Corporate Social Responsibility:  
A Case Study of Consumers’ Perception of McDonald’s  
Use of CSR in Relation to Image & Reputation

Bachelor Thesis in Marketing and Management Communication  
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No. of characters:  
Thesis: 54.985  
Summary: 4.165
Summary

The fast food industry has long been connected with the hot topic of health and obesity in the public domain. Being the leader within the fast food industry McDonalds has been accused of causing the issues of health and obesity, since its products are closely related to this. McDonalds have over the years changed its menus to include more healthy options, however, not cancelling its core products such as fries and burgers. Besides making menu changes to fit the expectations of the society McDonalds is, like many others in today’s business world, incorporating the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is a highly ambiguous concept. Moreover, there are several different reasons for corporations to engage in CSR, as the communication of it remains an essential tool when taking a PR perspective, especially concerning corporate image and reputation management.

Taking the above into consideration this thesis will strive to answer the problem statement of how McDonalds attempt to use its CSR initiatives in relation to the social aspect of the triple bottom line and the health and obesity issue, to satisfy consumer demands for responsible behaviour. This thesis will, additionally, strive to answer two associated sub questions of a) how do the consumers perceive McDonald’s CSR initiatives, and b) how these perceptions influence McDonald’s corporate image and reputation.

According to Morsing and Beckmann (2006) and Gao (2009), research focusing on CSR initiatives in relation to consumers as stakeholders’ perception, have been understudied. Thus this is interesting to look further intro, and functions as the motive for this thesis. This is interesting, as perceptions of a company’s products and services prove as being the most dominant predictor of the company’s overall corporate image and reputation, closely followed by CSR (Morsing, Schultz & Nielsen, 2008). Thus, this thesis will strive to examine how a large corporation like McDonald’s CSR initiatives are perceived by its consumers, whether it overshadows McDonald’s harmful core products and how the consumer perceptions influences the overall corporate image and reputation.

This thesis considers the social context to be essential for the interpretation and outcome of McDonald’s consumers’ perceptions. The thesis will, thus, provide a theoretical background defining Corporate Social Responsibility through Newsom and Haynes (2011), Tench and Yeomans (2009), and Morsing and Beckmann’s (2006) work within the field. Also, this thesis includes a corporate introduction to McDonalds, briefly touching upon the health issue in which it operates. Moreover, in order to answer the abovementioned problem statement and associate sub questions, the social media site Facebook will function as a communication platform for McDonald’s

This thesis is based on the scientific approach social constructionism, as this approach is based on that the world is socially and discursively constructed, happening through interactions between people, with language as a central part (Burr, 1995). Moreover, writing within social constructionism entails that the ontology is relative, meaning that this thesis does not aim at searching for one ‘truth’ but acknowledges several alternative ‘truths’ all equally valid (Burr, 1995). Through the analysis of discourses and social practices in the “Quality Matters Most” post by McDonalds and consumer comments, the thesis concludes that McDonalds might feel obliged to use CSR. In other words, McDonalds utilises CSR as a defensive strategy, in order to safeguard its reputation and to prevent damage of its overall image, caused by its inevitable connection with the health and obesity issue. Moreover, the thesis will conclude upon the sub questions, of how the consumers perceive McDonald’s CSR initiatives and how the perceptions affect the overall corporate image and reputation. These have revealed a prevailing discourse of distrust in the “Quality Matters Most” post, meaning that the consumers’ perception of McDonalds is distrustful. I.e., McDonalds image and reputation suffers hereof, as the company is only as good as its consumers perceive it to be (Tench & Yeomans, 2009). It can, thus, be concluded that although McDonalds has done a remarkable job regarding CSR, it may not be enough to overshadow or repair its tarnished image and reputation when it comes to the issue of health and obesity. At last the thesis will present suggestions for future research that can be done within the field.

**Key words:** Social constructionism, Corporate Social Responsibility, Triple Bottom Line, Health and Obesity Issue, Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Practices, McDonalds.
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1. Introduction

Engaging in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is regarded by many as essential for companies in today’s society, as there is increasing focus on the environment. This is especially when a company is dealing with its products being seen as a risk towards consumers’ health, which is the situation for the leading fast food company McDonald’s. Moreover, CSR is currently a hot topic in the public domain alongside the issue of health and obesity. Since McDonalds can be associated with these issues, it is relevant to examine how the company deals with this issue by being socially responsible. The communication content in this thesis is based on the notion that Public Relations (PR) is considered two-way communication where the intent is to establish or maintain mutually beneficial relationships and where the organisation takes its stakeholders interest seriously (Newsom & Haynes, 2011). This thesis will, thus, focus on interactive communication between McDonalds and its consumers, regarding CSR and the health and obesity issue, where the social media site Facebook functions as communication platform. The motivation for this thesis is that, although, the emphasis on CSR is increasing, not much is known regarding the CSR initiatives effects on consumers and their perceptions of these (Morsing & Beckmann, 2006; Gao, 2009). This thesis will examine this subject based on discourses and social practices, which will present an analysis of McDonald’s CSR initiative “Quality Matters Most” Facebook post and consumer comments, and its consumers’ perceptions hereof. Also, it will be evaluated how these perceptions influence McDonald’s overall corporate image and reputation.

1.1. Problem Statement

Considering the aforementioned, this thesis strives to answer the following research question and two associated sub questions:

1. With a public relations perspective in mind, how does McDonalds attempt to use its CSR initiatives in relation to the social aspect of the triple bottom line and the health and obesity issue, to satisfy consumer demands for responsible behaviour?
   a. How do the consumers perceive these initiatives?
   b. How do these perceptions influence McDonald’s overall corporate image and reputation?

1.2. Scientific Method: Social Constructionism

Social constructionism evolves around the idea that social reality is not ‘real’, but rather that the world is socially and discursively constructed, which happens in interactions between people,
and where language plays a central part (Burr, 1995). I.e., the focus of this approach is on process rather than structures. Furthermore, this approach does not conform to the conventional view that the understanding of our world comes from an objective reality. Oppositely, the social constructionist view is based on people and goes hand in hand with subjective interpretation (Burr, 1995). Social constructionists regard the ‘truth’ as “[…] our current accepted ways of understanding the world, [which] is a product of interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other” (Burr, 1995, p. 3). Hence, this approach is appropriate when examining the interactive communication between McDonalds and its consumers on its corporate Facebook page. Regarding the case study of McDonalds in this thesis, the corporate image and reputation is created in a social context based on health and environmental discourses, where the consumers’ perception of McDonald’s CSR initiatives create an agreed upon way of understanding the world the company operates in. This thesis will analyse how McDonald’s consumers participate in the construction of their perceived social reality of McDonald’s CSR initiatives and image. The social constructionist view will help clarify the established social constructs in the society and challenge them in the analysis in section 4.2.

Since the understanding of the world, according to social constructionism, is not objective but subjective, this thesis will depend on intuition in the identification of discourses and, thus, the reality is constructed through subjective interpretation of the empirical data. Moreover, according to Burr (1995), social constructionist theory “often tends […] to adopt a relativist position in which one cannot search for truth (i.e. objectivity) but must accept the existence of many alternative constructions of events” (p. 112), resulting in that within the social constructionist view throughout this paper, the ontology is relativist, the epistemology is subjective and the methodological tools are discourses and social practices

1.3. Empirical Data

The empirical data analysed in this thesis consists of an online data collection of McDonald’s “Quality Matters Most” Facebook post, representing the company’s CSR initiatives, which has been chosen, as it is the one where the impact of the consumers’ comments is most prominent. This thesis will provide a Critical Discourse Analyse (CDA) of the post and consumer comments, which have been deemed most relevant in relation to the communicated CSR initiatives and the health issue in focus in McDonald’s society. This will contribute to answering the two sub questions of how the consumers perceive McDonald’s CSR initiatives in the social context they are embedded in (Kozinets, 2007) and how these affect the corporate image and reputation. The analysis is, besides
social constructionism, based on the method of netnography involving ethnographic research techniques, which use publicly available information in online communities; in this case McDonald’s corporate Facebook page. Observational netnography will be used as this is considered to be most appropriate in order to “[...] reveal considerable information about brand meanings [...]” (Kozinets, 2007, p. 134) and can, thus, be used to analyse the dynamics and interactions of McDonald’s consumers from afar. I.e., this method is useful for getting inside the consumers’ world. Netnography includes several analytical techniques, where this analysis will adapt CDA and social practices techniques, which will be explained in section 2.3.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

In order to answer the problem statement and sub questions, this thesis will draw upon a wide-ranging theoretical framework including educational books, scientific articles, McDonald’s corporate website and social media. Relevant chapters from Public Relations Writing: Form & Style by Newsom and Haynes (2011), Exploring Public Relations by Tench and Yeomans (2009), Strategic CSR Communication by Morsing and Beckmann (2006) will be employed to cover the definitions of PR, CSR, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), and image and reputation. This thesis will, further, utilise chapters from Language and Power by Fairclough (1989) and his approach to CDA and will present background information about discourses and social practices in section 2.3. The background information is supported by Burr’s (1995) An Introduction to Social Constructionism. Additionally, the analysis will be examined by means of Fairclough’s (1989) approach to CDA and from Burr’s (1995) work on Social Constructionism. At last, supplementary scientific articles and McDonald’s corporate website will be used for backing up arguments where appropriate.

1.4. Method & Structure

This thesis is divided into 7 sections. Section 1 consists of an overall introduction and overview of this thesis. Section 2 provides a brief description of CSR in relation to PR. Also, the concepts of image and reputation along side with the notion of CDA and social practices will be described in this section. Section 3 consists of an introduction to the health and obesity issue along with a corporate description of McDonalds its CSR initiatives. The aim of section 2 and 3 is to provide the required background knowledge to fully comprehend the overall context and the analysis in section 4, which will strive to answer the problem statement and sub question a, by focusing on how McDonald's makes use of pre-existing discourses to construct new hybrid ones in its production of its “Quality Matters Most” post, and how its consumers does the same when
interpreting the post. The ultimate goal of section 4 is to investigate how McDonald’s consumers not only perceive its CSR initiative on its corporate Facebook page but also how these perceptions influences McDonald’s corporate image and reputation, which will be elaborated on in section 5. I.e., this section will answer sub question b, but at the same time it connects section 2, 3 and 4. Section 6 is a discussion of the findings made in the analysis in section 4 and a discussion of the answer of sub question b of how the consumers perceptions influences McDonald’s overall corporate image and reputation. Section 7 concludes upon the findings throughout the thesis by restating the research question, summarising the focal points from the thesis, and taking the preceding sections and the results of the examinations made into account.

1.5. Delimitation

When reading this thesis, it should be considered that certain limitations have been made in relation to the material used and examined. Firstly, consumer perceptions of McDonalds are only examined through the company’s “Quality Matters Most” post and consumer comments on its corporate Facebook page. I.e., only certain online material and publications from McDonald’s website have been included and serve as foundation for the analysis, hence, additional publications might exist with differing perspectives that have not been taken into account. Secondly, the limit of writing space has had a constraining effect, since this affects the depth of the analysis. Thirdly, regarding the elaboration in section 5 of how consumer perceptions influence McDonald’s corporate image and reputation, this thesis is only taking one of McDonald’s CSR communications into account, thus, providing a limited illustration of consumers’ perception of its CSR. Moreover, since CSR, image and reputation are highly complex and ambiguous concepts they are difficult to measure and conclude upon, as they are highly subjective. Fourth, although the TBL consists of three parts, this thesis will only examine McDonald’s CSR initiatives in relation to the social aspect and, thus, not look further into the environmental and economic aspects. This is due to McDonald’s main issues when speaking of its image and reputation lies with its ‘people’. Finally, as this thesis is written within the framework of social constructionism it is important to remember that the analysis have been carried out intuitively and subjectively, which means that others might find other aspects of interest than the ones found in this thesis. However, the analysis strives to reveal findings relating McDonalds CSR initiatives to the health issue, thus, other aspects are not of interest in this case.
2. Theoretical Background

The following will provide the necessary theoretical background to fully comprehend the scope of this thesis. Section 2.1 defines CSR in relation to PR, section 2.2 introduces the concepts of image and reputation, and 2.3 defines discourses and social practices, which will be used to carry out the analysis in section 4.

2.1. Defining CSR

The following definition will be used to clarify McDonald’s use of CSR in the analysis in section 4 and also to fully comprehend the relationship between McDonald’s image and its consumers’ perceptions of its CSR communication in section 5.

Since CSR is a very much-used, emerging business and management term within PR this section will briefly describe PR. There is no single definition of PR, as each expert has a different point of view, depending on his or hers understanding (Newsom & Haynes, 2011; Tench & Yeomans, 2009). However, there are certain definitions that most experts agree upon, where the most significant to this thesis are socially responsible, trusting relationships and reliable communication (Newsom & Haynes, 2011), as they can be associated with CSR and will be further elaborated on in section 5. Moreover, PR is not considered a one-way communication where the company manipulates its publics. Rather, PR is considered a two-way communication where the intention is to establish or maintain mutually beneficial relationships, where the organisation takes its stakeholders’ interests seriously (Newsom & Haynes, 2011). I.e., the organisation must know its stakeholders’ interests and expectations in order to be able to adapt to these or influence the stakeholders to make their interests fit those of the company.

Like PR, numerous scholars argue that CSR is a very ambiguous concept and, thus, have no general definition (Marrewijk, 2003). In today’s society it seems increasingly essential for companies to be perceived as respectable and socially conscious, hence, CSR can be assumed to be a corporate necessity, as ever more companies are conducting and implementing it into their business strategies. However, there are different reasons for companies to engage in CSR (Morsing & Beckmann, 2006). Marrewijk (2003) argues that these reasons are that: “[...] they either feel obliged to do it; are made to do it or they want to do it” (Marrewijk, 2003, pp. 99). Moreover, Morsing and Beckmann (2006) argue that: “[...] companies are [...] on their way to construct a social and environmental discourse universe in which they seek to gain credibility as respectable and responsible actors” (p. 285), which will be further commented on in the analysis in section 4. According to Tench and Yeomans (2009) CSR can be broadly defined as “ [...] an organisation’s
defined responsibility to its society(ies) and stakeholders” (p. 99), and to consider its impact on its environment. Moreover, “[...] there is a general agreement among marketers, communication scholars, and social scientists that CSR is defined as the organization’s status and activities with respect to its perceived societal obligations” (Brown & Dacin, 1997 in Morsing & Beckmann, 2006, p. 17).

There are two distinct views of where a company’s moral duties in society lie. On the one hand, shareholder view, which argues that a company is only responsible for making profit and enhance shareholder value (Friedman, 1970, in Tench & Yeomans, 2009). On the other hand, the stakeholder view argues that an organisation’s responsibility is not merely towards its shareholders, but also the immediate society, which the organisation is a part of (Freeman, 1984, in Marrewijk, 2003). Thus, this thesis will focus on concept of the triple bottom line (TBL), which includes environmental and social aspects in addition to economics. In a few words ‘people’, ‘planet’ and ‘profit’ describe the TBL and the goal of sustainability, as the TBL is not merely concerning the financial aspect of business and ability to generate profit, but also social in terms of caring for the people in the organisation’s society, and also caring for environmental or planet (Fauzi, Svensson, & Rahman, 2010). In fact, Swanson (1995) argues that “[...] corporations are responsible only for solving the direct and indirect problems they cause. Solving these problems is their public responsibility” (in Gao, 2009, p. 278). The problems referred to do not necessarily have to be caused by the corporation, but as long as it can be associated with the problems in its society, it is the company’s responsibility to solve them. This will be elaborated further on in section 4, 5 and 6 where the focus is on the social aspect of the TBL i.e. the ‘people’. In addition, the notion of TBL consider stakeholder interest rather than maximising shareholder profit, and thereby comply with the aforementioned stakeholder view in that an organisation's responsibility lies with stakeholders rather than with its shareholders and the general idea of PR where companies should be socially responsible and know its stakeholders interests and expectations. According to Marrewijk (2003) “[t]he three aspects of sustainability

![Diagram of Corporate Sustainability](image-url)
(economic, environmental, and social) can be translated into a CR approach that companies have to be concerned with” (p. 101), which is illustrated in figure 1, where the concept of CSR functions as a stage where an organisation strives to balance the TBL and where CS (Corporate Sustainability) is placed as the definitive goal (Marrewijk, 2003). Fautzi et. al. (2010) confirms that the TBL must be balanced by stating that the: “TBL [...] requires that the complexity and variability between financial, social and environmental measurement elements are properly and conveniently synchronized. Otherwise, the outcome of TBL [...] may be negatively affected” (p. 1355). In fact the TBL might form a combination forcing the company to meet a specific interest, which may differ among different stakeholders, thus, the company must strive to satisfy different stakeholder expectations (Fauzi et. al., 2010).

Taking the abovementioned into account, the analysis in this thesis will be based on the idea that an organisation’s responsibility lies with the well-being of the society in which it operates and that corporations are responsible for problems with which they can be associated.

2.2. Image and Reputation

There are several different reasons for corporations to engage in CSR including Friedman’s (1970) abovementioned principle that “[t]he social responsibility of business is to increase profits.” However, as this thesis focus more on the social aspect of the TBL the most interesting reason for companies to engage in CSR is societal pressure and the power of public opinion (Tench & Yeomans, 2009, p. 103).

In managing corporate image and reputation, CSR can be a very essential tool (Tench & Yeomans, 2009, p. 103). This can be supported by Pollach (2003), who states that “CSR has proven to be [an] effective ... tool to enhance corporate reputation or to proactively defend reputation against public criticism” (p. 278). According to Tench and Yeomans (2009) a corporate image is defined as stakeholder perception of a corporation at one moment in time, while the aggregate of images of the corporation accumulated over time, forms the corporate reputation in the minds of its stakeholders. Morsing, Schultz and Nielsen (2008) argue that stakeholders’ perceptions of a company’s products and services are the most dominant predictor of the overall corporate image and reputation, which is closely followed by CSR. It is, thus it, relevant to examine how CSR initiatives from a large corporation like McDonald’s are perceived by its stakeholders, in this case the consumers. According to Tench and Yeomans (2006) a corporation strives to influence its corporate images held by its various stakeholders through different PR strategies, such as CSR, which functions as a proactive strategy as it is intentionally made to influence the stakeholders.
perception about the company. CSR can also function to reduce the effect of unintended negative actions made by an organisation (Tench & Yeomans, 2006). According to Benoit (1997) the consumers’ perceptions are more essential than reality and “[a]s long as the audience thinks the firm at fault, the image is at risk” (p. 178). Thus, he further argues that: “shifting the blame cannot be viewed as a certain solution to image problems” (p. 184), which will be further discussed in section 6.

Corporate image and reputation are both complex concepts and since they are highly subjective of nature they are difficult to evaluate and conclude upon. However, section 5 will seek to examine these based on the finding from the analysis in section 4.

2.3. Discourses & Social Practices

In order to be able to answer the problem statement and associated sub questions, this thesis will utilise Fairclough’s (1989) approach to CDA, which will emphasise discourses and social practices. This section will, thus, provide a theoretical framework of discourses and social practices, which are fundamental for the understanding of the analysis in section 4 and the overall comprehension of the answers to the problem statement and sub questions.

Discourse analysis considers several diverse approaches and is described as “the analysis of a piece of text in order to reveal either the discourses operating within it or the linguistic and rhetorical devices used in its construction” (Burr, 2003, p. 202). This thesis will strive to examine the discourses operating within McDonald’s Facebook post “Quality Matters Most”. Additionally, Fairclough’s (1989) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which considers discourses as a form of social practice, which according to Fairclough (1989) are social preconditions for people to live by:

[T]he individual is able to act only in so far as there are social conventions to act within. Part of what is implied in the notion of social practice is that people are enabled through being constrained: they are able to act on condition that they act within the constraints of types of practice - or of discourse (p. 28).

Fairclough (1989) further argues for a dialectical relationship between discourses and social practices, which he describes as: “discourse has effects upon social structures, as well as being determined by them, and so contributes to social continuity and social change” (p. 17). I.e., the dialectical relationship between discourses and social practices is an important element in CDA, as
it is a two-way relationship where discourses are shaped by social practices. However, at the same
time discourses add to the development of social practices and reflecting social change and are,
thus, also shaping these, consequently creating a dialectical relationship. Additionally, the
dialectical relationship is based on the view that discourses, which are defined as the understanding
and knowledge of the world, derive from social practices.

In accordance with social constructionism, the CDA in this thesis will strive to provide a
comprehension of how McDonald’s CSR communication through its Facebook post “Quality
Matters Most” is formed by social processes and is concurrently a reflection of social context and
societal change. Fairclough’s (1989) notion especially evolves around simultaneous processes of
social change. Moreover, a focal point of his approach is the social practices, which have been
created by the sender’s production of the text and the receiver’s perception of these, as the text is
“[…] produced and interpreted against a background of common-sense assumptions” (Fairclough,
1989, p. 140). Hence, utilising Fairclough’s (1989) approach to CDA will enable this thesis to
present the effects that the discourses in McDonald’s Facebook post “Quality Matters Most” have
on society. The CDA in this thesis will, furthermore, present discourses that form identities, which
according to Burr (1995) are intimately tied to the social practices that are lived out in the society.
Thus, the findings in the CDA will enable the thesis to answer sub question b and open up for a
discussion of the effects the discourses and social practices have on McDonald’s corporate image
and reputation in section 5.

3. McDonalds

This section will briefly describe the current focus on the environment and health in the
public domain, mainly concerning the social aspect of the TBL. Also, there will be a corporate
description of McDonalds and its CSR activities.

3.1. McDonalds & The Health & Obesity Issue

The American company McDonalds is the world’s largest fast food chain, serving around 64
million customers daily in 119 countries and is globally recognised for its Golden Arches logo and
its burgers (McDonalds, 2013). McDonalds is operating in a society with a high focus on health and
obesity, the company has, thus, over the past years incorporate healthier options intro its menus
alongside with nutritional information and education to reflect the public concerns for obesity and
other health issues such as heart diseases and diabetes, which is inevitable connected to its products.
Thus, McDonalds is striving to communicate its healthy options and healthy lifestyle opportunities
in order to meet the social concern and public pressures regarding the specific social problem of health and obesity. According to its own website McDonalds stress that the change must be made together and that it has listened to its publics and fulfilled their wishes (McDonalds, 2013). According to Tench and Yeomans (2009) “[p]ublic health is evolving as a major global issue and appears to be echoing the way green issues began to make things happen three decades ago” (p. 367). They further argue that due to the health issue “[…] something had to be done’. Eating habits had to change . . . fast food companies had to rethink their menu options” (p. 371). While its world famous burgers might have been sufficient for satisfying the consumers in the past, it is now evident that, McDonald’s publics are concerned health and obesity issues and, thus, create public pressures for taking these issues seriously which can be related back to the definition of PR in section 2, where organisations should take its stakeholders interests seriously. On its corporate website McDonalds acknowledges the public concern about obesity and human well-being, and states that: “[w]e take these issues seriously and are working to do what we can to positively influence the situation. We know we cannot address this problem alone, but we are committed to being part of the solution” (McDonalds, 2013). The issue of health and obesity has been developed since people have unhealthy eating habits or do exercise enough, thus, more people start to suffer from obesity, which can be considered as a disease or a condition brought on by the individuals’ food choices (Hendrick, 2010).

3.2. McDonalds & CSR

Even though McDonalds is having a hard time regarding the issue of health and obesity, it has attained goodwill in other areas like CSR. Over the years McDonalds has had several collaborations with NGO’s, such as Green Peace, starting in 2006, Global Advisory Council for Balanced Active Lifestyles starting in 2003, and Nutritionist Steering Group Europe (2004) to inform about the company’s efforts regarding nutritional information and providing opportunities for active, balanced lifestyles (McDonalds, 2013). On its corporate website McDonalds states that: “We always strive to be better tomorrow than we are today” (McDonalds, 2013). By engaging in CSR and protecting the environment, McDonald’s society benefits in health, in sustainability and in welfare, in that relation McDonalds (2013) states that: “We’re determined to continuously improve our social and environmental performance. We work hard, together with our suppliers and independent restaurant franchisees, to strive toward a sustainable future – for our company and the communities in which we operate.” Moreover, McDonald’s latest CSR initiative is the introduction to sustainable fish, through the collaboration with the Marine Stewardship Council. Due to the size
of the industry and supply chain, this entail that McDonalds CSR efforts can prove to have a major impact on the whole fast food industry, since “[s]uppliers are more apt to change their ways when a large client demands change rather than when a handful of consumers demand the same thing” (Tepper, 2013). I.e., through the collaboration with NGO’s and sustainable suppliers McDonalds makes efforts in being socially and environmentally responsible. 

In short, it is obvious that McDonald’s has done a remarkable job with its CSR initiatives and protection of the environment. However, the question remains whether McDonald’s CSR initiatives are enough to overshadow or even out the negative perceptions of the company regarding the health issue. And whether it can continue its world dominance in the fast food industry by promoting active, healthy lifestyles and being a good corporate citizen through its CSR initiatives, when its core products continuously is being linked to health problems and obesity. The following two sections will strive to find answers to these questions and look into whether or not the above mentioned has an affect on McDonald’s image and reputation.

4. Analysis of Consumer Perceptions of McDonald’s CSR

The following analysis will examine consumers’ comments on McDonald’s “Quality Matters Most” Facebook post, which can be found in appendix 1. Moreover, this analysis will be carried out by means Fairclough’s (1989) approach to CDA, divided into two sections, where discourses will be addressed as an analytical tool in section 4.1, alongside with social practices in section 4.2 showing the dialectical relationship between the two.

4.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

In the “Quality Matters Most” post by McDonalds several discourses can be found, all with different stories and ways of presenting McDonald’s image and reputation to the world. In the “Quality Matters Most” post it is evident that McDonalds is adopting the language of CSR in its corporate strategy by indirectly referring to its CSR initiatives, namely that of having sustainable suppliers (appendix 1). Moreover, through the headline in itself “Quality Matters Most” indicating that McDonald’s CSR initiatives creates quality for its products (appendix 1). Furthermore, the posts include images of healthy looking red apples and participants representing the suppliers, one on an apple farm and one “exploring the ocean for Alaskan Pollock” (appendix 1) providing examples for both the sustainable suppliers and the resulting quality products. I.e., McDonalds has created a discourse of CSR, which is in accordance with what was mentioned in the definition of CSR in section 2.1, about companies constructing a social and environmental discourse. Through
this discourse it can be assumed that McDonalds strives to attain “[...] credibility as respectable and responsible actors” (Morsing & Beckmann’s, 2006, p. 285). It can, thus, be argued that the discourse of CSR is serving McDonald’s own interests regarding its image, since McDonalds, through the action of this discourse attempts to represent itself in an acceptable light with its consumers.

The clues about the discourses in the “Quality Matters Most” post can also be found in the consumers’ comments. Firstly, discourse of health can be found, as a consumer respond, not to the CSR discourse in the actual post, but to McDonalds in general and its offerings of healthy choices and different lifestyles, as also mentioned in section 3: “[t]here is a McDonalds for everyone. Unless you’re a vegan....or an environmentalist....or you actually care about your health” (appendix 1). This comment is not only indicating that a discourse of health is present, but also that McDonalds does not live up to this discourse. This is due to the health discourse serving the interest of the consumers and the society in general, while McDonald’s fast food is causing damage to the health of the consumers and is, thus, an opposing force to the discourse of health. Secondly, a discourse of distrust is present, as it seems the consumers perceive the “Quality Matters Most” post by McDonalds as being untrustworthy and even deceiving. As an example, one consumer states that: “[y]ou really think people are that stupid. Cheap and convenient, doesn’t equal quality” (appendix 1), connoting that the consumers perceive McDonald’s as trying to deceive the consumers into believing in the quality of its products, which they obviously do not believe its products possess. In addition, another consumer states: “It’s a joke isn’t it? Such a laugh! The word “Quality” in context to McDonalds!!!!!!!” (Appendix 1), connoting a strong disbelief in McDonald’s discourse of CSR rather aggressively by using several exclamation marks as to underline the importance of the comment and disbelief in McDonalds. Another consumer’s statement is further supporting the discourse of distrust: “apples? Who are you trying to fool[?] the[ir] food is bad for [you], even with a few nasty apples it do[esn’t] matter after [you] eat all the good fatty mccrap” (appendix 1). This comment further indicates that McDonald’s CSR attempts do not make up for the health issues caused by its core products, also relating back to the aforementioned discourse of health, and directly insults McDonald’s core products by calling them ‘mccrap’. Another consumer directly expresses distrust, however, in a more positive and less aggressive manner than the previous, by stating: “I love McDonald’s....but I’m sure this is such a lie. Ridiculous”. Similarly another consumer is being more harsh in stating “[y]our’re full of crap McDonalds” and at last one is conveying disbelief by stating: “Yea right your foods poison”
(appendix 1). The last statement is again referring back to the discourse of health, which McDonalds functions as a counterpart to by serving its consumers ‘poisonous’ food.

As mentioned in section 2 regarding PR and CSR communication is supposed to be reliable, however, in this case it can be argued that McDonald’s consumers do not find its communication reliable, but oppositely unreliable and distrustful. This last consumer statement also refers to a discourse of fast food, which is perceived as ‘poison’. It is evident that several of the comments mentioned above also have some outlet of anger towards McDonalds, which can be argued is due to the consumers seeing McDonalds a ‘the bad guy’ causing health problems in the society. It seems that the consumers might even be angry with McDonald's for thinking that adding sustainable food such as apples to the menu will make up for its core products. It can be assumed that the consumers’ strong reactions are due to the issue of health and obesity is a hot topic in society, even more so than the CSR, since this does not receive much attention from the McDonald’s consumers. Thirdly, the post presents a discourse of personal responsibility colliding with a discourse of corporate responsibility, more precisely, McDonald’s responsibility dealing with who is responsible of the social issue of health and obesity, and fast food as a source of this. For instance one consumer responses to others complaints in general about McDonalds, stating that: “[n]obody’s forcing you to eat the food” (appendix 1). In addition, another consumer more aggressively states: “Don’t like it???? SIMPLE!!! Don’t eat there!!!! McDonald’s is NOT the reason you’re fat....we are all responsible for what we eat!!!” (Appendix 1). Furthermore, one consumer is directly addressing another consumer in her comment: “[…] Then don’t eat it. But don’t eat it then complain about it” (appendix 1). These statements clearly connote that it is the consumers own responsibility to act in accordance with the health discourse, i.e. supporting the discourse of personal responsibility. On the other hand, the discourse of corporate responsibility is also present as a consumer directly blames McDonalds by stating “[u]r the reason I’m fat”. The colliding discourses of responsibility will be further commented on in the discussion in section 6.

Regarding CSR, public opinion can be defined as a social control view “as it shows how public opinion can be a constraining force silencing opposition to dominant ideas” (Morsing & Beckmann, 2006, p. 70) and where public opinion, although, not tangible, is considered a very real social force. It is safe to say that the dynamics of the consumer comments in the post are taking a shift in direction, moving away from the CSR discourse McDonalds is trying to communicate, towards health and distrust discourses instead. In fact, it can be argued that the CSR discourse and the health discourse collide, as they seem to support two different social constructions of
McDonald’s image and reputation. It can be interpreted that the public opinion as a social force is silencing McDonald’s CSR communication, as they perceive it as being distrustful and opposing to the discourse of health. It is obvious from the background information that McDonald’s strives to operate within this discourse of health alongside with the discourse of CSR, however the consumers perceive these attempts as contradicting due to the company’s core product, which consumer’s perceive as an opposition to the discourse health. Although McDonald’s has done an admirable job regarding the discourse of CSR it seems as if the social force only focuses on the health discourse when thinking of McDonalds and does not praise it for its CSR efforts. Instead it seems that McDonald’s consumers attack McDonalds for ‘telling lies’ and ‘poisoning’ the society. It can even be argued that the consumers see McDonald’s CSR initiative as a ‘distortion of the reality’. Thus, the discourse of distrust can be said to be the dominant and represents the consumers’ construction of McDonald’s image and reputation. This dominant distrust discourse overshadows McDonald’s own construction of its image, namely, that it lives up to the discourse of CSR as a corporate citizen. Instead the prevailing discourse of distrust represents the consumers’ construction of McDonald’s image, which does not perceive McDonalds as being socially responsible when its products continuously are being linked to health and obesity issues, thus, functioning as an opposing component to the health discourse.

In short, utilizing Fairclough’s (1989) CDA represents how McDonalds has drawn upon pre-existing discourses when construction the post and how its consumers have likewise drawn upon pre-existing discourses when interpreting the “Quality Matters Most” post. I.e. this is in accordance with what was stated in section 2.3 regarding the text both being produced and received and thereby revealing social practices.

4.2. Social Practices

The following part of the analysis will examine the effects the discourses in McDonald’s “Quality Matter Most” post presented above have on society. Moreover, this section will reveal the dialectical relationship, mentioned in section 2.3, between discourses and social practices, where both concepts are interdependent and help shape one another.

In the “Quality Matters Most” post a social practice of healthy living is present. This social practise is revealed through a high level of interdiscoursivity in the post, as it draws upon several discourses existing in daily social practices simultaneously and, thus, present several genres overlapping and playing off of each other, such as health discourse, CSR discourse, distrust discourse, fast food discourse and responsibility discourses, which are socially constructed
knowledge of the reality under the knowledge of healthy living (Kress, 2001). It can be argued that McDonalds makes use of the fast food and the health discourse in order to construct a new hybrid discourse of a “combined lifestyle”. Through this new hybrid discourse it can be argued that McDonalds is striving to associate its food with the social practice of healthy living, thus, trying to connect the fast food and the health discourses in a constructive way. In addition, it can be argued that McDonalds has created the new hybrid discourse of a “combined lifestyle” to affect the social practice of healthy living as well as being determined by it. Thereby the new discourse contribute to social change where McDonalds presents its own construction of the world where fast food and healthy living does not have to collide, but can coexist. However, based on the consumers’ comments it seems that the discourse of fast food, which McDonalds operates within, is seen as opposing to the social practise of a healthy lifestyle, which might make the new discourse and social change difficult for the consumers to accept. The “combined lifestyle” discourse is constructed in the text by drawing on the pre-existing discourses and social practices of fast food, health and lifestyle choices. Meaning, it is constructed by identifying a social issue: fast food as a source of obesity. Through the “combined lifestyle” discourse, McDonalds seeks to move against this social issue, by means of a construction of a new socially accepted lifestyle. It can be argued that McDonalds strives to portray itself not only as environmentally responsible, but also that it is a company caring about the health concerns of its publics, thus operating in both discourses. However, this is challenged and meets resistance from the public when associating these discourses with McDonalds.

According to Burr (1995) “[d]iscourses are intimately connected to the way that society is organised and run” (Burr, 1995, p. 36). I.e., the discourses are connected to social practices in a way where they shape and are shaped by society. Moreover, the conducted discourse analysis enables an explanation of the constructive effects that discourses have on social practices. The social practise in McDonald’s society focuses on the health discourse, dealing with eating habits and obesity, and connotes that having a healthy lifestyle is the “right” thing to do in today’s society. I.e., this is considered the natural way of living. Fast food has created major societal issues, since the products causes serious diseases amongst its consumers and, thus, goes against what is socially accepted as normal and healthy. McDonalds responds to this social practice by creating a world where it is possible to combine fast food with a healthy lifestyle. McDonald’s hereby attempts to deconstruct the fast-food industry’s ‘unhealthy environment’ social practice, and strives to create a new social practice of a ‘healthy environment’. Thus, McDonald’s invites its consumers to
interactively take part in a new “combined lifestyle” discourse by drawing on pre-existing social practices. I.e., this analysis argues that the social practices of McDonald’s new discourse is striving to make up for the social issues of health and obesity, created by the fast food industry. In addition, McDonalds offers the consumers a chance to implement McDonalds as part of a lifestyle through the new hybrid discourse of “combined lifestyle”. Thus, McDonalds is subjectively conveying a lifestyle that is not part of its consumers present ‘real’ world, but which may be. I.e., McDonalds is offering a new ‘real’ world the consumers can choose to adapt to (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). However, according to the PubMed Health (2011) adapting to new lifestyle is not easily done and takes time.

As mentioned earlier, public opinion is not regarded as a tangible, identifiable object, but rather as a “[...] amorphous reflection of social processes of construction which the company must respond to and/or take part in on the level of its overall corporate communication strategy” (Morsing & Beckmann, 2006, p. 71). In the case of McDonalds, it can be argued that the company acknowledges the possible constructive effects the CSR discourse and the new “combined lifestyle” discourse can have on the society and the social practices, as they have the opportunity to create social relations between McDonalds and the consumer and affect belief systems in the society. It can, thus, be argued that McDonald through its “Quality Matters Most” post strive to move the public needs in a constructive direction, meaning that the construction of the “combined lifestyle” discourse is intended to have a positive effect on social practices and society at whole. The construction of the “combined lifestyle” discourse in the case of McDonalds has, merely been possible due to a dialectical relationship between McDonalds and social practices, since pre-existing social practice of the fast food industry’s harming effects have made it difficult for McDonalds to obtain social value. Moreover, since the dominant discourse has been identified as being that of distrust, McDonalds does not benefit particularly from its CSR post “Quality Matters Most”. This is based on Morsing and Beckmann’s (2006) assumption that people especially tend to act in correspondence with the opinion of the majority, which in this case is the social practise of healthy living, when it regards hot topics or issues which are socially contested, such as the current focus on health. This is also in accordance with Fairclough’s (1989) description of how social practices are social preconditions for people to live by, where McDonald’s consumers are able to act within the constrains of the social practise healthy living.

In short, the consumers’ construction of perceived social reality of McDonald’s CSR initiatives and image and reputation is created in a social context based on health and environmental
discourses. Here the consumers’ negative perception of McDonald’s CSR initiatives creates an agreed upon way of understanding the world the company operates in, which in this case is the social practice of healthy living. In addition, as argued for above, the most dominant discourse is that of distrust, reflecting the consumers’ perceptions of McDonalds is going against the agreed upon understanding of healthy living.

5. Influence of Consumer Perceptions on McDonald’s Corporate Image & Reputation

Usually CSR creates positive associations with an organisation and “ [...] reflects an organization’s status and activities with respect to its perceived societal obligations [...]” (Morsing & Beckmann, 2006, p. 136). Furthermore, as mentioned in section 2.2 CSR has a potential to reduce the effect of unintended negative actions made by an organisation (Tench & Yeomans, 2006). However, the analysis above showed that McDonald’s CSR communication has attracted critical attention towards rather than positive (Morsing and Beckman, 2006). In accordance, Morsing and Beckmann (2006) argue that CSR communication instead of improving image and reputation creates suspicion and resistance towards the company’s intentions. In fact Brown and Dacin (1997) raise the question of “if a company focuses too intently on communicating CSR associations, is it possible that consumers may believe that the company is trying to hide something?” (in Morsing & Beckmann, 2006, p. 136). Based on the analysis in section 4 it can be argued that McDonald’s consumers consider McDonald’s CSR activity McDonalds as a scheme in order to divert the attention of its consumers and the general public opinion from the company’s negatively perceived core products causing health problems. Additionally, Gao (2009) argues that if companies “[...] conduct a CSR activity while leaving aside the problems (negative social impact) they cause, their motivation is to be questioned” (p. 279). He further states that this might result in negative reaction towards the company from its consumers, which is also evident based on the analysis in section 4. This is also in accordance with what is mentioned in section 2.1 that a company’s responsibility is to solve direct or indirect problems they cause (Gao, 2009), where it, based on the analysis, can be argued that McDonald’s consumers perceive that the company put these responsibility aside, while moving focus to its CSR instead.

As mentioned in the analysis, the consumers perceive this as distrustful and unreliable communication. This is can further be of risk to the company’s image, as it might appear as if the CSR activities have been conducted with profits in mind, which has been stated in section 2.1 that Friedman (1970) argues companies do (Tench & Yeomans, 2009). Moreover, if a company already
suffers from a bad reputation it will have a negative influence on the consumers’ perceptions of the CSR communication and increase the risk of scepticism, which relates to the dominant discourse of distrust found in the analysis. Moreover, the industry a company works within also might influence outcome of the CSR communication as consumers point negative attention to certain industries (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). This is especially the case for ‘sin-industries, where the industry is by nature considered bad for the environment and for the well-being of the consumers. This applies to McDonalds, as it is the leader with in the fast food industry, which is also considered a ‘sin-industry’.

Since the analysis showed the McDonald’s consumers evaluate the company’s CSR activities in relation to its negative relation to the health and obesity issue, and since these CSR activities prove to be less negative than the health problems the “[...] consumers might consider that the firm adopts CSR to cover up the impact of corporate misdeemans[ru]rs” (Gao, 2009, p. 279). In fact, if McDonald’s consumers perceive that the company is ignoring the health problems related to its products the CSR “[...] CSR activity might be evaluated negatively [...]” (Gao, 2009, p. 279). On that note Benoit (1997) argues that when a company is facing difficulties “[...] the business may attempt to refocus attention on other issues [...]” (p. 183) rather than focusing on shifting the nature of the accusations. Looking at the findings from section 4 it is evident that the consumers are more perceptive to unethical behaviour rather than to responsible behaviour, i.e. “[...] “doing bad” hurts more than “doing good” helps” (Morsing & Beckmann, 2006, p. 172). Thus, although McDonalds is doing a good job regarding the discourse of CSR, it does not seem to overshadow the discourse of health and the wrongdoings McDonald’s consumers perceive the company is blameworthy of.

Regarding the reasons for businesses to engage in CSR mentioned in section 2, it can be assumed that McDonalds might feel obliged to do CSR due to its negative reputation in connection with the health issue and, thus, have to do well in other areas to try to create a better image for itself (Marrewijk, 2003). Additionally, CSR can be used to establish and maintain positive reputations and “[...] safeguard their interests in the event of socially irresponsible conduct” (Brammer & Pavelin, 2005 in Gao, 2009, p. 270), such as McDonald’s connection to the issue of health and obesity, which can be argued to be perceived as irresponsible conduct, by its consumers. Based on this notion it can be further argued that McDonald’s may use CSR as a defensive strategy in order to safeguard its reputation, or at least attempt to make the reputation as strong as possible in order to prevent damage of its overall image, caused by its inevitable connection with the health issue. I.e., McDonalds might be trying to cover up its health related issues, with good deeds though the use of
CSR. In fact, CSR activities might backfire if the consumers suspect that the company’s true motive for the CSR activities is merely to improve its corporate image and reputation in order to enhance sales and profits, not acting for the well-being of the society. Additionally, the CSR activities might distract the company from its ability to manufacture quality products, although McDonald’s through its “Quality Matters Most” post stresses its high level of quality (Gao, 2009). Still, the analysis of this post found that the consumers perceive this as distrusting.

Concerning the discourse of CSR, the McDonald’s ability to control the discourses in the “Quality Matters Most” post is being threatened by its consumers “[…] who contribute to the debate with their own interpretations and who are considered more trustworthy […]” (Morsing & Beckmann, 2006, p. 293). In addition to this, it should be noted that although a company cannot control consumer-to-consumer messages, Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that the company still have the ability to influence the consumer conversations. However, to do so McDonalds must engage in a dialogue with its consumers on its “Quality Matters Most” post. In fact, the lack hereof is directly criticised in the consumer comments: “why is it whenever you make a legitimate complaint about McDonalds service or provide a constructive observation that Management never answer[s]? Do you only want to accept the “likes” and never the drawbacks? Do you think McDonalds is perfect??” (Appendix 1). Thus, although, it can be argued that McDonalds strives to satisfy their expectations towards the environment and the health and obesity issue, i.e., the ‘planet’ and ‘people’ of the TBL, by engaging in CSR and changing their menus, improvements can be made in its way of communicating to its audience over Facebook. According to Li and Bernoff (2011) a company can gain its consumers’ trust through the use of social media, since social media allows a two-way communication, which can prove to be a valuable communication aspect to McDonalds as this does not only enable an opportunity of getting feedback, providing an insight in what the groundswell is saying about the company, but also create a dialogue with its consumers, which offers insight in what the consumers expects from McDonalds. Entering the dialogue and interaction on its “Quality Matters Most” post and on its Facebook page in general will increase transparency and indicate that McDonalds both listens to its consumers and cares about its expectations and frustrations about the company, rather than merely ignoring them (Li & Bernhoff, 2008). I.e., by listening and adapting to its consumers’ expectations McDonalds maintains a mutual beneficial relationship, rather than one-way communication focused marketing efforts and avoid being seen as ‘ignoring’ the publics concern for its menu offerings and connection to health issues, and contribute to minimizing doubts of whether its CSR initiative is being used as a cover up for its
real problems. I.e., McDonalds may want to consider how to be focused on investing in environmentally responsible actions, while not compromising the need to invest in the health of the society and, thereby, regarding the TBL showing responsibility for the ‘people’ (Morsing & Beckmann, 2006, p. 152). The mutual beneficial relationship will then benefit the consumers by providing healthy choices, and McDonalds by achieving a chance to show a good and responsible site of the company and to repair its tarnished reputation. However, since McDonalds is not engaging with its consumers in the “Quality Matters Most” post, and based on the findings in section 4, it can be argued that McDonald’s consumers do not consider the company as being trustworthy. In that relation, Morsing and Beckmann (2006) argue that: “[…] part of improving the discourse work of companies and organisations will be to collaborate and enter into a dialogue with these stakeholder groups in order to gain a platform for better mutual understanding and consistent CSR discourse universe” (p. 293). I.e., McDonalds might benefit creating a dialogue rather than performing a one-way communication strategy, which is also in accordance with the definition of PR, mentioned in section 2, where the goal is to create two-way communication and mutual beneficial and trusting relationships (Newsom & Haynes, 2011; Tench & Yeomans, 2009).

Regarding the TBL it can be argued that McDonald’s does not pay enough attention to the ‘people’ outside of the company and their interests. In addition, when engaging in CSR McDonalds should support social causes in order to strive to improve well-being of the community and not solely focus on protecting the environment. As described in section 2.1, the social and environmental performances are equally as important as financial performance, and should not be neglected, since the “responsibilities are increasingly powerful drivers of reputation” (Tench & Yeomans, 2009, p. 109), in the eyes of the consumers and are, thus, important to consider.

6. Discussion

This section will discuss the findings in the analysis and the reflections on McDonald’s overall corporate image and reputation.

In addition to the health and obesity issue, mention in section 3, McDonald's is resolute that the American’s obesity problems are difficult and that the issues rely mostly on what consumers choose to eat. In fact, McDonald's director of worldwide nutrition Kapica, states that “[t]his is really not about McDonald's. It's more about personal responsibility” (Alexander, 2004). In addition, it is further stated that McDonalds strive to “[…] educate its consumers about the broader range of offerings it has on its menu” (Alexander, 2004). McDonalds clearly points out that it is
people’s own choice and responsibility and that the bad effects associated with their food are commonly known. I.e., McDonald’s does not claim to sell nutrition and based on the findings in the analysis in section 4 it can be argued that people also do not come to McDonalds for nutrition. Additionally, Langart (2012), vice president for CSR at McDonalds, states:

*Of course, we still serve burgers and fries. These are choices that can fit into one’s lifestyle. And they will always be part of our menu. But I wish more people knew the true extent of offerings we have around the world and the level of choice and innovation that has changed the face of our menu boards over the last decade.*

On that note, it can be argued that McDonald’s is trying to sooth different lifestyles, leaving the responsibility up to the consumers by striving that it is their own personal choice. Moreover, Langert (2012) states that: “at the end of the day, we’re going to give people what they want. We’re going to do it in a good, responsible, clean, safe way. We’ve tried veggie burgers. They hardly sell at all” (Gunther, 2011). Furthermore, based on the information in section 3 regarding the health issue, it can be argued that obesity is not something that happens to people but somewhat a condition they bring upon themselves (Hendrick, 2010). Thus, it can be argued that McDonalds cannot be said to be completely blameworthy, as this might hold some truth to it. In fact, McDonalds and the consumer might both be equally responsible for the health and obesity issue. However, as stated in section 2 corporations are responsible for solving both direct and indirect issues they cause on its society, or problems that are associated with the company (Gao, 2009). Thus, McDonalds cannot abdicate all responsibility, but must accept part of it.

Regarding the discourse of health, mentioned in section 4, it can be interpreted that it brings along with it the paradox that consumers know that the ‘right’ thing to do is to eat healthy and have a healthy lifestyle, but at the same time it does not seem like something easily doable as the society today is also very productive and time efficient, thus, many consumers may not have the time for a healthy meal and, thus turning, to fast food producers such as McDonalds. I.e., this is a somewhat contradicting world since the consumers on the one hand are living in a very productive world where they do not wish to compromise time and, thus, demand fast food and, which McDonalds offers. Also, it must be assumed that the company exists because there is a demand. On the other hand, the consumers blame the McDonalds for providing them with this harmful food, as they do also not wish to compromise health. However, whether the fast food is harmful depends on eating
habits and lifestyle, which McDonalds struggles to convince its consumers about. It might, however, be easier for consumer to have someone such as McDonalds to blame, rather than face problems of eating habits and lifestyle choices and thereby taking responsibility for themselves. In addition, McDonalds makes enough money that in a way it can be argued that the consumers are not only paying for food; but also for McDonalds to take the blame for the public issue of health and obesity.

The important is not whether McDonalds is actually responsible for the health issues in society, but rather if McDonalds is perceived as being responsible its consumers, since corporate image is defined as a stakeholder’s perception of an organisation at one moment in time, McDonalds is only as good as its consumers perceive it to be (Tench & Yeomans (2009). However, as stated in section 2.2 consumer perceptions are more essential than reality (Benoit, 1997), and based on the analysis it can be argued that McDonald’s consumers in fact perceive the company as being at fault. Although McDonalds strives to communicate consumer choices and emphasises personal responsibility, shifting the blame is no solution to the image problems, as the image is at risk when the consumers perceive the company as being at fault (Benoit, 1997). Hence, although the blameworthy and responsible may in reality be the consumers themselves, this has no influence on McDonald’s overall corporate image and reputation, as the consumers still sees the company as responsible.

Considering all of the above, the important is not how McDonalds communicate its CSR, since the consumers do not seem to forget its bad reputation regarding the issue of health and obesity. Thus, the problem might be in the strategy and not the actual communication regarding CSR. Thus, a suggestion for McDonalds could be to focus more on the health and obesity issues on a strategic level, rather than focusing on communicating its good deeds with its CSR activities, in order to attain an opportunity to repair its tarnished reputation. This suggestion is based on the analysis the consumers’ focus remains on the health issues related to the company’s core products and judge the company based hereof regardless of how good McDonalds might do regarding CSR. I.e., McDonald’s should focus more on the social aspect of the TBL and start showing more responsibility towards its consumers and not simply take abstains from it by focusing on general CSR, leaving out the social aspect. This might create some balance to McDonald’s TBL, which, as mentioned in section 2.1, is required to avoid that the outcome of the TBL is affected negatively, which it can be said it is now as the social aspect is currently perceived as being neglected (Fautzi et. al., 2010). However, this suggestion is based on the ‘truth’ in the consumers’ accusations against
McDonalds, nevertheless, since this thesis adopts a social constructionist view it must be remembered that the ontology in this perspective is relative. As stated in section 1.2, this entails that one cannot search for this one ‘truth’, but must acknowledge the possibility of several alternative constructions of the particular event (Burr, 1995). I.e., McDonalds might also hold on to its arguments of personal responsibility.

7. Conclusion

In order to answer the problem statement of how McDonalds uses CSR and associated sub questions of how its consumer’s perceive this as well as how these perceptions influences McDonald’s overall corporate image and reputation, this thesis has analysed the interactive communication between McDonalds and its consumers in McDonalds “Quality Matters Most” post. The social media site Facebook has functioned as communication platform for the analysed interactive CSR communication. This thesis found that McDonald’s uses CSR as a defensive strategy to safeguard its reputation, or at least as an attempt to make its reputation as strong as possible in order to prevent damage of its overall image, caused by its inevitable connection with the health and obesity issue. The sub questions of how McDonald's consumers perceive its CSR initiatives and how these affect its overall corporate image and reputation has been analysed by means of Fairclough’s (1989) approach to CDA, which revealed a prevailing discourse of distrust in the “Quality Matters Most” post. I.e., the consumers’ perceive McDonald as distrustful. Based on the findings in the analysis the thesis has discussed the discourses of personal responsibility vs. corporate responsibility and found that McDonald’s cannot be deemed completely blameworthy in the case of health and obesity.

However, whether McDonalds is responsible is not of importance, but whether the company is perceived as responsible by its consumers, which, based on the analysis, the consumers perceive McDonalds as being. I.e., McDonalds image and reputation suffers hereof, as the company is only as good as its consumers perceive it to be (Tench & Yeomans, 2009). It can, thus, be concluded that McDonalds has done a remarkable job regarding general CSR, however, since the social aspect of the TBL has been neglected it may not be enough to overshadow or repair its tarnished image and reputation regarding the issue of health and obesity.

Considering that this thesis is written within the framework of social constructionism, this thesis acknowledges that one cannot search for one ‘truth’ and that there are several possible suggestions to how McDonalds should cope with the public interest of health. I.e., taking a critical
stance to the truth claims made in these discourses in the analysis, it should be kept in mind that these discourses have been identified in a rather intuitive, subjective and interpretive process. Thus, within a social constructionist framework (Burr, 1995), this analysis reveals several possible and equally valid ways of understanding this text and thereby also presents different ways of understanding McDonald’s use of CSR activities and its overall corporate image and reputation.
References


Appendix 1.

McDonald’s Corporate Facebook Page, “Quality Matters Most” post
Retrieved February 20, 2013 from: http://www.facebook.com/McDonalds?fref=ts
In order to ensure anonymity and to protect the consumers’ identity their names have been hidden (Kozinets, 2007).
hahahahaha McDonalds is really saying it uses quality products?
January 25 at 8:44pm · Like · ²

Nobody's forcing you to eat the food.
January 25 at 8:47pm via mobile · Like · ⁷

Ur the reason I'm fat
January 25 at 9:03pm via mobile · Like · ⁴

You really think people are that stupid. cheap and convient,don'ts equal quality.
January 25 at 9:26pm via mobile · Like · ²

Don't like it?? SIMPLE!!! Don't eat there!!!! McDonald's is NOT the reason you're fat....we are all responsible for what we eat!!!
January 25 at 10:01pm via mobile · Like · ¹

It's a joke isn't it? Such a laugh!
January 25 at 11:46pm · Like · ²

The word "Quality" in context to
January 25 at 11:46pm · Like · ⁵

I love McDonald's....but I'm sure this is such a lie.
Ridiculous.
January 26 at 12:39am via mobile · Like · ²

There's a McDonald's for everyone. Unless you're a vegan....or an environmentalist...or you actually care about your health.
January 26 at 10:29pm · Like · ¹

McDonalds suck
January 28 at 5:17am · Like · ³

You're full of crap McDonalds.
January 28 at 8:03am · Like · ²

why is it whenever you make a legitimate complaint about McDonalds service or provide a constructive observation that Management never answer ? Do you only want to accept the "likes" and never the drawbacks ? Do you think McDonalds is perfect ??
January 28 at 1:40pm · Like
apples? who are they trying to fool there food is bad for u, even with a few nasty apples it don't matter after u eat all the good fatty mcrap
February 2 at 9:56pm · Like

Then don't eat it. But don't eat it then complain about it.
February 3 at 2:58am · Like

Yea right your foods poison
January 31 at 9:55am via mobile · Like · 1