An analysis of Turkey's telecommunications sector's social responsibility practices online

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ABSTRACT

Rooted in social identity theory, this exploratory study focuses on Turkey's four largest telecommunications companies (Turkcell, Türk Telekom, Avea, and Vodafone) to determine how public relations and corporate social responsibility practices help construct organizational identity. To achieve its aim, the study performs a thematic content analysis of the companies' corporate websites and social media accounts. Study results reveal that, in addition to focusing on their core business functions, telecommunications companies in Turkey try to create value and construct a legitimate identity by emphasizing community benefits and their superiority vis-à-vis their competitors. This study also demonstrates that companies' CSR activities play a crucial role in constructing organizational identity and gaining legitimacy.

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1. Introduction

Public relations, which helps organizations establish long-term relationships with their clients, is one of the most important organizational communication functions. Public relations activities are required to inform consumers about an organization, its identity, and its activities. While achieving communication goals and making decisions, organizations should also take into account their clients' opinions, ethical concerns, and social responsibility considerations (Grunig, 2006). Communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities to stakeholders is necessary if an organization wants to benefit from CSR initiatives and differentiate itself from its competitors (Smith & Alexander, 2013). The public relations literature does not contain extensive studies from Turkey, so this study aims to close that gap by portraying a case that reveals the public relations scene in that country. This research focuses on the role of public relations in constructing organizational identity by bringing together public relations studies and organizational studies through qualitative and quantitative techniques to understand this relationship in detail. The study also tries to bring a different theoretical perspective to the field of public relations though its focus on social identity theory.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Organizational identity, corporate social responsibility and public relations

Organizational identity helps people identify and differentiate the organization from others. Public relations is one of the major organizational communication tools used to construct organizational identity and communicate this identity to relevant stakeholders. Public relations may help an organization in creating a positive public perception and a strong reputation, and in gaining public support. Good public relations helps build, nurture, and strengthen mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Ki & Hon, 2007).

Stakeholders, especially customers, "tend to be more satisfied with companies that are more socially responsible, perceive these companies more favorably (in terms of corporate reputation and brand equity), and reward these firms" (Hsu, 2012, p. 198) by buying their products. Communicating about CSR activities has become an important part of organizational communication efforts because an organization's reputation and legitimacy strongly depend on those initiatives (Verboven, 2011). Corporate websites are increasingly used to communicate an organization's CSR efforts (Verboven, 2011) and as an interactive tool to engage with stakeholders (Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013). As Pavitt (2012) argued, organizations must make effective use of improving communication technologies and "recognize that they can no longer evade their responsibility to act ethically and responsibly as. . .true corporate citizen[s]" (p. 25).

2.2. Public relations and the use of social media

Shortly after social media gained popularity for social networking purposes, communication scholars realized its potential for organizational communication (Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013). The Internet and social media are studied by public relations professionals for the interaction and engagement opportunities they create between organizations and the public, such as asking questions, sharing content, and/or having conversations (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013; Hill & White, 2000; Ye & Ki, 2012). The use of the Internet and social media has evolved similarly in Turkey. Today, Turkey is a major user of social media, with 45 percent of the population (35 million) accessing the Internet, making the country the fifth-largest Internet user in Europe (Internet World Stats, 2012). According to Comscore (2011), social media is one of the most popular reasons for Internet use in Turkey. In fact, Turkey has the third-largest population of Facebook users in the world (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012).

This study aims to reveal how the telecommunications sector in Turkey uses corporate websites and social media accounts as part of their public relations strategies. Accordingly, the first research question focuses on revealing *which themes and theme categories are used by the four largest telecommunications companies in Turkey to construct their organizational identities on their websites and social media accounts.* The research also aims to reveal the role of CSR initiatives for identity construction; thus the second research question tries to *understand the role of corporate social responsibility in the online identity construction of Turkey's four largest telecommunications companies.*

3. Methodology

This exploratory research analyzes website content to study how organizations define themselves and communicate their distinctive characteristics to create a positive identity. Content analysis is a common research method for examining information provided by businesses and institutions (Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013; Ettredge, Richardson, & Scholz, 2001; Gallego-Alvarez, Rodriguez-Dominguez, & Garcia-Sanchez, 2011; Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). The language used on the websites of Turkey's four largest telecommunications companies to communicate organizational identity is the main focus of the study. This research also aims to understand influence of CSR activities on organizational identity construction.

3.1. Website analysis

The use of online public relations has become a common way for organizations to engage with their stakeholders. Research reveals that larger firms tend to have a stronger CSR engagement (Campbell, 2007; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006), thus this study focuses on Turkey's four largest telecommunications companies, who provide service to a significant number of people, assuming that CSR communication would be prevalent among them. Textual data were collected from the *About Us, History, Mission and Vision, and Corporate Social Responsibility* sections of each company's website.

3.2. Social media analysis

The posts and photos shared on the studied telecommunications companies' social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter) between March and May 2014 were collected in a word processing document and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The number of posts and photos was counted to reveal and compare the social media use of different companies. The content of the posts was then analyzed to reveal themes utilized by each company and to understand how many and what kinds of CSR activities are mentioned on social media. The content of social media and websites was analyzed to determine main themes and answer the research questions.