The online presence of Turkish banks: Communicating the softer side of corporate identity

Emel Ozdora-Aksak [a,*], Sirin Atakan-Duman [b]

[a] Bilkent University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Design and Architecture, Department of Communication and Design, Turkey
[b] Turgut Ozal University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Business Administration, Turkey

A B S T R A C T

This study tries to understand the process of organizational identity construction and the role of public relations in assisting this process. This study focuses on Turkey's banking sector to understand how organizational identities are constructed and supported by corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities in addition to how they are communicated to stakeholders. The corporate websites and social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter) of the eight largest banks in Turkey are examined through thematic content analysis to understand their identity construction processes and how much they benefit from CSR activities in this process. Institutional theory is utilized in this study to get a deeper understanding of the role of CSR in organizational identity construction. The results reveal that online presence of banks in Turkey tends to emphasize the softer, especially socially responsible side of their organizational identities.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The Internet is increasingly becoming an important public relations tool for organizations to communicate with their publics; the authors argue that this medium would also be an important tool for organizational identity construction and communication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. The focus of this study is the role of public relations and CSR practices in constructing an organization's identity. Public relations is one of the major organizational communication tools to construct an organization's identity and communicate this identity to relevant stakeholders. In fact, the role of public relations practitioners is to re-enforce organizational identity through communication activities.

This study analyzes a total of eight public and private banks in Turkey's banking sector with more than 300 branches, and investigates the role of public relations and CSR practices in constructing their organizational identities. In order to analyze the banks' organizational identity, the researchers examine their corporate websites and social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter) through thematic content analysis.

This research focuses on the role of public relations in constructing organizational identity by bringing together the literatures of public relations and organization studies, concentrating on external stakeholders, and using qualitative and quantitative techniques to understand this relationship in detail. In addition, the study also tries to bring a different theoretical perspective to the field of public relations through the focus on social identity theory while also analyzing social media, which over the last couple of years, has become increasingly popular in public relations research.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90 3122901061.
 E-mail addresses: emel.ozdora@bilkent.edu.tr (E. Ozdora-Aksak), sduman@turgutozal.edu.tr (S. Atakan-Duman).

2. Literature review

2.1. Public relations and organizational identity

Organizations use public relations to communicate and establish relationships with their stakeholders. Public relations has been defined as a management function which helps to build, nurture, and strengthen mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000; Ki & Hon, 2007; Ledingham, 2006). Public relations has been used as a organizational function to reflect an organization's identity and image to its publics (Bromley, 1993; Dowling, 1994; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; van Riel, 1995). Organizations use public relations to connect with their publics through various means and by using different media such as publications, websites, and more increasingly social media.

One of the important roles of public relations is to help construct and communicate an organization's identity. Organizational identity puts forth what the organization is (Balmer, 1995; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; van Rekom, 1997; van Riel, 1995). As Bick, Jacobson, and Abratt (2003: 839) defined: "*identity is the embodiment of the organization*" and it communicates "*the core values, philosophy and the strategy of the organization through the delivery of its products and/or services*". It can be conceptualized as the personality and the soul of the corporation (Lee, 1983). Abratt (1989) defines organizational identity as "*the collection of the physical and behavioral characteristics that represent and distinguish the company*" (p. 68). Therefore, all organizational activities, products/services, and communication efforts play a role in identity construction (Olins, 1989).

Legitimacy is critical for organizations. According to institutional theorists, the institutional environment determines the socially constructed rules and requirements which organizations have to comply with in order to gain legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995). Therefore organizations try to adapt to their environments and conform to environmental norms to increase their chances of survival. This means that organizations manage to survive and gain legitimacy by copying each other's actions. The norms and values of the organizational field, the context where socially constructed practices are reproduced and outspread (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002), determine organizational norms (Kondra & Hinnings, 1998). Therefore, organizations need to adapt to the rules and requirements of the environment not only for efficiency, but also to gain legitimacy (Kondra & Hinnings, 1998). Gaining legitimacy is critical for the survival and success of organizations and many try to gain legitimacy through CSR practices. As Fombrun and Shanley (1990) argue, publics today care about the non-economic agendas of organizations. In fact, there is increased concern about the organizations' added value to the society not just financial but also the non-financial benefits (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). As Claasen and Roloff (2011) argued, an influential way to gain legitimacy is making CSR practices highly visible through an organization's communication efforts.

2.2. Public relations and corporate social responsibility

Strategic public relations efforts usually focus on connecting an organization with a socially responsible cause that fits the organization's mission and business activities, enhancing reputation through CSR and communicating about these CSR efforts with the organization's stakeholders. CSR has moral, ethical, and social implications that promote mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics, which caused it to be also referred to as the "goodwill capital" of organizations (David, Kline, & Dai, 2005, p. 293). The goal of CSR is not short-term profits but doing good for the society (J.E. Grunig, 2000). Lai, Chiu, Yang, and Pai (2010) defined CSR as "voluntary activities taken by corporations to enhance economic, social and environmental performance voluntarily" (p. 458). The authors argued, "CSR and corporate reputation arouse customers' emotional perceptions about the firms they deal with, leading them to associate their perceptions with the brands they intend to purchase, thus developing brand equity as well as enhancing corporate reputation" (Lai et al., 2010, p. 459). In this new CSR-driven business era, public relations professionals and scholars need to understand how different CSR initiatives may influence an organization's reputation. This knowledge may assist professionals to strategically guide companies when planning and implementing CSR practices.

Having a strong CSR program might be seen by many as a strategic decision by organizations to improve their reputations and gain a competitive edge. However, CSR programs should not only serve the organization for image/reputation management purposes, but also benefit their publics and the society at large by supporting different social causes such as human rights, education, gender, anti-discrimination, children, environment, health, quality products/services, etc. (Lee, Mak, & Pang, 2012). In their study, David et al. described discretionary CSR practices as: "contributes resources to the arts and cultural programs in the community"; "contributes resources to raise social awareness of issues such as hunger and domestic violence"; "supports children and family issues, such as adoption and foster care"; and "supports public health programs" (David et al., 2005, p. 303). Many researchers argue that communicating an organization's CSR practices is critical for shaping stakeholders' views of CSR practices (David et al., 2005; Epstein & Roy, 2001; Kim, 2011; Maignan & Ferrell, 2001). Communication of CSR should focus mainly on establishing a linkage between an organization's image and its CSR practices. Epstein and Roy (2001) have even argued that a key performance measure of a successful CSR campaign is its communication and promotion to key publics, including the community.

CSR programs usually reflect an organization's culture, values and identity and they generally target key publics, including consumers, employees, and the community. Selvi, Wagner, and Türel (2010) analyzed Capital's "*The most admired companies in Turkey*" and "*The leaders in social responsibility in Turkey*" lists and compared the firm-year observations of companies before and companies after the financial crisis. The study results revealed a positive relationship between corporate social