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Bridging diversity management and CSR in online external communication

Abstract

Purpose – This study addresses the need to reconsider online external communication that integrates diversity management (DM) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) by examining the multimodal discursive strategies purposefully employed by organizations to reflect the symbiotic relationship between these two areas of management practice and to communicatively emphasize their corporate commitment.

Methodology – Building on the recently emerged stream of literature linking DM and CSR, and adopting a critical perspective on discourse analysis, this study delves into the multimodal discursive strategies that help bridge DM and CSR in online external communication. The analytical approach proposed is used for the qualitative analysis of 43 web pages selected from Microsoft company’s “Global Diversity and Inclusion” website.

Findings – Findings highlight the discursive efforts made by the organization to strategically integrate DM and CSR communication into one single framework. The analysis reveals how the coordinates of social practices (social actors and social actions) are purposefully and multimodally recontextualized in the corporate discourse when communicating this integration.

Originality – This study extends the focus of critical discourse analysis from exclusively language to the interplay of different semiotic modes, offering a fine-grained exploration of the multimodal meaning construction performed by organizations in the context of online external communication.

Keywords: Diversity Management, Corporate Social Responsibility, Online External Communication, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

Article classification: Research paper

Introduction

In both scholarly and business worlds there is a growing recognition that in order for companies to secure not just competitive success but the legitimacy they require in order to

operate, they must address the wants and expectations of a wider range of stakeholders than they traditionally did. Contemporary organizations are increasingly coming under close societal scrutiny. They are responding to this situation by implementing a number of strategies and practices that can address the changing business context and the pressing demands of internal and external constituencies. In particular, “globalisation, changing demographic trends and discourses around the role of corporations in society and in societal governance have pushed organizations to put both CSR [corporate social responsibility] and diversity management (DM) onto the agenda” (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017, p. 2).

Although there is no globally unique or precise definition of CSR as the term “has been employed in a bewildering number of ways that do not always cohere (Griffin and Prakash, 2014: 466), it should be pointed out that CSR is generally built on the idea that “the corporation has not only economical and legal obligations, but ethical and discretionary (philanthropic) responsibilities as well” (Carroll, 1991, p.40). Similarly, although there is an array of definitions of DM, this management practice is often understood as “the voluntary organizational actions designed to create greater inclusion of employees from different backgrounds into the formal and informal organizational structures through deliberate policies and programs” (Mor Barak, 2005:208).

Despite the above-mentioned present-day challenges, and even though employees represent one of the most significant stakeholder groups that can help in achieving business objectives and sustaining socially responsible values and practices in daily activities, it appears that most CSR research to date has focused on external stakeholders. Internal CSR practices (Hameed *et al.*, 2016) and their close connection to DM initiatives (Karatas-Ozkan *et al.*, 2014) have for the most part been overlooked. DM research, on the other hand, shows substantial knowledge gaps in relation to diversity-focused communication, especially outside the workplace (for a few exceptions, see Simons, 2002; Ravazzani, 2016), and additionally in the intersections between DM and CSR (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017). However, recent academic works (e.g. Hansen and Seierstad, 2017; Karatas-Ozkan *et al.*, 2014) prompt scholars to a more thorough examination of the links and benefits of acknowledging the connection between CSR and DM in both theory and practice. This is particularly relevant in the context of online external communication, which organizations employ to give visibility and legitimacy to both areas of management practice. Often the two areas have been combined, through strategic communicative integration, into one single

framework (Krause, 2017).

Taking its point of departure in these recent developments, both scholarly and practical, the present study scrutinizes the overarching integrative approach to CSR and DM that is reflected in online external communication.

The article begins by presenting the theoretical background to this study. DM and CSR will be presented in order to highlight their growing importance in contemporary organizations as strategic areas of management and communication. DM and CSR will then be interconnected so as to accentuate areas of overlap and synergies in their external communication. The article will continue by describing the methodological standpoint adopted in this study, which consists in a social semiotics perspective on critical discourse analysis, which furthermore takes into account the multimodal affordances of online communication contexts. After illustrating the specific research questions, data collection and analysis procedures, the article will delve into the results derived from the critical discourse analysis of the multimodal discursive strategies employed by the organization in focus, Microsoft. Finally, the results will be discussed and used to highlight the contributions and future research opportunities to which this study gives rise.

Theoretical framework: bridging DM and CSR

Setting the background: DM and CSR as two strategic areas of contemporary corporate practice

DM and CSR represent two distinct established areas of scholarly research and voluntary management practice. Both areas emerged originally in the United States (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017).

DM concerns practices intended to provide employees with an inclusive environment in which they can achieve their full potential, while at the same time enhancing the organization's capacity to grow, innovate, and meet pressing societal demands for responsible conduct with activities that may also extend beyond the boundaries of the organization (Mor Barak, 2005; Ravazzani, 2016). The construct of diversity is "multi-level" (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017) and generally comprises the vast range of differences that make up the spectrum of human heterogeneity (Loden and Rosener, 1991). Over the years, both scholarly literature and corporate practice have redirected attention from a limited array of

legally protected and social identity groups' attributes (commonly referred to as the "big 6": age, disability, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation) to additional dimensions of diversity that can be relevant in organizational contexts, such as knowledge, competencies, working styles, and attitudes (Bendl *et al.*, 2008; Ely and Thomas, 2001).

DM surfaced as a strategic priority in the 1990s, representing a proactive way for companies to increase their organizational creativity and performance in view of business globalization, socio-demographic trends, and society's changing expectations about the social and ethical dimensions of working lives (De Anca and Vásquez, 2007; Swanson, 2002). In addition, in the context of the strong criticism surrounding quotas and affirmative action programs, DM has become "a more palatable and socially acceptable way" (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004, p. 410) to address diversity issues. It is seen to adopt a more holistic perspective (Ravazzani, 2018) in which business-driven motives are put along with moral and social good arguments. Within this strategic perspective, research in the DM field has extensively examined arguments about the benefits of managing diversity (e.g. Cox and Blake, 1991; Ely and Thomas, 2001; Mor Barak, 2005). These include improved employee motivation and the retention of talented people, the capacity to effectively respond to market heterogeneity thanks to the variety of employee competencies and perspectives, and reputation among both internal and external stakeholders.

Most DM studies have focused on human resource management practices, touching only occasionally upon communication aspects (Allen, 2005), language issues excepted (e.g. Lauring and Selmer, 2012). Yet communication plays a central role in framing DM as an opportunity and a significant organizational objective (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004) and in making visible the rationale, initiatives, and achievements to be attained by promoting and maintaining diversity, both inside and outside the company (Simons, 2002). External communication in particular has proved to be central for organizations in their effort to involve the larger community of stakeholders and build social legitimacy both internally and externally (Ravazzani, 2016). Recent research on external communication has focused on contemporary online contexts, in particular on corporate websites (e.g. Pasztor, 2016; Point and Singh; 2003) where an organization's commitment and practices in relation to DM can be strategically "showcased" (Guerrier and Wilson, 2011). Such studies refer to DM as being typically positioned and framed by organizations in the context of CSR web pages, also in response to global reporting guidelines in which DM is included as an indicator of corporate

social performance. But researchers have not yet undertaken to discuss in a detailed and explicit way the intersections of these two areas of management practice, or how this interconnection can be discursively realized in online external communication.

CSR is traditionally defined as a set of organizational initiatives that go beyond economic and legal obligations and extend to the ethical and discretionary responsibilities that society expects businesses to assume (Carrol, 1979). Hameed *et al.* (2016) highlight that CSR can be further conceptualized in terms of practices directed toward internal or external stakeholders. Internal CSR, which is generally neglected in the literature (Mory *et al.*, 2016), includes practices related to employee well-being, including “respect for human rights, employee health and safety, work–life balance, employee training, equal opportunity, and diversity” (Hameed *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). External CSR, on the other hand, concerns practices related to environmental and social aspects, which reinforce the organization’s legitimacy and reputation among its external stakeholders. These may include “volunteerism, cause-related marketing, corporate philanthropy, and environmental and wildlife protection” (p. 2).

As with the emergence and evolution of DM, the recent exponential growth in CSR practices has been framed as a modern challenge and necessity for organizations, mainly linked to the rapidly changing globalized business context, in which “new stakeholders and different national legislations are putting new expectations on business and altering how the social, environmental and economic impacts should be optimally balanced in decision making” (Dahlsrud, 2008, p. 6). As a consequence, rather than a compliance and charitable give-away perspective (Griffin and Prakash, 2014), CSR is now being seen as a strategic component of company–stakeholder relations (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2009). Proactive CSR involves “seeking, responding to, collaborating with, and empowering a diverse array of stakeholders” (Rimington and Alagic, 2017, p. 270).

Following this change in perspective, CSR communication too is drawing increased attention, both in research and in practice (Golob *et al.*, 2017). CSR communication appears to be essential both for explaining what organizations do and for attaining the maximum benefit and legitimacy from their efforts (Basil and Erlandson, 2008; Colleoni, 2013), and it is occurring in multiple stakeholder contexts (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2009; Griffin and Prakash, 2014). Research to date has mainly concentrated on external stakeholders and related CSR communication. While external CSR communication is performed through a variety of channels, including online social media (Colleoni, 2013), the corporate website with CSR-

dedicated web pages represents a major platform for conveying socially responsible information (Basil and Erlandson, 2008; Tang, Gallagher and Bier, 2015; Ziek, 2009). Interestingly, in a longitudinal study of CSR representations on corporate websites, Basil and Erlandson (2008) found not only that successful organizations are including more and more CSR initiatives on their websites, but that this effect is being driven primarily by internal CSR practices.

Building on this, it is worth noting that while external communication about internal CSR practices reassures external stakeholders (Basil and Erlandson, 2008), showcasing both internal and external CSR also stimulates internal stakeholders' identification through perceived internal respect and external prestige (Hameed *et al.*, 2016). And in fact, "some of the most passionate and dedicated readers of the corporate CSR messages are organisational members" (Morsing, 2006, p. 171). Thus the need to better explore the synergistic interplay in communication between internal and external CSR contexts is emerging very strongly. Filling this knowledge gap appears particularly relevant from the perspective of this study, in which DM is understood as a key component of internal CSR (Hameed *et al.*, 2016), but also as a set of corporate activities that can extend beyond the company's boundaries (Mor Barak, 2005). As with DM research, neither CSR research has thoroughly addressed the reciprocal links between the two areas of management practice or explored how this interconnection takes discursive form in (online) external communication.

Based on all these considerations, the following section will delve into the cross-fertilization between DM and CSR and their external communication.

Understanding DM as a key component of CSR practice and communication

Although the prevailing view has been that "CSR has historically and predominantly been externally focused (a focus beyond the organization) while DM has been internally focused (a focus within organization)" (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017, p. 3), recent scholarly debate emphasizes that CSR and DM are intersecting one another in contemporary corporate practice and discourse.

Among the few researchers that have explicitly linked DM and CSR, Karatas-Ozkan, Nicolopoulou and Özbilgin highlight that "CSR can often be conflated as a concept and practice with areas such as reputation, image, identity, brand, legitimacy, status and diversity" (2014, p. 2). Mor Barak and Daya (2014) add that a broader corporate vision

embracing the organization and its surrounding community would lead to a “corporate inclusion strategy” naturally linking CSR and DM. Along the same line of thought, more and more researchers argue that DM should be seen as closely linked to CSR (Hameed *et al.*, 2016; Mory, Wirtz and Göttel, 2016; Starostka-Patyk *et al.*, 2015). This approach gains more attention because DM represents one of the main areas of concern of internal CSR, as it is employees who attest and sustain diversity and social-responsibility-related values and practices in their daily activities. Furthermore, scholars also highlight that the external community increasingly demands to know more about the internal functioning of organizations and about issues such as diversity (Karatas-Ozkan *et al.*, 2004). Increasing external awareness of diversity efforts as a part of CSR can have positive effects on the corporate reputation among stakeholders, as in cases where shareholders and stock prices have been affected by the ranking of the CSR dimension of diversity (Cole *et al.*, 2016).

Bührmann (2017) condenses the convergent points by comparing several DM and CSR types, and by establishing strong interconnections in the light of relative aims, strategies, and practices. According to his findings, interlocking strands of DM and CSR “refer to each other in a reciprocal way in as much as they aim to contribute on an ongoing basis to the shaping of their external environment and, in doing so, not only transform organizational processes and structures but also the external environment itself” (Bührmann, 2017, p. 55).

The review of studies carried out so far also supports the view that external communication related to DM targets both internal and external stakeholders (Mor Barak, 2005) – a view that accords with the comprehensive stakeholder view of modern CSR (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017). Apart from that, external communication related to DM represents an area of contemporary corporate practice judged by both employees and external stakeholders as being necessary for and constitutive of a socially responsible organization (Cole *et al.*, 2016; Hameed *et al.*, 2016).

The present study, recognizing too that the communicative convergence of DM and CSR is indeed developing in current corporate discourse and that “on websites (...) organizations often proudly display their diversity management practices, alongside other CSR activities” (Robertson *et al.*, 2017, p. 152), adopts a critical perspective on discourse. It proposes an analytical approach that makes possible to map and explain in detail the multimodal discursive strategies used by organizations to bridge DM and CSR in their online external communication.

Methodology

As mentioned above, this article argues that the synergies that exist between DM and CSR practices can emerge and take discursive form in external communication. We argue in particular that these synergies can be revealed through a fine-grained analysis of the discursive strategies employed on corporate websites related to these issues. Burchell and Cook have already highlighted the potential contribution of critical discourse analysis (CDA) for the exploration of CSR:

CDA raises some important questions for understanding the discourse of CSR. In particular it highlights two key issues; firstly, identifying the way in which a discourse selectively translates events around it, and secondly, examining why that particular interpretation and discourse has gained predominance (Burchell and Cook, 2006, p. 123).

However, with few exceptions (Kumaran and Fauziah, 2014), research has focused mainly on the textual manifestations of CSR discourse; the discursive connections between DM and CSR in online external communication have been ignored.

Multimodal critical discourse analysis

By investigating a more complex aspect of social responsibility communication – namely, the discursive recontextualization of overlapping DM and CSR practices – this article argues for a methodological framework based upon a multimodal perspective on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that can facilitate a more nuanced understanding and interpretation of these two symbiotic areas of management practice. This perspective allow us to detect systematically the reccurent strategies by which multimodal choices are harnessed to promote overlapping DM and CSR practices as “CDA can certainly increase our ability to describe texts and to document how they communicate” (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 207).

CDA as an inquiry field is methodologically eclectic as “there is no theoretical orthodoxy in CDA”. (Van Leeuwen, 2009, p. 278)). The discourse analytic methodology adopted in this study stems from a CDA perspective (Fairclough, 2005, 2010; Machin 2012, 2013; van Leeuwen 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Wodak and Meyer, 2009), based on the idea that “all discourses are modelled on social practices” (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 104). According to

this approach to CDA, versions of social practices are recontextualized from reality into various texts through discursive processes that change the representation of social actors and social actions (van Leeuwen, 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Machin (2013) points out that social practices “are not represented through actually giving a clear account of events, nor by logical argument, nor by a reasonable assessment of information, but through a process of abstraction, addition, substitution, and deletion” (p. 352). Furthermore, from this perspective, discourses are also viewed as social practices that in themselves can transform the larger social practices in which these discourses are embedded: “discourses transform these practices in ways that safeguard the interest at stake in a given social context” (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 104). In his examination of sustainable development discourse, Dryzek (2013) additionally claims that discourses are able “to constitute and re-constitute the world just as surely as do formal institutions or material economic forces” (p. 239). Similarly, in her investigation of corporate responsibility discourse, Ählström acknowledges that “discourses direct social activities” (2010, p. 71).

Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) is based on the assumption that all semiotic resources, not just language, have different affordances and consequently can fulfill different communicative purposes. Thus in the context of discourse studies MCDA brings an important contribution to CDA (Kress, 2010; Machin, 2013). This multimodal perspective on CDA allows researchers to show the relevance of how “semiotic resources can be used to both create meaning but also to avoid certain kinds of commitments” (Machin, 2013, p. 350). In other words, as Dobers and Springett (2010), put it when dealing with a critical perspective on CSR, a discourse analysis also allows researchers to pinpoint how “it is the ‘silences’ that are deafening” (p. 65). According to MCDA, such “silences” can be manifested through various semiotic resources and in the course of resemiotization processes from one semiotic resource to another (Iedema, 2003). In this study, unpacking corporate communication with the analytical tools of MCDA brings to light not only “silences”, but also the unproductive tensions that appear between semiotic modes when employed in a stereotypical manner.

Before concluding this part, it should be specified that approaching discourse from this perspective implies that a particular understanding of the term “critical” in CDA is adopted in this research work. Following Machin and Mayr (2012), we consider that “the term ‘critical’ means ‘denaturalising’ the language to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in texts” (p. 5). Furthermore, as a multimodal approach to discourse is inseparable from a commitment to fine-grained analytical work meant to unveil the

complexity of communication, Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) understanding of this term is also adopted in this study: "critical" means not taking things for granted, opening up complexity, challenging reductionism" (p.20). This perspective is also in line with the "constructive-critical" approach from diversity management field that explore how DM practices that are continually (re)negotiated in action are also "subject to processes of communicative construction" (Trittin and Schoeneborn, p. 309).

Based on this perspective on discourse, the present study proposes a multimodal discourse analysis approach that is intended to map and explain in detail the discursive strategies employed by organizations in their online external communication related to DM and CSR:

RQ1: How are the coordinates of DM and CSR social practices (social actors and social actions) multimodally recontextualized in the corporate discourse?

RQ2: How do these recontextualizations enable the strategic integration of DM communication and CSR communication in the context of online external communication?

Case, data collection, and analytic procedure

In order to answer these two research questions, the MCDA approach presented here is applied to the specific case of Microsoft. One of the biggest technology companies in the world, with 124,000 employees worldwide (Statista, 2017), Microsoft brand themselves as being among the world's diversity leaders in showing their ongoing proactivity in relation to CSR and in being transparent in their communication about these issues (Stoller, 2017). This proactivity and transparency are strategically manifested in online external communication through their "Global Diversity and Inclusion" and "Corporate Social Responsibility" websites. The "Global Diversity and Inclusion" website is linked to the "Corporate Social Responsibility" website through shared web pages with the same multimodal content but other names: the "Stories" web pages from the context of the "Global Diversity and Inclusion" website, and the "Empowering Our Employees" web pages from the context of the "Corporate Social Responsibility" website.

The data collected in spring 2017 for this study comprise web pages from the company's "Global Diversity and Inclusion" website (<https://www.microsoft.com/en->

us/diversity). Such hypermodal data comprise both verbal and visual elements; more specifically, the 43 collected web pages include 64 clusters of text and their 55 accompanying images (22 photographic images, 29 graphic images, and four diagrams). In the first stage, the transcription of these web pages is realized by including in the first columns of a Word document all the multimodal clusters (each cluster of texts, accompanying images, and information about hyperlinking strategies). A multimodal cluster has been determined as being composed of the cluster of texts that have a shared title, together with their accompanying images. The coding and analysis of data in complex multimodal texts such as web pages are closely interrelated (Ravazzani and Maier, 2017a, b). Consequently, the second stage has been dedicated to a more analytical coding work related to the choices of multimodal recontextualization strategies encountered in each multimodal cluster. Table 1 provides an overview of the main multimodal recontextualization strategies.

< insert Table 1 here >

This second stage of the coding work has thus been based upon a priori codes selected from van Leeuwen's categories of discursive transformations of social actors and social actions (van Leeuwen, 2008). First, all the categories in each multimodal cluster have been identified and highlighted. Second, examples of all the categories found in each spatial–visual unit have been provided in the last column of the Word document. Two researchers have replicated this coding and analytical work separately, then compared and refined emerging codes and interpretations to ensure consistency. Table 2 provides a sample of the coding and analytical work.

< insert Table 2 here >

Findings: multimodal discursive strategies for communicating the link between DM and CSR

In what follows, Microsoft's multimodal discursive strategies employed on the “Global Diversity and Inclusion” website are exemplified and explained. These findings concern the concentric recontextualization of social actors and social actions that characterizes the corporate discourse. Such recontextualization makes visible and enables the discursive interweaving of DM and CSR values and initiatives in order to represent them as Microsoft's joint corporate strategies. It should be noted that, in what follows, the particular usage of the terms of organizational identity and corporate identity is meant to accommodate our approach

to the conceptualization of these two complementary terms. Our approach is based on Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer's perspective as they draw attention to the blurring lines between corporate and organizational identity calling for an integrate understanding of these two terms: "an organizational identity can relate to a corporate identity and inform the perceptions and interaction of its stakeholders and hence be a corporate identity" (Cornelissen et al, 2007, p.88). Christensen (2008) also points out that "we can define corporate or organizational identity as *the way an organization is commonly presented*" (p.1016).

Concentric recontextualization of social actors

Microsoft uses specific discursive strategies of recontextualizing multiple social actors from reality into the digital context of the "Global Diversity and Inclusion" website. In order to shape the readers' understanding of Microsoft's diverse and inclusive universe, the company represents several groups of social actors as multilayered concentric circles going beyond the limits of the company's real or virtual perimeter.

The diverse social actors are thus grouped and defined according to their placement in relation to the company – inside Microsoft, or beyond it. Having the company as a core makes possible both the groups' existence and their intensive interaction and collaboration across all sorts of borders – individual, organizational, and societal. The various groups represented as being inside Microsoft are current heterogeneous employees, their families and friends, customers, local Microsoft communities, and global Microsoft communities. Those beyond Microsoft but still linked to the company's activities are prospective employees, worldwide community partners, civil rights and service organizations, US and international associations, universities, and high schools: "Our approach to diversity and inclusion doesn't stop with our workforce" ("Beyond Microsoft").

The distance between all these social actors and the company is reduced hypermodally through social media icons and through direct verbal address which encourage interactivity. For example: "explore how we're helping our employees thrive" ("Home"); "contact us, share" ("Asians"); "tell your school, compete or get inspired" ("Beyond Microsoft"); "get involved" ("Events"). Such hypermodal discursive strategies are also intended to generate concrete involvement and/or to enhance social actors' motivation to become part of the global Microsoft communities.

These groups are first of all represented through discursive assimilations that make clear the concentric design in relation to Microsoft as a reference point: “communities across Microsoft and communities around us” (“Home”). The concentric circles and the diversity-related characteristics of the groups and the social actors are also represented in an abstract way, starting from individuals and moving to the whole company: “diverse talent” (“The Business of Inclusion”), “diverse workforce and diverse Microsoft” (“Inside Microsoft”). Symbolic representations such as “our employees are a bridge to our customers or a supportive community across Microsoft” (“Home”) suggest the groups’ permeability and the connections existing among these multilayered circles. The multilayered aspect of these concentric circles is manifested through the implicit hierarchy that can be detected in the representation: “We see our leaders and managers as role models in transforming the culture” (“Inside Microsoft”).

The social actors from inside Microsoft are categorized as homogeneous Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), generically included in affinity groups according to multiple diversity-related dimensions (i.e. Asians ERG; Blacks ERG; Cross-Disability ERG; Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender ERG; Latino/Hispanic ERG; Parents ERG; and Women ERG), and employee networks: “To help foster diversity and inclusion, Microsoft has a rich community of Employee Resource Groups (ERG) and Employee Networks (EN)” (“Inside Microsoft”).

The representation of these categories of social actors as concentric and permeable circles is verbally supported by repeatedly adding three main premodifiers: the possessive pronoun “our,” and the adjectives “diverse” and “global.” For example: “our employees resource groups, our communities” (“Home”); “diverse teams” (“Women”); “diverse coalition” (“Asians”); “diverse students” (“The Business of Inclusion”); “global Latino/Hispanic communities” (“Latino/Hispanic”); “global hubs” (“Women”).

Each of these groups is allocated a dedicated web page on which the verbal information is accompanied by hyperlinks and by close-up photos of anonymous individuals representing the specific group. All the individuals are young and smiling. This monotonous visual strategy contributes to the concealment of the social actors’ individual identities and it also weakens the effect of the more nuanced verbal representation. Maier and Ravazzani (2018) also underscore how visual stereotyping strategies gloss over heterogeneity on corporate websites dedicated to diversity issues although the verbal representation revolves around the

idea of heterogeneity. In this way, the multimodal representation is marked by insufficient communicative strength because of unsuccessful processes of resemiotization. Only one group is represented by the portrait of an older person – the disability group. Visually connecting the only photo of an older person with the presentation of this group might implicitly suggest that age itself is considered a disability. In this case, it is evident that the visual discursive strategy is subverting the verbal strategies in the communicative process. Furthermore, the visual exclusion of older persons from the web pages explored also weakens the credibility of the company’s verbal representation of its overall commitment to diversity and inclusion. However, the animated graphics that show the dynamic progress of Microsoft’s workforce demographics contribute to the credibility of the verbal statements that emphasize the steady commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Although the social actors are predominantly represented through assimilations in order to highlight their attachment to self-identified groups that reproduce stereotypical diversity divisions, they are also represented as a “community of individuals” (“Parents”). Current and prospective employees are encouraged to maintain their unique personality and competency: “Come as you are. Do what you love” (“Home”). They are also represented multimodally as specific individuals, which brings them closer to the readers. For example, on the very first page of the website, a close-up of a smiling black woman is displayed near a verbal imperative that functions as a hyperlink, which both activates the reader and informally discloses the woman’s name: “Meet Migela” (“Home”).

The same strategy – of individualizing social actors both verbally and visually – is employed on the “Stories” web page, where diverse social actors are represented in a similar way. Some of the hyperlinks give the reader access to videos and blogs in which employees tell their stories, while making explicit their gratitude and commitment to the organization and its effort in the area of internal CSR. The stories are primarily meant to communicate how Microsoft concretely implements diversity and inclusion, but they also show how employees interact with one another and for what purposes. The multimodal stories also contribute to the concentric discursive representation of Microsoft’s efforts to create a sense of global “we-ness” across all borders, as for example with the title of a blog displayed on the “Stories” web page: “How five young technologists changed their communities, the jungle, and themselves.” The legitimization of such socially responsible activities is reinforced by the discursive inclusion of a new category of social actors, namely the future employees. The

company's proactive commitment to perpetuating their endeavors is manifested through anticipatory strategies by employing people who share the same socially responsible values and goals: "The common thread that attracts us to candidates is their passion for their work and the desire to make an impact in their careers, in the community, and on the world" ("The Business of Inclusion").

The representation of the company as a progressive force for social evolution at the core of all these concentric circles of diverse social actors allows the actions related to DM and CSR to be discursively integrated in similar multilayered concentric circles.

Concentric recontextualization of social actions

The discursive strategies used to recontextualize social actions across the website are intended to construct these actions as multilayered concentric circles, starting within the company at the level of the individual employee, then going beyond the company's real or virtual perimeter. The impact of Microsoft's initiatives is thus represented as influencing the trajectory of individual behaviors and careers, of various communities, and of the whole world. The impact is related not only to Microsoft's direct actions, but also to the influence of these socially responsible activities on the various social actors' own efforts to put Microsoft's values related to diversity and inclusion into practice. The efforts of the employees are manifested in their continuous involvement in the internal CSR activities initiated by Microsoft, and transformed into ongoing practices. An exemplary illustration of representing the socially responsible activities initiated by the company as concentric and permeable circles appears on the very first page of the website: "We support seven major employee groups and over 40 employee networks that help us build a supportive community across Microsoft" ("Home").

Discursively, the representational means include both interactive actions (e.g. *support*, *collaborate*, *network*) and instrumental ones (e.g. *donate*, *provide*, *offer*). However, the accompanying visual representations lack the nuances of the verbal representations, and do not add relevant information about the respective actions. For example, the symbolic visualization of these efforts is realized through the graphic images of an abstract network, a yellow electric bulb, and a yellow tree whose roots are replaced by a pencil and with the faces of different people placed in circles or on its branches. Furthermore, the stereotypical still images that accompany the text clusters are not able to provide a sense of authenticity

that could strengthen the communicative impact of the verbal mode. The unproductive tension between the verbal and visual distribution of information weakens the credibility of the multimodal message.

The repeated discursive strategy of presenting the interactive and mutually beneficial character of socially responsible activities is also found in the titles of several text chunks: “Community accelerates our progress” paired with “And our progress accelerates our communities” (“Home”). Apart from such actions, the discursive representation is also marked by “cognitive mental processes” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 58) that play a significant role in rendering how Microsoft understands the beneficial impact of workforce diversity upon the company’s performance: “At Microsoft, we believe that our continued success depends on the diverse skills, experiences, and backgrounds that our employees bring to the company” (“Inside Microsoft”); “We believe that more diverse teams create greater innovations with more diverse approaches, questions, and ideas. With this belief in mind, we strive to be a leader in attracting women to careers in high tech” (“Women”).

The perpetual and multilayered character of social actions is discursively conveyed through the repeated use of continuous verb forms, which suggest constant growth, both in terms of improvement and of expansion. The improvement efforts are related to career upgrading: “growing and developing leaders, nurturing future leaders, encouraging career advancement” (“Asians”). The idea of expansion is related to how the social actions are spread: “building the communities around us” (“Home”), “sharing language and culture with other Microsoft employees” (“Asians”), “bringing more diversity into science” (“Beyond Microsoft”). The continuous character of the social actions is discursively constructed through the repeated use of verbs that denote expansion and advancement, such as *broaden*, *improve*, *increase*, *empower*. These discursive strategies also contribute to the legitimization of the respective social practices, from individual development to community outreach and global impact, as the company strives to “empower every person and every organization on the planet to do more and achieve more” (“The Business of Inclusion”).

All these social actions are also substituted by generalizing abstractions – for example, by the verb “celebrating” – in order to highlight their fundamental positive quality: “celebrating workplace diversity” (“LGBT”) and “celebrating what technology can do to empower people” (“The Business of Inclusion”). Such strategic representations play a key role on the “Global Diversity and Inclusion” website, and they therefore contribute to a promotional

discourse of DM initiatives as inseparable dimensions of both internal CSR initiatives and the broader CSR practices.

The multitude of socially responsible activities is substituted discursively by symbolic representations that characterize them and the company's dynamic identity as being mutually constitutive: "In over 20 years of committed diversity and inclusion efforts, we've learned that diversity is not a finite goal; it is a journey that requires constant self-assessment and recommitment" ("Home"). The ongoing practices transcend their status as sequences of socially responsible activities and become the organizational and corporate identity itself: "Being inclusive is not something we simply do, but rather it stands for who we are" ("Inside Microsoft"). By defining diversity and inclusion in these ways, the company adds them to "the proto-attributes" of its organizational and corporate identity (Kroezen and Heugens, 2013, p. 98). The ongoing engagement in and responsiveness to DM and CSR are thus communicated in one single framework as being the visible ways through which the company's identity manifests itself.

Discussion and conclusion

Results from the analysis show in detail how the intersections and synergies between DM and CSR are discursively realized in online external communication; in particular, they show how DM is integral to internal CSR in the analyzed company strategy, while also stretching its impact beyond the limits of the organizational boundaries, along with external CSR. Thus, the main relevance of such a research endeavor lies in showing how through communicatively bridging CSR and DM, organizations can strategically create an interface with pressing societal demands and, at the same time, ensure recognition and a sense of pride among their employees.

This multimodal analysis reveals how Microsoft strive to communicatively construct DM and CSR as inextricable dimensions in their web context. DM is strategically integrated as a part of both internal CSR and the broader CSR practices. This is done through multimodal discursive strategies, which visibly represent the actors involved as well as the implemented actions of the company's holistic (Neuhaus and Schröer, 2017) and proactive (Rimington and Alagic, 2017) approach, centered on responding to and empowering a diverse array of stakeholders. Such multimodal discursive representations on Microsoft's "Global Diversity and Inclusion" website strategically link DM and CSR values and initiatives at individual,

communal, and global levels. In order to construct this strategic link, the recontextualizations of the social actors and social actions in concentric circles are marked by a constant discursive tension.

These circles are clearly defined and demarcated in the corporate discourse because the company needs to show that it acknowledges two issues. The first of these is the diverse identities of individual employees and of various collaborative groups of employees. The effect here is to reflect the wide range of visible and invisible differences (Loden and Rosener, 1991; Ely and Thomas, 2001). The second issue is the variety of the broader groups outside the company, thus extending the scope of the company's commitment beyond its formal organizational boundaries (Mor Barak, 2005; Mor Barak and Daya, 2014) in response to internal and external demands (Bühmann, 2017). However, these circles are also discursively constructed as being permeable, because the actors' actions connect them across all boundaries, from the individual ones to the organizational and societal ones. This permeability of the concentric circles that organize Microsoft's discourse is meant to communicate the company's holistic and proactive approach to CSR, as manifested through ongoing social practices that strategically connect DM and CSR values and initiatives and that ultimately frame them within the general strategy of the company (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004). The discursive strength of displaying blogs on the web pages resides in showing at first hand how internal "actors make sense of institutional logics via discourses and use these discourses in their interactions" (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2015, p. 22).

Consequently, when the continuous and simultaneous implementation of DM and CSR are showcased, the concentric discursive recontextualizations of ongoing practices clarify the overarching integrative approach that characterizes the company's general strategy. Such concrete manifestations include the company's internal, communal, and global initiatives shaping the employees' career paths, values, and behavior, the corporate identity and culture, and the corporate efforts to support the development of communities across the whole world. In particular, these concentric discursive recontextualizations of social actions contribute to explaining the dynamics of Microsoft's identity formation: namely, how the company's identity is enabled and maintained by this overarching integrative approach. Consequently, the company's social performance – embodied by the myriad of activities interlinking DM and CSR – is discursively represented as being at the core of the organizational and corporate identity. Thus it contributes to building both credibility (Neuhaus and Schröer, 2017) and

internal and external legitimacy (Basil and Erlandson, 2008; Hameed *et al.*, 2016).

However, the multimodal analysis of the discursive recontextualization strategies meant to construct an integrated image of DM and CSR practices has also revealed that the relation between the verbal and the visual representations is rather unbalanced. Both tensions and oppositions have been found in the semiotic landscape of the web pages. When resemiotized from one semiotic mode to the other, the discursive representation cannot entirely fulfill its communicative purposes due to a choice of stereotypical still images. The analysis has shown that in spite of the logical coherence provided by the verbal mode, this coherence is diluted and sometimes subverted in recurrent resemiotization processes from words to still images. Furthermore, when providing a weak or no associative resonance between words and still images in the representation of the social actors and of their actions, the credibility of the multimodal discursive strategies is also weakened.

This study contributes to contemporary CSR discourses on theoretical, methodological and practical levels. First, the study fills a gap in both the DM and the CSR literatures and responds to the recently expressed need (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017; Jonsen *et al.*, 2013) to examine and build bridges between the two management concepts and practices, in the effort to theoretically advance this emerging but still underresearched area. It does so by discerning and scrutinizing the discursive strategies purposefully employed across several semiotic modes by contemporary organizations in order to reflect the symbiotic relationship between the two areas in a credible way, and to manifestly emphasize and legitimize the corporate commitment to both DM and CSR. Furthermore, by exploring in detail how complex discursive strategies can facilitate or subvert a nuanced communication of intertwined CSR and DM practices in online external context, this study also contributes to an understanding of communication as a constitutive process by which the synergy between CSR and DM can be strategically manifested and maintained.

Second, on a methodological level, this study contributes to the current published literature examining corporate discourse in the online external communication of these issues (e.g. Pasztor, 2016; Point and Singh; 2003). The multimodal approach adopted extends the focus of analysis from exclusively language to other semiotic modes, while also addressing their interconnectivity and their functional differentiation. The qualitative approach also favors a fine-grained critical exploration of meaning construction over quantitative content description. Thus by qualitatively exploring the interplay of different semiotic modes from a

critical perspective, this study enhances a nuanced understanding of corporate strategies used for communicating about DM and CSR in an online multimodal context. Researchers are thus provided with a perspective and a range of analytical tools that can facilitate the examination of online external communication, and can serve to uncover discourses that might not be apparent through other methods. This observation corresponds closely to Machin and Mayr's claim that these tools provide the possibility to perform "a systematic and controlled exercise that can be empirically repeated by others" (Machin and Mayr, 2012:210).

Finally, this study also contributes to practice because, according to a practitioner, "the communication of diversity management is challenging as it is not only focusing on anti-discrimination and social objectives but is rather a valuable investment in the sustainability of a company" (Jablonski, 2017:243). This study offers tools and reflections that managers responsible for DM, CSR, and related communication can use to build effective discursive strategies in an online multimodal context, and additionally to credibly integrate DM and CSR communication into one single framework. When being aware of the meaning-making potential of several semiotic resources and of their interplay, practitioners can recognize and implement appropriate communicative strategies in order to highlight in a credible way the intersectional dimensions of CSR and DM activities of their companies. A multimodal perspective can also draw the attention of practitioners to the fact that web pages are inherently multi-semiotic, and that each semiotic resource can play a unique role in deploying meaning while complementing or subverting the other resources. Once the meaning-making potential of additional semiotic resources over and above language is acknowledged and strategically employed, communication can get more nuanced, while stereotypes and misunderstandings can be avoided.

The limitations of this research relate largely to its dependence on a single case study. In addition, this study has focused solely on the linguistic sense-making processes (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017) that can be visibly promoted by organizations in their online discourse. This paves the way for future research, which could usefully combine and compare this aspect with the exploration of, first, cognitive processes (by considering the influence of internal and external demands on management decisions regarding DM and CSR strategies and communication) and, second, conative processes (by considering the strategic and internal consistency of the actual organizational commitment and the interpretation of this by other actors). Furthermore, future research would benefit from exploring multimodal discursive

strategies across companies from the perspective of auto-communication theory (Christensen 1997 and Morsing 2006) in order to explain how particular patterns of multimodal meta-texts are strategically activated according to specific reasons.

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