On the role of social media in the 'responsible' food business: blogger buzz on health and obesity issues

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On the role of social media in the 'responsible' food business: Blogger buzz on health and obesity issues

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Abstract

To contribute to the debate on the role of social media in responsible business, this article explores blogger buzz in reaction to food companies' press releases on health and obesity issues, considering the content and the level of fit between the CSR initiatives and the company. Findings show that companies issued more product-related initiatives than promotion-related ones. Among these, less than half generated a substantial number of responses from bloggers, which could not be identified as a specific group. While new product introductions led to positive buzz, modifications of current products resulted in more negative responses, even if there was a high fit with core business. While promotion-related press releases were received negatively in general, particularly periphery promotion (compared to core promotion) generated most reactions. Our exploratory study suggests that companies can increase the likelihood of a positive reaction if they carefully consider the fit between initiatives and their core business, while taking the notion of 'controversial fit,' relating to the unhealthy nature of original products, into account. Further research avenues and implications, as well as limitations, are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, food companies have increasingly been called upon to take responsibility in reducing obesity and promoting health (Young and Nestle, 2007). Although individual behaviour and genetic predispositions could result in health problems, high-calorie products and marketing practices are believed to contribute to the obesity epidemic (Seiders and Petty, 2007). These social issues have entered the public debate as corporate social responsibility (CSR) concerns to which food companies have felt obliged to respond, also because of (threats of) regulatory measures. Reputation clearly plays a role in this respect, as potential consequences may be large (cf. Yoon et al., 2006); as noted by Wansink and Huckabee (2005, p. 1), "the threat of being the tobacco industry of the new millennium is not a trivial fear of leading packaged goods companies and quick service restaurants". In reaction, food companies have started to take steps, including changes in package-size, portions and recipes, and the provision of nutrition information through labels (Kolk et al., 2012; Wansink and Huckabee, 2005). However, as the food industry is currently producing more than the population needs and profits rely on increasing consumption (Ludwig and Nestle, 2008), many people believe that its CSR activities are limited and have focused on transferring responsibility to personal will power (e.g., Koplan and Brownell, 2010), resulting in negative responses towards these initiatives.

Coca-Cola, for example, recently launched a two-minute advertisement in the US, which emphasised that the company provides low-caloric options and has included this information on its labels. The campaign suggests that "if you eat and drink more calories than you burn off, you'll gain weight." While the content of advertising is in line with Coca-Cola's

CSR theme ‘Live Positively’ and the company indeed offers more low-calorie options than in the past, the adverts immediately drew negative criticism from various stakeholders.[1] Similarly, the exclusive deal with McDonalds as the only branded restaurant on site during the 2012 Olympics in London was strongly criticised, despite the Olympic committee’s defense that the company’s healthier menu options indicate that it takes its “public health responsibility” seriously.[2] On the other hand, Burger King’s introduction of apple slides cut to look like fries was positively received by the press, although not extensively discussed.

The negative associations with health issues may have forced companies to proactively communicate and engage in health improving initiatives (Schrempf, 2012). At the same time, however, legitimacy of companies that are subject to societal debates is often challenged by stakeholders who are sceptical (Du and Vieira Jr. 2012). Different responses of consumers towards CSR initiatives of food companies might be explained by the level of fit between the CSR activities and the company. The influence of fit has been widely studied in the context of cause-related marketing (e.g. Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006) and social alliances (e.g. Vock et al., 2013), but has not been applied to general CSR policies thus far. Literature on the influence of fit shows that the level of the fit between CSR activities and the company can be high or low. A high fit means that there is congruence between the cause and the brand in terms of image, function, and target markets, while a low fit refers to inconsistency between the cause and the brand. Researchers show that a high fit is more positively perceived by consumers than a low fit (e.g. Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). In the context of the food industry, this would suggest that a high fit between CSR initiatives and companies’ core business, i.e., manufacturing and/or serving food, will lead to favourable consumer responses. When the activities are inconsistent and have a low fit with core business, perceptions will be more negative.

So far, it has been unclear how consumers respond to different types of CSR activities in the food industry. We focus on two types of CSR initiatives that have been implemented by food companies, product-related and promotion-related activities. In order to compare the differential perceptions toward the two types of initiatives, we explore press releases from food companies about health and obesity issues and blogger responses to these releases on the internet. Press releases are regularly used by food companies to announce their health-related initiatives to the public (Whysall, 2005). Until recently, these were targeted at traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television. However, with the rise of social media, corporate announcements are often picked up and discussed by others than professional journalists (Wright and Hinson, 2008). In view of their greater interactivity and frequency, small online contributions via social media can quickly spread and generate ‘buzz’. For companies, online responses are unpredictable but with a potentially large impact, even separate from the ‘traditional’ news media, and thus something that they need to take into account (Meraz, 2011). User-generated content such as blogs may affect reputation and performance; it has even been said that social media contribute to long-run sales growth, while traditional media have a shorter-term impact (Stephen and Galak, 2012).

In light of the unique challenges the food industry is facing, this article explores blogger buzz in reaction to company press releases on health and obesity issues in the food industry. We focus on blogging, which has become more important in demonstrating consumer power over the years (Kerr et al., 2012). As the most used approaches by the food industry to prime consumers’ interpretations of companies’ activities and values are product and promotion (Schröder and McEachern, 2005), we use these two categories to critically examine blogger responses and sentiments toward the CSR practices of 10 leading food companies. More specifically, this research intends to explore the following questions: 1) What are the health-related CSR practices that have been communicated by these food companies? 2) Which types of CSR initiatives have generated awareness among bloggers? 3)

What are the bloggers' responses toward these CSR communications? 4) Who are the bloggers that participate in the discussions?

This paper responds to the call for a better understanding of CSR communications in industries and companies that are negatively associated with social, environmental and ethical issues (Du and Vieira Jr. 2012; Godfrey et al., 2009; Yoon et al, 2006). It focuses on a specific set of issues faced by companies for which CSR concerns directly relate to their core business activities. We also add a novel perspective on CSR awareness research by empirically exploring bloggers' responses toward CSR initiatives. We aim to provide input into the broader debate about the (future) role of social media in responsible business by contributing insights from one type of online reaction. Before moving to a presentation and discussion of results, we will first give an overview of health issues and CSR in the food industry, and CSR communications and blogging, followed by an explanation of sample and methodology.

HEALTH ISSUES AND CSR IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY

The food industry has seen a dynamic process of rules imposed by governments and standards and/or codes adopted voluntarily by companies. For example, after bans on soda sales were adopted in several states in the US, the American Beverage Association, which included PepsiCo and Coca-Cola, agreed to 'voluntarily' stop the sale of all high caloric drinks in schools in 2006 (Burros and Warner, 2006). This example shows that many of the 'responsibilities' expected from food companies are in direct conflict with their core businesses, i.e., selling more products. Moreover, despite growing demand for (self-) regulation from various stakeholders, the effectiveness of such initiatives is still under discussion (Simon, 2006). Scholars argued that government intervention targeted at restaurants was unlikely to remedy the obesity epidemic (Marlow and Abdukadirov, 2012) and even damage societal welfare (Anderson and Matsa, 2011). Taber et al. (2012) showed that the ban of sugar-sweetened drinks in schools may have reduced in-school access but not overall consumption among teenagers. And while governments have continued to tighten up the rules, food companies have spent large budgets on lobbying against such proposals (Wilson and Roberts, 2012). Their resistance may be partially due to uncertainties about consumer acceptance, perceptions of such initiatives, and fear of declining sales.

Concurrently, food companies have addressed health and obesity issues as part of their CSR. In the broader CSR context, relevant activities have been differentiated into two categories: institutional and promotional. Institutional CSR initiatives take a more comprehensive approach and aim for long-term performance implications, while promotional ones focus more on short-term results such as sales (Pirsch et al., 2007). In their review of CSR activities, Peloza and Shang (2011) distinguished three different types: philanthropy, business practices, and product-related initiatives. They propose that, compared to the two other categories, product-related activities require more commitment and effort from companies, and are, therefore, better perceived by stakeholders. In the food industry, product and promotion are the two most used approaches to prime consumers' interpretations of companies' ethical values (Schröder and McEachern, 2005). We, therefore, take this perspective to further explore the activities undertaken by food companies, as reflected in their press releases.

Product and promotion can be related to insights from a different body of research, on cause-brand fit, in the marketing field. Cause-brand fit has been defined as "the degree of similarity or compatibility that consumers perceive exists between the cause and the brand" (Lafferty, 2007, p. 448). Previous literature suggests that higher fit enhances the associations between the brand and the cause, which facilitates the process of integrating information, and results in more positive consumer responses (e.g., Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). Similarly, it can be argued that in the food industry a high fit between CSR initiatives and the company's core business, i.e., offering food products, should receive favourable responses from consumers. It seems plausible that product-related initiatives to improve health and obesity issues have a high fit with the company's core food business, as these initiatives aim to adapt the product to become healthier or to introduce healthier alternatives. However, promotion-related initiatives are often further removed from core business as they mostly involve the promotion of healthier life styles, including more exercise. These initiatives are not entirely consistent with selling food that is calorie-dense, and may thus be perceived as low fit. The literature also shows that these activities might be perceived by consumers as predominantly based on firms' egoistic motives, leading to negative responses (Du et al., 2007). For example, consumers perceive a beer company sponsoring anti-drinking and driving campaigns as being driven by egoistic motives (Szykman et al., 2004). To explore this influence of fit, we consider CSR communications from food companies and evaluate consumer responses by analysing blogs.

CSR COMMUNICATIONS AND BLOGGING

In the context described above, communication about health-related activities is taking place; namely, companies publish press releases to 'give sense' to stakeholders about CSR (Morsing and Schultz, 2006), including obesity (Schrempf, 2012), and health issues (Maloni and Brown, 2006). However, CSR communications often suffer from low awareness (Sen et al., 2006), and how and when they effectively generate favourable reactions is unclear (Bhattacharya et al., 2009). CSR initiatives in consumer-oriented sectors, including the food industry, are often communicated via press releases (Holder-Webb et al., 2009), which may be viewed as promises that companies make to the general public (Harris et al., 2009). This reflects a more general trend that press releases are not solely targeted to or handled by journalists anymore (Ward-Johnson and Guiniven, 2008). Everybody, (potential) consumers included, has access to the information and can write opinions or report on a news event (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Virtual CSR dialogues have recently been mentioned as ways in which companies may generate value (Korschun and Du, 2012). While such direct interactions with consumers are encouraged, it is largely unknown to what extent press releases are picked up by online users other than journalists. Moreover, research on how companies can influence the process of stakeholder involvement and engagement through the initial message issued has also remained scarce. It is crucial for companies to understand if and how various users receive this type of information, and social media discussions can give a clear indication.

Amongst social media platforms, blogs provide rich information and insightful conversations, and have less privacy issues than other settings (Hookway, 2008). Blogs are user-generated, not produced by professional media outlets, and can be interactive through readers' comments on posts (Stephen and Galak, 2012). Blogging as a phenomenon evolved from online personal diaries, but has quickly developed into a 'new medium' with the power of agenda setting (Wallsten, 2007). Bloggers, in particular, have been identified as empowered internet users that can potentially become online pressure groups (Kerr et al., 2012). Blogging has become prominent, even though other social media has grown rapidly as well (Hookway, 2008). This popularity has not been fully reflected in empirical academic research yet. Broader publications have considered the influence of blog(ger)s on politics and mass communications (e.g. Porter et al., 2007), tourism (e.g. Lin and Huang, 2006), journalism (e.g. Kaye, 2005) and public relations (Terilli and Arnorsdottir, 2008). Blogs are considered as a highly effective tool for public relations engagement (Kent, 2008), and the blogosphere, the totality of all blogs, has been characterised as an arena where executives can learn what has been said about their companies (Wyld, 2008).

In business-related research, two types of studies can be distinguished: one in which blogs serve to collect data, and one in which blogs are examined. Blogs can be categorised and understood by looking at, for example, bloggers' profiles and genres of blogging topics, such as personal diaries, hobbies and interests, and consideration of public affairs issues (Kent, 2008). Blogs are commonly used in the field of information management to capture the spread of the Internet and usage. They are generally categorised as positive, negative and neutral (e.g. Ku et al., 2006) with regard to topics discussed. One study that also considered press releases used the total number of blog posts as a measure to assess impact on sales, complementary to the activities in traditional media (Stephen and Galak, 2012). In this article, we will also use press releases and blog posts, but rather in a different way, i.e., to assess numbers and types of responses by bloggers and their peculiarities, considering specific types of CSR initiatives. Hence, it is not only used as data tool but also as a phenomenon that companies face and need to consider in their communication activities.

Existing research on blogs as object of study, the second category identified above, has paid attention to motivations for blogging (e.g., Huang et al., 2007), blog categories (e.g., Dearstyne, 2005), interactions between bloggers and readers (e.g., Huang et al., 2008) and the influence of employee bloggers (e.g., Aggarwal et al., 2011). Madsen (2009) suggested companies to utilise information transparency on the Internet, via corporate blogs, to become socially responsible. Along this line, Fieseler et al. (2010) took McDonald's corporate CSR blog as a starting point to illustrate how blogs can be valuable in CSR communications. They demonstrated how blogs allow stakeholders, consumers included, to write and give their views about companies' CSR initiatives, thus providing direct feedback and offering possibilities for companies to engage in micro-dialogues with stakeholders. However, the responses of the general public in the blogosphere to companies' broader communications on CSR-related issues have remained underexposed.

SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

The food sector is often related to responsibility for health issues such as the growing obesity problem (Chou et al., 2008). This study included three sub-sectors of the food industry: quick-service restaurants, beverage, and food & confectionary companies, which have been at the centre of the obesity epidemic debate (Kolk et al., 2012; Marshall et al., 2007). Following industry data (Millward Brown Optimor, 2009; Rogers, 2009), we selected companies that were either the top two industry leaders in English language countries, or listed in the 100 global brands in 2007-2009. We focused on companies with the highest revenues and brand values in respective sub-sectors, mainly because prominent companies are more likely to engage in and communicate about CSR activities (Campbell, 2007; Gray et al., 1995). Moreover, companies with high brand value tend to attract more attention from consumers, which increases the likelihood of critical scrutiny (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk, 2009). Based on these criteria, Burger King, KFC, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Subway, Starbucks (quick-service restaurants); Coca-Cola, PepsiCo (beverage companies), and Mars and Nestlé (food and confectionery companies) were selected. More quick-service restaurants were included because the top 100 global brand list contained more leading companies in this (sub)sector. They were also more discussed in general, along with the leading beverage companies, in terms of responsibility to address the obesity issue.

Press releases of these companies were retrieved from their websites, which usually listed them chronologically in the news sections. Although food companies are often associated with health and obesity issues, they hardly use the word 'obesity' in their communications. Instead, they tend to refer to the topic as 'Nutrition and Well -being' (McDonald's), 'Commitment to Food' (Burger King) or 'Active Healthy Living' (Coca-Cola). All press releases with information on policies, initiatives, and news about diet, health, nutrition, and wellbeing were included. The press releases were taken from the websites for the period between January 1, 2007 and July 31, 2009. At the time that data collection started, in 2009, the oldest press releases commonly available on the companies' websites were from 2007.

After all press releases were identified, the subsequent blog posts were retrieved online via Google Blog Search. Previous research has confirmed that media coverage for events is most intensive for a few days after an incident and then declines (Vasterman, 2005). Earlier blogging studies on political and social incidents found that blog discussions, like traditional media coverage, lasted for four days (Wallsten, 2007) to the first two weeks after the initial news events (Thelwall, 2006). Based on these findings, we set our search for blog posts for the period of up to two weeks after the release was first made public. Several keywords from the press releases' title and content were used as criteria to track the relevant blog posts. For example, on October 1, 2008, KFC published a press release entitled "Yum! Brands announced U.S. divisions will place calories on all company restaurant menu boards". The blog search was subsequently performed to find posts with keywords such as 'KFC', 'Yum!', 'calories' and 'menu' that were written between October 1, 2008 and October 15, 2008.

Each blog post was screened for its relevance to assess whether it is indeed related to the focal press release. Furthermore, only those blogs that had proven traffic and evidence of readership during the time of investigation were included in the sample, either by counting the number of visitors or the existence of comments from readers. Comments attached to a blog post were retained. We also collected the profile of the blog and blogger(s), including, if available, the characteristics of the blogs, such as the featured topics and the number of contributors, and whether they were single-authored or multi-authored. Moreover, bloggers' country of origin, profession, and interests were recorded when that data was published on the site. Finally, the blog posts were coded according to the sentiments of the overall blog posts;

positive, neutral or negative (Dickson and Eckman, 2008), in terms of their opinions regarding the initiatives (see Table 1 for an illustrative example). Blog posts that appeared to be sponsored by companies, such as providing free samples to give away, were included in the study. Even though the number of comments these blog posts received may be biased and considered to be marketing practices, they should still be recorded as they were part of the blogosphere activities.

Table 1

The analysis of press releases built on earlier research (Pirsch et al., 2007; Peloza and Shang, 2011; Schröder and McEachern, 2005), resulting in two main categories: product-related and promotion-related press releases as indicated above. Product-related press releases were further divided in ‘current product modification’ (e.g., reducing salt and calorie density in chips) and ‘new product introduction’ (e.g., introducing new low-calorie frizzy drinks). Promotion-related press releases were divided into ‘core promotion activities’ that directly relate to the product (e.g., a ban on fast-food advertising towards children) and ‘periphery activities’ (e.g., promoting healthy life styles by encouraging exercising). Furthermore, to analyse the influence of fit between initiatives and companies on blogger responses, the press releases were coded as ‘high fit’ or ‘low fit’ based on the definition of “comparability between the initiatives and the company’s core business” (Lafferty, 2007, p. 448). As explained in the previous section, the press releases were categorised based on whether the initiatives were seen as “consistent/inconsistent” and “compatible/incompatible” with companies’ core business. When initiatives were considered to be consistent and compatible in light of companies’ core business, they were coded as “high fit”.

Two coders were trained to analyse the category of press releases and blog posts, including one independent researcher who was not involved in the coding development, and one of the co-authors of the paper. We also trained two coders to analyse the fit level. These two had not been involved in the coding development and the coding of the category of press releases and blog posts. For both procedures, coders undertook the coding on the entire set of data separately and any disagreements were addressed at the end through discussion (as in Kerr et al., 2012). To ensure reliability of the result, the inter-rater reliabilities of the encoded blogs and press releases were tested. Agreement between the coders on the valence of the blogs, categories and fit level of the press releases was 94%, 95% and 95% respectively, while Cohen's Kappa was 0.91, 0.92, and 0.86 respectively. Based on previous research, this level of inter-coder reliability was deemed sufficient (Desai, 2011; Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). Chi-square analysis was conducted to analyse the relationships between press release categories and the fit level.

FINDINGS

We start by addressing the first research question mentioned in the introduction, related to the types of health-related initiatives communicated by the food companies. Overall, the 10 investigated companies published 165 relevant press releases during the research time frame, of which 67 generated in total 815 responses from bloggers, and 6,203 subsequent comments. Table 2 shows a detailed distribution of the press releases and accompanying blog posts over the 10 companies. It should be noted that there is one press release issued by YUM! Brands!, the company that owns both KFC and Pizza Hut, that was identical on both websites. Interestingly, when bloggers discussed the policy, they targeted KFC rather than Pizza Hut. We therefore counted the blog posts for this particular press release in the KFC figures, and did the same for the press release itself; there were thus 165 different press releases in total (this would have been 166 if the identical one had been included twice).

Table 2

Among the 165 press releases, each category and sub-category was represented, as the following examples show. PepsiCo announced on 4 February 2009 to cut the sodium level of current products under its crisps brand Walkers, which is product-related and a modification of the current product. An example of a new product introduction is Nestlé's press release from 15 July 2009 that announced the introduction of new candy, cranberry RAISINETS, targeted at health-conscious consumers. Promotion related to core product activities is Mars' 2008 announcement to restrict communication activities for kids under the age of 12. An example of periphery promotion is Coca-Cola's press release about the joint work of its foundation with the government of the US state of Alabama to promote summer activities and an education programme for youth.

To give an indication of the level of activity in the blogosphere, we calculated the average number of blog posts per press release for each company, and did the same for comments (see last columns in Table 2). For blog posts, this overall amounted to 12.1, and for comments to 92.6 per press release that generated a response. Companies with more press releases did not necessarily generate more responses in the blogosphere. For example, in two and a half years' time, the two leading beverage companies, Coca-Cola and especially PepsiCo, sent out considerably more press releases than the others, but that did not lead to higher response rates among bloggers.

To answer our second research question, we analysed blogger responses in more detail. Table 3 shows a detailed distribution of the press releases and accompanying blog posts over the categories. Of the 165 press releases, contrary to the general belief, we found that the product-related ones accounted for 64%, with new product introductions as highest within the category, while the rest was promotion-related. However, companies did have more periphery promotion-related CSR initiatives (25% of the overall press releases) than the ones concerning current product modification (17% of the overall press releases). Overall, bloggers responded to 67 (41%) of the total press releases, with product extension generating most discussion. Product-related press releases had a higher response rate (47%) than the promotion-related ones (28%).

Table 3

Similarly, to indicate the level of popularity for each topic in the blogosphere, we calculated the average number of blog posts and comments per press release for each category (see last columns in Table 3). Product-related press releases generated the most ‘buzz’ for both blog posts and comments, whereas core promotion generated the least in comments and periphery promotion generated the least in blog posts. Even if we excluded the blog posts that were blog marketing posts (e.g. giving free samples), the average number of comments on a blog post was still higher when it dealt with product modification rather than periphery promotion. Table 4 gives the distribution between press releases categories and fit levels. It shows that 129 press releases (78.2%) were coded as high fit, and 36 (21.8%) as low fit. Product-related initiatives have a higher proportion of high-fit press releases, while promotion-related ones had a more balanced distribution (X^2=19.2, df=1, p<0.001). Upon further analysis of the various subcategories, we found that press releases on core promotions were mostly high fit, while periphery promotions appeared to be the only one with equal high-fit and low-fit press releases (X^2=30.8, df=3, p<0.001). This indicates that, depending on the congruence between the activities and the company’s core business, promotional activities could be high fit as well.

Table 4

We also explored blog posts’ sentiments, which address the third research question posed in the introduction. In general, product-related press releases generated more positive responses (47.2%) than negative ones (33%). Conversely, promotion-related press releases led to more negative reactions (44.1%) than positive ones (38.1%). As expected, high-fit press releases generated more positive responses (47.2%) than negative ones (33.6%), while low-fit press releases generated more negative responses (42.7%) than positive ones (37.3%). Table 5 lists the detailed distribution of the blog post sentiments per category and fit level, which shows interesting differences within categories. While product extension reflected the overall category pattern of more positive responses for high fit and more negative responses for low fit, current product modification actually led to more negative responses for high fit and more positive responses in the case of low fit. And while periphery promotion led to more negative reactions in the low-fit condition, it had slightly more neutral responses when fit was high. Core promotions generated comparable percentages of positive and negative responses in case of high-fit press releases, but very limited observations for drawing meaningful conclusions for the low-fit condition.

Table 5

Finally, when it comes to the bloggers who were active, a considerable variety can be seen. The 815 blog posts were published on 721 unique blogs; the overwhelming majority of bloggers (93%) posted one relevant post in reaction to a press release. 7% of the bloggers (53 in total) reacted to more than one press release and altogether wrote 147 out of the 815 blog posts. Of these 53 bloggers, 40 reacted to various press releases from different companies, while 13 responded to just one specific company, Starbucks. 11 out of these 13 bloggers responded to only 2 press releases, and 2 bloggers to 3 and 7 press releases. Starbucks had more bloggers who repeatedly responded to more than one of their press releases (254 blogs came from 232 bloggers). For other companies that also had bloggers with more than one post per company (Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, KFC and Pizza Hut) this amounted to just a few ‘interested’ bloggers.

Looking at the bloggers’ profiles, the overwhelming majority (86%) appeared to be from the US, a small percentage from the UK (8%) or other countries (3%), while the origin of the rest (3%) could not be identified. Only a limited percentage of bloggers (14%) revealed details of their profession, with a considerable spread over dieticians, doctors, journalists, business specialists, and parents, mostly mothers. The type of blogs on which reactions were posted showed a large variety. This ranged from daily updates (mostly personal blogs; 32% of total), healthy living (diet, fitness, nutrition; 27%), food and drinks (product and restaurant reviews, focusing on taste and flavour; 16%), to business-oriented (17%). This latter category discussed press releases from a marketing or strategic perspective, e.g. characterising the launch of a new diet product as a “smart strategic move tapped into the health market”. There were a few other small categories such as topic-specific blogs on sustainability and ethical consumption, or the politics of food and other social issues, as well as a limited percentage that could not be clearly identified.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Health issues in general and obesity in particular have been of growing concern for the public, policy-makers, and also for companies. In this article, we examined responses in the blogosphere to press releases by food companies on health-related issues. While it is just a first study and there are still many issues that deserve follow-up research, the findings give insights into the scale of the phenomenon, in terms of numbers of press releases, blog posts and comments in the blogosphere, peculiarities of bloggers, and responses and sentiments. Regarding the research questions we wanted to answer, the analysis shows that companies communicated more product-related initiatives than promotion-related ones, with the former receiving more discussions among bloggers than the latter. While it is difficult to pinpoint a particular blogger community or blogger type exclusively involved in discussing health issues online, product-related press releases were generally perceived more favourably than the promotion-related ones, which can be partially explained by the fit between companies’ core business and the initiatives. This final section will further reflect on the study and its findings, and discuss implications, limitations and possible avenues for further research.

Communication and Bloggers

The main challenge of CSR communication is to generate awareness; and the key peril of social media and thus the potential risk for companies lies in the uncontrollability of information flows as Internet users can directly state their opinions about an issue (Capriotti, 2011), without companies' consent or guidance. Our study shows that bloggers indeed pick up information from companies and directly respond to it in the blogosphere. While not all press releases have generated equal awareness, there was substantial buzz around the topic. This is in line with Wright and Hinson (2008) who found that corporate announcements are often picked up online and discussed by others than only professional journalists.

It is important for companies to realise that the uncontrolled information flow occurs anyway and not only when companies proactively engage in social media (Korschun and Du, 2012). A more traditional instrument, such as a press release, can also reach social media and generate considerable discussions online. In that sense, it is not an issue of either/or in terms of addressing those active on social media, but the more common older approaches can continue to play a role as well. Online listening can be a useful method for understanding the debate about the company and its health-related activities and to detect potential challenges.

Regarding types of bloggers, we found a large presence of bloggers from the US. This may be due to the fact that most companies originate from the US and that press releases were in English. It has also been noted that Americans are in general more active in the blogosphere (Sobel, 2010). There may have been an influence of media attention to health and obesity issues in the US as well. Saguy et al. (2010), who compared news reporting on this topic in the US and France in the period between 1995 and 2005, found higher levels of attention in US newspapers, and also more discussion on individual choices and solutions.

More importantly, however, we found that blog posts originated from many different bloggers, i.e., the 815 posts were published on 721 unique blogs, written by bloggers that could not easily be put in one specific category. This means that, while many people seem to be interested in engaging about the topic, it is rather difficult to pinpoint who they are exactly. Although much research has focused on particular groups of bloggers (Fieseler et al., 2010), our study suggests that 'non-specific' Internet users also voiced their opinions and can be influential. They express an interest in a particular press release rather than consistently engaging in blogging about health-related issues. This group of random bloggers generated most of the buzz found on the Internet in response to the press releases studied.

While blogs generate helpful knowledge for companies from a large variety of potential consumers from different origins, it is rather difficult to use blogs to identify key stakeholder groups to engage in micro-dialogues with them. This latter approach was recommended by Fieseler et al. (2010) based on their study on corporate blogs, so that companies could receive input on, for example, CSR initiatives. Korschun and Du (2012) also suggest to identify "the community of dialog participants" to maximize the value of CSR virtual communications. However, this may not be that valid when applied to the blogosphere in general, as done in this study. The actual bloggers might not be health-conscious bloggers who are monitoring companies' health and obesity policies, but in fact be individuals who are discussing whatever they like to talk about.

As shown by Kozinets et al. (2010), bloggers may strongly vary in their background and motives to blog about a particular topic. This means that expectations for a clear CSR voice from people active on this social media platform may be too much, as opinions and expertise are all over the place. These results are different from what has been suggested by previous studies. Du et al. (2010) suggested that CSR communication is more effective when targeted at activists, who believe that companies should engage in CSR, rather than at ‘disbelievers’ who think that companies should primarily focus on their shareholders. Our study suggests that the effectiveness of the CSR communication outreach is not different for CSR activists and disbelievers. Although the general public may not proactively seek CSR information about a company (Dawkins, 2004), when they come across the information, they can still make their voice heard via online platforms.

Types of Press Releases and Blogger Responses

Although companies communicated more product-related CSR initiatives than promotion-related ones, those that might really change their business, i.e., modification of core products, were in a minority, compared to peripheral activities. This reflects public perceptions of companies trying to shift responsibilities toward consumers by offering more product options and encouraging a healthy life style, instead of taking direct (corporate) responsibility themselves. We also found that promotion-related campaigns received mainly negative discussions, whereas product-related ones were perceived positively. These findings are in line with Pirsch et al. (2007) who suggested that consumers are more cynical if initiatives do not relate to core business. However, different from impressions that product-related initiatives tend to be overlooked compared to promotion-related ones, the findings suggest that product-related press releases generated more discussions than promotion-related ones. This may be particularly the case in the food industry because the product itself is not only the contact point with consumers but also at the root of the health and obesity issue, which could therefore be more interesting to talk about.

Furthermore, our results indicate, as expected, that high-fit press releases generated more positive responses compared to the low-fit ones. However, high-fit press releases still generated negative responses, even though proportionally less than in case of low fit. This suggests that perceptions of press releases, while reflecting reactions amongst bloggers, could not only be explained by the level of fit. Taken together with the content of press releases, we found that modification of the current product, a high-fit activity, resulted in negative buzz, which differs from what would be expected on the basis of earlier research on company-cause fit in the literature on marketing and social alliances. This might be caused by what we call a 'controversial fit'; the adaptation of products in the food industry might underscore consumers' ideas that the original products were unhealthy.

These negative responses toward product modification highlight the dilemmas of implementing CSR initiatives when there is a fundamental conflict between expected responsibilities and companies' core business of providing food products that are usually calorie-dense. Also, since some consumers are already sceptical about healthy and diet food (Hamilton et al., 2000), it may be more challenging to offer the same product and to convince consumers that the modified version is better, than to offer an alternative to attract new customers and retain current ones. The difficulty of adapting existing products has been demonstrated before, as product modification has been found to account for the highest rate of failures (Rochford and Rudelius, 1997). Moreover, introducing new products, also a high-fit activity, is received positively. It could be that bloggers directly react to the item as a new healthy food product without being reminded of the negative consequences of the original product, i.e., obesity. We also found that core promotional activities led to comparable percentages of positive and negative responses for high-fit press releases (for low fit, the number of observations was too limited). Concurrently, periphery promotional activities generated more negative buzz regardless of the fit level, but more when press releases were low fit than in case of high fit. This suggests that consumers generally had more negative perceptions toward promotional activities, which could only partially be explained by fit levels. A high level of fit may offset some negative responses but seems insufficient to result in positive reactions. Future research is needed to confirm these initial findings and to study the underlying processes to further explain mechanisms that influence consumer perceptions toward CSR communications.

Limitations and Future Research

The study reported in this article obviously had limitations in view of its exploratory nature, and there are several issues that deserve follow-up research to better understand what influences consumers' responses. Specifically, previous research on obesity found positive links between responsibility attributions and support for (self)regulation, such as restrictions on food marketing (Oliver and Lee, 2005). When coding the data according to the categories used for this study, we also came across a statement that pointed in that direction, such as criticism on food companies' initiative to stop advertising to kids because parents were seen to be the ones taking responsibility for children's diets: "…parents need to start acting like what you are called, PARENTS!!!...". Similarly, consumers who see obesity as a personal responsibility may favour initiatives that would provide more options by introducing new products rather than limiting their options by modifying current products. For instance, a blogger wrote in reaction to Starbucks' announcement to only use reduced fat milk in its coffee drinks: "Let me just say that I drink 1% in my own home, but when I go out to "treat" myself that should be exactly what it is, a treat. [...] when I enjoy a latte I want the real deal". Such self-interest may induce a perception that a company compromised one's 'right' to enjoy a product for other people's personal issues. These examples suggest that responsibility attributions may influence bloggers' responses towards press releases, which is worth further study.

This also applies to an additional aspect that we observed in the coding process, which is that responsibility attributions revealed by bloggers in their posts appeared to be influenced by the topics of the press releases. Their contents seemed to suggest or remind the readers of different parties that bear responsibility for causing/solving obesity. For example, none of the bloggers mentioned parents or governments in response to Starbucks' initiative, whereas these two parties were brought up in blogger responses to communications by PepsiCo and Burger King about (self)restrictions on their own promotional activities. This observation suggests that responses are not only influenced by the bloggers' individual beliefs of responsibility, but also by different informational cues in press releases. It highlights the complexity of responsibility attributions, especially in the context of CSR communications. In the same vein, we observed that bloggers often did not mention responsibility attributions in their posts. Follow-up research using questionnaires and/or an experimental design could help to shed further light on (causal) relationships between bloggers' responsibility attributions and their perceptions towards compnay initiatives, which could not be uncovered through the research approach that we followed. Moreover, it would be worthwile to further investigate the interplay between initiatives and consumer perceptions, also considering different interpretations of fit levels based on consumers' understanding of companies' core business, image, and target markets.

In addition, from a CSR communication viewpoint, it would be interesting to study blogger responses towards a company's proactive social media strategy (e.g., when it starts the debate about a health-related product change). This type of communication gives companies more control as they can (partly) steer the direction of the debate and transform CSR communication from a one-way into a two-way interactive process (Jones et al., 2009). For a more comprehensive picture, it would be helpful to also include other platforms, such as twitter, and other CSR issues, even beyond the social media to study the interplay with traditional mass media. As outcomes of online discussions are difficult to predict and may be negative, it would be interesting as well to understand to what extent discussions online attract mass media attention and influence views of internet users. Finally, while our study covered a longer time frame than others by analysing 2.5 years, an extension to more and later years could add value as well. This article, thus, only presents a first step towards a better understanding of the (potential) role of social media in responsible business by contributing insights from one type of online reactions about a specific set of issues faced by companies for which CSR concerns directly relate to their core activities.

NOTES

[1] See e.g. http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/cbd21108-66c1-11e2-a83f-00144feab49a.html#axzz2LwE11qyi (date accessed 28/02/2013).

[2] See e.g. http://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/19/opinion/olympic-sponsorship-clark (date accessed 28/02/2013). We thank one of the reviewers for this suggestion.

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TABLES

Table 1. Examples of coded blog posts

Blog posts in response to Burger King's press releases on including apple slides in kids' menu	**Sentiments as coded**
"Great news! Burger King plans to sell apple slices that look like French fries. The *Associated Press* is all over this stroke of marketing genius. Take a look: ...*[direct quote from the press release]...*"	Positive
"Burger King has jumped on the healthy wagon, and is now going to offer a healthier Kids' Meal in its restaurants. The meal will include flame-broiled Chicken Tenders, apples cut to resemble thick-cut french fries and lowfat milk…*[direct quote from the press release]...*"	Neutral (only describes the news without personal opinion)
"Burger King announced today that they're going to offer healthier food for kids this fall. Their new "Kids Meal" will offer low-fat milk, flame-broiled chicken strips, and "Apple Fries"—red apples sliced (via BK's patented cutting process) and packaged, you guessed it, to look like fries. Although, leave it to Burger King to leave out the most nutritious part of the apple—the skin.… Burger King's attempt to provide healthier food could be in the interest of public health (or pressure?), but to me it sounds like just another marketing ploy which is par for the course for the fast food industry these days. But what's BK up to with these apple fries? Are they shaped like fries to trick children into eating them, or to have kids associate healthiness with french fries? Why not just give the kids a whole apple, skin and all? After all, a recent *Washington Post* survey of DC fourth graders showed that kids actually do like fruit. Minimally processed mandarin orange segments, applesauce, and pineapple receive as high a kid's review as processed, sweetened treats. But I guess kids can't have it their way at Burger King."	Negative

Table 2. An overview of press releases and related blog responses for each company

Company name	**Number of press releases**	**Press releases without blogger responses (No. and %)[*]**	**Press releases with blogger responses (No. and %)[*]**	**Number of responses from bloggers**	**Average number of blog posts per press release with response**	**Number of comments on blog posts**	**Average number of comments per press release with blogger response**
Burger King	11	5 (45%)	6 (55%)	21	3.5	233[a]	38.8[a]
McDonald's	10	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	42	8.4	256[b]	251.0[b]
KFC	8	3 (38%)	5 (63%)	120	24.0	315	63.0
Pizza Hut	4	0 (0%)[d]	3 (75%)[d]	47	15.7	959[c]	319.7[c]
Subway	4	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	6	6.0	12	12.0
Starbucks	12	2 (17%)	10 (83%)	254	25.4	2680	268.0
Coca-Cola	29	16 (55%)	13 (45%)	131	10.1	636	48.9
PepsiCo	57	40 (70%)	17 (30%)	151	8.9	1011	59.4
Mars	13	11 (85%)	2 (15%)	18	9.0	21	10.5
Nestlé	18	13 (72%)	5 (28%)	25	5.0	80	16.0
Total	165[d]	98 (61%)[d]	67 (41%)[d]	815	12.1	6203[e]	92.6

[*] percentages do not always add up to 100 due to rounding; [a] including 110 comments on 1 marketing blog post; if excluded, number in last column would have been 20.5; [b] including 56 comments on 1 blog marketing post; if excluded, number in last column would have been 40.0; [c] including 662 comments on 3 blog marketing post; if excluded, number in last column would have been 99.0; [d] one press release was issued under YUM! Brands!, the mother corporation of both KFC and Pizza Hut; when bloggers discussed the press release they focused on KFC, and it here therefore been included there; [e] including 828 comments reacting to blog marketing posts.

Table 3. An overview of press releases and related blog responses for each category

Press release category		Number of press releases	Press releases with blogger responses (No. and %)	Number of responses from bloggers	Average number of blog posts per press release with response	Number of comments on blog posts	Average number of comments per press release with blogger response
Product	Current product modification	28	11 (39%)	140	12.7	1486	135.1
	New product introduction	78	39 (50%)	557	14.3	4255 [a]	109.1
	Subtotal	106	50 (47%)	697	13.9	5741 [b]	114.8
Promotion	Core promotions	18	7 (39%)	54	7.7	109	15.6
	Periphery promotions	42	10 (24%)	64	6.4	353 [c]	35.3
	Subtotal	60	17 (28%)	118	6.9	462	27.2
Total		165	67 (41%)	815	12.2	6203 [d]	92.6

[a] including 772 comments on 4 marketing posts; if excluded, number in last column would have been 89.3; [b] including 772 comments on 4 marketing posts; if excluded, number in last column would have been 99.38; [c] including 56 comments on 1 marketing posts; if excluded, number in last column would have been 29.7; [d] including 828 comments on 5 marketing posts; if excluded, number in last column would have been 80.2.

Table 4 An overview of categories of press release and company-initiative fit

		Press release topic						
		Product			Promotion			
		Current Product modification	New product introduction	Subtotal	Core promotions	Periphery promotions	Subtotal	Total
Company-Initiative Fit	High	21	73	94	14	21	35	129
	Low	7	5	12	3	21	24	36
Total		17	78	106	28	42	59	165

Table 5 Distribution of blog posts' sentiments per category and fit level

Press release category			Total number of blog posts	Sentiments of blog posts (in %)*		
				Positive	**Neutral**	**Negative**
High fit	Product	Current product modification	124	36.3	16.1	47.6
		New product introduction	537	50.8	20.1	29.2
	Promotion	Core promotions	51	47.1	7.8	45.1
		Periphery promotions	28	25.0	39.3	35.7
	Subtotal		740	47.2	19.3	33.6
Low fit	Product	Current product modification	16	43.8	37.5	18.8
		New product introduction	20	35.0	25.0	40.0
	Promotion	Core promotions	3	33.3	0.0	66.7
		Periphery promotions	36	36.1	11.1	52.8
	Subtotal		75	37.3	20.0	42.7
Total			815	45.9	19.5	34.6

* percentages do not always add up to 100 due to rounding