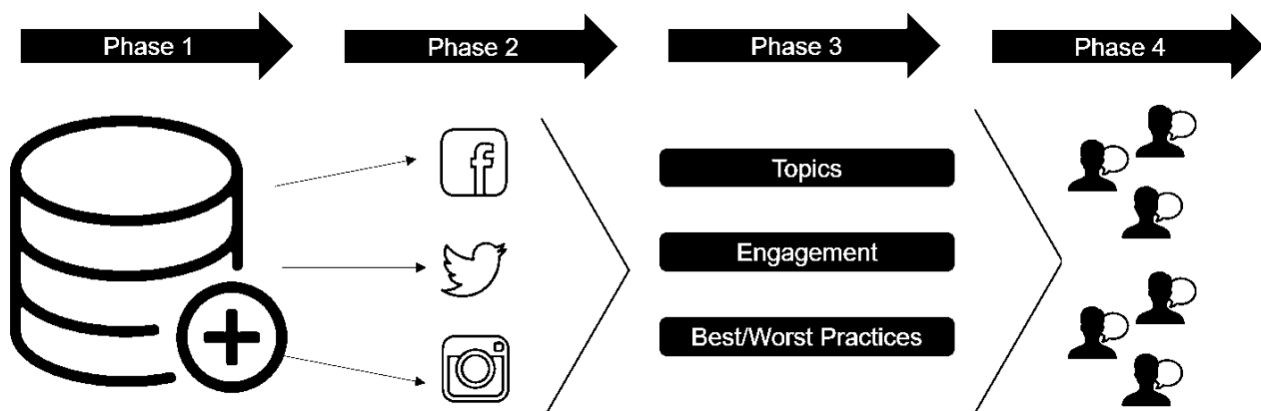
The companies' social media profiles on popular websites (i.e. facebook.com, twitter.com and Instagram.com) were monitored and data collected between 2010-2020.

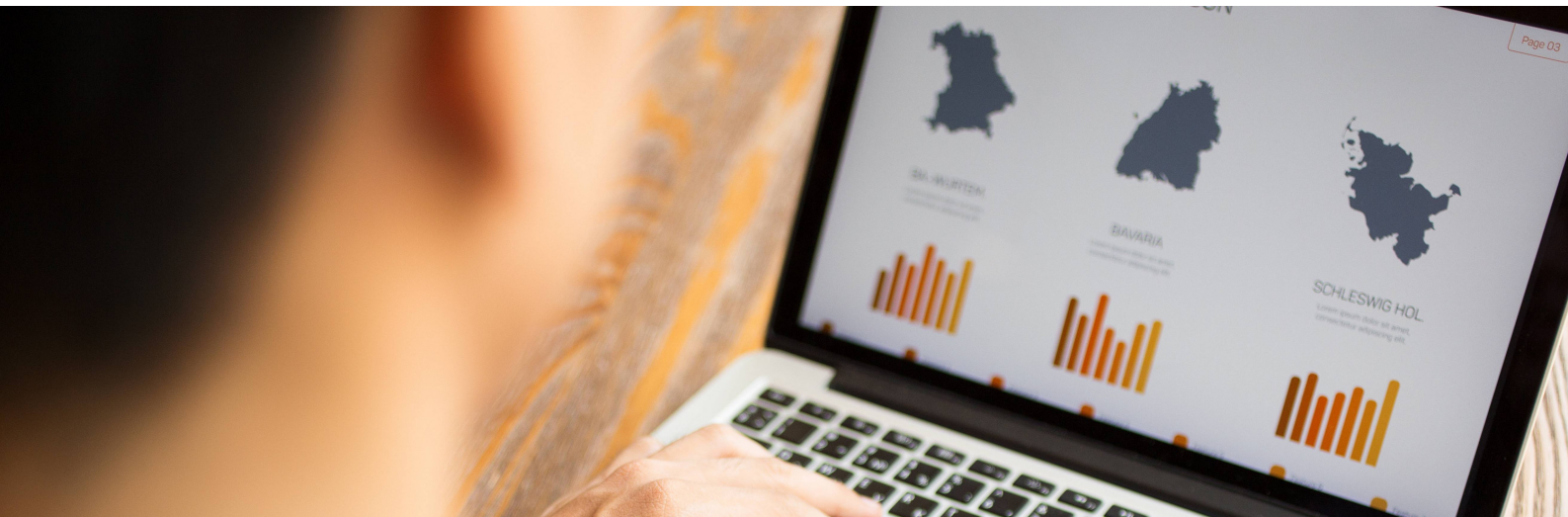
03 Phase 3: Filtering and Sense Making

Collected data was filtered both in a narrow way (i.e. only considering the keywords CSR, responsibility and sustainability) and in a broad way (i.e. thanks to the creation of a keyword list organized in generic, environmental, social and governance aspects). Results were then organized by topics, engagement and best/worst practices.

04 Phase 4: Interviews with CSR Leaders

CSR leaders in the service sector were interviewed to understand their points of view on the results generated by the quantitative phase of the analysis.

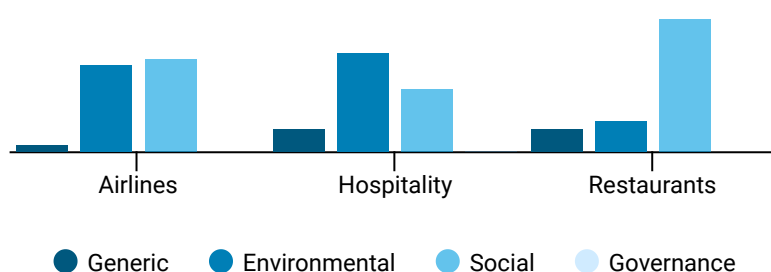




SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING



4,81%
Broad CSR
0,13% Narrow CSR



A Diverse Landscape

The majority of posts related to broad CSR topics are posted on Facebook.com by airlines companies (50,2%). While airlines discuss both social and environmental issues on facebook, hospitality firms prefer to deal with environmental issues and restaurants with social issues. However, hospitality firms and restaurants are in proportion late with respect to airlines in customer engagement on social media for what concern CSR topics.



Responsibility



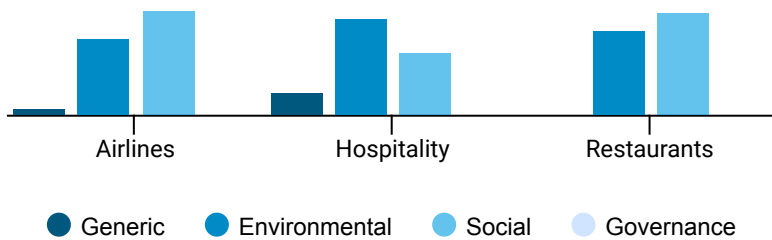
Inclusion & Diversity



Safety

* Figures refer to airlines

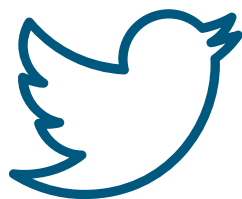
SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING



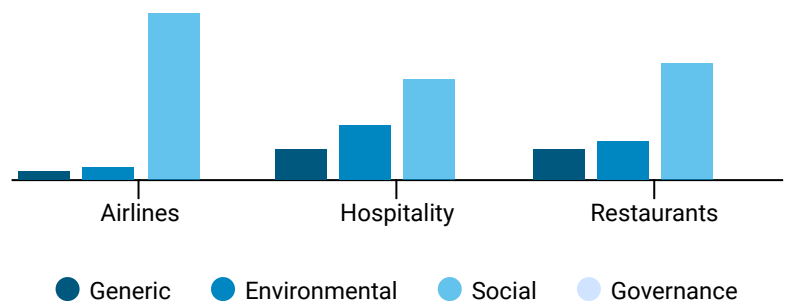
1,71%
Broad CSR
0,01% Narrow CSR

A Diverse Landscape

Instagram does not show a great number of CSR related posts; there are only 1077 in the considered period. In this section, the most active companies are the airlines who used the social network mainly for CSR purposes (i.e. 67% of the posts belong to airline companies).



0,57%
Broad CSR
0,007% Narrow CSR



A Consolidated Trend

Twitter is the oldest of the platforms considered and presents the lowest score for CSR posts. Although the total number of posts related to CSR is higher, it gets diluted in the general high number of posts on the social network. Airlines are the most active, especially for what concerns socially related posts.

On Twitter, businesses do not receive great attention with respect to the previously mentioned social networks. The most discussed topics are discrimination, health and healthcare and, in proportion, philanthropy also receives great attention.



* Figures refer to Airlines / ** Figures refer to Hospitality

KEY TAKEAWAYS

SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

Three main takeaways can be found after the quantitative analysis. Those related to general numbers, popular topics and the complete absence of the governance topic.

01 Incredibly Low Numbers

The numbers observed for the 45 companies under investigation over the period of 10 years seems very low. Research in the field reported CSR related posts on social media to be between 3% and 20% of the overall posting. Our data show that those are between 0,57% and 4,81%. Engagement is low for Instagram.com and very low for Twitter.com

02 Popular Topics Are Always the Same

Popular topics are the same across platforms. At social level, topics related to **Inclusion and Diversity** along with **Health & Safety** do receive very high attention. In the environmental category, there is great attention to the **Environment** and **Water** usage.

03 The Absence of Governance Topics

In our sample we could only find a total of 5 posts related to Governance. Companies prefer to post topics that are related to social and environmental issues rather than governance ones. This is possibly a lost occasion for businesses to engage at this level.



MANAGER INTERVIEWS

Interviewees agreed on the importance of communicating Corporate Social Responsibility on social media because this communication tool can be primarily used to **engage with customers, prospects, staff and future talent**. One hospitality company mentioned that they are getting interest from traditional CSR stakeholders such as **owners and investors**. One restaurant representative maintained that CSR is also helpful to **nurture the brand** and actively **listen to local communities**.

The representatives of the businesses interviewed mentioned the generic characteristics of successful CSR social media posts: trustworthy, transparent, emotional, as well as informative authentic and meaningful.

#9

PROFESSIONAL WORKING ON CSR & MARKETING

In Hospitality, Airline and Restaurant businesses belonging to the sample analyzed.



Trustworthy & Transparent



Emotional & Informative



Authentic & Meaningful

MANAGER INTERVIEWS

Interviewed companies see the threat of being accused of **greenwashing** when communicating about CSR on social media; some topics which are linked with the core business of the companies can **backlash** in a powerful way. Restaurant representatives see **self-praise** also as a critical issue going against their brand values.

Constructive comments are in general valorised by the interviewees.

We don't communicate topics like marine conservation and the environment on social media because we don't want to be accused of greenwashing. There is a recognition that we need to be active in these areas, but the job isn't done yet. Therefore, we would not communicate them.

Marketing Director, Hospitality

An airline representative mentioned that their CSR efforts are measured with a series of different **Key Performance Indicators** and that the **pressure** in the company has recently **increased** as they joined the **Dow Jones Sustainability index**.

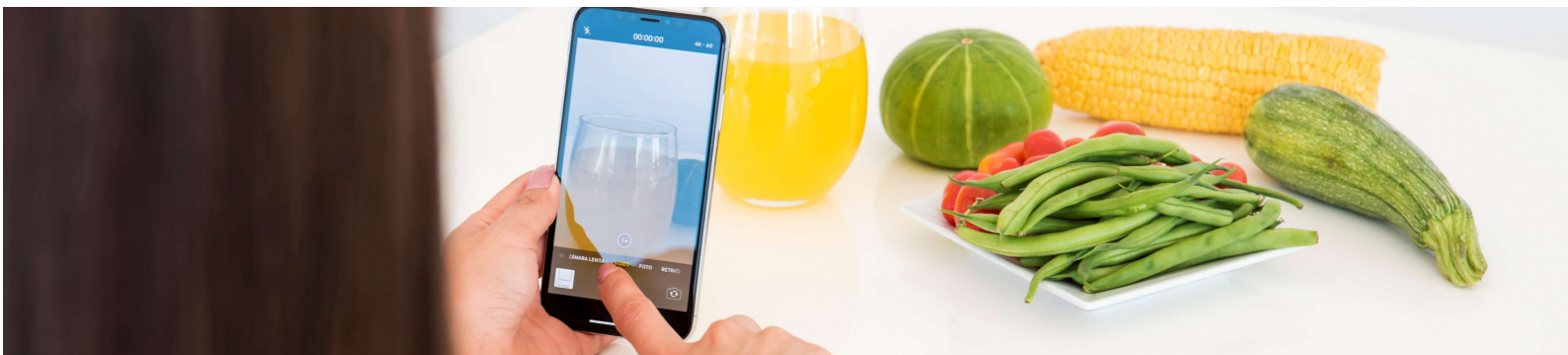
IN ESSENCE

Companies **shy away from communicating about CSR on their social media platforms**. They fear threats that come with social media communication such as greenwashing as the biggest threat, along with negative backlash in general that can be enhanced by the anonymity of the users.

The trigger for threats is evaluated to be unauthentic and uncarefully-formulated communication. In general, CSR communication is seen as a sensitive topic that involves countless considerations which take time and effort.

Because nobody coordinates it. Unfortunately, there is always something more important than working on your CSR objectives.

CSR Manager, Hospitality



LESSONS LEARNT

Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility on social media could be quite challenge for businesses independently of their size. Our research is based on 45 different services companies belonging to three different sectors, we have engaged in social media content analysis and executive semi structured interviews in order to propose essentially three main tips that can be useful while planning a CSR campaign on social media.

These are simple recommendations that services companies may like to follow to avoid backlashing while communicating sensitive topics online.

TIP 1

Choose the Right Topics

We saw a tendency of mentioning similar topics on different platforms. On Facebook, it seems better to speak about a company's responsibility practices, inclusion & diversity and safety; On Instagram, the trending topics are health & safety and the environment; while on Twitter, on top of the popular topics mentioned above, CO2 emissions and the environment are heavily discussed.

TIP 2

Frame the Message Correctly

While crafting the message it is important to be genuine and authentic, striking the right balance between emotional and informative content, and working on the meaning triggered off in the readers.

TIP 3

Empower Through Strategy

Strategically speaking, CSR topics should be brought to the center of the social media strategy for their communicative power. Companies should avoid self-praising themselves and telling trivial stories related to 'what is already' expected from them.

About the authors



Dr. Alessandro Inversini is Associate Professor of Marketing and Director of the Institute of Customer Experience Management at the Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne. He is an expert in digital marketing, digital communication, mobile marketing and eTourism, with extensive international academic and industry experience. Before joining EHL, Dr. Inversini worked at Università della Svizzera Italiana, Bournemouth University and Henley Business School. During his career, Alessandro has engaged with industry as a consultant and as managing director of a public-private digital innovation company. Alessandro's research has been funded and supported by public and private bodies in Switzerland, Italy and the United Kingdom and has been published in prestigious international research outlets.



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Ms. Anna Carla Hew (BA) is a Swiss Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne alumna, who after successfully graduating in February 2021 joined the rising Impact Investing fintech Inyova. During the last semesters of her studies, Anna grew her interest in sustainability and corporate social responsibility while writing her Bachelor thesis on CSR communication on social media. Furthermore, Anna was selected to participate in the Global Management Program of the international fashion brand Uniqlo, where she worked together with business experts on developing a sustainable strategic objectives for the company.

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