CSR communication and internal stakeholders: The overlooked market

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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the adoption of responsible business practices concerning economic, environmental and social principles, is a tool to develop market value for various stakeholder groups. CSR can create several competitive advantages and should not be seen as a cost, but as a strategic initiative to aid organisations in competing in the market. Effective internal CSR communication to employees enhances an organisation’s corporate identity (CI) – ultimately affecting employees’ attitudes and behaviour. This paper aims to explore South African retail employees’ perceptions of internal CSR communication methods used by their organisations. A dataset of 229 employees participated by completing a computer-aided self-administered survey, which was distributed via LinkedIn. The main findings of the study indicate that employees perceived their organisations to make use of e-mail communication, internal newsletters, web and social media platforms to communicate with them regarding CSR, indicating that other internal communication platforms such as intranet or internal meetings can be utilised more to communicate with employees.

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Introduction

CSR initiatives lead to the creation of confidence in retailers, among an organisation’s customers as well as other stakeholder groups such as employees (Marek, 2018:44). To create this confidence among their stakeholders, retailers need to apply a variety of CSR marketing activities (Marek, 2018:44). Hildebrand, Sen and Bhattacharya (2011:1357) argues that by communicating CSR externally and internally, organisations can promote congruence between the corporate identity as perceived by external stakeholders (customers, suppliers, shareholders and society) as well as internal stakeholder. Employees can, for example, better identify with organisations that build social value and implement CSR initiatives (Korschun, Bhattacharya & Swain, 2016:25).

The question of how CSR affects stakeholders’ perceptions and the organisation’s brand, identity and success has become a key topic at the intersection of sustainability and marketing research (Bhattacharya, Korschun & Sen, 2009; Smith, 2003). From a South African perspective, Fredericksz (2015) explored employees’ perceptions of CSR integration within an organisation and identified fundamental gaps in the involvement of and communication to employees with regard to CSR. Fredericksz (2015) found that employees should be more engaged with CSR initiatives, and that internal communication of CSR should be improved to build organisational trust and employee satisfaction. Van der Kooy (2014) explored the relationship between employees’ perceptions of the corporate brand and its CSR initiatives within the South African trade union sector. However, no studies relating to employees’ perceptions of CSR within the retail sector in South Africa could be found.

Additionally, limited attention has been paid to the analysis of CSR at internal organisational level (Hejjas et al., 2019:319). Most CSR research focuses on the organisation itself, as opposed to the employee, or on customers’ and external stakeholders’ perceptions...
of CSR (Hejjas et al., 2019; Burns, 2019; Roeder, 2019; Pratihari & Uzma, 2018; Deng & Xu, 2017; Brunton, Eweje & Tuskin, 2017; Hwang & Kandampully, 2015; Pitt, 2012).

The primary purpose of this study was therefore to determine retail employees’ perceptions of internal CSR communication methods used by their organisations. A computer-aided self-administered survey was shared with the target population to conduct empirical research. A quantitative approach was adopted to meet the research objectives of the study. An in-depth literature review was conducted which follows in the next section, followed by the research design, findings, limitations of the study as well as managerial implications.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

**CSR in South Africa**

Bowen (1953) initially defined CSR as the pursuit of decisions and policies that are desirable in the context of social values, and considered CSR as a moral obligation for organisations. He argued that “…as servants of society, businessmen must not disregard socially acceptable values or place their own values above those of society” (Bowen, 1953:6). CSR ultimately has three dimensions: people, profit and the planet - referring to an organisation’s social responsibility, economic responsibility and environmental responsibility towards the communities it serves, also known as the triple bottom line approach (Grafstrom, Gothberg & Windell, 2008:283). The social principle of CSR, sometimes referred to as social sustainability, requires that organisations take greater responsibility for social work and local issues in the communities in which they operate, and assist in solving identified non-business social problems in these communities (Freeman & Dmytriyev, 2017; Allen, 2016; Behrad, 2014). The economic principle of CSR refers to a number of financial aspects, including the responsibility of organisations to be profitable and to enable economic progress within communities (Van der Westhuizen, 2019:21), whereas the environmental principle of CSR refers to an organisation’s efforts to preserve and protect the environment from damage inflicted on it, and to promote environmental sustainability (Pitt, 2012:25).

Increased awareness of realities such as human rights violations and climate change, as well as pressure from society, activists, governments and other stakeholder groups such as investors, prompted organisations to look beyond themselves as the primary beneficiaries and customers as the only focus of marketing activities (Smith, Palazzo & Bhattacharya, 2010; Bode & Singh, 2018). Many organisations therefore agree that CSR should be a strategic business tool and should be positioned as part of the corporate brand’s marketing strategy (Ahman, Baharudin & Shamsudin, 2016; Fredericksz, 2015). In emerging markets such as South Africa there is also pressure on organisations to engage in responsible organisational practices and to implement CSR initiatives that will promote and protect the welfare of local communities as well as the environment (Fredericksz, 2015:20). The Sullivan Principles, which required American organisations operating in South Africa to treat all employees fairly and to allocate some of their profits to community development, were established in 1977 and encouraged the development of CSR in South Africa (Kabir, Mukuddem-Petersen & Petersen., 2015:283).

In recent years, key drivers in South Africa – such the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE), broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE) and the Institute for Corporate Citizenship (ICC), which promote CSR initiatives in South Africa – have assisted with the development of CSR programmes and regulations (Kabir et al., 2015:287). The JSE used its unique position in the financial environment to focus the debate on CSR by launching the Socially Responsible Investment Index (SRI) to measure triple bottom line performance (Skinner & Mersharn, 2016:120). In addition to the SRI Index, the South African King Report on Corporate Governance, first issued in 1994 and now internationally recognised, was established to provide guidelines to organisations as to how they should disclose CSR information in their annual reporting (Kabir et al., 2015:284).

CSR spend in South Africa has grown significantly in the last few years, reaching R10.3 billion in 2020 (or $673,105,000 at an exchange rate of R15.30 per 1 US dollar), with retail and wholesale, mining and quarrying and financial services being the top contributing sectors (Trialogue Business in Society, 2019:30). The retail sector, the sector under investigation with this study, is undergoing major transformations due to technological advancements such as online marketplaces, and traditional retailers must constantly find new ways to stay relevant and add market value, such as through CSR initiatives (Weiss, 2019:33). CSR initiatives can lead to the creation of, for example, confidence in retailers among an organisation’s customers as well as other stakeholder groups such as employees (Marek, 2018:44).

**CSR and employees**

Organisations have various stakeholders, which include “…any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievements of the organisation’s objectives” as defined by Freeman (1984). CSR has its roots in the stakeholder theory, which implies that the long-term value of an organisation rests as much on its relationship with consumers, investors and other stakeholders as it does on its abilities and the commitment of its employees (Freeman, 1984). Internal stakeholders include individuals or groups within the organisation, such as shareholders, employees and managers, whereas external stakeholders include customers, suppliers, local communities, competitors and governments (Gondivan, 2018:8).
Organisations are focusing on employees more than ever before and acknowledge that accountability demands arise not only from outside an organisation, but also from within (Shepard, 2019; Slack, Corlett & Morris, 2015; Lam, 2015). Employees are imperative as they are the “face of their organisation” and play a crucial part in shaping the perceptions of external stakeholders (Schaefer, Tertsch, & Diehl, 2020:192). However, available CSR research focuses mostly on the perceptions of external stakeholders, leaving a research gap concerning how CSR is perceived by employees (Burns, 2019; Roeder, 2019; Pratihari & Uzma, 2018; Deng & Xu, 2017; Frederick, 2015; Hwang & Kandampully, 2015; Kroh, 2014; Lee, Park & Lee, 2013).

CSR is used as a tool to attract and maintain employees, to build higher employee morale and better employee attitudes (Bode & Singh, 2018:1003). CSR has furthermore been linked to a motivated workforce, organisational pride, job satisfaction, increased morale and productivity, increased commitment, and improved recruitment, as organisations with CSR initiatives are more attractive to employees (Schaefer et al., 2020; Hejjas, Miller & Scarcia, 2019; Ramdenee, 2019; Tapang & Bassey, 2017; Glavas & Kelley, 2014; Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2011). CSR is also a critical part of an organisation’s CI, through which stakeholders engage with the organisation (Luu, 2019; Mousiolis & Bourletidis, 2015; Van der Kooy, 2014:7). Lu, Ren He, Lin and Streimikis (2019), and Simoes and Sebastiani (2017) confirm the importance of employees’ perceptions of an organisation being linked to that organisation’s CI and ultimately affecting employees’ behaviours. CSR aids in creating and building a CI, where CI is expressed through the corporate brand in the form of visual identity, the brand promise, brand personality and brand communication (Pratihari & Uzma, 2018; Habib & Wahid, 2016; Van der Kooy, 2014).

If employees perceive CSR positively, they can better associate with the organisation and its CI (Wang, Fu, Qiu, Moore & Wang, 2017:9). Employees observe an organisation’s social responsibility behaviours, which can result in a more favourable perception of the organisation as trust increases and relationships improve (Barnett, 2007:38). CI serves as a foundation for organisations not only to build beneficial relationships with employees, but also to communicate CSR practices accordingly (Balmer, Powell & Greyser, 2011:9). Consistent communication with employees regarding an organisation’s CSR will contribute to an aligned overall business direction (Fredericksz, 2015:5). Although the communication of information of an organisation’s CSR initiatives to internal stakeholders is evidently an important factor for the success of an organisation, organisations often neglect to do this (Coombs & Hollady, 2011:111).

**Internal CSR communication**

Balmer and Soenen (2001) presented a conceptual model of CI, which maps out the different constructs of CI, namely 1) actual: current structural, philosophical or organisational attributes such as leadership style, 2) communicated: often described in relation to an organisation’s reputation and image, which includes controllable communication such as public relations and advertising as well as uncontrollable communication such as the performance of products 3) desired: referring to what the organisation wants to be – the leaders’ vision, 4) ideal: referring to an organisation’s optimal positioning in the market, and 5) conceived: referring to stakeholders’ perceptions of an organisation’s CI. The communicated identity is the focal point of this article.

**Figure 1:** Corporate Identity Model; *Source: Adapted from Balmer and Greyser (2001).*

Effective internal communication forms an essential part of the process of implementing CSR initiatives, which can play an instrumental role in enhancing CI (Simoes & Sebastiani, 2017; Scandelius & Cohen, 2016; Jurisova & Durkova, 2012). Genc (2017) defines communication as the “…transfer of ideas, thoughts or feelings by the sender to receiver via verbal or nonverbal means”. Communicating CSR is a way for organisations to share information about their CSR initiatives (Stumberger, 2017:30). Ihlen, Bartlett, & May (2011), with regard to CSR communication, maintain that “…silence on how the corporation sees its social and environmental responsibility sends a signal that might be interpreted as poor strategising and/or callousness regarding the consequences of business”. Furthermore, incongruity may arise from an organisation’s actual CSR-related values and attributes and
what is being communicated about an organisation’s CSR initiatives, if not aligned with stakeholders’ perceptions of CSR initiatives and messaging (Vallaster, Lindgreen & Maon, 2012:38).

Some organisations might be engaging in CSR initiatives, but employees are simply unaware of them, in which case organisations will not benefit from the potential positive effects on employee behavioural outcomes such as employee loyalty and morale (Curt & Bjorneseth, 2017:23). Schaefer et al. (2020) agree that many employees have little or no knowledge about their organisation’s CSR initiatives. McShane and Cunningham (2012) comment that organisations should provide “…signals to employees that CSR is important to the organisation”. Especially in developing countries, much more should be done regarding the raising of awareness of CSR initiatives (Melovic, Milovic, Backovic-Vulic, Dudic & Bajzik, 2019:24). It is therefore important that employees understand why their organisations have CSR initiatives, and what the objectives are of such initiatives, as employees’ awareness and understanding of CSR initiatives are important for an organisation’s longevity (Forney, 2018:1). Awareness of CSR initiatives is created through communication tactics and advertising efforts, and is enhanced through strong internal communication (Doyle, 2019; Andreu, Casado-Daz & Mattila, 2015). Although the internal communication of information of an organisation’s CSR initiatives to employees is evidently an important factor for the success and longevity of an organisation, organisations often neglect internal stakeholders and spend more time educating external stakeholders on CSR initiatives (Coombs & Holladay, 2011:113). Researchers furthermore argue that organisations’ internal CSR communication and employees’ perceptions of it is highly under-researched (Schaefer et al., 2020; Brunton Eweje & Taskin, 2017; Slack et al., 2015).

It should be recognised that employees consume both internal and external communication sources (Doyle, 2019:12). External communication and advertising, such as TV and radio advertising, may reach employees even though other stakeholders are the primary target audience (Schaefer et al., 2020:192). The current study, however, focused on internal communication methods consumed by employees and utilised by organisations to communicate their CSR initiatives internally.

**Internal CSR communication methods**

Organisations use various methods to communicate information to employees, including information relating to CSR initiatives, to make them aware of such initiatives, and to enhance their perceptions of the CSR initiatives or actively engage them in CSR (Curt & Bjorneseth, 2017; Tafolli & Grabner-Kräuter, 2020). Understanding which communication methods are most effective at reaching employees is vital, because presented information may be poorly understood, or ignored (Doyle, 2019:16). The following internal communication methods are typically used by organisations to communicate with employees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Cited by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>Curt and Bjorneseth (2017); Ihlen et al. (2011); Kataria, Kataria and Garg (2013); Doyle (2019); Nagessur (2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mails</td>
<td>Doyle (2019); Curt and Bjorneseth (2017); Kataria et al. (2013); Tafolli and Grabner-Kräuter (2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face meetings</td>
<td>Tafolli and Grabner-Kräuter (2020); Curt and Bjorneseth (2017); Seele and Lock (2015); Doyle (2019); Kataria et al. (2013); Morsing, Schultz and Nielsen (2008); Brunton et al. (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet/web communication</td>
<td>Moreno and Capriotti (2009); Basil and Erlandson (2008); Seele and Lock (2015); Borttree (2010); Melovic et al. (2019); Lindholm (2018); Kataria et al. (2013); Morsing et al. (2008); Brunton et al. (2017); Doyle (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media and digital material</td>
<td>Tafolli and Grabner-Kräuter (2020); Nagessur (2020); Doyle (2019); Wang and Huang (2018); Thulkanam (2014); Ihlen et al. (2011); Borttree (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Doyle (2019); Gavrila (2019); Habib and Wahid (2016); Talaulikar and Mali (2016); Li, Zhang, Wu &amp; Peng (2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal publications and reports</td>
<td>Doyle (2019); Gavrila (2019); Seele and Lock (2015); Ngorima (2011); Kataria et al. (2013); Morsing et al. (2008); Brunton et al. (2017); Borttree (2010); Ihlen et al. (2011); Diling (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal CSR strategy papers and compliance handbooks</td>
<td>Seele and Lock (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee hotline</td>
<td>Forney (2018); Seele and Lock (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal campaigns and events</td>
<td>Forney (2018); Doyle (2019); Ngorima (2011)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CSR communication is commonly dispersed to employees through an organisation’s intranet – internet channels only accessible to staff – which could include informative CSR web pages, dialogical forms of online communication, or chat forums. This is seen as a deliberative unpublished CSR communication tool where access is granted only to members of the organisation (Brunton et al., 2017; Seele & Lock, 2015:18). E-mails are often used to communicate CSR information to employees, for example, to provide survey feedback, or to communicate to employees on behalf of the CEO or the HR department (Doyle, 2019:31). Face-to-face CSR meetings
are often seen as a preferred communication channel among employees, as employees want two-way communication that enables them to provide feedback and suggestions for the improvement of CSR initiatives (Curt & Bjorneseth, 2017:5). Continuous stakeholder employee communication is needed to ensure credibility and transparency, which goes beyond instrumental one-way notions (Seele & Lock, 2015:13). Two-way communication can be accomplished by “strategically inviting” employees to provide feedback and voice their opinions on CSR issues they deem important, such as in face-to-face meetings (Morsing et al., 2008:245).

Internet/web communication is an important CSR communication channel (Curt & Bjorneseth, 2017:7). Web communication of CSR, for instance, through a dedicated section on an organisation’s website, has the advantages of being easily accessible to stakeholders, and the information can quickly be updated by organisations (Tetrevova, 2018:479). Organisations also make use of social media and digital material on the internet to communicate CSR information to employees. CSR initiatives can be communicated, for instance, on the organisation’s social media pages, or on the CEO’s personal Facebook page to communicate with employees (Wang & Huang, 2018:328). Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, posted about Facebook’s paid maternity leave policy and Facebook’s external CSR initiatives, such as helping curing children’s diseases, on his personal social media platforms (Wang & Huang, 2018:327). Other digital material to disperse CSR information to employees could be through podcasts, YouTube channels, webcasts or webinars, and blogs (Doyle, 2019; Ihlen et al., 2011; Bortree, 2010).

CSR information is furthermore distributed through employee training such as through workshops, CSR-specific training sessions, CSR strategy sessions, onboarding or orientation of new employees, or through behaviour change training sessions (Doyle, 2019:31). Internal publications and reports, such as internal CSR strategy papers and compliance handbooks, are used to communicate with employees regarding CSR initiatives (Seele & Lock, 2015:16). Other internal CSR publications could include internal newsletters, case studies or articles, publications in internal magazines, posters or flyers and weekly notices, or integrating CSR in an organisation’s code of conduct (Doyle, 2019; Gavrilova, 2019; Seele & Lock, 2015). Reporting as part of an organisation’s JSE SRI guidelines, for example, can also serve as an internal publication tool to build trust and influence employees’ perceptions, if distributed internally to employees (Ngorima, 2011; Diling, 2011). Other CSR reports that can reach stakeholders, including employees, could include environmental compliance reports, integrated financial and sustainability reporting, annual reports, or director reports (Doyle, 2019:31).

Internal CSR strategy papers and compliance handbooks, although unpublished and not accessible publicly, can be an instrumental internal CSR communication tool if directed at employees (Seele & Lock, 2015:16). An employee hotline could also be used as a deliberative internal CSR communication method. On the South African front, for example, Pepkor Holdings also introduced a whistle-blowing hotline (Pekpor, 2020:35). Internal campaigns and events to communicate CSR internally include global, regional or site events, organisational events, volunteer opportunities for employees, conferences, competitions, spontaneous activities and events, road shows, or town hall meetings (Doyle, 2019; Seele & Lock, 2015:18).

Research & Methodology

The research was empirical primary research into retail employees’ perceptions of their organisations’ CSR initiatives by means of a quantitative computer-aided self-administered survey. A non-probability sampling method – namely the snowball sampling method – was used, which encouraged participation and sharing of the survey on the social media platform, LinkedIn.

The target population for this study was employees from all South African retail organisations, as the retail sector was listed as one of the top contributing CSR sectors in South Africa in 2020 (Trialogue Business in Society, 2021:36). According to South African Market Insights (2019), the retail sector in South Africa employs approximately 894 966 employees, which was considered as the target population. The sample size for the study, with a 95 percent confidence level (associated with a Z-score of 1.96), 0.5 standard deviation and a margin of error of 5 percent, was 385 respondents.

A factor analysis, with the purpose of ensuring that all the survey items measure a specific construct or factor and also test for underlying dimensions, (Malhotra, 2019:607) did not produce any problems as part of a pre-test, which indicated that all the survey questions contributed to the constructs of the survey. Frequencies were used to obtain descriptive statistics for categorical variables, which indicate how many people gave each response.

Findings

The findings are based on 229 completed and workable questionnaires. The final baseline of 229 responses was less than the 385 anticipated responses. However, the formula used to determine the sample size for this study did not include the size of the target population, but rather focused on the process used for the selection of the actual sampling units to ensure representativeness (Hair, Page & Brunsveld, 2019:196). Respondents were asked, on a scale from no extent to a very large extent, whether they perceived that their organisation informed employees about its CSR activities. For ease of reporting, the 5-point Likert scale was converted into two scales by keeping the scale “no extent” and combining the scales “small extent”, “moderate extent” and “very large extent” to form the scale “to some extent”. This was done to determine overall trends in the responses. A total of 65.9 percent of respondents agreed, to some extent, with the statement, “I receive too much information about my organisation’s Corporate Social Responsibility activities.” This could indicate that many retail organisations are overcommunicating to their employees regarding CSR. However, 96.1 percent of respondents agreed that they receive sufficient information on what they would like to know about their organisation’s
CSR, while 11.4 percent of respondents stated that they didn’t receive “sufficient information on the stakeholders that are affected by my organisation’s Corporate Social Responsibility activities”. Even though most respondents indicated that they receive sufficient CSR communication, the communication might therefore not include information employees would like to receive, such as particulars of the specific stakeholder groups targeted with the CSR initiatives. High variances occurred in responses to “Corporate Social Responsibility communication in my organisation is a two-way platform – employees are allowed to give feedback and suggestions on our organisation’s Corporate Social Responsibility activities” (M = 2.89, SD = 1.265). Even though employees acknowledged that they received sufficient CSR communication, there might not be a collaborative two-way platform for employees to engage in the communication. It was indicated by 99.1% of respondents that employees should “have a say in Corporate Social Responsibility projects”, which indicates the need for collaboration and including employees in two-way communication.

### Table 2: Employee perceptions of CSR communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>To no extent</th>
<th>To some extent</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I receive sufficient information on what I would like to know about my organisation’s Corporate Social Responsibility activities</td>
<td>3.9% n = 9</td>
<td>96.1% n = 220</td>
<td>100.0% n = 229</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>1.149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I receive sufficient information on the stakeholders that are affected by my organisation’s Corporate Social Responsibility activities</td>
<td>11.4% n = 26</td>
<td>88.6% n = 203</td>
<td>100.0% n = 229</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I receive too much information about my organisation’s Corporate Social Responsibility activities</td>
<td>34.1% n = 78</td>
<td>65.9% n = 151</td>
<td>100.0% n = 229</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>1.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Social Responsibility communication in my organisation is a two-way platform – employees are allowed to give feedback and suggestions on our organisation’s Corporate Social Responsibility activities</td>
<td>19.7% n = 45</td>
<td>80.3% n = 184</td>
<td>100.0% n = 229</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should employees have a say in Corporate Social Responsibility projects?</td>
<td>0.9% n = 2</td>
<td>99.1% n = 227</td>
<td>100.0% n = 229</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>0.938</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were furthermore asked what their perceptions were of the internal CSR communication methods used by their retail organisations. Respondents had to choose from a given list of internal communication methods, which was analysed by means of a frequency count, and were able to add any internal communication methods they perceived not to be listed.

The results indicated that the majority of respondents perceived their organisations to make use of e-mails to communicate with employees regarding CSR (72.5 percent, n = 166). Internal newsletters (69.4 percent, n = 159) and company websites (68.1 percent, n = 156) also ranked very high by respondents as methods for their organisations to communicate internally regarding CSR. CSR brochures (10.5 percent, n = 24) were at the lowest end of the spectrum, which could be as a result of traditional internal communication tools being phased out and being replaced by digital communication tools. Few employees (38.4 percent, n = 88) said that their organisations exposed them to shareholder reports to communicate CSR initiatives internally. Also to be noted is the high number of respondents who did not select certain internal communication methods – 64.6 percent of retail employees indicated that their organisations did not use internal meetings to communicate regarding CSR, and 70.7 percent (n = 162) stated that their organisations did not use word-of-mouth to communicate with employees regarding CSR. From the frequency counts it can be concluded that employees perceived their organisations to make more use of digital communication methods to communicate with them regarding CSR, as opposed to traditional or in-person communication methods.

### Table 3: Perceptions of internal CSR communication methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal communication tool</th>
<th>Not selected (n)</th>
<th>Yes (n)</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>63 (27.5%)</td>
<td>166 (72.5%)</td>
<td>229 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal newsletter</td>
<td>70 (30.6%)</td>
<td>159 (69.4%)</td>
<td>229 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company website</td>
<td>73 (31.9%)</td>
<td>156 (68.1%)</td>
<td>229 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media platforms</td>
<td>99 (43.2%)</td>
<td>130 (56.8%)</td>
<td>229 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet (internal private network)</td>
<td>118 (51.5%)</td>
<td>111 (48.5%)</td>
<td>229 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shareholder reports</td>
<td>141 (61.6%)</td>
<td>88 (38.4%)</td>
<td>229 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal meetings</td>
<td>148 (64.6%)</td>
<td>81 (35.4%)</td>
<td>229 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-of-mouth</td>
<td>162 (70.7%)</td>
<td>67 (29.3%)</td>
<td>229 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR brochures</td>
<td>205 (89.5%)</td>
<td>24 (10.5%)</td>
<td>229 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When respondents were asked if there were other internal communication methods not listed that their organisations used to communicate with employees regarding CSR initiatives, respondents mentioned a company app, canteen awareness programmes, chat messages, company information sessions, short video clips, store radio and access to senior management.

Conclusions

CSR, which requires organisations to be economically, environmentally and socially responsible, is one way for retailers to add value to their employees. By communicating CSR initiatives internally, South African retailers can leverage the effect this communication can have on employees’ perceptions of the organisation’s CI, and ultimately have an effect on employees’ attitudes and behaviour. Frequency count was used to determine which internal CSR communication methods employees perceived their organisations to use.

It was determined that the internal CSR communication method used the most, as perceived by the respondents, was e-mail communication, followed by internal newsletters, company websites, social media platforms and company intranet. This indicates the importance of digital platforms when communicating CSR to employees. It was furthermore established that two-way communication, such as internal meetings and word-of-mouth, can be utilised more to communicate with employees regarding CSR in order to encourage collaboration and involve employees more in CSR. Future research can, for example, focus on the impact of improved internal CSR communication on employee behaviour and organisational performance within the retail sector.

Managerial implications

As this study was exploratory in nature, future research can distinguish between selected demographic subgroups’ perceptions of internal CSR communication methods in order to tailor internal CSR communication strategies based on employees’ positions within the organisation. Future research can also distinguish between the perceptions of employees of JSE-listed and non-JSE-listed retail organisations.

Internal CSR communication should be positioned more as a two-way platform where employees are allowed to give feedback and suggestions. With face-to-face meetings being an integral part of internal CSR communication, some face-to-face meetings can be utilised for employees to be able to provide input and feedback on their organisation’s CSR initiatives before CSR strategies are drafted, thus improving two-way communication. Consistent communication to employees regarding CSR initiatives is also important. However, too much CSR communication can lead to a decline in employees’ perceptions of CSR initiatives. Marketers or organisations should therefore streamline their CSR communication to employees by providing constant feedback and means for engagement, but not overcommunicating CSR initiatives to employees.

With visual design elements forming part of the corporate brand identity as discussed, marketers or organisations can consider design elements specific to their organisation’s CSR, such as a logo or graphic, so that employees can easily identify all communication relating to their organisation’s CSR initiatives. Design elements specific to CSR can be integrated, for instance, with organisational e-mails or intranet updates pertaining to CSR initiatives.

The research findings furthermore indicated that South African retail organisations mostly make use of digital communication methods to communicate with employees regarding CSR. Only two respondents indicated that their organisations make use of cellphone applications to communicate with them regarding CSR, which can also be a digital CSR marketing tool that can be adopted by other retail organisations.

Limitations of the study

As this researcher could not obtain permission from top spending CSR retail organisations in South Africa to participate in the study (as listed in the Trialogue Business in Society Handbook, 2021), the study was made available to all South African retail employees. The selection of employees to participate in this study was based on availability and willingness to participate, and was limited to respondents who had access to LinkedIn. However, this study was exploratory in nature and the findings were used to establish areas for future research.

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