

THE UNDERUTILIZED POTENTIAL OF EMPLOYEES IN CSR COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

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<p><i>Abstract</i></p> <p>This master's thesis studies employee communication behaviours concerning a company's overall CSR communications. From the employee perspective, this thesis strived to identify factors that shape employee engagement in CSR communication and explored the various communicative roles that employees perform in CSR communication. Finally, the thesis shed light on employee's understanding of effective CSR communication.</p> <p>These research questions were explored in the context of a case company offering sustainability services. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 employees from the case company and analysed by applying thematic analysis.</p> <p>The findings of this study suggest that employees' engagement in CSR communication stems from a combination of personal, interpersonal, and organizational factors. Employees were found to perform a variety of different communication roles in the context of CSR communication, including roles focused on managing stakeholder perceptions of CSR, roles focused on understanding the operational environment and roles focused on driving socially responsible change. Findings suggest that the active employee communication behaviours (AECCR) model by Verhoeven and Madsen (2022) is applicable to the present study for the most, but also new roles were identified: the activist, the content creator and the conveyor. Lastly, when it comes to employee perceptions of good CSR communication, employees linked especially measurability, transparency, thought leadership, relevancy and expertise to effective CSR communication.</p>	
<i>Key words</i> CSR communication, employee communication behaviour, employee communication roles, corporate social responsibility	
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<i>Tiivistelmä</i> <p>Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tavoitteena oli lisätä ymmärrystä työntekijöiden viestintäkäyttäytymisestä osana yritysten vastuullisuusviestintää. Tutkielmassa pyrittiin tunnistamaan tekijöitä, jotka edistävät työntekijöiden osallistumista vastuullisuusviestintään. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa kartoitettiin erilaisia viestintärooleja, joissa työntekijät viestivät vastuullisuudesta. Lopuksi tutkielma valotti myös, millaisia ominaisuuksia työntekijät liittävät vaikuttavaan vastuullisuusviestintään.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen kohdeorganisaationa oli kestävän kehityksen palveluita tarjoava yritys. Aineisto kerättiin haastattelemalla viittätoista yrityksen työntekijää ja analysoitiin teemaattista analyysiä soveltaen.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset viittaavat siihen, että työntekijöiden osallistaminen vastuullisuusviestintään on moniulotteinen henkilökohtaisten, relationaalisten ja organisatoristen tekijöiden summa. Lisäksi työntekijöiden havaittiin viestivän vastuullisuudesta useissa eri viestintärooleissa. Osa rooleista liittyi erityisesti sidosryhmien vastuullisuusodotusten hallintaan, osa toimintaympäristön ymmärtämiseen vastuullisuuden näkökulmasta ja osa vastuullisen muutoksen edistämiseen. Tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että toisen tutkimuskysymyksen teoreettisena viitekehystenä sovellettua Verhoevenin ja Madsenin (2022) työntekijöiden aktiiviset viestintäroolit -mallia voitaisiin täydentää kolmella uudella työntekijän viestintäroolilla, jotka tämä tutkimus nimesi seuraavasti: aktivisti, sisällöntuottaja sekä viestin välittäjä. Tulosten perusteella havaittiin myös, että työntekijät odottavat organisaatioiden vastuullisuusviestinnältä erityisesti mitattavuutta, läpinäkyvyyttä, ajatusjohtajuutta, olennaisuutta ja asiantuntijuutta.</p>	
<i>Asiasanat</i> vastuullisuusviestintä, työntekijöiden viestintäkäyttäytyminen, työntekijöiden viestintäroolit, yritysvastuu	
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CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	9
2	CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT	12
2.1	Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	12
2.1.1	Differentiating CSR from similar concepts	14
2.2	CSR Communication	15
2.2.1	Challenges of CSR communication.....	16
2.3	Employee engagement in CSR.....	17
3	EMPLOYEES AS COMMUNICATORS.....	20
3.1	Employee Communication Behaviour (ECB)	20
3.2	Employee Communication Roles (ECRs).....	22
4	METHODOLOGY	25
4.1	Qualitative study	25
4.2	Case study of company offering sustainability services	26
4.3	Data collection method	26
4.3.1	Interview protocol	27
4.3.2	Sampling approach.....	27
4.4	Thematic analysis.....	29
5	RESULTS AND ANALYSIS.....	32
5.1	Factors that shape employee engagement in CSR communication. 32	
5.1.1	Personal factors	33
5.1.2	Interpersonal factors.....	38
5.1.3	Organizational factors.....	41
5.2	Communication roles employees enact in CSR communication	47
5.2.1	Roles focused on managing stakeholder perceptions	48
5.2.2	Roles focused on understanding operational environment ..	53
5.2.3	Roles focused on driving change.....	54
5.3	Employees' understanding of good CSR communication.....	58
5.3.1	Measurability.....	59
5.3.2	Transparency.....	59
5.3.3	Thought leadership	60
5.3.4	Relevancy	60
5.3.5	Expertise.....	61
6	DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	63
6.1	Discussion of the results	63
6.1.1	Factors shaping employee engagement in CSR communication.....	63
6.1.2	Employee communication roles in CSR communication	67
6.1.3	Employees' understanding of good CSR communication.....	72

6.2	Theoretical implications.....	74
6.3	Practical implications	74
6.4	Limitations and future studies.....	76
	REFERENCES.....	78
	APPENDIX 1	87

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of interviewees.....	28
Table 2. Example of how themes were constructed.....	31
Picture 1. Example of thematic map	31
Picture 2. The results of RQ1 presented in the form of a thematic map.....	33
Picture 3. The results of RQ2 presented in the form of a thematic map.....	48
Table 3. Employee communication roles (ECRs) focused on managing stakeholder perceptions.....	52
Table 4. Employee communication roles (ECRs) focused on understanding the operational environment	54
Table 5. Employee communication roles (ECRs) focused on driving change	58

1 INTRODUCTION

Social responsibility and sustainability discourses have been highly emphasized in societal discussion in the past years. Sustainability is vital in ensuring the longevity and success of societies (Galpin et al., 2015). As sustainability goals have become top priority, governments leave some responsibility over societal issues to companies (Marrewijk, 2003, p. 100). Organizations are increasingly facing expectations to do their part for sustainable development by engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR), meaning taking responsibility of the economic, social and environmental impacts of their operations and carrying their obligations to stakeholders and society (Smith, 2003). As the ecological carrying capacity of the earth is challenged, organizations must take a step back to evaluate what kind of future they want to contribute to and what will be their place in it (Piha, 2021).

Sustainability has been recognized as a strategic imperative for doing business in the twenty-first century (Galpin et al., 2015). A survey of large Finnish corporations (2021) conducted by OP Financial Group reveals that 92 % of the respondent companies consider CSR to be a source of competitive advantage (OP Suuryritystutkimus 2021). So, CSR has moved from sidelines to the very core of business. Studies support this view, recognizing not just that being socially responsible is good for business (Du et al., 2010), but that it is vital for business. CSR is a source of legitimacy for the organization's operations (Girschik, 2020a), and without legitimacy the organization cannot survive.

However, practicing CSR and reaping benefits from it does not come easy. One of the top challenges in CSR that Finnish companies are struggling with is CSR communication (FIBS, 2018; Olkkonen & Quashire, 2019). The problem is no different elsewhere. Organizational CSR messages are often perceived as uncredible, and they can result in negative reactions by stakeholders (Dawkins, 2005; Du et al., 2010). Moreover, through the rise of social media, organizations are increasingly visible to publics and thus more vulnerable to criticism that may affect corporate image or reputation (Smith, 2003, p. 60).

In a blogpost “Whose responsibility is it to communicate about CSR? – everyone’s” Finnish CSR communication entrepreneur Kaisa Kurittu highlights that CSR communication is still seen solely as the task of communications and CSR professionals, when instead it should be seen as part of everyday communication of all organizational members (Kurittu, 2019). In fact, some of the responsibility over both internal and external communication overall is shifting over to especially employees as the freedom to self-manage work will only increase in the future (Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 20).

At the same time academics have identified employees as the underutilized potential in strategic communication (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019), and CSR communication (Dawkins, 2005). Previous research has found that there is a connection between improved corporate reputation and employee engagement in CSR communication (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 137; Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010, p. 301). Employees are highly important strategically because they are the stakeholder closest to the organization (Dhanesh, 2012, p. 51). They are seen as trustworthy sources of information other stakeholders turn to when trying to find information about organizations. Employees therefore have a unique potential to span the boundaries between the organization and its environment, and to connect with a wide range of other stakeholders. (Dawkins, 2005, p. 118; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, p. 150) Interpersonal channels are perceived more trustworthy than “faceless” messages from the organization (Kim & Rhee, 2011), and external stakeholders perceive in particular employee generated word-of-mouth as credible (Thelen, 2020).

Despite these benefits, the communicative roles of employees in the context of CSR have not been explored much in the academic world (Lee & Tao, 2020). Therefore, the present study will strive to address this gap and shed light on the various communicative roles that employees perform in CSR communication. The active employee communication roles (AECCR) model by Verhoeven and Madsen (2022) will serve as theoretical framework in this context. So far employee perspectives have been left to the sidelines in CSR communication research (Crane, 2016, p. 1230; Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010). Since previous research has called for more studies on how employees are integrated into the CSR communication process specifically (Morsing et al., 2008; Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010), the present study will also strive to identify factors that shape employee engagement in CSR communication.

In conclusion, the aim of the present study is to increase understanding on employee communication behaviour as a strategic tool for CSR communication through answering the following research questions:

- What factors shape employee engagement in CSR communication?
- What communication roles do employees enact in CSR communication?
- What kind of communication do employees perceive as good CSR communication?

These research questions will be explored in the context of a case company offering sustainability services, from the perspective of employees. After the introduction, the theoretical framework will be presented. Chapter 2 will cover the topics of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and CSR communication, as well as engaging employees in them. Chapter 3 will then dive into the topic of employee communication behaviours (ECBs) and employee communication roles (ECRs). This will be followed by a description of the methodology in chapter 4, and the presentation of the results in chapter 5. Finally, chapter 6 will discuss the findings in light of previous studies, propose practical implications, present limitations of the study and ultimately make suggestions for future studies. No AI has been utilized in the research or writing process.

2 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be defined as an organization's voluntary commitment to better social well-being with corporate resources and practices (Kotler & Lee, 2005). CSR is typically considered to consist of three focus areas: social, environmental and governance. This concept originates from what is called the triple bottom line approach first introduced by John Elkington (1997). According to the approach an organization's responsibility consists of financial stability, minimizing of harmful environmental impacts as well as respecting and adhering to the expectations of the society the organization operates in (Juholin, 2004, p. 22).

However, considerations regarding what companies are or should be responsible for vary from discipline to discipline and author to author, so CSR can take a variety of different meanings (Pater & Van Lierop, 2006, p. 340). The complexity of the phenomenon is reflected in the variety of definitions that exist for it. CSR has been studied in fields such as management (Du et al., 2010), organisation studies (Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Vlachos et al., 2017), business ethics (Marrewijk, 2003), marketing (D'Aprile, 2020; Kotler & Lee, 2005; Morsing & Schultz, 2006), organizational psychology (Glavas, 2016b, 2016a) and corporate communications (Crane & Glozer, 2016; Dawkins, 2005; Ihlen et al., 2011; Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010)

Several scholars have tried to bring structure and clarity to the numerous understandings and definitions of CSR. For example, Garriga and Melé (2004) have categorized CSR definitions into four groups based on what is considered part of the interactions between business and society: *the instrumental, the political, the inclusive and the ethical dimensions*. Definitions that consider CSR through the *instrumental* perspective highlight that CSR is solely a way for the organization to increase its profits. The instrumental perspective represents what can be

regarded as the traditional or classical view on CSR, according to which social responsibility to businesses means making profits (Friedman, 1970). Since Friedman first introduced this so called Friedman doctrine in an New York times essay (Friedman, 1970), the world and expectations have changed drastically, and it is difficult to name companies that would loudly advertise that they are only concerned about making money. Rather, companies seem to have embraced that making money is to be balanced with equally important environmental and social responsibilities (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 3). While the instrumental perspective is focused on the economic factors of business-society interactions, the *political perspective* focuses on the power that organizations hold in society and the political arena (Garriga & Melé, 2004). The *inclusive perspectives* fall somewhere in-between as they bring these two perspectives together and argue that business and society are tightly linked and that CSR should integrate both business and social demands (Garriga & Melé, 2004). For example, Ihlen et al. (2011, p. 8) define CSR as the “corporate attempt to negotiate its relationship to stakeholders and the public at large.” Lastly, CSR can be defined from an *ethical perspective*. This perspective highlights that companies are ethically obligated to carry their social responsibilities (Garriga & Melé, 2004). From this perspective, CSR is defined as the duties or obligations that the organization has towards those affected by its activities (Smith, 2003). Also, Costas and Kärreman (2013) have suggested that most definitions have in common the corporate attempt to establish ethical behaviour as the norm in the organization.

In addition to understanding CSR as the above presented different types of interactions between business and society (Garriga & Melé, 2004), CSR definitions can also be approached through the object of the organization’s responsibilities. One such object can be shareholders. The *shareholder approach* emphasizes that organizations have a responsibility to shareholders who are looking to increase profits and achieve value from owning the business (Marrewijk, 2003). The shareholder approach thus limits CSR to business responsibilities, similar to the above discussed instrumental approach (Garriga & Melé, 2004). Today, the general understanding seems to be that at the very least the organization is responsible to all its stakeholders, not just ones that have a monetary bond to the organization. If the object of the organization’s responsibilities is perceived to be all stakeholders, the term *stakeholder approach* can be used. As defined by Freeman (2010) the stakeholder approach highlights that an organization’s responsibility is to balance various stakeholders’ interests, needs and expectations. Lastly, the object of an organization’s responsibilities can be viewed even more broadly to also include broader society. According to this *societal approach* CSR can be seen as a responsibility towards the whole society, and from the perspective of business society interactions (Garriga & Melé, 2004). No organization operates in a vacuum but as part of a society that legitimizes its activities. Thus it should carry the responsibility of serving society (Marrewijk, 2003).

To conclude, most CSR definitions have in common that they describe the relationship between business and society, as well as the responsibilities

that organizations have within the societies they operate in (Hartman et al., 2007, pp. 373–374). CSR definitions typically link the organization to its operating environment and the actors within it (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 8), and discuss the impacts of companies within the societies that they operate in (Crane & Glozer, 2016). Most definitions seem to highlight the inclusive and societal approaches, indicating that even the most minimal understanding of CSR implies that the responsibilities of organizations are no longer limited to only seeking profits (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 7).

Lastly, it is important to specify how CSR is understood in the context of this study. As is highlighted by Marrewijk (2003, p. 96), the vast number of definitions should be seen as a positive problem, an opportunity to choose the one that best suits the circumstance and the aims of the organization – or in this case academic research paper. Roblek et al. (2020, p. 7) has successfully brought some of the different CSR perspectives together and defined CSR as “the sustainable operation of the business that contributes to improving the well-being of society as a whole, taking into account the interests of all stakeholders and their interests, including profit, and consistently respecting ethical and moral principles”. Therefore, in this thesis CSR is understood broadly as defined by Roblek et al. (2020, p. 7) as the organization contributing towards sustainability and the social well-being of the society.

2.1.1 Differentiating CSR from similar concepts

Understanding CSR is further complicated by the fact that several similar concepts exist for describing interactions between business and society. Sometimes their definitions are even used interchangeably. Examples are corporate responsibility (CR) (Bansal & Song, 2017), corporate sustainability (CS) (Bansal & Song, 2017; Marrewijk, 2003; Roblek et al., 2020) and corporate citizenship (Garriga & Melé, 2004; Matten & Crane, 2005; Roblek et al., 2020, p. 36).

Corporate citizenship refers to organizations activating its operations and employees to create better value for business and society (Mirvis, 2012). Corporate citizenship differs from CSR in emphasizing the political role that organizations have in society. It focuses on the responsibilities and rights that organizations have based on their citizenship role (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 6). Corporate citizenship can be understood as the administration of social, civil and political citizenship rights (Matten & Crane, 2005).

Historically corporate responsibility and corporate sustainability research have differed from each other more distinctively than what seems to be the case today. Responsibility research was originally closely linked with business ethics. This approach was normative in nature as it emphasized social duty and moral obligations of business and management (Bansal & Song, 2017). Interestingly, the historically normative dimension of CSR seems to have faded. Even though expectations regarding CSR have only grown in recent years (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), voluntariness is one of the key elements found in CSR definitions (Dahlsrud, 2008).

In earlier years research on sustainability was less value-driven and more scientific as it took a systems and environmental focus. Sustainability research was concerned with how business activities created disruptions in the natural resource systems and ultimately also in social welfare (Bansal & Song, 2017). Corporate sustainability stems from sustainable development and emphasizes the role that the corporate level and individual organizations have in meeting sustainable development goals (Roblek et al., 2020, p. 7). Similarly Dahlsrud (2008, p. 5) found that the environmental dimensions appeared significantly less in CSR definitions than any of the other dimensions identified, stakeholder, social, economic or voluntariness. In conclusion, CS is more focused on environmental management than CSR. Since CSR encompasses more perspectives on social responsibility, and because CSR has been described as the dominant term in both academics and in practice (Carroll & Shabana 2010, p. 86), the present study will use the term CSR.

2.2 CSR Communication

Several authors have highlighted that CSR management research has largely overlooked the role of CSR communication (Dawkins, 2005; Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 4; Juholin, 2004). Additionally, the studies that have been conducted mostly focus on external communication (Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010, p. 300). Studying CSR from a communications perspective can help shed light on how CSR gets its meaning from social constructions and how organizations can implement CSR policies to reach their goals (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 11).

CSR communication can be defined as communication through which the organization makes sense of its responsibilities towards its stakeholders and with which it manages its CSR activities (Ihlen et al., 2011). CSR communication therefore encompasses several processes. Firstly, it can refer to identifying, evaluating and prioritizing stakeholder needs and expectations regarding CSR (Eräranta & Penttilä, 2021; Podnar, 2008). Secondly, CSR communication includes the processes of managing CSR policies, implementing them, and communicating about them to internal and external audiences. Lastly, contributing to societal discussions in order to influence how CSR is perceived in broader society is also one form of CSR communication that organizations engage in (Eräranta & Penttilä, 2021, pp. 14–15). Other definitions have highlighted transparency by approaching CSR communication as all communication aimed at truthfully informing stakeholders of how the organization considers social and environmental issues in its business (Podnar, 2008, p. 75).

Since CSR has been recognized as vital organizations have started to view CSR communication more strategically. Various strategies exist for communicating CSR of which one approach is focused on how the organizations engages with their stakeholders, through information, response, or involvement strategies. If the organization applies a stakeholder information strategy, it per-

ceives CSR communication as one-way distributing of messages crafted by the organization (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Here the organization just informs its stakeholders of how it makes sense of CSR. In the stakeholder response strategy the organization relies on two-way communication to first get information from stakeholders (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), so that it is able to respond to external expectations and issues, and craft its CSR messages accordingly (Lim & Greenwood, 2017). Finally, the stakeholder involvement strategy means that the organization engages in continuous dialogue with its stakeholders because their input and support is perceived as vital. Here the organization makes sense of its CSR together with its stakeholders in an iterative process (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010).

CSR communication has traditionally occurred through responsibility reporting (Olkkonen & Quarshie, 2019, p. 65). Today through digitalization and the rise of social media the platforms for CSR communication have multiplied, social media platforms and company websites have become important platforms for CSR communication. This has also been reflected in the sudden surge of research on CSR reporting on the internet (Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010, p. 300), and online CSR communication (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009). Moreover, as the present study also argues, CSR communication is increasingly becoming part of organizations' day-to-day communications (Olkkonen & Quarshie, 2019, p. 67), where also other organizational members, particularly employees, can have a strategic role to play.

2.2.1 Challenges of CSR communication

"Corporate social responsibility – a PR invention?" (Frankental, 2001, p. 18), *"Corporate responsibility: the communication challenge"* (Dawkins, 2005, p. 108), *"The perils and opportunities of communicating corporate ethics"* (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005, p. 267) – academic paper titles like these reveal one of the main challenges that organizations face when practicing CSR communication.

As organizations face increasing pressure to respond to CSR related stakeholder expectations, CSR communication has been taken under close examination by stakeholders and publics (Crane & Glozer, 2016). CSR messages are often perceived as uncredible or inauthentic and can result in negative reactions by stakeholders (Dawkins, 2005). Another challenge for companies is to balance between various stakeholder groups' expectations and requirements regarding CSR, inevitably having to disappoint some stakeholders in order to please others (Dawkins, 2005).

Paradoxically, even though companies are expected to care about and partake in CSR activities, external stakeholders are becoming critical of CSR communication because it is perceived as too aggressive. When every organization is bombarding publics with messages about CSR and sustainability, it is not surprising that signs of external stakeholders becoming disinterested in CSR communication altogether are visible, as for example Morsing et al. (2008) have highlighted. Despite the criticism towards CSR messages, Ihlen et al. (2011, p.

11) state that refraining from communicating about CSR is not a very good option either. Silence on the matter can be considered as a strong stance against CSR, thus ending up being just another form of communication. Some organizations declare themselves apolitical to avoid having to take a stance towards e.g. social or environmental issues. However, they fail to realize that inaction might be conveying ignorance or indifference – not neutrality (Reitz & Higgins, 2022).

Du et al. (2010, p. 10) have fittingly described CSR communication as a highly sensitive issue as organizations are expected to communicate their motives for CSR activities but should do so without evoking stakeholder scepticism. Solving the issue of communicating about CSR activities without overcommunicating has become central to organizations (Podnar, 2008, p. 78). One solution that has been suggested to address these issues is to involve employees (Morsing et al., 2008). Studies have identified employees as the strategically most important stakeholder of CSR communication (Lim & Greenwood, 2017). Employees have been recognized as a vital communication channel for organizations because other stakeholders consider them credible information sources (Dawkins, 2005, p. 118; Frandsen et al., 2019). Previous research has found that there is a connection between better corporate reputation and employee involvement in CSR communication (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 137). Despite this, employees as a communication channel is a concept still not utilized to its full potential in CSR communication (Dawkins, 2005; Morsing et al., 2008). For authentic external CSR communication to occur, CSR activities and messages must first be accepted and implemented internally, which can be achieved through involving employees in the CSR activities. Other stakeholders should be reached indirectly through organizational members or directly only after the CSR messages have been accepted internally (Morsing et al., 2008, p. 103.) The next section of the paper will discuss this topic.

2.3 Employee engagement in CSR

It has been argued that in order to get employees involved in CSR communication, they first have to be committed to the organizations CSR (Morsing et al., 2008). Research about CSR in the context of employees, also referred to as *Micro CSR*, has consisted of mainly three recurring domains (Gond et al., 2017). Firstly, what motivates employees to engage or participate in CSR, and what prevents their participation (Hejjas, 2019; Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010). Secondly, how employees evaluate the CSR activities (Sasidharan Dhanesh, 2012) and lastly, what kind of reactions and impacts do the employers' CSR activities as well as the employees' own judgements of these activities provoke (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Vlachos et al., 2013, 2017). Research on what affects and drives employee CSR engagement has only more recently come into focus (Gond et al., 2017, p. 226)

The term *engagement* was first introduced by Kahn in the context of employee engagement (Kahn, 1990). Today the term engagement is understood as a complex construction that encompasses cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions (Saks, 2006, p. 602). Similarly, employee engagement is understood as a broader relationship between employee and organization, not just employees' connection to work (Eräranta & Penttilä, 2021). Engagement can be positive, negative or neutral, depending on the effects it has on the engager's goals. Positive engagement supports the goals, negative disrupts them and neutral has no effect (Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2019). Naturally then organizations strive to promote positive employee engagement, because it encourages positive behaviours and attitudes toward the organization (Kang & Sung, 2017), such as communication behaviours.

Many scholars seem to agree that employee engagement in CSR starts with overall *perceptions and attitudes of CSR* (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Hejjas, 2019). This includes for example overall evaluation of CSR as important or insignificant, and whether it is something employees should be included in. Some employees differentiate organizational and personal CSR engagement and want to engage in CSR only at a personal level as individuals outside of work, while others also want to engage through their work at an organizational level (Slack et al., 2015).

Another commonly identified antecedent to employee CSR engagement is *organizational culture* (Hejjas, 2019; Slack et al., 2015). Creating a culture of sustainability in the organization can enhance employees' CSR engagement and extra-role performance, such as communication behaviour (Galpin et al., 2015). Within organizations there may exist subcultures that have values different from those represented in the core organizational culture, which may also impact CSR engagement but are often disregarded (Hejjas, 2019, p. 323). These subcultures might exist in, for example, specific departments or age groups.

Leadership behaviours have also been linked to employee engagement in CSR. Leaders' who act as role models in CSR activities, advocate for the importance of CSR in their communication and facilitate CSR engagement by offering incentives and training to help with participation, support employee engagement in CSR (Chen & Hung-Baesecke, 2014, p. 218). *Perceived management support for CSR* is another similar factor: employees evaluate based on concrete actions whether the management really stands behind CSR activities before offering their support and engagement for CSR (Edinger-Schons et al., 2019, p. 369).

Similarly, employee engagement in CSR may be influenced by the *relationship between CSR and strategy*. CSR engagement is more likely to occur if CSR is noted in strategic planning of communication (Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010, p. 311), linked with the broader business strategy and business goals (Slack et al., 2015, p. 542), and in alignment with the corporate identity (Chong, 2009). Organizational culture, leadership behaviour and strategy all signal to employees what is considered important in the organization (Galpin et al., 2015, p. 2). Nat-

urally, if CSR is visible in the organization, CSR engagement is more likely to occur (Slack et al., 2015).

Communication is one tool with which employees can be brought closer to organizational CSR activities (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Thus, it is not surprising that *internal communication* influences employee engagement in CSR. Lack of internal communication about CSR (Slack et al., 2015), as well as lack of consistency and clarity in CSR communication can impact engagement negatively (Bhattacharya et al., 2008).

Employees who perceive CSR to be aligned with their personal goals or beneficial in some other way are more willing to engage in CSR (Slack et al., 2015, p. 545). *Perceived benefits of participation* thus also play a role in determining employee CSR engagement (Hejjas, 2019). Examples of benefits include, opportunity for personal development (Bhattacharya et al., 2008, p. 39), but also fulfilment of psychological needs such as sense of meaning (Glavas, 2016a). Similarly, social identity and organizational identification have been connected to CSR engagement (Morsing, 2006b). Motivation to engage in CSR can also depend on the context or, as Hejjas (2019, p. 319) describes the individual CSR activity or issue, *CSR invention design*. This means that employees choose to engage selectively when they perceive a certain CSR topic or activity as personally important to them. Employee engagement in CSR has also been linked to possible *conflicts between CSR and business priorities* (Slack et al., 2015). Lack of time has been highlighted as one barrier for CSR engagement (Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010, p. 310), which is one manifestation of CSR and business priorities being misaligned with each other.

It has been argued that employees are willing to take a bigger role when it comes to CSR. If employees get to partake in CSR development and influence what kind of CSR the organization engages in and how, then they are likely to become more invested in CSR (Bhattacharya et al., 2008, p. 41.) Still, it should not be assumed all employees want to participate and individual variations in drivers and antecedents of engagement should be considered when planning to integrate employees into CSR activities. Considering employees as individuals in the context of CSR engagement also has ethical justifications. Employees have their own individual moral values and the right to express them in the context of CSR, in order to have a say in how their work and their employer's activities impact society (Maclagan, 1999, p. 45). Similarly, from a corporate moral branding perspective it has been suggested that expecting employees to be perfectly aligned with the moral messages of the brand is unethical behaviour towards employees. Additionally, it may discourage innovation and creativity, which in turn are vital for organizational development (Morsing, 2006).

To conclude, employees should not be perceived as a homogenous group with similar expectations and attitudes towards CSR, instead individual differences should be recognized (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008). This study will strive to shed light on the variety of different factors that might be shaping employee's willingness or reluctance towards engaging in CSR communication.

3 EMPLOYEES AS COMMUNICATORS

3.1 Employee Communication Behaviour (ECB)

In contemporary organizations communication is not solely the task of corporate communication professionals anymore (Andersson, 2019; Falkheimer, 2016; Heide & Simonsson, 2011). Since work has become “highly social and interconnected” (Heide et al., 2018, p. 463), all organizational members are increasingly, and sometimes without intent, playing an integral part in the organization’s strategic communication. Especially employees are taking on some of the communication tasks and roles previously deployed by communication professionals (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022), while communication professionals focus on strategic and consultant roles (Falkheimer, 2016). Employees’ participation in communication is valued as it can contribute to organizational performance (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, p. 145), as well as organizational reputation and the relationship the organization has with its stakeholders (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Employee communication behaviours are not limited to frontline-employees but include all employees within an organization, whether they come in direct contact with customers or not (Thelen, 2020, p. 3). Furthermore, social media has increased the possibilities for employees to perform communication roles, because it has made employees more visible to stakeholders outside of the organization (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019). Employees engage in spreading company-related information on their personal social media pages and on anonymous platforms (Ravazzani & Mazzei, 2018). Employees have the opportunity to span the boundaries of an organization (Kang & Sung, 2017), and are also in this sense informally stepping into the role of corporate communication professionals when they interact outside of the organization (Kim & Rhee, 2011, p. 244). These interactions with other stakeholders necessitate more communication capabilities than were expected of employees before digitalization and the rise of social media (Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2019).

Employee communication behaviours (ECBs) refer to employees enacting communication behaviour in the context of their organization. ECBs can occur externally and internally (Lee & Chon, 2020), and they can be either positive or negative in nature depending on the effect the behaviour has on the organization (Kang & Sung, 2017). A distinction has also been made between active and passive communication behaviours. Passive communication refers to forgoing any sort of communication behaviour, unless prompted to react to others' communication by, for example, processing what was communicated to them. Unlike with passive communication behaviours, active communication behaviours initiate and enable interactions (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, p. 93).

ECBs have been conceptualized in many ways so different scholars link different behaviours to it. For one, ECBs can refer to information seeking and information forwarding (Lee, 2021c). Voluntariness is one factor that helps differentiate similar concepts from each other. Proactive transmitting of information without a specific request to do so is called *information forwarding*. In contrast, *information sharing* refers to giving out information only reactively when asked by someone seeking that information (Kim et al., 2010, p. 139).

Another concept of employee communication behaviour is *megaphoning*. *Positive megaphoning* refers to employees communicating to external stakeholders about what the organization has accomplished and where its strengths are, while *negative megaphoning* refers to pointing out the organization's weaknesses and problems (J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011), or even badmouthing their organization to outsiders (Kang & Sung, 2017). While negative megaphoning occurs in employees' personal interactions with for example friends and family, *whistleblowing* refers to employees sharing negative information about the organization with the media or other external authorities (Kaptein, 2011).

While megaphoning describes communication behaviour directed outward towards external stakeholders, in *scouting* the direction of the information flow is the opposite. Scouting refers to communication behaviour directed toward the organization, so employees bringing in strategically useful information to the organization. The employees actively look for and gather this information from interactions with other stakeholders (Kim & Rhee, 2011, p. 248). *Employee voice* is another communication behaviour that occurs within the organization, and it refers to employees voicing their views and ideas that could somehow help the organization develop its operations (Lee & Kim, 2017; Morrison, 2011).

In communication studies employee communication behaviour has been shown to be of strategic importance for CSR (J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011). ECBs impact among others organisational effectiveness and reputation (Lee, 2021b, p. 16). Positive megaphoning has been shown to bring credibility from outsiders (Kang & Sung, 2017, p. 96), which is much needed in the context of CSR as discussed earlier. On the other hand, internal CSR activities are important in supporting positive employee communication behaviours, such as information seeking and transmitting (Lee, 2021b).

Studying what drives employees' active communication behaviours (ECBs) is vital because of their impact on organizational effectiveness and external reputation (Lee, 2021b). Kim and Rhee (2011) found that employees' evaluations of their overall relationship with the organization is an antecedent of ECBs, meaning a positively perceived relationship will likely lead to positive communication behaviours. Also symmetrical internal communication fosters positive ECBs as they are a key tool in managing the employee-organization relationship (Kang & Sung, 2017; J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011, p. 262). It is important that employees have enough resources and understanding on strategy, tactics, and core messages. The former highlights the importance of leadership and management support while the latter highlights the need for corporate communication professionals to step in as coaches (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019).

Several studies have pointed out that employee engagement is vital in creating ECBs (Kang & Sung, 2017; J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011). Previous research on the relationship between communication and engagement has dominantly viewed communication as an outcome of engagement. Engaged employees display positive communication behaviours more than disengaged employees (Kang & Sung, 2017). Employees must be engaged or feel committed to be inclined to communicate about the organization. However, a constructive view of the communication-engagement relationship argues that it works the other way around as well: communicating about the organization and work related issues may in fact facilitate engagement and commitment to the organisation (van Zoonen & Banghart, 2018.) Van Zoonen and Banghart (2018) call this approach the co-constructive perspective. From this constructive perspective employees participating in CSR communication would build or deepen the engagement toward CSR and the organization.

Traditionally employee communication behaviour, especially promoting behaviour such as employee advocacy, is understood as an extra-role behaviour meaning behaviour that is not within the scope of what the employee is responsible for in his work position. However, this view can be challenged, as Madsen and Verhoeven (2019) have argued; in their typology employees can take a variety of different communication roles also outside of the assigned responsibilities. These employee communication roles are discussed in more detail next.

3.2 Employee Communication Roles (ECRs)

Just as communication can have numerous roles and purposes in an organization, employees can also play a number of various communication roles. Madsen and Verhoeven (2019; 2022) have conceptualized a framework for employees as strategic communicators by examining the various active communication roles that employees display in organizations. Based on role theory, which perceives organizations as social systems consisting of specific roles performed by individuals dependent on each other (Katz & Kahn, 1978), the framework im-

plies that employees are not just able but to some extent expected to enact communication roles in today's post-bureaucratic and interconnected organizations (Heide et al., 2018; Heide & Simonsson, 2011). The typology of active employee communication roles, in short the AECR framework, consists of eight communication roles: the embodier, the promoter, the defender, the scout, the sensemaker, the innovator, the relationship builder and the critic (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; 2022).

The first communication role of the framework is *the embodier*. This role means that employees embody their organization when interacting with external stakeholders. Embodiers represent the organization's identity, by aligning their own behaviour and communication with the organization's values (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022, p. 96.) Since technically any kind of behaviour that is visible to external stakeholders can be perceived as embodying, employees are often automatically perceived as extensions of their organization on social media platforms (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, pp. 148; 154).

While an embodier represents the organization and acts in alignment with its positive characteristics, in the promotor role the employee tells about these positive sides (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022, p. 94). *The promotor* spreads positive communication about their organization, often online but also offline through word-of-mouth in their personal interactions. Similarly, the third communication role, the *defender*, speaks positively of the organization but does so typically only when the organizations legitimacy or reputation is threatened due to for example a crisis (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, p. 154). Because of this, the promoter and the defender communication roles have been linked to corporate reputation and crisis communication in particular (Kang & Sung, 2017). Paradoxically, employees communicating in these roles with the aim of improving the organization's reputation can also predispose the organization to risks and crises, for example if there are no guidelines for what is considered confidential organizational information (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, p. 144).

The embodying, promoting and defending communication behaviours can all be understood as forms of employee advocacy (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022), which encompasses externally directed positive communicative behaviours such as sharing of positive company-related information, showing support for their organization and defending their organization (Lee, 2021b, p. 6). Similarly, Kim and Rhee (2011) use the term positive megaphoning to describe behaviour where employees choose and convey positive messages about their organization in interactions with stakeholders. Employee advocacy has become a phenomenon that organizations are highly interested in, which could be explained by the increased trust placed on more personal sources, such as employee generated word-of-mouth (Thelen, 2020). CSR has been shown to have a positive impact on employee advocacy. Employees involved in CSR activities are more likely to recommend and speak positively of the company to outsiders (Dawkins & Stewart, 2003, pp. 191-192).

The scout refers to employees monitoring the operational environment of the organization in order to identify relevant issues, trends or changes that may

somehow affect the organization (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019, p. 154). This voluntary search for or sharing of information is of strategic importance to the organization as scouting can reveal threats and opportunities that might otherwise go unnoticed (J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011). Through scouting employees become information influencers in their organization (Lee, 2021b), that contribute to the learning capacity of the organization (Barker & Camarata, 1998). Scouting is also referred to as listening or environmental listening (Macnamara, 2014).

The sensemaker is a role that employees take when they construct and give meaning to information given by the organization or other stakeholders in the external environment. So, employees performing this role take organizational or environmental information and make sense of it by organizing it into frames (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; 2022). Employees might for example interpret organizational messages on social media to make sense of their work and the organization. Employees' sensemaking behaviours often occur in change processes, such as when organizations are going through the transformation towards more sustainable and socially responsible business (Perdersen 2016).

Via the above discussed scout and sensemaker roles employees become familiar with the changes occurring in the organization's operational environment. In *the innovator* role the employees support the organization in responding to these changes by coming up with ideas and solutions to drive organizational change. This communication role is closely tied to a bottom-up approach to organizational management as it highlights the importance of involving employees in organizational change processes as early on as possible. Employees' ideas and skills are seen as the starting point for innovations and change (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; 2022).

The relationship builder role refers to employees taking an active role in building and maintaining relationships with other stakeholders. The underlying reasoning behind the expectation for employees to take this role is that employees are in a unique position in the sense that other stakeholders perceive employees as the most trustworthy source of information (Dawkins, 2005; J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011). Lastly, employees can also take on the roles of a *critic* by speaking up about issues or problems in the organization. This can be done either internally to for example colleagues or upper management, or externally on social media platforms (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; 2022). Although, it has been found that employees of organizations that are active in CSR are more likely to report misconduct or even fraud internally rather than externally for the public to see (Brink et al., 2018). Lastly, it should be noted that the communication roles employees can take on are not static but change with the operational environment and practices of the organization (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022, p. 90).

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Qualitative study

The aim of this study is to increase understanding on the factors that shape employee involvement in CSR communication and the communication roles employees have in the context of CSR. Additionally, its goal is to shed light on the employee perspective of what CSR communication should be like.

To answer these research questions, a qualitative research approach was chosen. As is typical for qualitative studies (Puusa et al., 2020, p. 75), the research questions of this study are explorative in nature so they cannot be answered simply by deeming a certain hypotheses either valid or not valid. In contrast to quantitative studies where the goal is to explain, qualitative studies strive to elicit meaning and build understanding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

A qualitative study is interested in the point of view of the persons participating in the study. Typically, it is focused on studying thoughts, perceptions, feelings or interpretations, which are shaped by the personal experiences of the object of study (Puusa et al., 2020, p. 81). Since the objects of this study are employees' experiences and perceptions of CSR communication, qualitative study is a suitable approach for this thesis. In addition to focusing on the perspectives of the objects of the study, qualitative research places emphasis on the researcher's voice. In a qualitative study the researcher should be aware of how their interpretations play a role in the research process (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Qualitative research is a fitting approach also when there is limited previous research on the studied phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), as is the case with this thesis and the topic of employees as CSR communicators. Lastly, in the context of business studies specifically, a qualitative approach can provide insightful practical implications for real business contexts, as these are

often too complex and multidimensional to be captured solely by quantitative approaches (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

4.2 Case study of company offering sustainability services

To investigate employee communication behaviours concerning a company's overall CSR communications from the perspective of employees, a case organization was needed to collect such insight. The case company that was chosen for the present study is an internationally operating sustainability services company. Driving the sustainable development of society is at the core of the case company's business. CSR is therefore firmly integrated into the organizational strategy and business of the company instead of it showing mostly in specific campaigns that address issues outside the scope of the company's business. The case company can be categorized as a small and medium-sized enterprise and its organizational culture is characterized by a flexible, international, and low-hierarchy culture. Employees have more flexibility and control to lead their own work and take on responsibilities of their choosing than they might have at a much bigger, hierarchical company. Most teams within the company are small, consisting of about 5-10 persons.

The aim of a case study is not to make generalizations but to gain deep understanding of a specific organization, social group, event or individual by studying them thoroughly in their own context (Walliman, 2006). The case company of this research provides an interesting and unique context for answering the research questions of this thesis, because of the organization's strong strategic focus on sustainability. Because many of the employees are experts of topics relating to sustainability and responsibility, at least to some extent it can be expected that employees are well informed and aware of topics connected to corporate social responsibility and would be equipped to engage in CSR communication behaviours.

4.3 Data collection method

As Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, 72) phrase it: "When we seek to understand what a person is thinking or why they act in a certain way, it is reasonable to ask them that directly." Therefore, qualitative research often favours methods in which the research subjects' point of view is well expressed (Puusa et al., 2020, p. 85). To make sense of employees' experiences and thoughts regarding CSR communication, qualitative interview was chosen as data collection method. Qualitative interviews shed light on how something is experienced (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 47), and allow for a deep dive into the research topic (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). Data collection can benefit from the flexibility of interviews since the

researcher is present in the process of data collection and can ask follow-up questions when a particularly fruitful topic arises. Questions can be asked in any order depending on how the conversation flows which can result in more natural responses and ultimately give the interviewer more relevant information. Moreover, misunderstandings are easier avoided because respondents can ask for guidance if needed. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009.)

4.3.1 Interview protocol

The interview followed a semi-structured protocol, which means the structure of the interview was planned beforehand but not strictly enforced. The interview questions were formed with an inductive approach, meaning that they covered topics derived from theory and literature (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). Questions covered themes such as the background of the interviewee, personal values, perceptions, and attitudes towards CSR, understanding of the company's CSR, channels and content, leadership and management, organizational encouragement and support, communication roles and employee communication behaviour, interest and motives for participation, roles as well as communicative skills. The specific themes were loosely based on theory introduced earlier in this master's thesis regarding employee engagement, employee communication behaviour and the typology of eight communication roles (embodier, promoter, defender, scout, sensemaker, innovator, relationship builder and the critic) introduced in the theory chapter of the thesis (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; 2022). In total the planned interview protocol featured 30 questions.

The interview protocol can be found in the attachments of this study (see Appendix 1). In most interviews, all the listed questions were asked, although not necessarily in the planned order. Only in the case of a couple of interviews it did not make sense to ask all questions. As an illustrative example, interviewees who made it clear not to use social media at all were not asked about platforms used or intentions for being on social media.

Since the study is focused on the personal experiences and views of the employees, it was important to convey to the interviewees that there are no right or wrong answers to encourage comprehensive and authentic responses. Another factor that was considered when conducting the interview was asymmetry of the conversation, meaning that interviewees are allowed to speak freely without disruptions or comments from the interviewer, unless interviewees asked for clarifications (Brinkmann, 2013, pp. 16-17.)

4.3.2 Sampling approach

In qualitative study it is not practical nor required to have a large sample (Alasuutari & Alasuutari, 2011, p. 39). Since statistical generalization is not a target, the number of subjects is not as relevant as in the case of quantitative studies (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). The right sampling size is determined by what the researcher considers sufficient to obtain the necessary information

(Puusa et al., 2020, p. 85). For this study, the sufficient number of interviewees was pre-determined to be 10-15. This was because the intention was to collect enough data from different age and experience levels to be able to compare different groups. In the end, a total of 15 employees were interviewed.

With the sampling, the aim was to reach persons who know as much as possible about the phenomenon under study (Puusa et al., 2020, p. 84). Persons who had worked at the company for less than half a year were therefore secluded from the sample. The interviewees were pre-selected based on the following criteria: years at the company, age, and position, as these characteristics were expected to influence the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees. The intention was that different experience levels, age groups and positions would be represented as equally as possible to allow for possible comparing of groups, which was important primarily for the case company. The pre-selected persons were contacted directly via email and invited to participate. Not all pre-selected persons were able to participate in the interviews, so adjustments had to be made. The table (table 1) below lists the 15 participants and their demographic information:

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of interviewees.

Gender	Age group	Years at company	Position	Interview duration time
Male	20-35	2-5	Junior or supportive	43min 22sec
Female	20-35	0,5-2	Junior or supportive	35min 50sec
Male	35-50	2-5	Middle management	41min 58sec
Male	20-35	0,5-2	Junior or supportive	38min 42sec
Female	20-35	0,5-2	Junior or supportive	45min 23sec
Male	35-50	2-5	Senior management	47min 41sec
Male	50-65	5-10	Middle management	37min 40sec
Male	50-65	0,5-2	Senior management	47min 01sec
Female	50-65	5-10	Middle management	40min 20sec
Male	35-50	0,5-2	Middle management	41min 35sec
Male	20-35	2-5	Middle management	45min 38sec
Female	50-65	0,5-2	Junior or supportive	30min 48sec
Male	35-50	5-10	Middle management	34min 14sec
Male	35-50	5-10	Middle management	45min 50sec
Female	50-65	5-10	Junior or supportive	24min 16sec

Before the interviews the participants were sent via email information about the study, a consent form and a privacy notice to inform them of the handling of personal data. These emails were sent in such a way that no information of any other research participants was visible in the recipient field. E-mail addresses for participation requests and interview invitations were stored on the re-

researcher's computer only until the interviews had been conducted, after which they were deleted. Participants were asked to carefully read through all documents and sign the consent form before the interviews. Since a few of the participants said it was not necessary for them to sign the consent form, as a precaution every interview started with the participant stating on tape that they had read the documents and were participating voluntarily in the study.

All interviews were held over the course of March 2022, and they were conducted remotely via Zoom. Each interview was recorded, most with picture but some without due to unstable internet connection. No other issues arose with using Zoom as the interview platform. The length of the interviews varied from 25 minutes to a maximum of 50 minutes. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on the personal hard drive of the author of the thesis and on the network disk of the University of Jyväskylä (U-drive) only until the completion of the research process. Anonymity was maintained throughout the process as files and data were given code names from the start.

All interviews were conducted in Finnish, and they were transcribed as accurately as possible, with the intention of following what was said in the interviews word by word. The interview transcripts were not fully translated into English, but all the relevant quotes that were chosen from the data, as well as keywords, codes and themes were all translated into English. For the exemplary quotes used, filler words that were said when thinking or stumbling to find the right words were edited out to make the data more understandable. Examples included words like "hmm" or "well, or repetitions of the same word.

4.4 Thematic analysis

The aim of any qualitative research analysis is to derive meaning from the collected data. In order to succeed in doing so, the researcher has to find a suitable method of analysis. In this study that method is thematic analysis. In short, the thematic analysis process consists of familiarizing oneself with the collected data, coding of the data, identifying themes from the codes, refining those themes, settling on the definitions for the themes and finally reporting of the results (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023). Coding refers to the process of identifying meanings from the data and giving these meanings specific labels (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis is interested in both expressed and unexpressed meanings and ideas that can be derived from the data, so thematic analysis leaves a lot of room for the researcher's reflexivity (Guest et al., 2012, p. 11). To some extent, the themes identified and labelled always reflect the researcher's own interpretations of what is being said (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). While this is an inevitable part of thematic analysis and qualitative research in general, it does highlight the importance of reporting findings in a transparent and clear manner.

In practice, the process of thematic analysis was conducted in the following way: The interview transcripts were explored in detail while expressions and words that seemed relevant from the point of view of the research problem were initially marked. The most relevant parts are often those where the interviewee emphasizes, repeats or explains something about the topic (Puusa et al., 2020, p. 163). In this case the chosen keywords represented the interviewees' perceptions or experiences about CSR communication and communication behaviours. These were then translated into English because the transcripts were in Finnish. After identifying key words from the data, they were given codes to give the keywords specific meanings which link to the research questions (Naeem et al., 2023). Even though there were segments marked with several keywords, each of the codes reflected only one meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 66) phrase it, coding is not paraphrasing but should be seen as "mining of the data, digging beneath the surface to discover the hidden treasures contained within data". After coding it was possible to start grouping the codes into themes based on similarities, differences, and connections. Themes often surface throughout the entire interview and they connect and bring together lesser concepts or codes with specific meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The keywords, codes and themes were reflected against the theoretical frameworks presented earlier in this study, and new complementing concepts were introduced and defined.

As is typical for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023, p. 2), themes evolved during the analysis process. With thematic analysis the focus is in developing themes from the data to then be elaborated and expanded on, rather than reducing it into strict categories right away (Wheeler, 2022). Therefore, as the data became increasingly familiar, new patterns were identified and connections between the research questions and the data became refined. As an example, after themes had been identified, they were further grouped under overarching themes, personal, organizational or interpersonal, in order to bring more clarity into the multifaceted themes and their interconnections. Among others, Lee (2020) has utilized a similar division in a study on employees' motivation to engage in communicative behaviours.

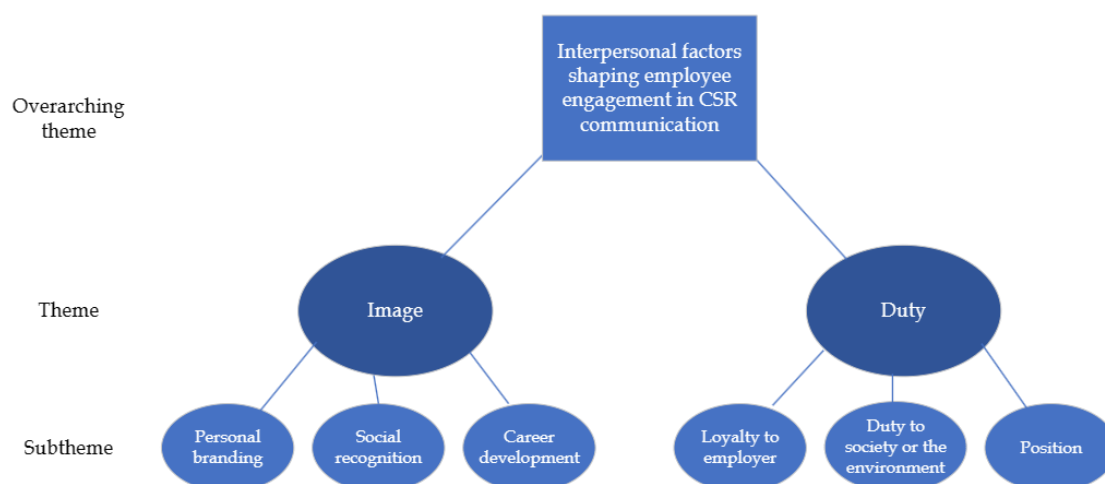
Thematic maps were utilized throughout the analysis process to bring clarity to the meanings and their connections (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Refined versions of some of these thematic maps were also brought into the thesis report to visualize the findings and present results in a clearer manner.

The table on the next page (table 2) illustrates the process of theme development and the various levels of themes that were identified in the analysis for the first research question:

Table 2. Example of how themes were constructed (RQ1).

Overarching theme	Interpersonal factors shaping employee engagement in CSR communication	Interpersonal factors shaping employee engagement in CSR communication
Theme	Image	Duty
Subtheme	Social recognition	Duty towards society or the environment
Expression from data	<i>I guess I also do it partly because one gets more appreciation from the community, not only from the company's point of view but also on a personal level.</i>	<i>I believe that we should all try to communicate about and work towards ensuring that this all goes in the right direction. It would be pretty selfish to just ignore what is going on (referring to climate change).</i>

The picture below (picture 1) showcases an example of a thematic map for the first research question concerning factors that shape employee engagement in CSR communication. The highest category in the picture refers to an overarching theme, which in the example is interpersonal factors. This overarching theme is superordinate to a couple of themes labelled image and duty, which in turn are each further categorized into subthemes.

**Picture 1.** Example of thematic map.

5 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter the results are presented. The aim of this thesis was to increase understanding around the topic of employees as CSR communicators by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors shape employee engagement in CSR communication?

RQ2: What communication roles do employees enact in CSR communication?

RQ3: What kind of communication do employees perceive as good CSR communication?

5.1 Factors that shape employee engagement in CSR communication

When interviewees described their motivations for participating in CSR communication several factors surfaced. Based on the factors, ten key themes shaping employee engagement in CSR communication were identified, which were: interest, values, competence, image, duty, resources, organizational culture, organizational communication, leadership behaviour and economic incentives. Ultimately, the ten themes were further grouped as personal, organizational or interpersonal (Lee, 2020), in order to bring more clarity into the multifaceted themes. Themes that were grouped as personal factors were interest, values and competence. Resources, organizational culture, organizational communication, leadership behaviour and economic incentives were grouped as organizational factors. Lastly, image and duty were interpreted as interpersonal factors. Next each of these will be discussed in detail.



Picture 2. The results of RQ1 presented in the form of a thematic map.

5.1.1 Personal factors

One overarching theme that was identified as a factor shaping employee engagement in CSR communication is personal factors. The present study identified three such themes that relate to the individual person, which are: Interest, competence and values. Employees considered personal interest and competence important for engagement in CSR communication. Also values such as environmentalism and privacy arose as factors. Each of these themes is discussed in detail next.

Interest

The most frequently surfaced factor that relates to engagement in CSR communication was **personal interest**. Employees felt that involvement in CSR communication should be **voluntary** and not forced on anybody. While almost all employees identified employee participation in CSR communication as important and felt that somebody should do it, personal interest and **internal mo-**

tivation to participate was seen as the starting point. Employees also reflected on whether it is reasonable to expect lighter participation in CSR communication, such as sharing company messages. For example, one interviewee mentioned that they know some employees have joined LinkedIn only to share company messages.

So even sharing organizational CSR communication, such as posts on LinkedIn, could require some level of interest and a feeling that the person can agree with the message.

“Maybe I'd say it should start with everyone's own motives. If a company obligated employees to do so, it would probably not be as good as when everyone makes that decision for themselves, if they see the benefit for their own work.” (Interview no. 13)

“I could be expected to participate more actively, but I do not know what benefit it would bring to pressure reluctant people. I think encouragement works better.” (Interview no. 14)

“Even if the company said I should join Twitter, I wouldn't.” (Interview no. 12)

Values

For many employees it seems a key source of internal motivation to communicate could be derived from **values**. Especially **environmentalism** and **transparency** values surfaced several times as drivers of employees' actions and communication behaviour. Additionally, **privacy** and **alignment of personal and company** values arose from the data.

The data revealed that **environmentalism** and living responsibly and sustainably is an important value for most of the interviewees. Many seemed to feel concerned over the world and society's survival and highlighted how focused they are on making sustainable and responsible choices in their personal lives as well. Examples of these kinds of choices mentioned include choosing to live energy efficiently in smaller apartments, shopping second hand whenever possible, avoiding excess consumption, not owning a car, avoiding traveling by plane, recycling, and so on.

Persons who discussed how important environmental values are to them also described that it makes them feel good when they share or write social media posts regarding CSR because they consider it important that the topics are discussed. Some said it is easy to be involved in discussions about responsibility and sustainability because they can honestly get behind those values. In addition to sharing information to promote discussions, influencing others by changing their views and actions was described as a personal win, further highlighting the part environmental values hold as a driver for communication behaviour.

“I am truly concerned about the situation of the world and genuinely would like to be involved in making it better through both deeds and speech.” (Interview no. 15)

“It (sustainability and social responsibility) is like this big theme that at the moment largely defines me and my actions.” (Interview no. 9)

Another value that was connected to involvement in CSR communication was **transparency**. Organizations are expected to walk the talk and it was evident that employees want to know they are being truthful when they communicate about CSR. This meant they want to understand the real situation of where the company is at currently in terms of CSR. Some employees expressed that there could be more internal communication regarding possible failures or shortcomings. Being in the know about possible points of improvement was perceived as important for both the employees and the organization. If employees have limited information regarding the state of the company’s social or environmental responsibility, they could be predisposed to difficult situations when they communicate about CSR outside of the organization. With transparency possible reputational risks could be mitigated, and employees could communicate with a clear conscience and less fear for being challenged by publics.

“The more we know about how we're doing, including the aspects we're not so good at, the better. We need to be aware of them (the shortcomings) so that we can reduce the risk that any of the staff involved in CSR communication get caught with their pants down, so to speak.” (Interview no. 8)

Another perspective that arose in connection to the theme of values, was **alignment of personal and company values**. Most employees mentioned they shared their company’s values. Some said that a shared value base is precisely what encouraged them to apply for a job at the case company in the first place. In fact, many interviewees seemed to consider it a given that everyone working at the company shares their employer’s sustainability and environmentalism values. However, not all the interviewees felt a connection to the company’s environmental values. Some had been working at the company since before sustainability became the central strategic focus, so it is not surprising that among those people there were some who did not relate as much to environmental values. These persons did, however, share the company’s understanding of sustainability, meaning that in a market economy true sustainability is also financially sustainable. This means that no matter how ground-breaking some innovation is, if it is not economically viable, it will not succeed and help combat the challenges the society and the planet are facing. So, in a way these persons too did feel some level of identification to the company’s values. Some interviewees argued that these days employees should not work in a company if there is a gap between personal and organisational values. Many interviewees brought up that personal and organisational communication often gets mixed

up on social media. Personal messages, even if marked as personal views, could be nevertheless associated with the company.

“The values of a company and an employee cannot be terribly different. If we think of highly skilled workforce, then nowadays the employee will not stay in the company for long if their values differ much from those of the company. And when that value base is the same, can you any longer tell the difference between representing yourself or the company on social media?” (Interview no. 13)

Privacy is another value that was found to shape employees’ will to engage in CSR communication. Some employees expressed they choose not to communicate on public platforms because they want to protect their privacy. Digitalization and blending of work and private lives make this issue even more complex for employees (Smith et al., 2017). Some interviewees made a distinction between work related and personal communication channels emphasizing that while they do or could communicate about CSR in the context of work, they like to keep for example their social media channels for private use only.

“I’m quite open to it (communicating about CSR) at work, but on personal channels I like to keep my privacy.” (Interview no. 5)

“I’m very careful about what I share with the outside world. The threshold for doing so is high, and when I do put something there (on social media), I want to do it very carefully.” (Interview no. 9)

Competence

Competence was a reoccurring theme in the context of employees’ engagement in CSR communication. On one hand competence to employees meant expertise in sustainability or social responsibility related matters, on the other hand it meant competence in communication.

Insecurity over sufficient **knowledge and expertise in topics that relate to CSR** surfaced in the interviews as one factor that might hinder employees from communicating about CSR. Overall employees highlighted the importance of CSR communication being built on expertise. It was emphasized that if employees were to make CSR communication content by themselves, then it is vital to make sure that those people have the relevant expertise of the topic in question. Some perceived it as risky for a person without sufficient expertise in social responsibility or sustainability to take part in CSR communication. Especially in the case of CSR communication occurring on social media platforms, employees seemed to think that their posts could raise responses or questions they might not be able to answer, which in turn could damage not just their personal image but also make their employer look bad.

“Well simply sharing a message does not require a lot of time or training, but on a larger scale, if we are going to talk more deeply about ESG and other things, then of course it requires familiarizing yourself with the topic.” (Interview no. 2)

“I am not knowledgeable enough to be an active communicator in these matters and attract focus on what I have to say.” (Interview no. 6)

Similarly, some described that they do not possess good **communication skills**, a natural talent for communication or a sufficient understanding of communication channels or tactics, so they do not participate in CSR communication. In particular, social media as a platform for employees to communicate about CSR communication raised caution in interviewees. CSR was perceived as a sensitive and highly visible topic which is particularly prone to heated public conversations. Without sufficient communication skills, the risk to get caught in the eye of the storm was perceived as high. Since expectations regarding CSR are so high these days, it was seen as impossible to meet all of them. Some employees felt it is risky to communicate about CSR because somebody might respond by highlighting the areas in which the company is still falling short of the expectations. Another risk interviewees associated with social media was cancel culture. It was described how it is difficult to be opinionated and interesting on social media when there is zero tolerance for any mistakes.

“You can see a lot of people liking or writing like “good comment” or great writing”, but that won’t bring you anywhere. Instead, you should be able to really produce and engage and provoke thoughts. I don’t have a natural talent for that sort of thing.” (Interview no. 10)

“Because these things are not black and white, there is also the risk that these topics will then be aggressively picked up on social media. If you communicate about these topics personally, you may find yourself in a heated online debate or the eye of the storm.” (Interview no. 1)

Interestingly, some employees seem to evaluate their qualifications for participating in CSR communication also based on how **socially responsible or sustainable lifestyles they lead outside of work**. A couple of interviewees indicated that because they were not living responsibly enough outside of work, they should not communicate about CSR in their work roles. For example, one person said they are only now about to update their recycling boxes to meet current standards. Another person said they sold their car recently but wanted to highlight that in all honesty it was because there was no use for it not because they wanted to live more sustainably. Based on these kinds of statements it seems employees feel the pressure to walk the talk and do not feel comfortable in communicating about CSR if their actions outside of work don’t match with what is communicated in the organization’s context.

“I am only now about to renew my recycling system at home so who am I to communicate about environmental responsibility or sustainability.” (Interview no. 6)

5.1.2 Interpersonal factors

In addition to personal factors, another overarching theme shaping employee engagement in CSR communication is interpersonal factors. This refers to themes that relate to the individual employee’s relations towards others. Themes that were identified as interpersonal in nature are: image and duty. Communicating about CSR was driven by a will to maintain a socially responsible image in front of others for personal branding, social recognition, or career development purposes. The other interpersonal driver for CSR-related communication behaviours was duty towards another party– either towards the employer or towards society and the environment. These two themes will be presented next.

Image

In addition to personal factors, also interpersonal factors were found to be shaping employee engagement in CSR. The first of these is image. Interviewees seemed to link communicating about CSR with image related topics such as crafting an expert or personal brand and gaining recognition in their social circles and communities as well-doers or good citizens. Social responsibility and sustainability discourses have been highly emphasized in societal discussion in the past years, so is not surprising that people are concerned about having a responsible image. It seems to motivate some employees to engage in CSR communication.

Employees discussed how they are happy to for example share company posts or write their own posts on LinkedIn because they are proud of the positively impactful and important work their employer does, and proud that they get to be a part of it. Some mentioned that whenever they talk about their employer, they like to highlight environmental and social responsibility. This sense of pride for the employer’s actions is for some a driver of involvement in CSR communication.

“I’m sure everyone communicates when there is something really positive to communicate about. Something you want to bring up and you’re damn proud of. Where you think it is so cool that you get to be a part of this that you just have to tell others about it.” (Interview no. 10)

“No one can be forced into doing that (communicate about CSR). I can’t tell you to go post on your own LinkedIn or Facebook or wherever. But a lot of people want to do it if we are doing good things. I believe so, most of them.” (Interview no. 4)

Involvement in CSR communication was linked by employees to building a **personal brand**. When employees were asked about what possible advantages or disadvantages they saw in communicating about CSR personally, many mentioned building a personal brand as an advantage. It could serve as a way for employees to promote their **career development** and showcase to their networks what kind of expertise they have. Some employees believed that building an expert brand around sustainability and social responsibility may positively influence their future career prospects.

“I see it (communicating about CSR) as a kind of personal profiling, which I have always done.” (Interview no. 4)

“I am aware that the more I can be present on social media or other media platforms, and thereby build my own eminence, the more I am promoting my personal career development. That is why I'd like to be much more visible.” (Interview no. 14)

While some employees highlighted that communicating about CSR could serve to brand their expertise and advance their professional careers, others mentioned that it could brand them as good persons overall and bring them **recognition in their community and networks**. Discussing CSR on social media or offline was described as a way to gain respect on a personal level. One employee explained that they communicate about social responsibility on social media because they wish to tell other people that they are a good citizen. Another employee said that while it may be a selfish starting point for participating in CSR communication, the fact remains that people are motivated by gaining the respect and appreciation of their community.

“I talk about it also because I get more appreciation from the community, not only for the company but on a personal level. You like to do things that you are proud of and of which you can tell your network, your work community, and your own family. Whether that is a selfish or selfless reason is hard to say.” (Interview no. 13)

Duty

Another theme that arose in connection with employee engagement in CSR communication was duty. Duty was visible in several forms; a duty created by a position or work contract, a duty towards society or the environment, and a duty to support the employer as loyal employees.

The data revealed that some employees communicate about CSR because they work in a **position** where it is required. These interviewees worked mostly in sales or other front-line positions where contact with clients and potential clients occurs on a regular basis. The topic of positions surfaced also amongst interviewees who did not recognize communicating about CSR as part of their own roles. Employees seemed to agree that some roles by nature require com-

municating about CSR. The positions that were most frequently raised in this context was leadership and management positions because the people who occupy these roles were perceived as the representatives or faces of the organization. Within the organization, people in management and leadership positions were perceived to have a great responsibility in leading by example and motivating others to participate in CSR communication as well. In particular, the CEO position was singled out as vital in this sense. Another example of a position where participation could be expected was employees of the marketing and communications department.

“Management is in a way the face of the company, so it would be quite difficult to be a part of the management team if you did not participate (in CSR communication).” (Interview no. 13)

“It (communicating about CSR) is to great extent tied to what a person does and what position they occupy. As a communicator, do they get listened to and get visibility? Do they deal with customers or other stakeholders, for example?” (Interview no. 1)

Similarly, when interviewees reflected on the question of whether employers can expect participation in CSR communication from employees, the topic of **work contracts** also surfaced. One person highlighted that involvement in CSR communication could be expected from pretty much anyone in any position – as long as this requirement is brought up already during the recruitment process so that the expectation is known beforehand and can be taken into consideration when the details of the work contract are negotiated.

As was highlighted in the values section of the findings, environmentalism drives employees to communicate about CSR. Surprisingly many interviewees, especially from the youngest age group, seemed to feel what can be described as almost a sense of **duty towards society or the environment**. This feeling of responsibility motivates, or as some interviewees put into words, “forces” to do work that can have a positive impact on the environment and drives them to influence others to do the same. While acting in accordance with one’s values was described as something that brings a sense of meaning and personal satisfaction, this sense of duty and obligation expressed by some employees seemed to stem from more negative emotions such as worry, fear and frustration. Since everyone is not taking environmental and social issues seriously, those who have the understanding regarding the severity of the situation have no other choice but to take on this responsibility.

Several employees highlighted that everyone has a responsibility in ensuring the survival of the planet. Everyone should do their part, but especially the people who know better and have expertise on the matter – referring to themselves. Most of the employees working for the case company are experts in sustainability and sustainable development. Joining the discussion either online or offline to inform and influence others was perceived as one form of carrying

out this duty. Some referred to the circulation of false information regarding sustainability to emphasize that especially people like them who have expertise on CSR have a responsibility to inform those who do not have as much knowledge and might buy into mis- or disinformation.

“I believe that we should all try to communicate about and work towards ensuring that this all goes in the right direction. It would be pretty selfish to just ignore what is going on (referring to climate change).” (Interview no. 15)

“I am pragmatic about this issue, and I think that we all carry a great deal of responsibility here. So that is why I choose to talk about this.” (Interview no. 4)

“The more these things are communicated (referring to CSR), the more people will understand them. Then it becomes the norm to consider these aspects, which in turn contributes towards actions and going in the right direction.” (Interview no. 13)

Similarly, employees were also motivated by a **sense of duty or loyalty towards their employer**. Some highlighted that asking employees to be involved in CSR communication can be justified because social responsibility and sustainability are key drivers of business for the company. Building strong expert brands in the context of CSR was brought up a few times as a necessary measure for the company’s success and some interviewees felt competitors were ahead in this area.

“This is our workplace of choice, after all. Naturally everyone wishes for the company to succeed and to still be there next year. (About reasons why involvement in CSR communication can be expected)” (Interview no. 3)

A few interviewees perceived that on a company level there is an intention to get customers committed in sustainable development, which is why they strive to communicate about the topic as well.

“After all, we do also want to engage our customers in this way of thinking.” (Interview no. 15)

5.1.3 Organizational factors

In addition to the above discussed personal and interpersonal factors, employee engagement in CSR communication was also found to be shaped by organizational factors. Themes identified under this category are: organizational culture, organizational communication, leadership behaviour, resources and economic incentives. Each will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Organizational culture

Organizational culture is another theme that surfaced in the analysis. CSR was perceived to be embedded into the case company's organizational culture by most interviewees, and therefore as collectively important. The influence of individual employees on the CSR-centric organizational culture was highlighted. Some interviewees described that it derives, at least in part, from the values of individual employees.

"CSR is strongly in our DNA or corporate culture. In that sense, it's a bit like an umbrella under which everything else has to fit." (Interview no. 1)

"It is our people's values that in a way build the organizational culture. It has probably also been consciously built, but it culminates in people's own words and values. It feels real. It's not like we promote responsible business, and then when we go on a coffee break, that would suddenly disappear, and we'd start talking about something completely different." (Interview no. 11)

However, a few employees highlighted that because CSR is so embedded in the organizational culture, as an extension **CSR communication could also be seen as more of a collective effort**. There were interviewees who brought up that they would feel more compelled to communicate about CSR if it was a collective effort that every employee would participate in.

Another factor that surfaced in the context of the organization, was **employees' perceived support and encouragement towards engaging in CSR communication**. Most employees recognized that they are encouraged to share organizational messages when something is posted on the organization's social media channels. However, many questioned whether this was sufficient encouragement to take action. Moreover, there were employees who felt that there is general encouragement to communicate but not in the context of CSR specifically.

"There probably is enough time, but since it's not a habit for me, maybe it would take a little more for me to take action, than just a general message on our group Teams chat where everyone is encouraged to share the post." (Interview no. 11)

"Sometimes we are asked to share some news, but perhaps no more than that (-). I think it's left to one's own initiative." (Interview no. 7)

There was also high variation in the degree to which employees felt support like this existed depending on business area and age group. Specifically, younger interviewees felt that encouragement and support to engage in CSR communication existed.

“Since almost the first day of work, I have been told that if there is a topic I wish to write about on the company's website and bring to the attention of a bigger audience, then it is possible to do so. Whether there is enough time to do it is another matter. But the support is there.” (Interview no. 9)

In addition to the shared organizational culture, **sub-cultures** also play a role in employees' involvement in CSR communication. Interviewees perceived there to be cultural differences between different business functions and between different generations when it comes to CSR. Some departments were described as particularly vested in driving CSR and communicating about it because they consist of persons highly committed to environmental and social responsibility. All interviewees from the department did show motivation to participate in CSR communication and did consider it important. Some also described how their supervisors or colleagues from the department encouraged and pushed each other in this matter. In contrast, amongst employees who had been with the company since before sustainability became the core of the company's business strategy, there were individuals who perceived there to be more variation in levels of commitment and interest in CSR communication.

“I think they might to some extent have a culture of their own in department X. There are a lot of young people there so there can be some differences (in the cultures).” (Interview no. 7)

Organizational communication

Some interviewees highlighted that **good organizational CSR communication**, particularly internal communication, can make a big difference on employee engagement in CSR communication. It was perceived as important in fostering pride in employees towards their work and their employer. They argued that if the internal CSR communication is good and employees are well informed and truly understand for example the positive impacts the company is leaving behind in terms of for example carbon dioxide emission reductions, then they should feel more motivated to communicate. Whereas if employees are not sufficiently informed, many of the positive impacts might go unnoticed by them.

“No one can be forced into doing that (communicate about CSR). I can't tell you to go post on your own LinkedIn or Facebook or wherever we post company videos or other content. But a lot of people want to do it if we are doing good things. I believe so, most of them.” (Interview no. 4)

“Above all, I personally feel proud if we do good things... you like to do things that you are proud of and of which you can tell your network, your work community, and your own family.” (Interview no. 13)

Some employees hoped for more **internal communication solely focused on the topic of CSR**. Examples mentioned were a separate CSR-focused Teams chat and regular group meetings to discuss CSR, because in the current monthly meeting of the whole organization employees did not recognize communication allocated specifically to CSR. An expectation for more interactive communication regarding CSR also surfaced in the interviews.

Leadership behaviour

Setting and implementing the CSR strategy, taking care of a good and egalitarian working environment with regular personnel surveys and interactions with stakeholders were perceived as the main forms of participation for leadership in CSR communication. Most employees viewed these management focused tasks as primary and felt these were well taken care of. However, the data revealed that employees also had expectations for leadership to take a bigger role in CSR communication. Many interviewees felt that leadership should **lead by example and take an active role in CSR communication** to get more employees excited about participating in CSR communication. What leadership and management do was described as a signal to employees, saying that this is something important, and something worth telling others about.

Many discussed that the leadership is often considered the face of the organization externally, and they were worried that currently the case company's leaders and the CEO were not visible enough to publics. Most employees perceived as common practice nowadays that leaders are expected to be active on social media. Especially the most important messages should come from leadership, and CSR was by many identified as such a topic of high importance. While many expected the management to communicate and be more visible externally, more employees had expectations for leadership to communicate about CSR internally. One person highlighted that the **leadership could have a big role in encouraging**, as well as raising pride and confidence, which are key in motivating employees to discuss CSR.

"It would be good to understand internally just how important work we are doing, and for that to occur it would be a good idea for social responsibility to show in the leadership of the management as well. To emphasize the impacts and legitimacy of our organization, and through that motivate employees. That doesn't seem to be happening at the moment." (Interview no. 10)

"Those regular important messages about the company's operations should come from the CEO. I think it would be a matter for the CEO level to a large extent." (Interview no. 8)

"Involvement in CSR communication could be somehow brought into people's performance targets. If it were possible to define for everyone individually how it could be promoted, then surely it could be taken to the level of employees." (Interview no. 8)

Resources

Unsurprisingly, resources were described as a reason for lack of involvement in CSR communication. **Time** was the resource most frequently mentioned. Particularly being active on social media was described as too time-consuming with the current workload. Some explained how the interactive nature of social media demands that employees would not just have to find time to write social media posts but also time to follow up on possible comments or questions. Providing templates or readymade content was mentioned as a solution for lowering the threshold of participation for busy employees.

Another resource that was emphasized was human resources. Some interviewees discussed that the company should have a **CSR manager** whose sole task it is to focus on coordinating CSR within the organization to help employees understand how it is present in everyone's work and communication. Some employees were not sure whether this kind of coordination was currently being sufficiently carried out. However, at the same time it was recognized by some that the organization was going through major changes which could at least in part explain this. Still, without such coordination and support by a dedicated CSR manager, the inputs that employees could make in CSR communication was seen as limited by some.

Many interviewees indicated they would be happy to receive **skills training** in order to be better equipped to communicate about CSR, but even more than that, interviewees were hoping for some sort of playbook or **guidelines** for employee communication. Currently employees told they are allowed to communicate freely what and how they want. Some thought a lack of clear guidelines might be keeping employees from communicating altogether because they would not even know where to start. Additionally, no coordination means that employees messages might not be aligned with the strategy of the company, which some perceived as risky.

"It (communicating about CSR) is expected and encouraged, but perhaps the concrete tools or common rules for it are still missing." (Interview no. 5)

"Employees have not been given instructions such as "How could this be communicated from the point of view of corporate responsibility or how has corporate responsibility been implemented in a certain matter." These have not been given. Naturally, employees then communicate very little from this point of view, and we cannot demand that they should, because that is not fair." (Interview no. 8)

Economic incentives

Some factors that surfaced in the interviews revealed that economic incentives can also play a role in employees' involvement in CSR communication. A few

interviewees described that their motivation to communicate about CSR stems from a will to contribute positively to the company's **business turnover**.

“My goals are mainly to promote the company's cause. That is, to talk about what we are doing and contribute to the development of our turnover.” (Interview no. 8)

Other economic incentives that came up was receiving a **bonus** or more **salary** in exchange for the employee's efforts to communicate about CSR. In these cases, CSR communication was mostly interpreted as communication on social media, instead of for example day to day interactions with stakeholders. These kinds of incentives were mentioned by a couple of employees who did not otherwise use social media.

“There are topics I have a strong opinion on and in those contexts it would not be difficult to motivate me (to participate), but if it is about something I do not have a particularly strong opinion on, then I could not be motivated. Well let's say I got paid some bonus for posting on social media, then I'd probably do the job I was told. But if I could do the same money by doing something else, I'd probably do something else.” (Interview no. 7)

In conclusion, it was found that employee engagement in CSR is shaped by a mix of personal, interpersonal and organizational factors. Personal factors included interest, competence and values. Employees to whom environmental values were important seemed to be more inclined towards engaging in CSR communication, while employees who valued privacy were more reserved towards engaging in CSR communication. Alignment of personal and organizational values also mostly shaped positive CSR-related communication behaviours. Good competence in both communication and CSR related fields such as environmental and social responsibility, as well as interest in the topics, shaped CSR-related communication behaviours positively, while employees who evaluated these skills to be limited were more reserved to engage in communication behaviours regarding CSR. If employees perceived they did not lead responsible enough lives outside of work, they were not as inclined to communicate about CSR in their work roles.

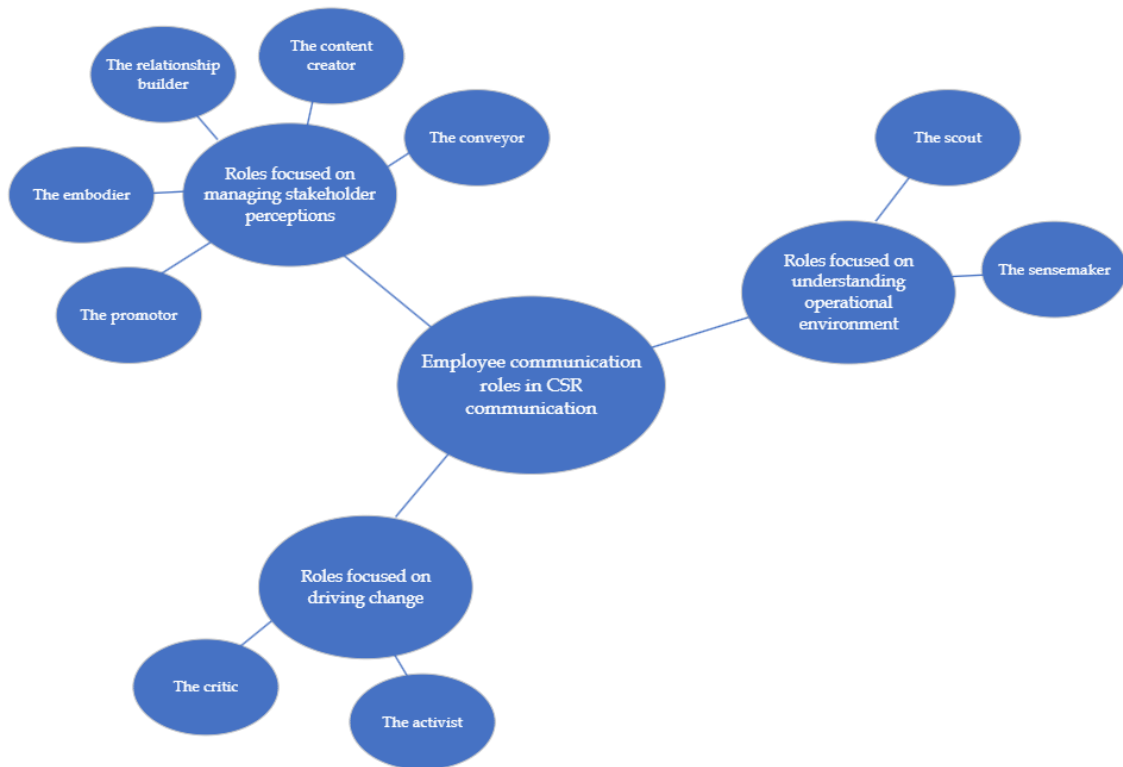
Interpersonal factors were found to motivate employees to engage in CSR communication. To some, communicating about CSR was driven by a will to maintain a socially responsible image in front of others for personal branding, social recognition, or career development purposes. Another interpersonal driver for CSR-related communication behaviours was duty towards another party- either towards the employer or towards society and the environment. Especially the latter emerged as a strong motivator for engaging in CSR communication.

Lastly organizational factors also surfaced as relevant for engaging employees in CSR communication behaviours. Employees who perceived there to

be a lack of resources such as time and skills training were not as inclined to engage in CSR communication. CSR was mostly perceived to be built into the organizational culture and therefore most employees considered communicating about CSR as an important priority. Good and frequent organizational communication and especially internal communication about CSR specifically were also found to motivate employees to perform CSR communication behaviours. For a few interviewees, economic incentives such as bonuses would motivate participation. Lastly, leadership behaviour surfaced as an important factor, as most perceived that leadership sets the example in communicating about CSR. If leaders were not perceived to engage in CSR communication, also the employees were less inclined to do so themselves.

5.2 Communication roles employees enact in CSR communication

This chapter will present the result for the second research question and discuss what communication roles employees were found to perform in terms of CSR communication. Overall, nine different employee communication roles surfaced in the analysis and these roles were categorized under three overarching themes, based on the active employee communication role framework presented earlier in the theory chapters (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022). Firstly, some employees performed communication roles that were focused on managing stakeholder perceptions. These roles are the promotor, the embodier, the relationship builder, the content creator and the conveyor. Secondly, employees performed communication roles that were focused on understanding the operational environment of the organization, which were the scout and the sensemaker. The third theme that arose in the analysis was employee communication roles focused on driving change. Roles identified in this category were the critic and the activist. While six of the identified employee communication roles are aligned with the AECR framework (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; 2022); the promotor, the embodier, the scout, the sensemaker, the relationship builder and the critic, the present study also found that employees were performing roles that did not fit into the typology. Therefore, the present study complements the AECR framework with three new roles that were labelled the content creator, the conveyor and the activist. The thematic map below (picture 3) illustrates all employee communication roles identified in this study, each of which will be discussed in more detail next:



Picture 3. The results of RQ2 presented in the form of a thematic map.

5.2.1 Roles focused on managing stakeholder perceptions

The analysis revealed nine different communication roles that employees enact in the context of CSR. These roles were categorized under three overarching themes based on their key functions. Firstly, some employees performed communication roles that were focused on managing stakeholder perceptions. These roles are the promotor, the embodier, the relationship builder, the content creator and the conveyer. Each of these roles will be presented next.

The promotor

One role focused on managing stakeholder perceptions that surfaced in the analysis was the role of **the promotor**. Many employees said that they **proactively talk about CSR with stakeholders**. These employees like to talk about their employer and particularly the positive impacts that the company makes. When asked about their work, employees were proud to tell examples of the environmental or social impacts of their work, such as how many households can gain access to green electricity or how much co2-emissions can be reduced. This sort of promoting or advocate behaviour occurred on social media, in interactions with stakeholders such as client meetings, but also outside of work in discussions with family or friends. CSR was also said to come up constantly in sales pitches.

“I have a lot of meetings with stakeholders, either alone or together with colleagues, where I talk about what we do. There is always an emphasis on how we are trying to make the world a better place.” (Interview no. 13)

“If and when I talk about my employer even outside of work, to a large extent the examples I tell relate to social responsibility.” (Interview no. 3)

Another indication of promoting behaviour is that talking negatively about the employer was not seen as acceptable by some of the employees. Speaking up about any problems internally and direct criticism was seen as the suitable way to deal with discontent instead of badmouthing the organization externally. This was highlighted in the context of social media but to some the rule extended also to private conversations with for example friends.

“Of course, you can praise the organization, but not bring out anything negative, even if you think that. It could become a problem for everyone.” (Interview no. 3)

The embodier

Similarly, the analysis revealed that there are employees who perform the role of **the embodier**. In the role of CSR embodier the employee represents the organization’s CSR agenda and practices. The employee **takes the organization’s understanding of CSR as their own and represents it in interactions with stakeholders**. Personal and organizational values and agenda seemed to be aligned for employees acting as embodiers. Some even emphasized that they communicate about CSR only in the context of their organization, or that they would not take a public stand on a topic that was not connected to or supported by their employer.

“I would not take a stand on anything my company could not support, or on anything that is not connected to my company.” (Interview no. 8)

A few interviewees perceived that on a company level there is an intention to get customers committed in sustainable development, which is why they strive to communicate about the topic as well. The role of the embodier was typically enacted in regular interactions with clients or business partners, but also when holding presentations or giving speeches at events.

“After all, we do also want to commit our customers in this way of thinking.” (Interview no. 15)

The relationship builder

The analysis revealed that some employees perform the role of **the relationship builder** in the context of CSR. They initiate dialogue and try to **build or maintain relationships with other stakeholders through connecting about social or environmental responsibility**. A couple of employees actively approach other sustainability-oriented companies operating in the same sector on social media. They might, for example, congratulate others on the good they have done, such as positive environmental or social impacts, or encourage each other to do more in these areas. This sort of communication behaviour occurred on social media, some of which also on closed discussion forums or groups one must be invited to. As an example, one person described their activity on discussion forums or closed groups where key experts of the sector come together, with the intention of initiating conversations and forming connections with other key experts and organizations.

“I do write a little on LinkedIn as the company’s representative too. I post my opinions there and initiate conversations like ‘hey it seems we operate in the same market. Our company has made X impacts, and so on’.” (Interview no. 12)

The content creator

One communication role identified in this study, that does not fully fit into the AECR framework by Verhoeven & Madsen (2022), is the role of **content creator**. This means that employees who do not have a formal position working in the communication function of the organization **participate in producing content that is used in organizational CSR communication**. The content creation employees described in the interviews was for example writing case reports when projects start or end, putting together market reviews, or producing expert articles. Some write opinion pieces or blogs where they bring out their own views and highlight their expertise in sustainable development. One person mentioned they have previously participated in writing content for the company’s sustainability report.

The analysis revealed that there are also employees who prefer to build on content made by others or work on the CSR communication content together with other experts. There were interviewees who created content in their own social media channels by building on organizational CSR communication messages. Sharing for example company posts on social media with additional information or commentary surfaced several times in the interviews.

“Well, yes, through these projects (involved in CSR communication). We write about them and get to use our own creativity in it.” (Interview no. 5)

The conveyor

The analysis also revealed that some employees communicate about CSR only reactively when prompted to do so. They **answer CSR-related questions or otherwise engage in CSR-related reactive information sharing** when asked by a client, a business partner, or other stakeholders. This role was labelled as **the conveyor**. Since sustainability and social responsibility regulations and requirements have increased, many stakeholders have policies and criteria for choosing partners. Employees described that with some customers they have gone through quite extensively how social and environmental responsibility is visible in the company's actions and which areas are most affected by it. In some of these situations, employees said that additional material had to be prepared after such request because extensive enough material was not always readily available to give out to partners with such detailed and extensive requirements.

“At the request of some customers, we have gone through how it (social responsibility) is visible in our operations and how it affects various areas of our operations.” (Interview no. 15)

“Recently there was this case where the other party wanted to know our ESG plan. It was like their ‘tick in the box’.” (Interview no. 7)

In addition to external stakeholders like customers or business partners, the request to share CSR messages or information can also come from internal sources, such as supervisors or the marketing and communications department. For example, employees told how they might share content posted on the organization's website or social media at the request of their supervisor or a colleague from the marketing and communications department. While some of these interviewees would add a short comment of their own before sharing, most conveyors just shared the post without adding any content of their own to those messages.

The table on the following page (table 3) summarizes the employee communication roles focused on managing stakeholder perceptions with brief descriptions and example behaviours that surfaced in the interviews.

Table 3. Employee communication roles (ECRs) focused on managing stakeholder perceptions.

ECRs focused on managing stakeholder perceptions		
Role	Description	Example behaviours
The CSR promotor	Employee spreads positive word-of-mouth about their employer in the context of CSR	- Talks about positive outcomes of the organization's business (e.g. social or environmental impacts, such as jobs created, or carbon dioxide emissions reduced)
The CSR embodier	Taking the organization's values and understanding of CSR as their own, employee represents the organization's CSR agenda and practices in interactions with stakeholders	- Communicates about CSR only in the context of their organization - Would not take a public stand on a topic that was not connected to or supported by their employer
The CSR relationship builder	Employee initiates dialogue and tries to build relationships with others through connecting about CSR	- Approaches other sustainability-oriented companies from the same field on social media - Congratulates or encourages other players in the field on their positive impacts
The CSR communication content creator	Employee produces or participates in creating content that is used in the organization's CSR communication	- Writes expert articles or blog-posts on responsibility or sustainability for e.g. website or sustainability report
The CSR communication conveyor	Employee engages in CSR communication or shares CSR information only reactively when asked to do so (by e.g. stakeholder, employer, colleague, marketing department)	- Reacts to requests to like or share organization's content on social media - Responds to stakeholders' questions regarding CSR - Provides evidence that the organization meets stakeholder's criteria in CSR

5.2.2 Roles focused on understanding operational environment

The analysis also revealed that employees were performing communication roles that are focused on gaining an understanding of the organization's operational environment – and especially changes and trends relevant for CSR. Two such roles were identified: the scout and the sensemaker. Both will be discussed in detail in the following part.

The scout

The first role in the category of roles focused on making sense of the operational environment is **the scout**, which in the context of CSR refers to an employee who finds and **collects information connected to social responsibility and sustainability** and actively strives to learn about the topics. At least 6 of the 15 interviewed employees engage in this sort of scouting behaviour. Employees followed discussion forums that relate to their areas of expertise or interests in sustainable development. Some said they have joined closed groups on social media platforms to get insights and discuss newest research or innovations with other experts in the field. Reading up on the newest academic research as well as attending seminars related to social responsibility were topics that also surfaced in the interviews. When it comes to social media platforms, especially LinkedIn was favoured by employees when it comes to learning about and staying up to date on social responsibility and sustainability related topics.

“I read up on all the latest research, reviews, and discussions. The same topics also catch my attention when I open a newspaper.” (Interview no. 5)

“I have attended some twenty different seminars where social responsibility has been discussed. Whether that constitutes as training or not, I don't really know. It may have been more due to my own curiosity and activity rather than someone pushing trainings at me.” (Interview no. 13)

“It has been a subject of great interest for me. I actively try to find out more about the topic and educate myself in that field.” (Interview no. 15)

The sensemaker

In addition to scouting, the data revealed that some employees seemed to engage in sensemaking in the context of CSR in the role of **the sensemaker**. Several employees discussed how the team regularly comes together to discuss whether potential projects are responsible enough to be taken on or not. In this process employees get to evaluate whether a certain project is aligned with their personal and the organization's values and should be taken on as a client or not. Everyone gets to give their input on whether a certain case should be dropped and why. A few interviewees highlighted that this is taken so seriously that one can always choose to drop out or not partake in any given project. In this way

employees quite concretely take part in **defining what CSR means for the company**. Through this sensemaking process, employees naturally also drive improvements in terms of CSR when the discussions regarding the suitability of individual projects spill over to broader discussions about what is right or fitting for the organization.

“Then in sales meetings and the like (--) when we go through some ongoing projects and new possible projects, it (responsibility) comes up every time. We discuss whether the projects are aligned with our values.” (Interview no. 5)

The table below (table 4) summarizes the employee communication roles focused on understanding the operational environment with brief descriptions and example behaviours that surfaced in the interviews.

Table 4. Employee communication roles (ECRs) focused on understanding the operational environment.

ECRs focused on understanding the operational environment		
Role	Description	Example behaviours
The CSR scout	Employee finds and collects information connected to topics linking to CSR, and actively strives to learn about the topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Joins closed social media groups to get insights on and discuss trends or innovations with other experts - Follows newest research in the field of sustainability - Attends seminars related to social and environmental responsibility
The CSR sensemaker	Employee takes part in defining and constructing what CSR means for the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evaluates whether a certain project or action is in accordance with the organization's values and should be taken on/continued

5.2.3 Roles focused on driving change

Lastly, some employees perform communication behaviours which aim at initiating change towards more socially and environmentally responsible practices. Two such roles were discovered in the analysis: the internally focused critic and the externally oriented activist. Both will be discussed next.

The critic

In addition to roles focused on managing external perceptions of stakeholders and roles focused on gaining an understanding of the dynamic operational environment the organization operates in, it was found that employees perform roles that are focused on driving change. The first of the roles grouped under this theme is **the critic**. There were interviewees who had engaged in or witnessed communication behaviour typical to the role of the critic in the AECR framework. Some employees actively made suggestions about how the company could be more responsible and sustainable. These persons said they **detect and bring up faults from the perspective of CSR**. An example that was given, was the use of capsule coffee machines in the office, which was seen as not sustainable and environmentally conscious, and therefore unfitting to the sustainable values that the company externally represents. Most interviewees highlighted that the organizational culture and communication climate were such that made open criticism relatively easy. One person mentioned that employees often initiate change by pointing out where something could be done better in terms of CSR. This sort of bottom-up approach was perceived as valuable by the person, since leadership might not always think of everything.

“In a way the staff demands and drives CSR locally, and I think it's really good that the input comes from the people as well, because leadership doesn't always understand or take into account everything.” (Interview no. 13)

“In my opinion, if you disagree with the management, then you need to have the courage to say it inside the company. That this is how something should be handled instead.” (Interview no. 3)

“As typical for Finnish companies, people have the courage to speak up here and criticize and discuss things. We have the courage to disagree.” (Interview no. 13)

The activist

One particularly interesting finding was that many employees discussed how they wish to make a change towards a more sustainable future, and they see their work as one important platform for initiating such change. Through their jobs they have an opportunity to **influence others' attitudes and behaviours towards a more responsible and sustainable direction**. These sort of influencing or persuasion behaviours surfaced repeatedly in the interviews. As many as 8 of the 15 interviewees participated in communication behaviour with the aim to change the other party's perspectives or behaviour somehow and to encourage them to become more sustainable in their actions.

“I always strive to influence various stakeholders to be more socially responsible, be it internally or with our customers.” (Interview no. 10)

“Every single project of ours and every single customer meeting is a situation where we can contribute to how our customers see the world.” (Interview no. 15)

Several interviewees said they want to **increase understanding on topics such as environmental and social responsibility or sustainable development**. Many feel a need to contribute to conversations as experts in the field, especially when they hear that people have misunderstandings about these topics or when they come across mis- or disinformation.

“Since I have been in this expert role for a long time, of course there is always something to be said when discussions about these topics surface. At least in those debates, one can correct some of the misunderstandings that people have.” (Interview no. 14)

Interestingly, some of the employees who said they correct these misunderstandings did not view such behaviour as influencing of any kind even though these interviewees recognized they were doing so with hopes of changing perceptions. Employees in the activist role aimed to influence attitudes and behaviours through, for example, appealing to the other party with their expertise on sustainability. Such actions could result in the other party changing perceptions, regardless of the motivations, especially if the employee appeals to the other party with their expertise on sustainable development.

“I hope people take notice and realize that they too can take part in this, and maybe change their own perceptions.” (Interview no. 3)

“I feel that it is extremely important to take a stand and choose a side in such matters. So far, at least, it seems that the company has had nothing against doing so.” (Interview no. 8)

It was surprising to find out, just how strongly some employees felt about influencing stakeholders to become more sustainable in their actions – and how this was reflected in their communication behaviour. For example, one person explained that when they talk to customers, they highlight the urgency of the crises our world is facing and that something has to be done to deal with those crises. These persons identified with environmental values and were also otherwise engaged in CSR communication through e.g. being active on discussion forums that relate to the topic. This would indicate that these influencing measures are not sales tactics, but above all driven by personal motivation to bring change.

“I always try to point it out in the discussions (with customers) how much must be done for us to be able to achieve climate goals, be it on a European or global level or on the Paris Agreement level.” (Interview no. 15)

“I am promoting the shift away from fossil fuels. There (on a discussion forum) are the technical directors of all the major car manufacturers and the likes. So, I am doing a little influencing and giving encouragement, like ‘hey hurry up now’.” (Interview no. 12)

A couple persons contemplated whether more provocative communication has a place in organizational communication and concluded that radicality can be justified when change is happening too slowly, and the situation is severe. These persons were **ready to be provocative if they felt it might be necessary in making positive impacts and driving sustainable change faster**. The direct quote below shows how the person is not excited to have difficult public discussions but would be prepared to do so to get messages through and drive change in society.

“I personally would be prepared to even have heated debates in public under my own name, to bring some radicality into the discussions when I feel it is necessary.” (Interview no. 10)

While some employees seemed to perceive their jobs as the primary influencing platform, other employees described influencing behaviour outside the scope of work. Many described how they strive to get the people closest to them, such as family and friends, to make more sustainable and responsible choices in their lives.

“Then at the same time I try to have conversations with the people around me about whether some things could be done a little more sensibly.” (Interview no. 5)

“To some extent I try to influence the choices that my partner or my parents make.” (Interview no. 11)

Since this sort of communication role is not part of the AECR framework, this study proposes that the typology be complemented with the role of **the activist** in the context of CSR communication. The definition of activists as “a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics or force” (L. L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 505), encompasses well the communication behaviours and attempts to influence described by several of the interviewed employees. The role of the activist differs from the role of **the embodier** in the sense that the activist is not only focused on getting the organization’s agenda or messages through with external stakeholders, but also – if not even more so – their own. The CSR activist’s motivation to communicate

about e.g. sustainable development stems from a will to change or influence the other person's thoughts and actions towards more environmentally and socially responsible ones. The motivation is not to promote the organization's cause but rather an environmental or social cause.

The table below (table 5) summarizes the employee communication roles focused on driving change with brief descriptions and example behaviours that surfaced in the interviews.

Table 5. Employee communication roles (ECRs) focused on driving change.

ECRs focused on driving change		
Role	Description	Example behaviours
The CSR critic	Employee speaks up about issues or discrepancies in terms of the organization's CSR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Points out shortcomings in responsibility, - Voices their disagreement on CSR policies or activities
The CSR activist	Employee wishes to make a change towards a more sustainable future and sees their work role as one important platform for initiating such change influencing others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appeals to stakeholders with their expertise - Can use more provocative communication tactics to achieve wished result of change in attitudes or behaviour

5.3 Employees' understanding of good CSR communication

During the interviews employees were asked to reflect on what is good and what lacking in the current state of the case company's CSR communication. They were also asked about what characteristics they link with good and successful CSR communication. Especially these two questions provided data to answer the third research question. However, also answers to other questions provided data to answer the third research question as interviewees reflected on the topic in various different contexts. The data included both general descriptions of communication characteristics as well as detailed suggestions for e.g. specific platforms that could be used. For the purpose of answering the research question, the results focus on general characteristics rather than very detailed company-specific suggestions. Overall, five characteristics that employees link with good CSR communication stood out from the data, which are measurability, transparency, through leadership, relevancy and expertise.

5.3.1 Measurability

Half of all employees interviewed mentioned that good CSR communication should be measurable. Measurability meant to the employees not just measuring actions, but also - if not more so- measuring the impact of the actions. Moreover, measurability to the employees meant not just communicating in figures but explaining what they mean on a concrete level and in an understandable way.

“In my opinion, for CSR communication to be something other than marketing material or green washing, it should be measurable.” (Interview no. 1)

“We communicate a lot about our actions, but terribly little about what they mean on a tangible level, such as in terms of emissions reductions.” (Interview no. 8)

“We talk about actions, but they have social implications as well. When you think about case X for example, it brings the municipality ten million a year in municipal tax, covering the care of the entire elderly population and early childhood education of the municipality.” (Interview no. 13)

5.3.2 Transparency

Similarly, at least 6 employees considered transparency an essential characteristic of good CSR communication. Transparency meant to the employees firstly, that the company walks the talk, meaning that the communication accurately reflects the actions and vice versa. Secondly, employees mentioned transparency in the context of being open about shortcomings and failures. These employees mentioned that there is a general trend in society for transparency and authenticity, especially so when it comes to CSR. Organizations are more likely to gain respect from their publics by communicating openly about their social responsibility, even if they are still at a very early stage in it, rather than trying to polish their image by claiming their operations are more responsible than they actually are. Avoiding green washing came up several times as the first and foremost requirement.

“We should communicate honestly about how our operating models are still evolving and what stage we are at currently in terms of the social responsibility of our own processes. In my opinion, transparency is an organizational value, which is increasingly emphasized when it comes to CSR. By that I mean that instead of polishing reality and green washing organizations should humbly state that they are on a growth path and there is still a lot to do.” (Interview no. 10)

“I would highlight authenticity. That we don’t slip into green washing. That we don’t claim to do everything right (...) but instead bring those areas of development to the forefront.” (Interview no. 5)

“People are always happy to tell others about their successes, but I also think it says a lot about a company's good self-esteem, if you can also tell where you have not succeeded.” (Interview no. 13)

5.3.3 Thought leadership

A third of the interviewed employees mentioned that good CSR communication should be courageous and opinionated. Taking a stand was perceived as important for CSR communication. Many interviewees were familiar with the concept of thought leadership, as it was brought up in the interviews several times. Employees were also asked about their opinions on corporate activism. Many benefits such as visibility for the organization and furthering a cause were linked to thought leadership and corporate activism.

“The challenges we are trying to tackle sometimes require quite radical measures and taking strong positions. If a company never proactively tries to take a stand on an issue and is not prepared to take any risks to initiate significant changes with its actions, then perhaps it can be questioned whether the company is doing enough.” (Interview no. 10)

“I would emphasize courage. We’re a relatively small player within our field so we can draw a relatively bold line in our communications. We could stand out if the company took a stand on certain issues.” (Interview no. 9)

While employees perceived many benefits to taking a stand in CSR communications, they also perceived it as risky. While others highlighted that risks are inevitable if the company intends to make an impact with communications, others perceived the risks as too big, especially for a company of the case organization’s size.

“As long as we are terribly careful in our communication as an organization or at the individual level, we will not awaken any emotions. You cannot please everyone, so if we end up angering some individuals, that might actually indicate we have done something right.” (Interview no. 1)

“Corporate activism can be expected from really big players. For big companies it can be quite strange and possibly damaging to their reputation if they don’t take a stand or further social responsibility within their own field in any way. However, it is good to remember that there are a lot of SMEs in Finland. (...) in my opinion, large companies should be expected to take a stand but for smaller companies it may still be too much to ask of.” (Interview no. 5)

5.3.4 Relevancy

One interesting characteristic that was found in the interviews was relevancy. Some of the interviewees were frustrated about the fact that many organizations do not stop to think about what is truly relevant to focus on in their CSR

and CSR communications. Organizations might communicate about minor inputs for responsibility here and there, which do not have a significant impact on anyone outside the work community. One example that was repeated, was recycling. Employees felt like while it is important to have procedures in place to ensure proper recycling, that is usually not where the organization's biggest potential impact on society or the planet lies. Therefore, some employees wished organizations would identify where the biggest positive impact can be made and then focus on that. Communicating too much about anything other than relevant impactful areas of the organization's operations was described by one person as misdirecting the focus of societal CSR discussions.

"Relevancy is important. We should try to identify the things where we can really make a significant impact in society and communicate about the big handprint we are leaving behind." (Interview no. 10)

"One organization cannot cover the responsibilities of the whole world. (...) I think it would be wrong to put into our CSR strategy that at the office we do not use certain types of (unethically produced) fabrics for example. That would reach the point of ridicule, I think. Instead, organizations can choose a focus area, which is then 'their thing'. (...) One organization cannot solve all the world's problems." (Interview no. 7)

5.3.5 Expertise

According to employees it was important that CSR communication is built on expertise. It was emphasized that if employees were to make CSR communication content by themselves, then it is vital to make sure that those people have the relevant expertise for each topic. It was perceived as risky for a person without sufficient expertise in social responsibility or sustainability to take part in CSR communication, particularly on social media where it could cause online storms or crises, which could end up damaging the employees' and the employer's reputation.

"The people who write these articles and share this information should have the know-how; know what they're talking about, so they don't share misinformation." (Interview no. 6)

"Substance competence is quite important because otherwise it can become risky when we start communicating things that we don't understand." (Interview no. 10)

"Of course, the expertise regarding the topic you are going to communicate about. You have to have all the facts right." (Interview no. 14)

To conclude, employees identified particularly measurability and transparency as characteristics of good CSR communication. Especially claiming to be something the organization was not, and communicating only about the positive was

perceived negatively. In addition, thought leadership was raised by many in the form of taking a stand, communicating about CSR boldly and differently from others. Corporate activism was supported by many interviewees but considered as too risky by a minority. Relevancy arose as another characteristic that was frequently associated with good CSR communication. Finally, CSR communication was seen as communication that should be based on expertise on the subject matters. CSR communication was mostly perceived as a delicate matter that requires thorough knowledge to make sure the content is factual.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Discussion of the results

This chapter will discuss and summarize the results of the study with relation to previous research and knowledge. After this, theoretical and practical implications will be offered, and avenues for future studies suggested. The aim of the present study was to increase understanding around the topic of employees as CSR communicators, by studying employees' experiences and perceptions about CSR communication in a case company offering sustainability services. The research questions of this study were the following:

RQ1: What factors shape employee engagement in CSR communication?

RQ2: What communication roles do employees enact in CSR communication?

RQ3: What kind of communication do employees perceive as good CSR communication?

6.1.1 Factors shaping employee engagement in CSR communication

The present study identified ten themes shaping employee engagement in CSR communication: interest, values, competence, image, duty, resources, organizational culture, organizational communication, leadership behaviour and economic incentives. The ten themes were further grouped under overarching themes personal, organizational or interpersonal, which has been done in previous research as well (Lee, 2020). Themes that were grouped as personal were interest, values and competence. Resources, organizational culture, organizational communication, leadership behavior and economic incentives were grouped as organization related. Lastly, image and duty were characterized as interpersonal themes. The key findings will be summarized and their significance in terms of previous research discussed next.

Personal factors

In light of previous research, it was not surprising that most employees felt that employees' participation in CSR communication should be voluntary and stem from **personal interest** rather than it being forced. Personal motivation and interest were perceived as the starting point for employee communication behaviour in the context of their organization.

The present study found that **values** create one overarching theme shaping employee engagement in CSR communication. Particularly privacy, transparency and environmentalism stood out. The present study found that some employees refrained from communicating because they were concerned about their *privacy* on online platforms. This finding was not surprising in light of the fact that anonymity has been found to be crucial in encouraging employee communicative behaviors on social media (Lee, 2020). To some employees maintaining privacy meant they would not engage in CSR communication outside of work, however, as previous studies have indicated (Smith et al., 2017) employees have difficulty in drawing the line between professional and personal communication due to blending of work and private lives. Similarly, *transparency* was also perceived as important because employees want to be able to stand behind their words when communicating about CSR. This, too, supports previous studies which have shown that employees' CSR social media engagement is linked with employees' perceptions of how truthful organizations are in their CSR communication (Jiang et al., 2022, p. 19). Lastly, the present study found that to some employees *environmentalism* and sustainability are key values that are reflected across various areas of their lives -including their work. This is supported by previous studies which have shown that to some employees it is important to do work that is aligned with their values. When companies allow employees to express their values and aspirations such as serving society or the planet, employees are more fulfilled at work and likely to engage in positive communication behaviors to promote their employer. (Mirvis, 2012, p. 105.) Employees perceived that optimally, *personal values and organizational values should be aligned*, supporting previous studies highlighting that employees who are motivated by their values are likely change jobs if the organization does not act in accordance with the values important to them personally (Reitz & Higgins, 2022). Some employees of the case company choose to communicate about CSR to express what is important to them. Especially communication on social media can serve as a reflection of values or persona (Smith et al., 2017). Previous research has even suggested that by communicating about CSR to external stakeholders, employees are at the same time in a sense communicating with themselves to bring clarity to their own core values and ethics (Bhattacharya et al., 2008, p. 40).

Competence was found to be another key theme shaping employee engagement in CSR communication. Employees perceived CSR communication competence to consist of both expertise in CSR and communication skills. Par-

ticularly familiarity with social media was raised by employees as a factor that facilitated communication behaviours. This is in line with Lee's (2020) finding that the degree to which employees enjoy using social media platforms influences the likelihood of them engaging in communicative behaviours about their organization online. Interestingly, employees found that CSR communication requires particular caution, because CSR is a sensitive topic prone to heated online discussion and high visibility in the media. This worry is not without reason, as it has been found that most of the heated "online firestorms" picked up by the news media are in fact connected to CSR (Einwiller et al., 2017). However, through communication skills training and addressing employees' worries related to social media this risk can be mitigated and employees can feel encouraged to communicate about CSR. Interestingly, the present study found that employees demand transparency not just from the organization but from themselves as well. This was evident in the fact that competence for communicating about CSR was evaluated also based on how responsible lifestyles employees lead outside of work. This finding is an interesting indication of how blending of private and work life makes employee communication behaviours more complex.

Interpersonal factors

In this study it was found that employees' perceived social benefits of participating are one key theme connected to employee engagement in CSR communication. Particularly, employees were motivated by having a socially responsible **image**, because it was perceived to bring *social recognition* in communities and personal networks. A similar finding has been made by Costas and Kärreman (2013, p. 407), who argued that employees are motivated by "representing a responsible and caring individual within and outside the company". Particularly on social media, employees have been shown to communicate positive organizational information to enhance their professional identities and promote themselves (Lee, 2020; van Zoonen & Banghart, 2018), and social responsibility makes for a fitting topic for such impression management purposes. In addition to social recognition, the image of a socially responsible individual was perceived as important professionally: it allows employees to craft a desirable *personal brand* and advance *career development*. This perspective is also in alignment with previous studies that have linked career prospects with employees' communicative behavior particularly on social media (Smith et al., 2017).

The findings of this study suggest that employees' motivation to engage in CSR communication can also stem from a sense of **duty**. For one, this meant that employees engaged in CSR communication because their position or work contract demanded it, or because supporting the employer was perceived as a duty of loyal employees. In line with this finding, previous studies have shown that employee communication behaviour can stem from loyalty towards the employer and a will to support the organization (Lee, 2021a; Smith et al., 2017).

However, interestingly duty also arose in another context, namely as a duty towards society and other people. This study suggests that some employees engage in CSR communication because they are motivated to educate others on social responsibility and sustainability. Particularly when employees had been faced with mis- or disinformation on these topics, many felt the need to step in and correct these as experts in sustainable development. Providing others with helpful information has been found to drive employees' intentions to share information online (Lee, 2020), and these findings suggest that this is the case in the case of CSR communication as well.

Organizational factors

Organizational culture was also found to be a factor in employees' engagement in CSR communication. Sustainability and social responsibility were perceived to be built into the case company's organizational culture and an overarching theme for business. In light of this, it is not surprising that almost all employees identified participation in CSR communication as important. This finding supports previous research which has found that engagement is more likely if CSR is considered to be part of the corporate identity (Chong, 2009), culture (Galpin et al., 2015) or strategy (Slack et al., 2015, p. 542). Another relevant finding is that the culture of the case company was described as open and not hierarchical, which employees perceived as a facilitating factor for engaging in CSR communication. A similar finding has been made by Andersson (2019), who has emphasized that open internal communication climate plays a vital role in increasing employees' willingness to take responsibility in communication.

Overall, the visibility of CSR in the organization was found to support employee engagement in CSR communication, as has been argued also by previous studies (Slack et al., 2015). This is evident in the fact that also **organizational communication** was found to play a part in engaging employees in CSR communication. Employees highlighted that good organizational CSR communication is important in keeping employees informed and in fostering a sense of pride towards the organization, both of which were seen as vital in encouraging employee communication behaviours. Previous studies have made similar findings. Engagement in CSR has been shown to rise if CSR is built into the strategic planning of communication (Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010, p. 311). Similarly, Schaefer et al. (2020) has found that whether employees like the organization's CSR communication or not can play a part in determining if employees engage in employee-generated WOM behaviours. Moreover, the same study also highlighted the importance of evoking a sense of pride with CSR communication, which is a perspective that was found in the present study as well. This study found that environment-oriented CSR messages in particular fostered pride in employees and encouraged WOM.

Also **leadership behaviour** and in particular the example set by leadership arose as a factor employees perceived as important for motivating en-

agement in CSR communication, as has been found in previous studies as well (Edinger-Schons et al., 2019). In particular, the role of the CEO in CSR communication was emphasized in the present study: employees perceived that the CEO should be visible to publics and one of the main voices when it comes to CSR communication. This supports previous studies which have found that perceived quality of CEO communication and CEO social media presence are linked with higher employee engagement. Leadership behaviour has been found to influence employees' internal communication behaviour as well, such as employee voice. If leadership behaviour is ethical, employees feel more encouraged to voice their ideas or concerns (Morrison, 2011). It is notable that the role of immediate supervisors was not equally highlighted in the present study. This deviates from previous studies that raise immediate supervisor communication even above leadership communication as a factor influencing employees' inclinations towards engaging in communication behaviour by taking on communication tasks (Andersson, 2019) or voicing their opinions (Morrison, 2011).

The present study found that **resources** also factor into employee engagement in CSR communication, particularly time, training and guidelines surfaced as important. Moreover, a minority of the interviewed employees expressed they could be motivated by **economic incentives**, such as bonuses or increased salary, when it comes to engaging in CSR communication. Economic incentives were mentioned by a couple of employees who did not otherwise use social media, which is not surprising as employees who enjoy using social media platforms are likely to engage in communicative behaviours (Lee, 2020). Economic incentives represent a more traditional, transactional approach to employee engagement in CSR (Mirvis, 2012).

Organizational factors, and especially organizational culture, communication and leadership behaviour, have in common that they all signal to employees what is considered important in the organization (Galpin et al., 2015, p. 2), so the extent of their impact on employees' motivations to engage in CSR communication should not be overlooked.

6.1.2 Employee communication roles in CSR communication

Overall, the present study identified nine different communication roles that employees enact in the context of CSR. These roles were categorized under three overarching themes. Firstly, some employees performed communication roles that were focused on managing stakeholder perceptions. These roles are the promotor, the embodier, the relationship builder, the content creator and the conveyor. Secondly, employees performed communication roles that were focused on understanding the operational environment of the organization, which were the scout and the sensemaker. The third theme that arose in the analysis was employee communication roles focused on driving change. Roles identified in this category were the critic and the activist. While six of these roles are aligned with the AECR framework (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; 2022); the promotor, the embodier, the scout, the sensemaker, the relationship builder

and the critic, the present study also found that employees are performing roles that did not fit into the typology. These roles were labelled the activist, the content creator and the conveyor. Next these findings are discussed in light of previous research.

ECRs focused on managing stakeholder perceptions

The findings of this study suggest that employees can take on the role of **the promotor** in the context of CSR. This meant, for example, speaking positively of the impacts the organization's business has on society and the environment. This is aligned with previous studies that have found that employees can help increase the CSR knowledge of external stakeholders through interactions with them (Edinger-Schons et al., 2019). Through CSR-related word-of-mouth (WOM) employees can influence external stakeholders' perceptions and behaviour towards an organization (Lee & Tao, 2020). The present study found that employees engage in word-of-mouth behaviour particularly offline through informal discussions in their social circles, which supports previous findings that suggest that employee-generated word-of-mouth typically happens in close personal interactions with family and friends (Lee & Kim, 2017).

Some employees take the promotor role a step further and perform the role of **the embodier** by taking the organization's values and CSR agenda as their own and representing these outside of the organization. The CSR embodiers highlighted a shared view on CSR as they would not communicate about anything their organization was not also supporting. Also previous studies have found employees to perform the role of the embodier in the context of CSR: employees have been recognized as CSR ambassadors that help increase the CSR knowledge of external stakeholders (Edinger-Schons et al., 2019), as sustainable behaviour enactors that actively support sustainability and sustainable efforts to other employees (Galpin et al., 2015), and as organizational or corporate citizens which engage in voluntary behaviour not expected by the employer that benefits the organization and ensures its effective operations (Lee, 2021a).

It was also found in this study that some employees perform the role of **the relationship builder** when they initiate dialogue and try to build relationships with stakeholders, such as organizations operating in the same sector or business partners, through connecting about CSR. Forming relationships with relevant and influential stakeholders can help the organization receive legitimacy and support for its CSR (Girschik, 2020a). This communication role of the relationship builder is the only role Madsen and Verhoeven (2019) clearly link to CSR. While this categorization can be explained by the fact that in recent years CSR studies have focused on the importance of developing stakeholder relationships (Wang & Chaudhri, 2009), the present study argues that CSR communication can be understood more broadly and applied to most of the communication roles identified in the typology.

The findings indicated that some employees share CSR information reactively when, for example, urged to share a post on social media by the marketing team or asked to provide CSR materials by a client. While this sort of reactive communication behavior is similar to the role of the defender identified in the AEER framework (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022), the term defender implies a situation where the organization is somehow threatened – as indicated by the fact that the role has been mostly studied in the context of crisis communication and reputation management studies (Kang & Sung, 2017; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019). Therefore, this study proposes that the typology be complemented with a role called **the conveyor** to describe the reactive sharing of CSR-related information and messages in a situation where the organization is not in a crisis with its legitimacy questioned or reputation on the line. Interestingly, many of the employees engaging in the role of the conveyor questioned whether this sort of behavior had any value to the organization, while studies have shown that employees sharing organizational information in their personal networks strengthens organizational messages by bringing them credibility and visibility (Lee & Tao, 2020). Due to its strategic relevance to the organization, the conveyor should not be disregarded as a purely passive communication role either.

Similarly, **the content creator** was another role identified in this study outside of the AEER framework by Verhoeven and Madsen (2022). The role describes employees who do not work in a communications department but still produce or participate in creating content that is used as organizational CSR communication material, such as the sustainability report or expert articles on sustainable development. It must be noted that this role might only be applicable to an organization such as the case company where most of the employees are experts in fields relevant for CSR and sustainability. This sort of expertise naturally does not exist in all organizations. Also, the size of the organization and its resources in part determine whether employees are asked to write for example expert blogs or articles themselves or whether communications professionals write everything for them from start to finish.

ECRs focused on understanding the operational environment

In addition to roles focused on managing stakeholder perceptions and relationships, the present study found that employees also perform roles that are relevant to understanding the operational environment of the organization. The role of **the scout** was also found to be performed by employees in the context of CSR. Some employees actively searched for and collected information connected to CSR, such as sustainability and social responsibility to increase their knowledge on the topic. The scouts strived to stay on top of new innovations, developments and even legislations in the field. Through these behaviors the scouts have a thorough understanding of the organization's operational environment and the expectations towards the organization's CSR, which has been shown to be crucial in receiving legitimacy and support from stakeholders (Girschik, 2020a).

The present study found that employees also perform the role of **the sensemaker** in CSR communication. These employees took part in defining and constructing what CSR means for the organization. Previous studies have found that for this sort of collective sensemaking to occur within the organization, employees have to be as equals and approached with two-way symmetrical communication (Uusi-Rauva & Nurkka, 2010, p. 302). This was the case here, as employees were regularly given the opportunity to evaluate whether a certain project or action is in accordance with the organization's values and should be taken on or continued. Through this sort of employee feedback the organization can then reshape relevant CSR goals and values (Galpin et al., 2015). Some scholars have even argued that employees should take the role of co-creator in CSR (Bhattacharya et al., 2008), and that CSR should be understood as a bottom-up process (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Hejjas, 2019, p. 324; Onkila et al., 2021). This perspective also arose in the present study when some employees highlighted that to an extent it is the people and their values and passions which drive and define the case company's CSR. In a relatively small low-hierarchy organization, such as the case company, employees sensemaking behaviours might have bigger influence over overall CSR strategy. In addition to CSR being defined in collective sensemaking processes with the organization, previous studies have found employees construct CSR information in interactions with external stakeholders (Pater & Van Lierop, 2006). However, in the present study sensemaking was identified only within the organization.

ECRs focused on driving change

The present study found that some employees perform communication roles that are focused on driving change within the organization or external to it. When it comes to driving internal changes, some employees were found to act in the role of **the critic** when pointing out shortcomings in social responsibility within the organization to drive it towards more responsible practices and set the bar higher in CSR. This finding supports previous studies recognizing employees' potential in improving CSR policies through employee voice (Morrison, 2011). Employees bring up ethical issues and question organizational behaviour which drives the development of the organization's CSR (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022). Employees interviewed in this study highlighted that any dissatisfaction regarding CSR should be voiced internally opposed to public channels such as social media. However, previous studies suggest that if the critics concerns are not addressed within the organization employees might move on to voicing their dissatisfaction outside of the organization (Lee, 2020), through whistleblowing (Kaptein, 2011). Even if employees would not go to such extents, the critique might be expressed offline with friends and family, which, in fact, has been shown to be even more detrimental to the organization than online critique (Lee & Tao, 2020).

While **the critic** is focused on evaluating the organization's actions and policies and makes shortcomings known within the organization, **the activist**, in turn, directs its focus also outside of the organization. The activist role is a particularly interesting finding of this thesis. It was found that some employees seem to perceive their positions at work and interactions with stakeholders as platforms for influencing others' attitudes and behaviors to drive sustainability and social responsibility. While similar to the embodier role, these employees don't act as extensions of the organization but rather based on their own values and agenda to promote sustainable development and environmentalism in order to contribute towards a more sustainable society. Since the AECR framework does not entail a communication role like this (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022), the present study labelled the role **the activist**. This is because the communication behaviours described by these employees are like ones deployed by activists, defined as "a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics or force," (L. L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 505). Employees in this role aimed to influence attitudes and behaviours through, for example, appealing to the other party with their expertise on sustainability or highlighting the urgency of environmental or climate crises. Referring to "expertise power" Smith et al. (2017) have made a similar finding in discovering that some employees strive to influence people in their social media networks through referring to their expertise or knowledge. Some of the interviewed employees were prepared to use more provocative communication tactics such as persuasion or debating. Overall, the activist seemed to be highly motivated in engaging in communicative behaviours, which could be to some extent explained by the fact that those employees who engage in voluntary communicative behaviors have been found to be more likely to engage in activism behavior as well (Lee, 2021c).

Because the activist role was among the most often surfaced roles in the present study, the finding would suggest that this sort of employee activism behavior might exist in other sustainability-oriented companies as well. Previous studies seem to agree that employee activism is on the rise. A study by Reitz & Higgins (2022) found that more than half of 1500 employees try to influence their organization's action on societal and environmental issues. Previous research has also recognized the power that internal activists can have in transforming organizations towards more responsible business practices (Girschik, 2020b). However, most of these studies view activism as behavior directed towards the organization as is clear from how employee activists are defined as "organizational members who believe in and identify with corporate responsibility and may mobilize others in an endeavour to promote different ways of thinking about and doing business" (Girschik, 2020b, p. 35) or "voices of difference, on issues of wider social and environmental concern, that seek to influence company action and that challenge existing patterns of power" (Reitz & Higgins, 2022, p. 1). Therefore, this understanding of activism is similar to the

role of the critic acting within the bounds of the organization (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019).

However, the present study found that the communicative behaviors of the activists were mostly directed towards external stakeholders or individuals outside of the organization. Gond et al. (2024, p.161) has made a similar discovery in the context of sustainable development consultants, which can be assumed to possess similar expertise in sustainability and environmental responsibility than many of the employees of the case company. He found that sustainable development consultants do not only drive their own organization towards more sustainable business, but they also support their client companies in this shift. A similar broader understanding has been presented in a recent study where employee activist were conceptualized as hidden and informal corporate change agents for sustainability (CAS), who “initiate, scale and sustain change in an organization with regards to purpose, processes and people in order to contribute to sustainability transitions of the markets, industry, and society” (Schaltegger et al., 2024, p. 152). This definition highlights the broader societal-level motivations, that also arose in the context of this study. The present study found that attempts to influence and drive change can occur in any contact with stakeholders through individuals, which then presents the question of how does this sort of behavior fit in with the organization’s agenda and values? This will be discussed in the practical implications chapter.

6.1.3 Employees’ understanding of good CSR communication

One of the characteristics that employees most associated with good CSR communication was **measurability**. Employees emphasized that actions and their impacts should be measured and shared with stakeholders. Without facts and figures, CSR communication was perceived as too vague and unspecific, which could present a risk for the company to be accused of green washing. This supports other studies that have found that effective CSR communication should be factual and data focused, and not too promotional (Kim & Ferguson, 2018). Measurability could also support another characteristic that was found to be important by employees, which was **expertise**. Employees felt strongly that CSR communication should be based on high expertise. This too, is supported by previous research. For example, Kim and Ferguson (2018) found that informativeness was the most important characteristic of effective CSR communication to publics. This expertise could also stem from a third-party endorsement (Kim & Ferguson, 2018).

Employees also highlighted **transparency** as an important aspect of CSR communication. Employees perceived transparency to mean that the CSR communication should be aligned with the organization’s true actions. Highlighting the current trend for authenticity, some employees even emphasized that by proactively being open about shortcomings or failures the organization could increase stakeholders’ trust. Also previous studies have highlighted the importance of transparency for effective CSR communication, as it reduces

stakeholders' scepticism (S. Kim & Ferguson, 2018). Interestingly, employees themselves could play a part in ensuring transparent CSR communication. Especially in smaller organizations that are not required to engage in formal reporting, transparency could emerge through employees' interactions with stakeholders rather than CSR reporting (Sendlhofer & Tolstoy, 2022). Even though employees in the present study did not highlight dialogue as important for CSR communication, CSR communication that is two-way and build on engaging external stakeholders could resonate more with stakeholders and increase the effectiveness of CSR communication messages (Cho et al., 2017). While not emphasized in the findings of this study, previous studies have also found frequency of communication and consistency in messages to be important for effective communication (Fernández et al., 2022; Kim & Ferguson, 2018).

Thought leadership is another theme that employees brought up as desirable for CSR communication. Thought leadership in the context of CSR communication meant to employees above all courageous communication that is different from what other companies do, as well as taking a stand on issues relevant to the organization. When it comes to CSR communication that stands out, previous studies have raised for example self-efficacy (Kim & Ferguson, 2018) or empowerment (Fernández et al., 2022) as one avenue for it. This means that the message aims to empower the recipient of the CSR message into feeling like their actions can make a difference (Kim & Ferguson, 2018). The findings also indicate that taking stands on societal issues was also perceived as a way to stand out by employees. Especially employees that were found to perform the role of the activist questioned whether a company is doing enough in terms of CSR if it never proactively tries to take a stand on an issue and is not prepared to take any risks to initiate significant changes with its actions. However, there was also a number of employees that were reserved about smaller companies such as the case company engaging in corporate activism.

The present study found that employees also consider **relevancy** important in CSR communication, meaning that organizations should first and foremost focus their actions on areas where the biggest positive impacts can be made, and the CSR communications should reflect this. Communicating too much about anything other than relevant impactful areas of the organization's operations was described as misdirecting the focus of societal CSR discussions, as organization's CSR communication can have great influence over how CSR is perceived in broader society (Eräranta & Penttilä, 2021, pp. 14–15.) Also previous studies have shown that when organizations take a stand on social issues that are strategically aligned with their business, consumers are more likely to show support for the organization – provided they agree with the stance taken by the organization (Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016). Similarly, Schaefer et al. (2020) has found that employees consider the cause-company fit highly important in CSR communication, surprisingly even more so than message credibility. However, what is considered relevant may vary from stakeholder to stakeholder. So, if the organization is too heavily focused only on certain areas of CSR at the ex-

pense of other focuses, then it might face difficulties if stakeholders have other expectations regarding CSR. For example, Kim and Ferguson (2018) have found that for external stakeholders it is important that the CSR communication covers topics that are of personal relevance to the stakeholders. Thus finding a balance between stakeholder expectations and the organizations agenda is important (Pater & Van Lierop, 2006).

6.2 Theoretical implications

The present study has the following theoretical implications. Firstly, it addressed the call for more research on CSR communication from the perspective of employees (Crane, 2016, p. 1230; Uusi - Rauva & Nurkka, 2010), and provided insight into how employees could be better integrated into CSR communication processes (Morsing et al., 2008; Uusi - Rauva & Nurkka, 2010) by identifying factors that shape employees' engagement in CSR communication.

Secondly, the present study explored the different communicative roles employees perform in the context of CSR communication specifically, which is an area that has remained relatively unexplored in academic research (Lee & Tao, 2020). Moreover, the present study contributed to the active employee communication roles (AEER) typology by Verhoeven and Madsen (2022) with 3 new roles: the activist, the content creator and the conveyor.

Overall, this thesis increased understanding on the different employee communication behaviours concerning a company's overall CSR communications. Its results further enforce the argument that CSR communication should be understood broadly. As one of the respondents of this study phrased it: "CSR communication is everyday interactions with stakeholders." The findings showed in just how many ways employees could be playing a part in an organization's CSR communication. These sorts of communicative behaviours represent CSR communication that is not carefully crafted by communications professional and strategically enforced by organizations. Nevertheless, it can be of equal strategic relevance to the organization and therefore should not be an overlooked area in CSR communication studies either.

6.3 Practical implications

The findings of the present study offer several practical implications for communication practitioners and managers. Firstly, the present study offers insight into what factors might motivate employees to participate in CSR communication. By addressing these factors, managers and communications professionals can enable employees to engage in communication behaviour and take on communication roles. Especially the identified organizational factors, resources,

organizational culture, organizational communication, leadership behaviour and economic incentives are factors that managers and communication professionals have concrete influence over.

When it comes to engaging in CSR communication on social media specifically, employees seemed to have many fears related to making mistakes and accidentally causing a crisis. Communications professionals could help address some of these fear through social media training or crisis communication simulations. Considering how important employees perceived leadership participation in CSR communication, leaders could encourage participation with their own active social media usage and in their interactions with employees. Especially top management-employee communication have been shown to impact employees' predisposition towards taking on communication responsibilities (Andersson, 2019). Supervisor-employee communication (Andersson, 2019) and internal communication efforts could also be systematically directed towards motivating employees to engage in CSR communication on social media (Jiang et al., 2022, p. 19), as some employees of the case company perceived that there could be more internal communication solely focused on CSR.

Still, keeping in mind also personal and interpersonal factors, managers and communications professionals should consider that not all employees will feel interested in or qualified to perform any or specific communication roles. Similarly, individual strengths should be considered as some employees will be more suited to play certain roles than others (Verhoeven & Madsen, 2022). Although, the variety in the forms employees can engage in communication should make it easier for individuals to find ways to participate that feel natural and not forced (Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 19).

The present study also offers practical insight into the different communication roles employees could take on to support the organization's CSR communication. The findings invite managers and communication professionals to consider the possibility that employees might already be performing communication roles autonomously, and perhaps unknowingly, which could still be of strategic relevance to the organization's CSR communication. A particularly interesting example of this was the finding that some employees consider their positions at work excellent platforms for influencing others' attitudes and behaviours to drive sustainability and social responsibility. The findings of this study show that attempts to influence and drive change can occur in any contact with stakeholders. This means that activism can occur through individuals even if it were not part of the organization's mission and actively driven in the organization. Moreover, external stakeholders might not be able to tell the difference between the organization's and the individual employee's views. If these activist employees are bringing their causes to work and driving these in the context of the organization, then this prompts the question: how does this sort of communication behaviour fit in with the organization's agenda?

To evaluate this, organizations should first be aware of the changes employees are driving and the expectations that employees have regarding the societal issues the organization should address (Reitz & Higgins, 2022). After this

the organization can mirror these against its agenda. For example, in the case of the activist employees: Is it also the company's agenda to change stakeholders' views and actions to drive sustainable development? If so, then having employees who are passionate about driving change towards a more socially and environmentally responsible future is an asset for the organization. Since the present study found that employees wished for thought leadership and courage in CSR communication, adopting this activist mindset and incorporating it into the organization's CSR communication strategy could offer one avenue for such thought leadership: The organization inviting and pushing its stakeholders to make sustainable choices and drive sustainable development could represent the kind of out-of-the box CSR communication employees are calling for.

All in all, managers should understand that the activism behaviour is not something that automatically should be weeded out of the organization. Activism does not necessarily stem from any sort of resentment or hostility towards the organization, rather it could be an indication of how invested the employee in question is towards the organization (Lee, 2021c). While traditionally activists have been regarded as strategic publics that can constrain an organization's ability to accomplish its goals and mission (Taylor et al., 2001), employee activism can have a lot to offer for CSR (Girschik et al., 2022). Using the term internal activist, (Girschik, 2020b) has called activist employees "the protagonists of corporate responsibility" because they play a key role in transforming organizations towards more responsible practices. Through their boundary spanning positions these internal activists mediate between external stakeholders and internal managers' perspectives on CSR, which allows them to construct a cohesive understanding about the organization's responsibilities and ways to address societal problems. Therefore, employee activists can be a possibility and an asset to the organization if driving social and environmental change is also the organization's agenda – as might be the case for also other companies offering sustainability services.

6.4 Limitations and future studies

This research is not without its limitations. First, even amongst somewhat similar companies where CSR or sustainability is connected to the core business, CSR communication might look very different from company to company. In the present study's case company employees understood and defined CSR mostly as environment-oriented CSR, so results might look different in the case of organizations focused on other areas, such as, customer- or employee-oriented CSR.

Secondly, as in the case of most qualitative studies, the choices made over the course of the research process have played a role in forming findings. For one, thematic analysis leaves a lot of room for the researcher's interpretations. This thesis attempted to combat this limitation by striving for transparency in de-

scribing the analysis process. Lastly, since previous studies of employee communication in the context of CSR are limited, finding a fitting theoretical framework proved to be challenging, which is why this study tapped into several theories. For example, instead of CSR, a sustainability focused theoretic framework could have also worked for the purpose of this study, especially since the employees of the case company associated CSR mostly with sustainability and environmental responsibility.

While the present study shed light on some of the factors shaping employee engagement in CSR-related communication behaviours in general, future studies could identify what these factors are specifically to each of the communication roles identified in this study. Moreover, it could be fruitful to increase understanding on the characteristics of employees that make them particularly suited for some communication roles over others in CSR communication. Lastly, another avenue for future research would be to increase understanding on employee activism as it appeared in this study: not just within the organization but also in external stakeholder interactions. While the topic of employee activists has surfaced in recent studies in the context of internal employee activism (Reitz & Higgins, 2022), it has not been covered much in the context of external stakeholders (Schaltegger et al., 2024) from a corporate communications perspective.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview protocol

Background

- How long have you worked at the company?
- What made you apply here?
- Have you worked at another sustainability/CSR focused company before?

Personal values and attitudes towards CSR

- From your understanding what does CSR mean?
- How would you describe your personal interest towards CSR topics such as sustainability practices, environmental issues etc.?
- What should be included in an organization's CSR activities and what not, could you please give examples? (in general, not the company's)

Understanding of organization's CSR

- From your understanding, what is the company's CSR strategy?
- What are the company's top priorities related to CSR activities?
- Can you tell me from your point of view what is good and what is bad in the company's CSR communication?

Channels/Content

- What channels is the company using to communicate about CSR internally and externally?
- In your opinion, what kind of channels should be used in CSR communication?
- What should be highlighted in the content?

Leadership and management

- Does your immediate supervisor talk about CSR? In what situations and how?
- Does the leadership and management participate in CSR communication? How?

Support

- What role does CSR play in the company's organizational culture?
- Do you feel like participating in CSR communication is encouraged at work?
 - If yes, how?

- If no, why not?
- Do you feel like you are given the resources (e.g. time, training) to participate in CSR communication?
 - If yes: Has that helped you somehow? Could you describe on which circumstances?
 - If no: What resources are you lacking?
- Have you received communication or CSR training?
 - If yes: What kind of training have you received?
 - At the company?
 - At a previous job?
 - If no: Would you like to receive training on CSR communication?

Communication roles and employee communication behaviour

- In what situations do you talk about CSR?
- How are you communicating about CSR? (e.g. through which channels, with what kind of approach, with what intent)
- In which situations have you talked about the company and its CSR activities?
 - Could you give some illustrative examples?

Interest

- What possible advantages and disadvantages do you see in participating in CSR communication for yourself?
- What motivates (/would motivate) you to participate?
- What particular topic related to CSR do you feel more passionate about talking?
- What kind of organizational incentive (e.g. bonus, remuneration, promotion, etc.) would motivate you to decide to talk about CSR to stakeholders?

Roles

- In your opinion, who do employees represent when they communicate about CSR outside of the organisation? (just themselves or also the organisation)
- Why should communicating about CSR be expected/not be expected from employees in your opinion?

Skills

- Do you regularly use social media in your private life?

- If yes: How would you describe your social media use and skills?
(for what purposes, which platforms, etc.)
 - If not: Why not?
- In your opinion what skills should someone have to be a successful communicator?

To conclude

- Before concluding, do you have anything else to add on this topic that you think it is important and that we have not touched upon yet?