

How Companies in Controversial Industries Communicate about CSR

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Abstract

The question of whether controversial companies should communicate their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) engagement is controversial. This paper reviews the extant literature on CSR communication of companies operating in controversial industries. We analysed 39 articles using Du et al.'s (2010) conceptual framework of CSR communication to structure our synthesis. Our review suggests that companies in controversial industries have to pay particular attention to what they communicate related to CSR and which (social media) channel they use. System-generated information (e.g., the number of followers) can have positive effects, such as reducing scepticism. Companies' perceived motives play an important role, and especially firm-serving motives seem to negatively affect the company's evaluation. While cause-company fit appears to be highly relevant in non-controversial industries, studies on the effects of high-fit vs. low-fit initiatives have yielded contrasting and different results for controversial firms. Credible, transparent and authentic messages are key to positive corporate reputation and legitimacy. Based on our synthesis, we develop an agenda for future research.