Communicating CSR – identifying effective practices and how to overcome stakeholder skepticism

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21.8.2022
Turku

Master's thesis

Today, corporate social responsibility (CSR) plays a significant role in practically any internationally operating company's business: more than ever, consumers perceive companies' environmental, social, and economic responsibilities as a prerequisite for ongoing business. However, in addition to implementing CSR activities, companies should also be able to communicate them in a manner that stakeholders perceive as genuine and intrinsic. While successful CSR communication can positively impact company's brand image and correspondingly, negative consequences may be gained from unsuccessful attempts of CSR communication. Previous research has found that in many cases, companies are not aware of how their CSR activities should be communicated and may thus refrain from any CSR communication in fear of accidentally harming their brand image.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand what communication strategies companies use to overcome stakeholder skepticism. This is implemented through a case study by analyzing what kind of a role does CSR play in companies overall, examining how CSR is communicated to stakeholders, and inspecting what kind of tactics do companies use in their CSR communication to overcome stakeholder skepticism. Focal theories of CSR and stakeholder skepticism are employed to form a comprehensive framework for the research.

Three case companies were chosen to carry out the qualitative study. In the analysis process, the corporate websites, latest sustainability reports, and social media accounts were carefully inspected to create an understanding of the CSR communication in the companies and thus answer the appointed research questions.

The findings of this thesis suggest that CSR plays a notable role in the case companies' online communication. However, commitment to all three dimensions of CSR – environmental, social, and economic – as well as utilization of different communication strategies in terms of CSR was found varying. While each of the case companies was found to outperform in some parts of the analysis, none was found to utilize all tactics even moderately well. Thus, it appears that knowledge of CSR communication strategies or tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism might still not be very good in companies. To better be able to gain the full positive effects of CSR on their business, companies could benefit from familiarizing more with the existing tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism and identifying the most effective tactics for them.

Key words: stakeholder skepticism, corporate social responsibility, CSR communication

Pro gradu -tutkielma

Oppiaine: Kansainvälinen liiketoiminta
Tekijä: Suvi Mattila
Otsikko: Yhteiskuntavastuusta viestiminen – tehokas vastuullisuusviestintä sidosryhmäskeptisyyden ehkäisemisen keinona
Ohjaajat: D.Sc. Niina Nummela, M.Sc. Emilia Isolauri
Sivumäärä: 98 sivua + liitteet 2 sivua
Päivämäärä: 21.8.2022

Yhteiskuntavastuu (CSR) on nykypäivänä tärkeä osa käytännössä katsoen minkä tahansa kansainvälisillä markkinoilla toimivan yrityksen liiketoimintaa. Kuluttajien näkökulmasta yhä enenevissä määrin yritysten ympäristö-, sosiaalinen ja taloudellinen vastuullisuus ovat edellytyksiä menestyksekkäälle liiketoiminnalle. Vastuullisen toiminnan lisäksi yritysten tulisi kuitenkin myös kyetä viestimään vastuullisuudestaan sidosryhmilleen luontaisella ja vilpittömällä tavalla. Onnistunut vastuullisuusviestintä vaikuttaa positiivisesti yrityksen brändiin, kun taas heikosti toteutettuna se voi päinvastoin jopa vahingoittaa yrityksen imagoa. Aiemmat tutkimukset ovat osoittaneet, että yritykset eivät välttämättä tiedä tai osaa viestiä omista vastuullisuustoimenpiteistään, ja negatiivisten seurausten pelossa saattavat jopa pidättäytyä kokonaan viestimästä vastuullisuudestaan.

Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tarkoituksena on tapaustutkimuksen keinoin ymmärtää, minkälaisia viestinnän keinoja yritykset käyttävät vastuullisuusviestinnässään välttääkseen sidosryhmien kokeman skeptisyyden sanomaansa kohtaan. Tämä analysoimalla minkälainen rooli vastuullisuudella on yrityksissä ylipäänsä tänä päivänä, tutkimalla miten vastuullisuudesta viestitään sidosryhmille, ja tarkastelemalla, minkälaisia keinoja yritykset käyttävät vastuullisuusviestinnässään sidosryhmäskeptisyyden voittamiseen. Tutkimuksen viitekehys rakentuu yhteiskuntavastuun ja sidosryhmäskeptisyyden keskeisten teorioiden ympärille.

Laadullisen tutkimuksen suorittamiseen valittiin kolme eri aloilla toimivaa case-yritystä. Tutkimuksessa analysoitiin näiden yritysten virallisia nettisivuja, viimeisimpiä vastuullisuusraportteja, sekä yritysten omia sosiaalisen median käyttäjätilejä. Vastaukset tutkimusongelmiin muodostettiin näiden lähteiden perusteella.

Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että vastuullisuus on tärkeässä osassa jokaisen case-yrityksen verkossa tapahtuvaa viestintää. Tästä huolimatta sitoutuminen kaikkiin kolmeen CSR:n osa-alueeseen – ympäristö-, sosiaaliseen ja taloudelliseen vastuullisuuteen – sekä viestinnän eri keinojen hyödyntäminen vastuullisuudesta viestittäessä, oli yrityksissä vaihtelevaa. Tuloksista käy ilmi, että vastuullisuusviestinnän eri osa-alueiden hyödyntäminen vaihteli yrityksissä suuresti: jokainen kolmesta case-yrityksistä onnistui erittäin hyvin jollain vastuullisuusviestinnän osa-alueella, mutta tutkimuksen perusteella yksikään yrityksistä ei hyödyntänyt kaikkia tutkimuksessa analysoituja vastuullisuusviestinnän osa-alueita edes kohtuullisen hyvin.

Tutkimuksen tulosten perusteella vaikuttaa siltä, että yritykset eivät välttämättä ole kovin tietoisia olemassa olevista vastuullisuusviestinnän strategioista tai keinoista, joilla sidosryhmien kokemaan skeptisyyttä voitaisiin vastuullisuusviestinnässä vähentää. Täten yrityksille voisi olla hyödyllistä tutustua vastuullisuusviestinnän keinoihin ja tunnistaa omalle yritykselle sopivimmat viestintästrategiat, jotta vastuullisuuden tuomat hyödyt ulottuisivat myös yritysten omaan liiketoimintaan.

Avainsanat: sidosryhmäskeptisyys, yritysten yhteiskuntavastuu, vastuullisuusviestintä

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background for the study

Today, topics related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) are extremely timely; one could even say that communicating responsibility acts is an insistence for any company operating nationally or internationally as consumers have become increasingly aware of the products they consume and their impact on our environment. However, the ways of presenting the responsibility acts in companies' annual reviews, websites, overall marketing communication and even purpose-built annual sustainability reviews are quite miscellaneous. Michelon et al. (2014) find in their article that in many cases of CSR communication, the reporting practices are not purely associated with higher disclosure quality, but in many cases symbolic, rather than substantive.

While continuously growing amount of attention is being directed to corporate responsibility in companies operating basically any field of business, simultaneously, consumers seem to become increasingly skeptical and cynical about corporate responsibility communication. According to GlobeScan's Radar Report 2021, fewer than half of the consumers in European markets believe that companies communicate honestly and truthfully about their performance on addressing climate change. Trust especially in big businesses has dropped particularly sharply in recent years and large companies' attempts to appear responsible and / or purpose-driven are easily viewed as artificial (GlobeScan Radar Report 2019).

The importance of CSR is showing no signs of fading off (Agudelo et al. 2019). Actually, it is quite vice versa: according to a recent study, putting sustainability at the core of the business model marks the most important reason for a company to be recognized as a leader on its field (GlobeScan SustainAbility Survey 2021). As a result of continuing globalization and constantly heightened and widened expectations and overall awareness of stakeholders, the responsibilities of corporations keep on expanding. Simultaneously, arises the need for credible and effective CSR communication. (Crane & Glozer 2016.) Differentiation through CSR can be an effective way for companies to build relative advantage and thus stand out from one's competitors (Jinhua et al. 2019).

Since its first introduction in 1950s, the topic of CSR has been one of the most multidimensional and controversial concepts in business and related academic literature

(Carroll 1991). Perhaps due to its very multifaceted and constantly evolving nature, to this date, no single, generally accepted definition of CSR still exists in the academia (Carroll & Brown 2019, 43; Rahman 2011). Outlining the concept, it is worth pointing out that the reporting of responsible actions alone does not solely mean that a company is committed to the principles of CSR. While obligatory regulations for companies' responsibility reporting set by law also exist, CSR is understood as a much wider concept. For example, a definition presented by Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010) concludes:

> Corporate social responsibility stands for a commitment to improve (societal) well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources (Du et al. 2010, 8).

Deducing from the definition above as well as the other widely acknowledged frameworks of CSR that will more closely be introduced in Chapter 2, it becomes evident that rather than settling for only reporting actions that are classified as responsible, the concept of CSR stands for more comprehensive and ambitious commitment of companies to improve societal wellbeing and conduct business in an environmentally sustainable way. In this thesis, the same definition of CSR will be utilized.

Traditionally, CSR is agreed to consist of three elements of responsibility: economic, environmental, and social. (Elkington 1997, 70; Rohweder 2004, 77.) With an engagement in CSR activities, there are numerous both short- and long-term benefits companies seek to generate: in the short run, for instance, favorable stakeholder attitudes and enhanced support behaviors in purchasing, employment-seeking, employee and customer satisfaction, and company-investing. In the long run, building positive corporate image and goodwill, strengthening stakeholder relationships, creating employee and customer loyalty, and enhancing stakeholders' advocacy behaviors are at aim. (Du et al. 2010, Skarmeas & Leonidou 2013).

The fair aim of conducting business in a more responsible way does not come without issues. What marks an increasingly noteworthy issue in conducting CSR in the 21st century, is the growing amount of skepticism that consumers and other stakeholders tend to direct to corporate social involvement. Since consumers, governments, and other corporate stakeholders direct progressively more attention to the contributions companies can, should, and actually make to society, a greater notice is given to the CSR communication as well. Not always is companies' engagement in CSR initiatives automatically seen as a mere will to make a positive contribution to the society and

environment. Instead, skepticism regarding the true objectives behind corporate responsibility actions and CSR communication is on the rise. (Skarmeas & Leonidou 2013.)

By definition, stakeholder skepticism refers to the inclination to distrust and even perform negative feelings to companies' CSR activities and claims experienced by company's stakeholders. Typically, it arises particularly when stakeholders repeatedly detect an inconsistency between company's CSR actions and communication about it. (Rim & Kim 2016.) In the literature review of this thesis, published academic literature regarding skepticism towards CSR actions and overcoming it was found to be quite fragmented. The literature review reveals that skepticism as a topic has been studied and touched in various articles with keywords such as "CSR skepticism", "stakeholder skepticism", "consumer skepticism", "CSR communication", and "stakeholder involvement", but more compiling research is still needed.

To gain the full beneficial effects on their businesses, companies must be able to communicate their CSR practices on a credible and intrinsic manner. Should they fail to do so, there will potentially be unfavorable consequences: not only are the positive sides of the CSR activity missed, but also, even negative perceptions on the company's brand image may be gained. (Marin et al. 2015). Thus, to encourage companies to further CSR activities, a better understanding of how to implement CSR communication effectively and overcome stakeholder skepticism becomes vital.

1.2   Aim and structure of the study

This study aims to better understand the ways international companies commit to and communicate about their CSR actions and seeks to analyze how previously identified means to enhance the credibility and thus overcome stakeholder skepticism are used today in the case companies' CSR communication. Hopefully, companies today and in the future will find help from this study in order to find ways to create and enhance their own CSR communication. What is more, proven positive effects gained from successful CSR activities may encourage companies to commit to even more and longer-lasting CSR actions in the future.

The focus of this study is on the CSR-related communication of the chosen case companies as representatives of CSR communication in the Nordics today. When

analyzing the discourses of CSR communication, the focus is directed on the web pages and online sustainability reports of the companies. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to find out *what are the CSR communication strategies are used in case companies today to overcome stakeholder skepticism.*

Deducing from the above, this research seeks to find out answers to the following sub-questions:

I. What kind of a role does CSR play in the business of case companies today?

II. In what ways is CSR communicated to stakeholders in the case companies?

III. What kind of tactics do the case companies use in their CSR communication to overcome stakeholder skepticism?

With these research questions, all three sectors of CSR – economic, environmental, and social – are equally examined. Related marketing communication is analyzed thoroughly with a framework built from pertinent theory. This study uses secondary sources as the data for empirical study – that is, online marketing communication of case companies own origin.

While the level and diversity of the case companies' commitment to the three aspects of CSR are examined, analysis of the true effectiveness of the detected CSR activities in case companies and thus their real impact on society is excluded from this research. This is due to the reason the investigating the effectiveness of the CSR activities would require extensive, both internal and external data from the case companies this study has no access to. Therefore, the focus in this study is solely on the case companies' own online communication. When conducting the empirical research and making conclusions, it was acknowledged that when companies communicate their own CSR activities, it is possible that the information might contain some distortions: for instance, the message could be presented in a more positive light than would be truthful.

This study proceeds as follows: firstly, in the introduction chapter, CSR and its present state and the concept of stakeholder skepticism have been introduced alongside the

research topic and the research questions. The second and third chapter will provide a literature review of the two main theoretical concepts of this study: in the second chapter, the concept of CSR along with the focal frameworks of CSR and the concept of CSR communication will be presented, and in the third chapter, stakeholder skepticism, including the stakeholder theory and methods earlier literature has identified efficient in overcoming it, will be set forth.

Fourth chapter presents the research design. Firstly, the context of the study, as well as the chosen qualitative research approach will be illuminated, with reflection to the research questions. Secondly, the case companies are introduced. In chapter 4.3 data characteristics and data collection methods will be presented for the name of transparency in the research process. For this study, it was chosen to carry out a case study of CSR communication implemented by the chosen companies, which in turn is displayed in chapter 4.4. Finally, in chapter 4.5, the reliability and transferability of the study will be evaluated.

The findings of the research are announced in the fifth chapter with support of the sub-research questions. The sixth chapter starts with the summary of the study, followed by the main findings alongside conclusions and limitations of the study. Suggestions for future research will also be presented.

2   Corporate social responsibility communication

2.1   CSR as a concept

Over the past decades, we have got to witness a notable development in the understanding of the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Whereas in 1970, a famous American economist Milton Friedman controversially stated in the *New York Times* magazine that "the only social responsibility of business is to increase its profits" (Friedman 1970), approaching to the 21st century, the understanding of companies' social responsibility has grown significantly wider. In 2001, European Commission defined CSR as follows: "Corporate social responsibility is essentially a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment" (Commission of the European communities 2001, 4). While acknowledging the importance of social and environmental aspects in business operations, one can see that CSR was still presented as only a voluntary activity for companies to contribute. The thought of companies' responsibility for their actions was obviously starting to raise its head, yet the main emphasis of business still remained in profit-making, as outlined further in the same publication:

> Although the prime responsibility of a company is generating profits, companies can at the same time contribute to social and environmental objectives, through integrating corporate social responsibility as a strategic investment into their core business strategy. (Commission of the European communities 2001, 4.)

A full decade managed to pass from the abovementioned definition until CSR was recognized as something obligatory for companies to commit to in 2011. To this date, the following, significantly broader definition of CSR remains valid and officially used in European Commission: CSR stands for "the responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society" (European Commission 2011, 6).

To this date, the concept of CSR has been widely researched and several definitions have been provided by scholars emphasizing alternately the social, economic, political, and environmental aspects of the term. Despite the numerous efforts to bring out an unbiased and clear definition of CSR, no single generally accepted definition for the concept still exists. (Carroll & Brown 2019, 43; Rahman 2011). This is not, however, as problematic as it at first glance might seem. Dahlsrud (2006) analyzed 37 definitions of CSR based

on a literature review of earlier provided definitions for the concept. In his analysis he concluded that although applying very different phrases, the definitions turned out predominantly congruent and managed to present the universal matter in different definitions that actually only altered in their words. In this thesis, the definition provided by the European Commission in 2011 (quoted in the previous page) is used.

Despite the widely recognized framework, CSR does not come without critique or ambiguity. There are several publications questioning the positive effect of CSR for company performance: for instance, Govindan, Kilic, Uyar, and Karaman found in their study (2021) on logistics sector, that companies' sustainability performance had no positive association with the company value but more likely, the opposite. Martinez-Conesa, Soto-Acosta, and Palacios-Manzano (2017) outline on their study on Spanish SMEs that the positive effect of CSR on company performance is only moderated by innovation, finding sustainable performance itself having less of an impact. On MinChung & YongHee's study (2019) on restaurant industry, CSR communication was found to have no effect on the company's shareholder value. Additionally, in a survey conducted by McKinsey & Company (2009), nearly half of the CFOs experienced skepticism towards the financial value of CSR activities.

In addition to the skepticism towards CSR's positive effectiveness inside companies, controversial issues have also been presented on CSR's true ability to make a difference outside companies. Particular conflict lies especially between the promises of brand companies and their true actions in their sourcing countries in the Third World: despite the good intentions, in many cases, the outcomes of these brand companies' actions tend in reality to turn out rather questionable from the local communities' and workers' point of view (Boje & Khan 2009). Significant criticism has been directed especially to the lack of measurability of companies' CSR activities and their effectiveness. In order to be able to better evaluate the value of CSR activities and their company impacts, more consistent and effective measurement systems are needed. (Weber 2008, Yang & Basile 2021.) CSR activities that appear to consumers as artificial or serving company's self-interest can indeed backfire and cause negative attributions towards the entire company (Marin et al. 2015).

It has been commonly suggested that the first formal definition of modern era CSR was brought in already in the 1950s by American scholar Howard R. Bowen, sometimes even

referred as the founder of CSR. (Carroll 1991, Dahlsrud 2006, Rahman 2011). In his book *Social Responsibilities of a Businessman* (1953) – being notably ahead of his time – Bowen argues the following:

> CSR refers to the obligation of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of objectives and values of our society (Bowen 1953, 6).

Following the pioneering work by Bowen, various frameworks for CSR have been performed. To gain a more throughout understanding of the concept, two of the well-known, widely borrowed frameworks of CSR, including pyramid of CSR by Carroll (1991) and triple bottom line by Elkington (1997), are presented in Chapter 2.2. These concepts were chosen into the literature review due to their wide acknowledgement in the academia as well as relevance to this study.

2.2 Theoretical frameworks of CSR

2.2.1 Pyramid of CSR

Pyramid of CSR, created by Archie B Carroll in 1991, stands still as one of the most borrowed frameworks of CSR. It illustrates the concept of CSR as built upon four different social responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. The pyramid model is illustrated next page in Figure 1.
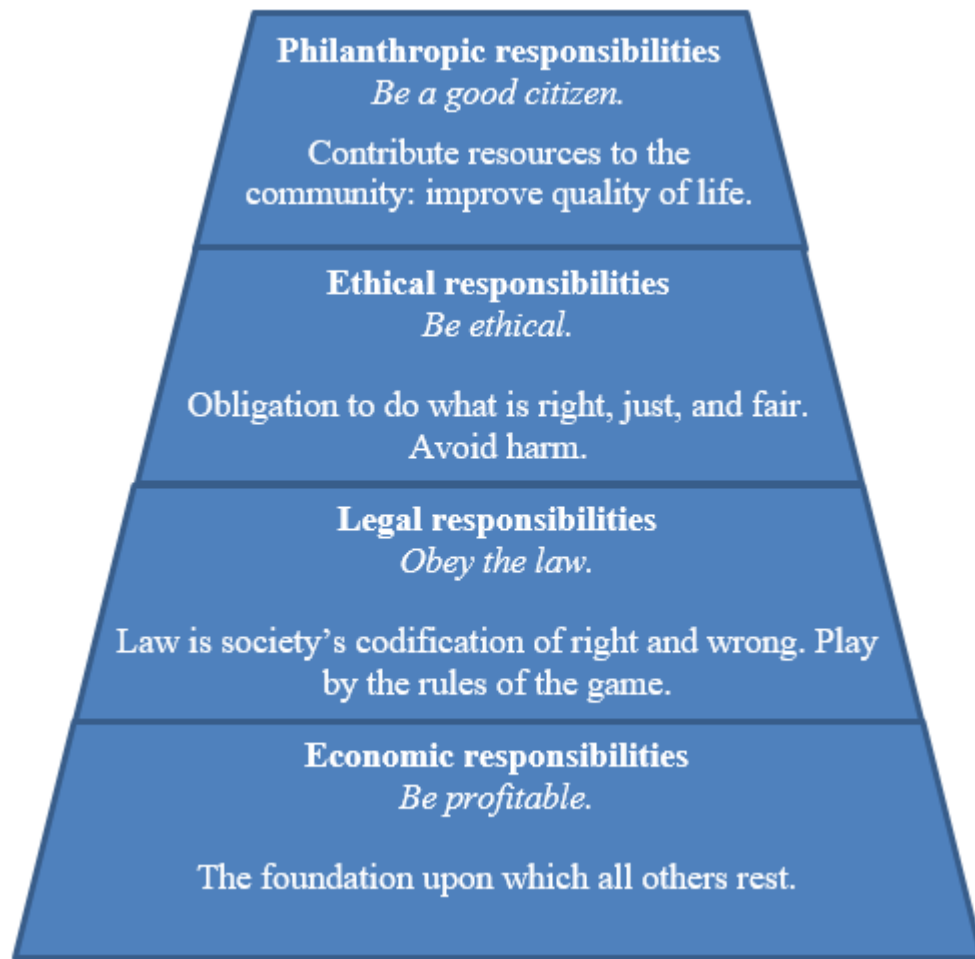
Figure 1: The pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility by Carroll (1991, 42).

The base of the CSR pyramid stands for economic responsibility: aside producing goods and services that consumers want and need, companies are expected to make maximum profit for its shareholders and maintain their strong competitive position. As it can be agreed, economic performance of a company is a prerequisite for any operating company and undergirds all other actions. (Carroll 1991.) However, this standpoint of prioritizing economic responsibility before everything else has been challenged: for instance, Baden (2016) criticizes the importance given merely to economic aspects in the framework and Kang & Wood (1995) even go as far as concluding that a business unable to be profitable without breaking legal or ethical norms should not be in business at all. On the other hand, Carroll has later on defended his view on economic responsibility by stating that it is society's expectation for companies to be profitable (Carroll 2016).

Simultaneously to economic responsibility, firms are in all cases expected to operate within the framework of the law, therefore legal responsibility being the second block of

the pyramid. There are varying regulations and rules provided by federal, state, and local governments, under which companies must operate to be regarded as an accepted part of the society: thus, legal responsibilities could even be referred to as "codified ethics" of a society. Together with economic responsibilities, legal responsibilities form the fundamental precepts of the free enterprise system. (Carroll 1991.) In their article commenting the pyramid of CSR (2016), Meynhardt and Gomez agree with Carroll that legislation forms the inevitable, overall framework for companies to operate in. Additionally, they bring out the fact that out of the four blocks of the pyramid, legal responsibility is the only one without which companies basically cannot do business.

Third, there is ethical responsibility: business's duty to do what is right and fair, while avoiding or minimizing harms to its stakeholders. Ethical responsibilities include the standards, expectations and norms that reflect a concern for what stakeholders regard as fair or morally or ethically right. Even though these often non-spoken rules of behavior have not been coded into law, obeying to them is practically necessary for companies. (Carroll 1991.) In line with Carroll, Bhattarachya and Sen (2004) highlight the importance of ethical responsibility by explaining CSR as doing more than is required by law. At its latest in 21st century, good ethics are a key consumer issue for practically any company (Carrigan & Attalla 2001).

Whilst fulfilling the first three blocks of the pyramid could be described as necessary for any successfully operating company, the last one, at the very top of the pyramid, stands more optional, as in Carroll's words, the 'icing of the CSR cake'. This means that philanthropic responsibilities, being the fourth block of the pyramid, are highly desired and prized actions when occurring, but according to Carroll (1991), not actually demanded from a company in an ethical or moral sense: not committing to philanthropic activities does not make a company unethical, like skipping any other block of the CSR pyramid would do. (Carroll 1991.) However, viewing philanthropic responsibilities only as a voluntary activity in a company's business has been questioned (Baden 2016, Baden & Harwood 2013), and have also been criticized for being difficult to grasp (Masoud 2017).

While Carroll's pyramid of CSR continues to validate its place as one of the most influential and popular constructs of CSR used in literature and practice (Moran et al. 2019, Baden 2016, Meynhardt & Gomez 2016, Carroll 2016), certain criticism on the

framework has been delivered. Especially the transferability of the model has been questioned: rather than providing a universal framework, pyramid of CSR has been stated to serve only American type developed, capitalistic societies (Matten & Moon 2005, Moran et al. 2019, Masoud 2017). Modifications to the model have also been proposed: for instance, Masoud (2017) suggested adding *glocal responsibilities* to the pyramid, emphasizing the role of place and time variant factors, such as socio-cultural matters and environmental conditions, whilst Baden (2016) rearranged the blocks of the original pyramid, placing ethical responsibilities to the bottom, followed by legal, economic, and philanthropic responsibilities.

2.2.2 Triple bottom line

Another well-known and widely borrowed framework for CSR was firstly proposed by John Elkington in the late 1990s. Elkington's Triple bottom line model (1997) focuses on the accountability of three aspects of business and simultaneously aims to fulfil them all: economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social justice. In the Triple bottom line model, the three are situated as each other overlapping areas of economic, environmental, and social responsibilities, portraying CSR in the middle. The triple bottom line model is illustrated below in Figure 2.
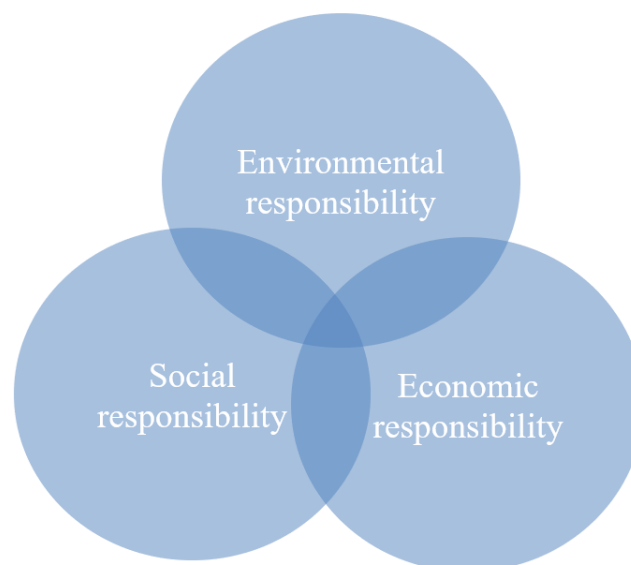
Figure 2: The triple bottom line model (adopted from Elkington 1997, 70).

Firstly, there is the economic bottom line: the demand that companies should at all times aim in their actions at economic sustainability and ensure their operations and economic capital are stable. Of the three bottom lines, economic responsibility is the most traditional and established: companies' responsibility to report their economic figures has been regulated by law for decades (Rohweder 2004, 98). Economic bottom line is not, however, restricted to only financial capital, as one might firstly comprehend it: in addition to monetary assets, there are *physical capital*, such as machinery and plants an organization possesses, *human capital*, with reference to the measure of experience, skills, and other knowledge-based assets of the individuals working in an organization, and finally, *intellectual capital,* that by definition of Edvinsson (1997) refers for instance to the soft skills, goodwill, hidden values, and other supplementary information to financial information. In terms of economic bottom line, it is all this tangible and intangible capital that companies should manage and ensure the continuity of, in order to survive in the business as a company. (Elkington 1997, 70, 74-77.)

Secondly, there is the environmental bottom line. While more often than not, companies' operational activity has certain negative impacts on environment, environmental bottom line aims at re-balancing the treatment of environmental costs and benefits that companies cause. According to Elkington, this is realized by two ways: firstly, avoiding mechanisms that are harmful to the environment and replacing them with better options, such as switching non-renewable energy sources to solar panels and other renewable substitutes, and secondly, taking actions to embrace the natural capital that is essential to ecosystem integrity. Therefore, with the bottom line of environmental responsibility a company can reach beyond the concrete damage they might be causing to environment, to preventative actions taken to protect the diversity of nature in tomorrow's world. In addition to companies' voluntary environmental actions, there are also some regulations regarding environmental sustainability that countries have provided in order to push companies operating on their lands to bear the responsibility of the impact their actions might have to the land they are operating on. (Elkington 1997, 79–84.)

The final of the three bottom lines in Elkington's model is the social bottom line. While businesses inevitably are and will always be a part of society, disagreeing arguments on whether sustainability actually has anything to do with social, ethical, or cultural issues, were presented especially in the 1990s. Today, however, there is a better agreement on the topic: social responsibility plays a vital role in the triple bottom line, and it is

understood that should the social and ethical issues ever be overlooked, the impact would unavoidably negatively reflect on the progress of environmental responsibility as well.

Social bottom line aims to assess the impact on people both inside and outside a company or an organization. Issues related to the people inside an organization typically include training and education initiatives, employment of disadvantaged groups, and fair working conditions, whilst issues related to people outside the company typically incorporate topics such as product safety, community relations, sponsorships, and charitable donations of money and time. While these actions might not have their immediate take on company's success, by now it is commonly agreed that the long-term benefits won't go unignored. (Elkington 1997, 84–94.)

Having familiarized oneself with the three aspects of Triple bottom line, it is worth pointing out that it is not solely the issues that are found within these three areas of sustainability, but rather, the issues arising between them. For instance, since environmental and economic responsibilities might in many cases have some conflicting interests, in the past 25 years, gaining more comprehensive understanding of CSR, many companies have solved the question by combining the two as so-called eco-efficiency. (Elkington 1997, 70.) As can be seen from the figure 2, true CSR can be reached at the intersection of the three areas of responsibility, by actively measuring all three aspects and shaping actions according to the results gained.

Even though to this day, the triple bottom line is widely utilized and acknowledged framework for CSR both in the academia and business (Svensson et al. 2018), not always have companies fully understood nor successfully implemented it in their operations. In his article (2018), Elkington himself comments his own framework and criticizes it for being utilized in companies under false pretenses: narrowing down the economic responsibilities solely to financial ones and instead of using the framework as a comprehensive guideline for sustainability, exploiting it only as a fashionable accounting system (Elkington 2018). While simultaneously acknowledging people, planet and profits in a single framework, the model has also been criticized for being difficult to put into practice and especially measuring the related activities (Slaper & Hall 2011). Rather than using money as the common measure for all three, Slaper and Hall (2011) suggest calculating triple bottom line in terms of an index with economic measures such as personal incomes, establishment sizes, and job growth, environmental measures like fuel

consumption and waste management, and unemployment rate, relative poverty, and average commute time as social measures. Using such sectoral metrics in the usage of the triple bottom line could enable companies to more comprehensively take the model into practice, as was suggested by Elkington in 2018.

2.2.3 Comparing the CSR frameworks

Comparing the CSR pyramid by Carroll (1991) and the Triple bottom line model by Elkington (1997), some similarities can be identified. Firstly, both frameworks begin with the essential assumption of the economic responsibility: in order to operate, a company must be profitable. To continue from economic aspects, both frameworks acknowledge the importance of other responsibilities, though from differing starting points. Carroll and Elkington both highlight the importance of not only avoiding and compensating the harms companies might be causing, but, in addition, the obligation for preventative activities, that are not directly addressed to companies because of what they have done, but more likely, to prepare oneself for the future. Carroll refers to this on the fourth block of his CSR pyramid as the 'icing of the CSR cake': the philanthropic responsibilities that a company could potentially fulfil, whilst Elkington brings the topic forward when discussing about the multifaceted aspects of environmental and social bottom lines that should be taken into action.

There are certain differences in the models as well. Carroll tends to approach the topic of CSR from a very abstract level, using more ethical traits as the categorization of his pyramid: apart from economic responsibilities, there is no division between environmental and social responsibilities, but rather a grouping by legal, ethical, and discretionary activities. Elkington, on the other hand, handles the topic from a much more concrete standpoint, categorizing the aspects of CSR in action-based sections as in economic, environmental, and social bottom lines. Despite the differences in the structure of the models, the understanding of CSR as a concept in both frameworks seems to be surprisingly congruent.

With a closer look to the evolvement and to two of the most widely used frameworks of CSR presented in this chapter, a general understanding of the CSR theory has been reached. Even though no single, generally accepted definition of CSR has still been agreed in the academia, the fundamentals of the concept in the works of different academics are still rather analogous. Building on the works published by Elkington (1997)

and Rohweder (2004), the key contents of CSR, divided to economic, environmental, and social responsibilities, are presented in the Table 1 below. These will also be utilized in the empirical part of the study.

Table 1: The contents of CSR (adopted from Rohweder 2004, 96–105; Elkington 1997, 74–90).

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY		
Economic responsibilities	**Environmental responsibilities**	**Social responsibilities**
• Profitability, risk management • Employment, salary payments • Taxes and dividends • Effects on national and international economy • Innovations and their societal impacts	• Environmental risk management • Sustainable usage of natural resources • Effective waste management and recycling practices • Sustainability through the entire supply chain • Promoting biodiversity	• Employees' wellbeing and education • Providing safe and fair working conditions • Respect of different cultures and values • Product safety and liability • Respectful interaction with local communities, authorities, and other businesses • Participation in the public good • Auditing and adequately communicating with representatives through the supply chain

Having formed a general understanding of the concept of CSR and its economic, social, and environmental bottom lines, communication of CSR and related issues will be discussed in the next subchapter along with relevant scientific literature.

2.3 Communicating CSR

Marketing communication includes all the elements of communication that are used to create such interaction between the company and its stakeholders that has positive impact on the profitability of the company's marketing actions (Vuokko et al. 2003). Thus, marketing communication plays a remarkable role on how the company is perceived and

what kind of an image it has in the eyes of their stakeholders. CSR communication, on the other hand, can be described as any corporate communication that acknowledges any CSR-related processes or CSR efforts of an organization (Viererbl & Koch 2022), and may be researched through varying academic disciplines, such as marketing, consumer research, or communication research (Fischer et al. 2021). Kim and Ferguson (2018) define effective CSR communication as a communication that can "improve consumers' CSR knowledge or awareness, trust, engagement, and their perceptions of corporate reputation while lowering consumer skepticism" (Kim & Ferguson 2018, 552). In addition to traditional means of communication, such as text, picture, graph contents, CSR communication may be carried out by newer media applications too, such as gamification (Maltseva et al. 2019) and social media activity (Fernandez et al. 2021). In this thesis, attention is directed particularly at CSR communication aimed at stakeholders with an emphasis on the marketing discipline.

Today, academic research of CSR communication remains rather fragmented and relatively little attention has been paid to the aspects of CSR communication (Kim 2019, Fischer 2021). Based on the earlier literature of communicating CSR and sustainability, Fischer et al. (2021) conceptualize communication of these topics as means to four types of approaches: aiming at behavior change, self-empowerment, systems change, or sustainable consumption discourses among individual consumers. According to their analysis, it becomes evident that majority of CSR communication today still lies in the so-called weak approach, referring to focusing on efficiency gains through marketing greener or more socially responsible products, rather than strong approach that aims to reduce overall resource consumptions through stakeholder interactions (Fischer et al. 2021).

While an increasing amount of recognition continues to be directed to the themes of CSR by a myriad of different stakeholders, rises the importance of credible and effective CSR communication too (Crane & Glozer 2016). However, not always is that quite simple. The more stakeholders become conscious and call for more responsibility from organizations, the more room arises for skepticism towards CSR communication and doubt on companies' true motives behind them. Greenwashing, referring to companies highlighting positive information about their environmental or social performance, while simultaneously withholding negative information on the same dimension, has become an issue regularly attached with CSR communication (Lyon & Montgomery 2013). Major

public greenwashing scandals, such as Nike's infamous sweatshop labor (Boje & Khan 2009) and Volkswagen's emission manipulation back in 2015 (Jung & Sharon 2019), have damaged the image of CSR and created a call for credible CSR communication that manages to overcome stakeholders' skepticism. When carried out successfully, however, CSR communication can positively affect the brand image and enhance customer brand preference (Liu et al. 2014).

A significant part of CSR is to share honest information and keep company's stakeholders updated on what the company is doing, as well as to continuously listen to and be aware of their stakeholders' expectations on their operations. However, since the topics regarding corporate responsibility tend to differ even notably from the traditional business-related topics companies are used to communicate about, certain challenges in getting their message delivered may potentially occur. (Rohweder 2004, 194.) To achieve the positive outcomes for a company's performance, they must be able to communicate their CSR activities successfully: in a manner that is perceived authentic and communicated to stakeholders effectively (Lock & Schulz-Knappe 2019, Du et al. 2010, Liu et al. 2014).

A focal point for companies is to comprehend that it is worthwhile and important to communicate their CSR activities. In the same breath, it must be noted that CSR communication should not be implemented as a so-called marketing gimmick – otherwise, it will very easily turn against the company. (Halme & Joutsenvirta 2011, 246–265.) To overcome the potential misunderstandings in the communication with stakeholders, Kim and Ferguson (2018) identify six essential dimensions of CSR communication: 1) informativeness, 2) third-party endorsement, 3) personal relevance, 4) message tone, 5) consistency, and 6) transparency. Naturally, companies should be *informative* on why and how they are committing to CSR activities, and preferably make their message appear more credible by employing independent *third-party endorsement,* such as NGOs, and influential by including examples with *personal relevance* to the suggested audience. To better resonate with the audience, effective CSR communication should involve *self-efficacy* related to company's CSR activities, such as means how people can participate in the CSR activities themselves and be presented in a *message tone* that can be perceived genuine and intrinsic. Finally, CSR should be viewed as continuous on-going activities in a company and therefore, CSR communication and its messages should be *consistent.* (Kim & Ferguson 2018.)

In line with Kim and Ferguson's work, Viererbl and Koch also identify in their article (2022) three key factors behind successful CSR communication. Firstly, it is essential that the extent of the CSR communication is in line with the true amount of company's CSR activities: should the communication be notably more active than the real practices, the communication is easily viewed as fake and overall negative. Thus, companies should aim at aligning their CSR communication with actual activities. Secondly, CSR communication should appear as authentic and intrinsic: for instance, CSR communication implemented by companies operating on controversial industries is often viewed negatively by nature. Thirdly, Viererbl and Koch outline that the more consumers are exposed to different kinds of marketing communication, the more prone they become to recognize the persuasion attempts behind these messages and thus potentially question the contents. Therefore, companies should ensure the credibility of their CSR communication and avoid excessive use of persuasion in their CSR communication.

Quite aptly, Morsing and Schultz (2006) have described CSR communication as a double-edged sword, referring to the fact that while it is necessary to implement, conspicuous efforts should be avoided. This is due to the concept's ability to cause both positive and negative outcomes in companies' brand image and stakeholder engagement, depending on the success of its implementation. When conducted in a credible and intrinsic manner, CSR communication can indeed be a powerful way to enhance consumers' perceptions on the company. On the other hand, CSR communication that is lacking credibility or is found 'fake' among stakeholders may lead to legitimacy problems or even a weakened brand image. CSR communication to stakeholders and overcoming stakeholder skepticism in particular will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

3   Stakeholder skepticism

3.1   Stakeholder approach

Stakeholder theory first started to emerge in 1980s, as R. Edward Freeman's book *Strategic Management: a Stakeholder Approach* was published in 1984. Freeman himself did not create the concept of the theory, as it had been already discussed in the academia, but in his book, he created a pivotal foundation for the literature that would follow the topic in the coming years. (Freeman & McVea 2001.) Today, stakeholder theory is widely recognized and utilized theoretical framework in organizational literature.

Freeman's definition for stakeholders, created already in 1984, remains still valid up to this date:

> A stakeholder in an organization is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives (Freeman 2010, 46).

Building on Freeman's work above, Clarkson (1995, 106) has come up with a more thorough definition:

> Stakeholders are persons or groups that have, or claim, ownership, rights, or interests in a corporation and its activities, past, present, or future. Such claimed rights or interests (---) may be legal or moral, individual, or collective. Stakeholders with similar interests, claims, or rights can be classified as belonging to the same group: employees, shareholders, customers, and so on.

While once only shareholders were seen as the most important target group of a company to serve, stakeholder approach recognizes a more comprehensive number of actors that either can affect or are affected by company's operations. With stakeholder approach, the significance of a wider group of stakeholders is acknowledged: it is understood that in today's world, the purpose of a company is to create and distribute value to not only its financial, but a wider range of stakeholders, without favouring one group over another. What is more, this aim is not realized by only in terms of profits, dividends, or share price, but adoption of alternative, more comprehensive measurement systems and disclosure practices are needed. (Clarkson 1995; Prado-Lorenzo et al. 2008.) However, the stakeholder concept is viewed slightly differently depending on the approach. According to Freeman (2010, 38–39), stakeholder approach in CSR literature distinguishes from interpretations of other business theories particularly on the way it puts emphasis on the

public, community, and employees, that in other theories are typically thought of having more of an adversarial relationship with a company. Correspondingly, comparing CSR literature approach to other traits of stakeholder theory, less emphasis is put on satisfying the owners. In this dissertation, the stakeholder conception provided by CSR literature is followed.

An example of the most important stakeholders of a company is presented in Figure 3. It is worth noting, however, that since the figure is very much simplified, it only contains the category headings of stakeholders. Each category can be broken down into several smaller categories.

Figure 3: Stakeholder view of a company (Adapted from Freeman 1984, 25).

3.2 Defining stakeholder groups

Various criteria have been presented to classify stakeholders into smaller groups. For instance, according to their necessity or direct influence for company's operations, stakeholder groups can be divided into primary and secondary stakeholder groups, or respectively, direct and indirect stakeholders. On the other hand, stakeholders can be classified into internal and external stakeholder groups depending on their position in relation to the organization (Niskala et al. 2013, 72–73; Clarkson 1995.)

Stakeholder groups without whose continuous participation a company cannot keep up its going business are defined as primary stakeholder groups. Due to such nature, the interdependence between a company and its primary stakeholders is typically very high: Clarkson (1995) goes as far as calling companies as a 'system of primary stakeholder groups'. If any of the primary stakeholder groups is dissatisfied with the company, it will result a notable damage on the company. Primary stakeholders include typically owners, employees, customers, and suppliers together with public stakeholder groups, such as governments and local communities that provide the market and infrastructure for a company to operate in. (Clarkson 1995; Niskala et al. 2013, 72.)

Secondary stakeholder groups are those that influence or affect, or respectively, are influenced or affected by the company, but are neither engaged in direct transactions with the company, nor essential for company's survival. Special interest groups, environmentalists, consumer advocates and media are typically considered as secondary stakeholders. Typically, these groups do not possess a powerful influence directly on the company, and neither is it possible for the company to acknowledge all these stakeholders. However, secondary stakeholders are oftentimes able to shape public opinions in favour of, or in opposition to, a company's performance and interests, which in turn can have a strong impact on their operations as well. (Clarkson 1995; Niskala et al. 2013, 73.)

The classification into direct and indirect stakeholder groups follows quite closely the pattern of primary and secondary stakeholder groups. While the definition of direct stakeholders is rather similar to the primary stakeholders, in this classification, indirect stakeholder groups are viewed as more of representative groups: for example, NGOs giving voice to environment, animals, disabled groups, or generations to come, rather than serving the targets of solely their own needs. (Niskala et al. 2013, 72–73.)

Rohweder (2004) approaches the topic from a more precise classification: in her work, she has divided stakeholders into seven groups, based on their relationship to the company. While it is not always necessary nor relevant to use such a meticulous classification when dealing with stakeholders, Rohweder's classification does provide us with another illustrative picture of different types of stakeholders attached to a company's operations in one way or another. Rohweder's classification of stakeholder groups consists of 1) internal stakeholders, 2) product chain stakeholders, 3) other stakeholders providing factors of production, 4) stakeholders in the economic environment, 5) stakeholders in the political environment, 6) stakeholders in the societal environment, and finally, 7) mass media (Rohweder 2004, 194–197). In this thesis, classification into primary and secondary stakeholder groups is utilized.

Examining the various types of companies' stakeholders and ways of their classification, it soon becomes evident that not all stakeholder groups can be acknowledged or treated equally. In many cases, there are even conflicting needs and demands among different groups of stakeholders: while shareholders call for continuous surplus value and consumers and society manifest for more environmentally friendly solutions, companies may find themselves in a tough spot between a rock and a hard place. Therefore, it is beneficial for companies to identify their most important and powerful stakeholder groups and concentrate on assessing the preferred ways of interaction with these groups. (Rohweder 2004, 194; Niskala et al. 2013, 73.) An effective way to evaluate the importance of a stakeholder for a company is to consider whether the stakeholder is potentially able *and* willing to influence the company's operations (Koipijärvi & Kuvaja 2017, 135).

3.3 Overcoming stakeholder skepticism

As especially in the recent years, companies have pointed increasingly strong emphasis on CSR activities and communicating about them to great audience, simultaneously, a public concern over such activities and their real positive impact has risen. Skepticism, referring to public's inclination to distrust, question, and even perform negative feelings to companies' CSR activities and claims, arises particularly when stakeholders repeatedly detect an inconsistency between company's CSR actions and communication about it. (Rim & Kim 2016.)

Today, CSR is a core element of organizational business strategy in basically any internationally operating company and regarded as an insistence for any business. However, alongside the rise of the theme inside companies, the public's attitudes towards companies communicating about the responsibility actions have grown stricter too (Du & Vieira 2012.) In general, certain cynicism is perceptible in people's attitudes towards CSR communication: for instance, Cho, Furey, and Mohr find in their study (2017) that public tend to engage more with responsibility communication originating from noncorporate sources than they do with actual CSR communication coming from companies.

The paradox between the nature of a for-profit company and CSR aiming at creating a better society through voluntary actions understandably raises suspicion of the claims of good deeds. If communicating CSR is not implemented successfully, CSR activities' positive effects for company's business are missed and potentially, even contrary, negative effects may be gained (Marin et al. 2015). Etter (2013) and Colleoni (2013) find in their studies that due to the fear of stakeholder skepticism and thus potentially harming corporate legitimacy, companies may even refrain completely from CSR communication. On the other hand, Ramasamy and Yeung (2009) find positive relationship with consumer awareness of CSR and company's economic development in Asian markets. What is more, Meynhardt and Gomez (2016) argue responsible behavior to be equated with positive impact on public value and uniformly, Mishra and Mohanty conclude (2013) that with successful CSR communication, companies can build strong corporate brands that differentiate them from their competitors. Therefore, overcoming stakeholder skepticism and enhancing the credibility of CSR messages have become key challenges in CSR communication for companies on all fields of business to solve.

While skepticism as a concept has been studied widely on other disciplines of science, such as marketing, advertising, and media studies, there is not as much research on skepticism in the context of CSR. Though varying slightly between the fields of science, the common understanding seems to be that skepticism refers to publics' "disbelief", "distrust", or "defensiveness" towards certain activities, typically performed by companies, media, or other public instances. (Rim & Kim 2016.)

Rim and Kim (2016) identify three factors of stakeholder skepticism in their article. Firstly, there is skepticism towards company's altruism: doubts on whether a company's motive to support a cause is because it sincerely cares about it, or because company is

just in seek of positive reputation and following profits. Second factor of stakeholder skepticism performs disbelief of CSR messages and CSR activities, that being mistrust on whether the company really is committed to CSR actions they communicate about, as the real advantages of CSR only come true when corporate responsibility is tied to company's key decision making process (Martinez-Conesa et al. 2017). Finally, the third factor represents skepticism towards CSR informativeness. Out of these three factors of stakeholder skepticism, the first one, regarding the company's altruism, was identified to be the strongest predictor in determining negative public response. (Rim & Kim 2016.)

Prior research has identified certain methods to enhance the credibility of CSR communication and thus overcome stakeholder skepticism. Since publics tend to adopt a cynical attitude towards companies own CSR communication, CSR information from independent, third-party instances can potentially result in better credibility (Cho et al. 2017). On the other hand, alongside communicating about CSR activities, third-party endorsement as well as employees should also be involved into the actual CSR activity. A failure to portray company's CSR activities with high involvement of its stakeholders and employees can make the CSR communication appear as self-serving and thus less credible. (Morsing et al. 2008.)

Quite interestingly, merely positive and high-flying information on a company's CSR activities does not always serve as the best means to communicate CSR. Du and Vieira conclude in their analysis (2012) of oil companies' CSR communication, that two-sided messages on companies' CSR activity, including not only positive but also negative information, were found to be more effective on creating credibility in the eyes of the consumers, than communicating solely positive matters. While revealing information of failures or other unsuccessful CSR practices can potentially put a company to a more vulnerable position and thus requires courage to implement, reporting negative sides alongside the positive can make a company's CSR communication as a whole appear as more credible and can therefore create a feeling of truth for stakeholders. (Du & Vieira 2012.)

Another effective tool for companies to enhance the credibility of their CSR communication and thus overcome stakeholder skepticism is social media. While activity and creating posts on social media can serve as an efficient way to reach audiences and spread information, alone, they might not generate the desired outcomes on overcoming

stakeholder skepticism. However, social media platforms do provide companies with effective, new kind of channels for direct, two-way communication with their stakeholders. Two-way communication, in turn, has been found as an effective means for enhancing the credibility of CSR communication. (Yang & Basile 2021; Goodstein & Wicks 2007.)

In this chapter, various means of overcoming stakeholder skepticism originating from previous academic research have been displayed. These means, including self-critique, information from independent sources, and use of social media, were all used as measures in the empirical part of the study. The framework for the study will be discussed in more detail next.

3.4 Synthesis

The theory part of this dissertation compiles together the concepts of CSR and stakeholder skepticism. Firstly, CSR was presented with two of the widely known theoretical frameworks: pyramid of CSR by Carroll (1991) and Triple Bottom line by Elkington (1997). CSR, as it is generally defined, consists of three dimensions: the economic, environmental, and social responsibilities of companies (Elkington 1997; Rohweder 2004). While some decades earlier, committing such ethical business could have been seen as a competitive advantage for a company, today, it is understood more as a prerequisite for basically any internationally operating business (Carrigan & Attalla 2001). CSR communication refers by definition to any corporate communication that acknowledges any CSR related processes of efforts of an organization (Viererbl & Koch 2022).

While CSR has been studied widely throughout the past decades, stakeholder skepticism as a concept is a relatively recent field of business research (Rim & Kim 2016). Stakeholder skepticism appears in the context of CSR communication when CSR messages are not perceived as credible or authentic. Thus, it can potentially have a remarkable negative impact on stakeholders' perceptions on the company and its brand image (Marin et al. 2015; Morsing et al. 2008). At the worst, companies may even refrain from communicating their CSR activities at all in fear of the negative consequences of stakeholder skepticism (Etter 2013; Colleoni 2013). On the other hand, successful CSR communication can provide notable positive outcomes on the company's brand image (Mishra & Mohanty 2013). Thus, it is decidedly important for companies to identify the

characteristics of effective CSR communication and how to overcome stakeholder skepticism.

Prior research has identified various ways to enhance the credibility of CSR communication and thus overcome stakeholder skepticism: for instance, providing information from independent sources alongside company's own messages, utilizing emotional aspect of communication, social media activity as well as using social media as a platform for two-way communication, and concreteness of CSR information are all effective means to reinforce the positive effects of CSR communication (Kim & Ferguson 2018; Du & Vieira 2012; Fernandez et al. 2021). Additionally, committing to versatile activities on all three dimensions of CSR as well as embedding CSR to key company statements represent high level of company commitment and can thus make the company's CSR activities appear as more intrinsic and thus more credible (Du et al. 2007).

This study seeks to analyze CSR communication in the context of overcoming stakeholder skepticism. Alongside the main research problem, three sub-questions are presented: firstly, what kind of a role does CSR play in case companies in today's world, secondly, in what ways is CSR communicated to stakeholders, and thirdly, what kind of tactics are used in CSR communication in order to overcome possible stakeholder skepticism. Having grounded the topic with a thorough literature review, a theoretical framework for conducting the empirical part of the study has been created.

To successfully answer all the research questions, it was found essential to analyze both 1) *CSR practices* that companies are committed to, as well as 2) ways of how *CSR communication* is implemented. Together, these two themes form the basis for the framework of the study. While *CSR practices* examine the concrete actions taken regarding CSR practices and the width and the depth of their implementation to the company operations and primarily answer to the sub-question 1, *CSR communication* seeks to analyze in more abstract terms the nature and character of the actions taken: for instance, how accessible is the communication, is there any two-way CSR communication detected between the company and its stakeholders, and how is the credibility of CSR communication on corporate websites boosted. Therefore, *CSR communication* branch in general aims to answer research questions 2 and 3. However, the division between the themes and research questions is not solely unequivocal but in

certain cases, overlapping. Combining all three elements together, the purpose of the study can be reached. The visualization of the research framework is presented in the figure 4 below.
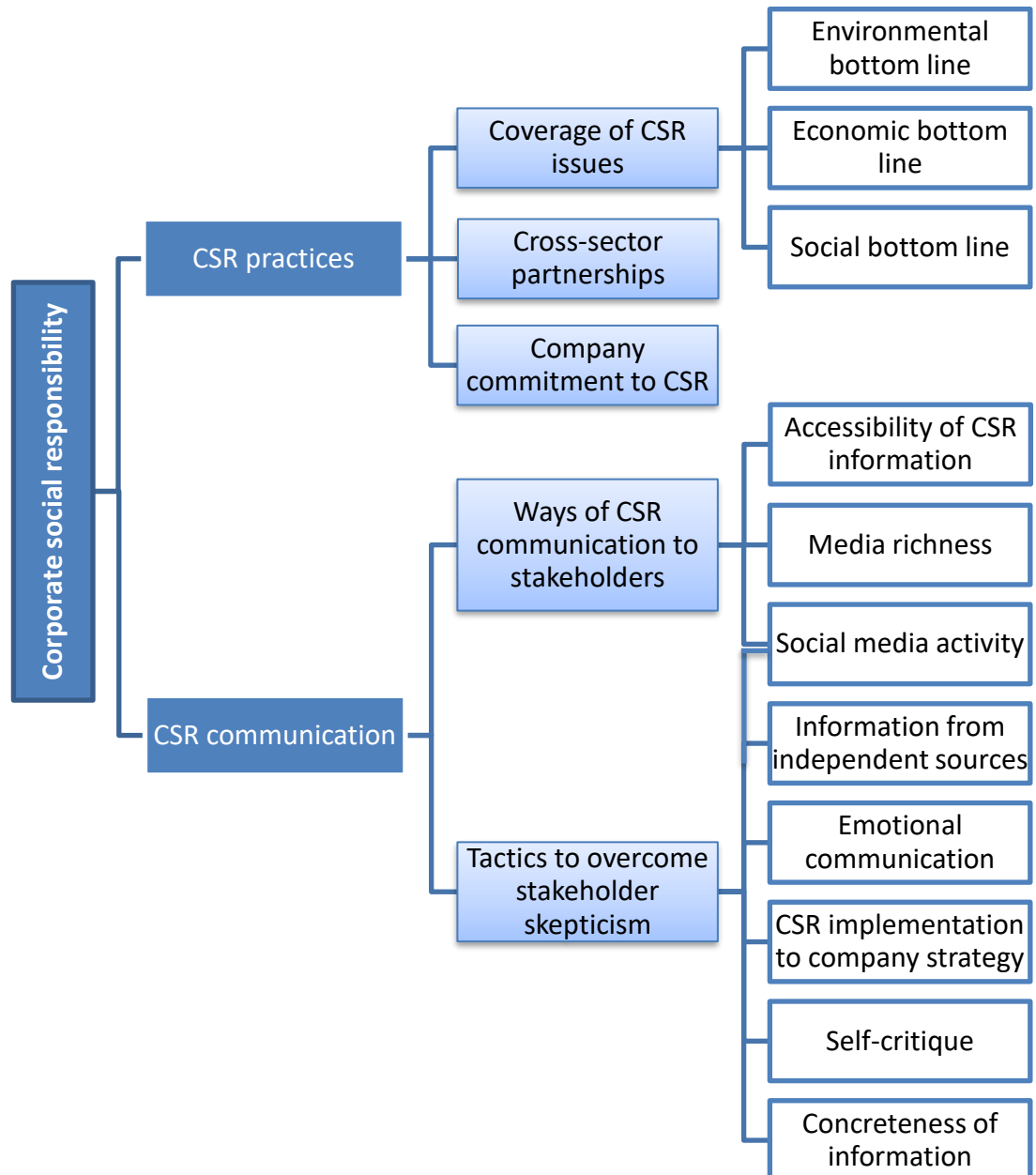

Figure 4: Framework of the study.

3.4.1 Analyzing CSR practices

The analysis of CSR practices in the case companies seeks to answer the first research question of the role of CSR in Nordic companies today. Examining the case companies' CSR practices is beneficial for this study, as it provides a more comprehensive view on

the activity and level of commitment case companies have invested into the theme and thus enables to better assess the related communication as well. Next, the sub-sections of CSR practices in this analysis will be briefly presented.

In CSR practices, *coverage of CSR issues* refers to the number of CSR-related initiatives company has committed to, regarding the three dimensions of CSR: environment, economics, and society. By analysing the diversity of the CSR issues the company has chosen to address to, the company's will to commit to all kinds of multifaceted CSR issues can be defined. In the analysis, it is also examined, how versatilely the case companies have adopted the individual dimensions: for instance, regarding the social bottom line, are there people and communities both inside and outside the companies acknowledged, or when it comes to economic bottom line, have other types of capital than only financial capital been acknowledged. With this part of the framework, it is aimed discover the case companies' altruism in their CSR activities and thus answer especially the first research question about the role of CSR in the case company.

While it is not desirable to adopt CSR practices only for the sole sake of CSR itself, ideally, CSR should be included and implemented at all stages of a company's operations. The *company commitment to CSR* examines how case companies have in practice adopted CSR into their business. This is assessed primarily by studying the level of implementation of CSR into company strategy and its other key statements, such as mission, vision, and values. Du, Bhattarachya, and Sen (2007) conclude that implementing CSR into a company's key statements indicates greater commitment to the themes and thus makes the CSR communication appear more authentic, while Koipijärvi and Kuvaja (2017, 45) call it even a prerequisite for credible CSR communication. Therefore, implementation of CSR into company strategy measures both the role of CSR in the company operations (question 1) and the credibility of the CSR communication (question 3).

Cross-sector partnerships refer to companies cooperating with non-profit organizations. As non-profit organizations (NGOs) typically have a keener sense of communities' needs, they can provide companies valuable guidance on implementing the social initiatives effectively on the ground (Poret 2019). Through non-profit organizations, companies can provide financial and human resources, as well as utilize their core competencies, to providing solutions to societal, environmental, and communal problems. By analyzing

the number and nature of a company's cross-sector partnerships, a picture of the company's real willingness to improve societal and local problems can be formed. In addition, conjoining the research to its theoretical framework, it can also be specified, which stage of Carroll's pyramid of CSR (introduced in Chapter 2.1.1) a company currently stands on.

3.4.2 Analyzing CSR communication

Analysis of the CSR communication strives to answer to the second and third questions of the ways how CSR is communicated to stakeholders and the tactics in which stakeholder skepticism is sought to overcome in the case companies. These parts will be briefly introduced next, beginning with the ways of communicating CSR to stakeholders, and followed by the factors measuring the companies' tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism.

Since internet is a pull media, no information is automatically brought to the eyes of consumers. On the contrary, like all other knowledge as well, getting in touch with a company's CSR-related information requires active participation from an aware consumer their self. (Moreno & Capriotti 2009.) *Accessibility of CSR information* on corporate website measures accessibility and the level of importance that a company has given to CSR-related themes within its corporate site: is the topic easily discovered from the main page? How is the information structured? Is it presented in a clear and understandable way? How are CSR related theme positioned on the webpage compared to other topics? Answering these questions provides us with an insight both to the first research question of the role that CSR plays in the case companies' marketing communication, and respectively, to the second research question of the ways in which stakeholder groups are pursued.

Originally presented by Daft and Lengel in their article in 1986, *media richness* theory states that the richer the communication and its forms are, the more effective the communication is. Leading from the theory today, utilizing various multimedia technologies, such as graphics, videos, animations, games, and other applications, companies can raise the richness of their media and thus, the overall effectiveness of communication. Since CSR information oftentimes appears quite complex and value-laden, utilizing multimedia technologies in helping to convey the message to bigger audiences becomes necessary and simultaneously, the use of multimedia technology's

position as one of the mechanisms to study the reaching of different stakeholder groups, justified.

In today's world, the importance of *social media activity* cannot be dismissed. Social media provides companies a new kind of channel for two-way interaction with their stakeholders and instant and direct communication. This in turn enables reaching potentially new groups of audiences, as well as provides a tool for gaining legitimacy from CSR communication, thus overcoming stakeholder skepticism. (Yang & Basile 2021; Lyon & Montgomery 2013.) Leading from these conclusions, it can be stated that analyzing the use of case company's social media activity can gain valuable information to answer both the second and the third research questions: in what ways is CSR communicated to stakeholders and how is potential stakeholder skepticism sought to overcome.

In order to make their CSR communication more credible, companies should also involve third-party endorsement into their communication practices. While a failure to include external stakeholders into the companies' CSR communication might result in skepticism towards the company itself and its CSR activities, bringing in *information provided by independent sources,* such as non-profit organizations or community members, could help the CSR information appear as more credible in the eyes of the consumers. (Cho et al. 2017; Yang & Basile 2021; Kim & Ferguson 2018.) Therefore, primarily to study the tactics companies use in their CSR communication to overcome stakeholder skepticism, it pays to examine whether or not and in what ways they have involved information provided by independent sources into their CSR communication.

The effect of CSR communication on external stakeholders may be enhanced by storytelling. With emotional stories, companies can better connect with their stakeholders and additionally, make the message appear more meaningful and memorable. (Hall et al. 2021.) Use of stories in corporate communication has also been found to make readers more highly identify with the message (Du & Vieira 2012). Thus, as a means to enhance the credibility of CSR communication, the aspect of *emotional communication* is also analyzed.

As presented already in the CSR practices, company commitment to CSR can be seen to signal the authenticity of the CSR activity. While being a key measure for the CSR practices and thus responding to the first research question, *CSR implementation to*

strategy can also serve companies as making the CSR activities more credible in the eyes of stakeholders.

Rather than listing vaguely described actions from the past or hazy goals for the future, companies should strive for *concreteness* in their CSR communication. Providing concrete examples and factual arguments on their CSR activity can serve companies with better credibility, when it comes to CSR communication (Du et al. 2010; Du & Vieira 2012).

It is rather obvious that not always can CSR progress in companies nor communication about it merely be positive. Therefore, from time to time, presenting negative arguments and *self-criticism* in the CSR communication are also welcomed. In contrast to one-sided messages that only transfer positive information about the company itself, two-sided messages convey both positive and negative information and thus, actually boost the credibility of company's overall CSR communication. (Du & Vieira 2012.)

In the following methodology chapter, the research approach along with the chosen research strategy will be explained. Next, an introduction of the three case companies and their selection as well as the contributions from the theory are performed. Finally, the results of the research are reported, and conclusions of the study presented.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research approach

Qualitative research strategy emphasizes the significance of words over quantification and aims at contextual understanding rather than generalization. Taking typically a constructivist or an interpretivist stance on research, qualitative research seeks to understand the reality as a social construction through the lenses of cultural meanings and interpretations. *What, how,* and *why* questions are all typically utilized in qualitative research, especially in the context of business studies, because these types of questions tend to provide descriptive, qualitative answers focusing on the cause and effect and thus support the use of qualitative research approach. (Bryman & Bell 2007, 401, 427; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 4–5, 39.) Such questions were also used in this study to formulate the research problem and its sub-problems.

The purpose of this study was to understand how internationally operating, listed companies originating from the Nordics communicate their CSR actions on their corporate web pages and what kind of tactics do they use to overcome stakeholder scepticism. Therefore, the case companies CSR actions and particularly their CSR communication were in the focus of this study. To fulfil the purpose of this study, qualitative analysis was chosen as the approach for the research.

There are several factors validating the use of qualitative approach in this study. Firstly, this thesis examined the actions of the three case companies. Focus was directed especially on the details of case companies' CSR communication. Qualitative analysis' strength is its concentration on rich case descriptions, details, and interpretations (Koskinen et al. 2005, 16–17). Secondly, as it has been addressed by Ghauri and Grönhaug (2005, 202), when previous insights of the research problem are modest, qualitative research is needed. While CSR as a theme has been widely studied in international business academia, stakeholder skepticism as a concept and ways of overcoming it are relatively new and sparsely studied adds to the topic. Thirdly, this thesis aimed at comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of CSR communication today. In qualitative research, the data collection methods and analysis serve the objective of formulating a holistic understanding of the studies issues (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 5).

4.2 Case study as a research strategy

Case studies are typically associated with descriptive, explanatory, or exploratory research on phenomena that are best understood in their natural, real-life context (Ghauri & Grönhaug 2005, 115). Case studies' widely recognized strength is that they can present complex and hard-to-grasp business issues in an accessible and understandable format. On the other hand, however, case studies have been criticized for lacking scientific rigor and providing only anecdotal results. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 116.) Since the purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of CSR communication especially in the context of overcoming stakeholder skepticism, it became natural to examine the CSR communication on its own natural habitat. Therefore, a case study method was chosen as the method for this thesis. To avoid the scientific inaccuracy case studies have been criticized for, a framework for the study was created leaning strongly to the earlier academic literature.

Case studies may be conducted either as a single or a multiple case study. In single case study, there is only one single case addressed in order to answer the research questions, whereas in a multiple case study, two or more cases are analyzed to fulfill the purpose of the study. In single case studies, it is understood that the chosen case is unique, critical, and exceptional and therefore the results of the study are typically not particularly generalizable. The objective of a single case study is rather to explore and understand how the chosen case works as a unit of an analysis. Multiple or extensive case studies, on the other hand, strive to investigate, elaborate, and explain a phenomenon, rather than examine a single case itself. With the results from a multiple case study, a prior theory may be tested or extended, or a completely new theory built. Neither the results of a multiple case study are typically statistically generalizable. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 118–127.) In this study, a case study along with elements of content analysis have been combined with certain characteristics of focal CSR theories to create a suitable framework to conduct the research. *Qualitative analysis* approach, and more precisely, *case study research,* is used as the research strategy.

This case study utilized the multiple case study method. Since the objective of this study was not to examine a single company's CSR activities per se but to analyze CSR communication and its ways to overcome stakeholder skepticism as a larger phenomenon, conducting a multiple case study was a reasonable choice.

For the case selection, a few preconditions were set: firstly, to gain a wider understanding of the characteristics of CSR communication today, case companies from not only one but three different fields of business were chosen. Secondly, as the purpose of this study was not to examine the characteristics of CSR communication on a geological context, a limitation for the case companies' country of origin was set: all three case companies were chosen from the Nordic countries, where the overall atmosphere and attitudes towards CSR are relatively similar across countries (Olkkonen & Quarshie 2019) and thus would minimize their effect on the findings of the study. Thirdly: when conducting a case study, it is often even desirable to choose a certain company particularly because it can gain certain valuable insights that other organizations might not be able to provide (Siggelkow 2007). To gain as informative and extensive findings from this study as possible, a so-called convenience factor was utilized in the case company selections: having outlined the location and the fields of business for the case companies, large-scale, internationally operating companies with as extensive CSR communication as possible, were identified. For this phase of the study, several companies, and the extensiveness of CSR communication on their website as well as the recency of their latest corporate sustainability report were analyzed and evaluated.

4.3 Descriptions of the case companies

As a result of careful preliminary analysis, three Nordic-based, internationally operating companies with extensive CSR communication on their online channels were chosen as the case companies of this research. These case companies operate each on different fields of business – textile production & resale, faculty management services, and energy production, and represent thus both business to consumer (B2C) and business to business (B2B) markets. Key figures of the three case companies are presented in the table next page.

Table 2: Key figures of the case companies.

	Marimekko	ISS	Equinor
Corporate name	Marimekko Oyj.	ISS A/S	Equinor ASA
Founding year	1951	1901	1972
Country of origin	Finland	Denmark	Norway
Industry	Textile production & resale	Faculty management services	Energy production
Gross profit (2020) (ISS and Equinor numbers converted from DKK and US $)	20.2 M €	660 M €	44 000 M €
Main customer segments	B2C	B2B	B2C
Employees	420	379 000	21 126

Marimekko is a Finnish-based textile and homeware producer. Having started their business in 1951 in textile design and production, today, the company operates internationally in consumer market in roughly 35 countries and is renowned especially on its colorful clothing and home textiles, along with its other products, such as tableware and accessories. Its design, production, sourcing, marketing, and retail operations are all implemented mainly inhouse. (Marimekko.com) In their sustainability report, Marimekko names sustainability as one of its key factors guiding their business and states that through the power of example, the company is aiming at moving the entire industry forward towards more sustainable future (Marimekko sustainability report 2020, 12).

The two Marimekko's domains from where all their information used in this analysis were www.marimekko.com and www.company.marimekko.com along with the numerous subpages of these two. The first domain, *Marimekko.com* stands for Marimekko's online retail and is more consumer-oriented, while the second one, *company.marimekko.com*, contains more official information about the organization and serves Marimekko's other stakeholders, such as investors, employees, media, and other companions. For comparison, both Finnish and English (Great Britain) site versions were examined in the analysis on both domains, yet no notable differences between the language versions were detected. In addition, Marimekko's newest available sustainability report, published in 2020, was also utilized in the analysis.

ISS (abbreviation from the words International Service System) is a company founded in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1901. ISS offers facility management services and operates on business-to-business markets in more than 30 countries in all inhabited continents with nearly 380 000 employees across the world. (ISSworld.com.)

ISS' international website *issworld.com* along with its subpages were actively used in conducting the analysis. For comparison, the Finnish site version *issworld.com/fi* was also examined. No major differences between the two language versions were detected: for their contents, the sites were found to be largely identical. Therefore, the international site was used as the reference material for the analysis. In addition to the website, the latest international corporate sustainability report (2021) was also carefully examined in the study.

Equinor (formerly known as Statoil) was founded in 1972 by an act passed by the Norwegian parliament. The company operates on energy business having oil, gas, renewables, and low-carbon solutions currently in their portfolio. Currently, Equinor is present in around 30 countries worldwide with more than 21 000 employees. (Equinor.com.)

In the empirical research, the main references used were the corporate website *equinor.com* along with its several subpages, and their latest sustainability report from 2021. While there are Norwegian and English versions provided for the corporate website, the latter one was utilized in conducting this analysis.

4.4 Data collection and analysis

This study utilized secondary sources as the material for the empirical study. The data was collected mainly from the case companies' own marketing communication, that being primarily their web pages and particularly the *Sustainability*-section on the site as well as the companies' latest corporate sustainability reports. The analysis was conducted mainly on the international / English versions of the websites and sustainability reports. Where applicable, in the case of Marimekko and ISS, Finnish sites and reports were also examined for comparison of the contents. When needed and available, other secondary sources, such as the case companies' social media accounts were also used as an addition to support the study.

Since commercial mass media texts are typically created for a certain purpose, that being particularly promoting and creating a positive image of a company and its business, a certain criticism must be kept in mind when analysing the corporate web page and its content. Coming from a corporate source, stakeholders typically view corporate websites as lower in credibility than information retrieved from a neutral source. (Du & Vieira 2012.)

The data was collected from the case companies' publicly accessible websites between March and June 2022. The official corporate websites in English, and in the case of Marimekko and ISS, in Finnish, were visited and revisited several times during the analysation process.

As the focus of this study lies heavily on the theories of CSR, CSR approach was also utilized in the forming of appropriate framework for the data analysis of this thesis. Today, a great deal of companies' own sustainability communication is gathered on the companies' online environment for consumers to view. Therefore, an analysis of such corporate web pages and other relevant online sources is a valid object for qualitative research.

The operationalization table next page portrays the methodological framework of the study in relation with the objectives of the study and its theoretical framework. As can be seen from the table, analyzing the CSR practices of the case companies provide answer to the first sub-question of the study, while the two latter questions are mainly answered by examining the CSR communication of the case companies.

Table 3: Operationalization table of the study.

Purpose of the study	Sub-objectives	Theoretical framework	Methodological framework
To analyze what are the characteristics of CSR communication in the context of overcoming stakeholder skepticism	To find out what kind of a role does CSR play in the business	Triple bottom line Pyramid of CSR	**CSR practices:** Coverage of CSR issues Implementation in company strategy Cross-sector partnerships
	To explore in what ways is CSR communicated to different stakeholders	Triple bottom line Media richness theory	**CSR communication:** Accessibility of CSR information Consideration of different stakeholders Media richness
	To identify what kind of tactics do companies use in their CSR communication to overcome stakeholder skepticism	Stakeholder theory Stakeholder skepticism	**CSR communication:** Information from independent sourced Affective dimension of communication Self-critique **CSR practices:** Implementation in company strategy

The first step of the analysis process was forming the methodological framework for the study. Having conducted a thorough literature review on theories of CSR and stakeholder theory, as well as familiarizing oneself with previously identified means to overcome stakeholder skepticism, a framework for the study could be created. Second steps of the study were case selection and data collection. The process of case selection was introduced in more detail in Chapter 4.2, while this chapter was started by a summary of the data collection. As has been previously stated, a so-called convenience factor was used in selecting the case companies. In practice, this means that the methodological framework was utilized in preliminary examining the potential case companies before the conclusive case selection.

Having formed the methodological framework and collected the data from the case companies, the actual analysis phase could be begun. The case companies were analyzed one by one first according to their coverage of CSR issues, then cross-sector partnerships, and so on. When conducting the analysis, each part of the methodological framework was broken down into smaller, concrete codes that were searched and studied in all three companies before moving on to the next part of the analysis. A thorough presentation of the concrete codes analyzed in this study may be found in Appendix 1.

The third step of the analysis examined the analysis results gained in the previous step and relying strongly to the theoretical framework of the study, drew conclusions from them. In addition to examining whether and how a company implemented the analyzed factors in its CSR practices and communication, suggestions on how the current state could be improved were also provided. Implications regarding managers and scholars were also formed.

Finally, as the fourth step of the analysis, the trustworthiness and limitations of the study were evaluated alongside coming up with suggestions for future research. The evaluation of the study will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter 4.5.

4.5   Evaluation of the study

To evaluate the trustworthiness of this study, a widely used framework by Lincoln and Guba (1985, 294–327) is utilized. In their framework, the trustworthiness of qualitative research is evaluated by the four following attributes: 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability and 4) confirmability.

Credibility refers to the process of evaluating the truthfulness of the findings of the study. There are five techniques provided for researchers to increase the probability of credible findings in their research and to improve the overall credibility of the study results. With *transferability* is meant the applicability of the findings to other contexts. The results of a study should always be reproducible in new, similar studies conducted by same or different researchers, which is described by *dependability.* Finally, *confirmability* refers to the process of evaluating the study findings' reflection to the study itself and not the researcher's own biases or preconceptions. (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 301–327.)

The *credibility* of this study is relatively good. Since the purpose of this research is to analyse the effectiveness on characteristics of the case companies' own CSR related communication mainly on their own websites, the data used in the research (case companies' commercial and corporate websites, sustainability reports, and their organic social media activity, where applicable), serves to this purpose quite well. Even if the marketing communication of a company can typically be expected to be biased and present the company on more positive light than is realistic, the results of this study do not suffer from that as it is intended to concentrate particularly on that communication and not, for instance, the real, factual information. However, one must bear in mind that communicative messages are always produced and interpreted by individuals and thus, misinterpretations are possible. To minimize these incidents, the findings of the research are always supported and justified with arguments from the used data.

As in this study, only three companies, Finnish textile brand Marimekko, Danish based faculty-service provider ISS, and Norwegian oil producer Equinor and their CSR communication have been analysed, the applicability of these findings to other such companies even similar to the case companies is not quite meaningful. In order to gain more transferability and to form a more comprehensive picture of the CSR communication in the Nordic countries, a larger sample of case companies would be required for analysis. Noteworthy is also that the case companies were indeed selected into this study through a preliminary selection process that indicated that their current CSR practices and communication already are in notably good shape. Therefore, *transferability* in this particular study remains relatively low.

Dependability of this study is really good: since all the data used in this analysis is public and accessible for anyone on the Internet, and the framework used in this study easily

reused, the study can easily be repeated. What is more, the phases of implementing the study are carefully described in Chapter 4. All the arguments presented in this study are supported by the empirical data and previous theoretical literature. Therefore, the references may be easily followed and thus the arguments presented in this research validated. However, it should be noted that this study was conducted in March-June 2022 with data and materials available on the case companies' websites at that time. Hence, this study represents the state of CSR communication in the case companies at the moment of the analysis. Should the study be repeated at a later date, the information on the case companies' websites might be updated, altered and / or even removed, and the findings of the analysis thus different.

Finally, *confirmability* of this study is quite good as well. To avoid researcher's own biased and presumptions finding their way to the text, data-based reasoning was presented at all stages of drawing conclusions in the analysis. What is more, to answer to the research questions, a comprehensive framework developed by the careful literature review was used in order to ensure a holistic analysis of the topic.

Ethical consideration is essential for all types of research and was also acknowledged when conducting this study. As this research rests solely on the publicly available, secondary data on the case companies' online platforms, no risks of threatening the anonymity, privacy, or confidentiality of any party of the study were involved during the process. Respectively, no special requirements for data management came to question in this study as practically all empirical data utilized in the research continues to be managed by the case companies.

5 Findings

In this chapter, the results of the qualitative analysis are presented. In this section, all the references are from the empirical data, that being the case companies' official corporate or commercial websites and latest sustainability reports, unless otherwise stated in the text. The findings of both CSR practices as well as CSR communication are introduced in this chapter.

5.1 CSR practices in the case companies

5.1.1 Marimekko

In general, Marimekko's sustainability strategy appears to cover quite comprehensively a diverse range of CSR issues categorized by Elkington's (1997) triple bottom line classification. In their latest sustainability report from 2020, the company's sustainability commitments are presented through seven of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in which Marimekko as a company has particularly announced to commit to: *4. Quality education, 5. Gender equality, 6. Clean water and sanitation, 7. Affordable and clean energy, 8. Decent work and economic growth, 12. Responsible consumption and production,* and *13. Climate action.* (Marimekko: Sustainability report 2020; 16, 22, 28, 36, 44.)

Regarding environmental bottom line, there are both procedures that aim at avoiding mechanisms harmful to the environment, and actions embracing the natural capital. Marimekko acknowledges climate change and declares impressive objectives for their environmental impacts: by 2025, the company aims at reducing their environmental footprint of textile materials by 30 %, carbon emissions by 20 %, and water usage by 50 %, compared to the levels from 2018. There are also other additional initiatives regarding environmental sustainability implemented, such as developing and adopting novel, more sustainable materials for their textile production and dyeing. Alongside minimizing their negative impacts on environment, there are also actions to embrace the natural capital acknowledged, yet relatively to lesser extent. In the name of carbon neutrality, Marimekko participates in reforestation and a CO_2 compensation projects.

Social bottom line is taken into account from both employees' and society's point of view: according to Marimekko's website, there are training, and proactive health services

provided for their employees, as well as is diversity encouraged at the workplaces. Fairness and equality are also raised to a very visible role on the company's sustainability page as their key values, which could be seen to serve both as social and economical aspect of responsibility. However, concrete actions regarding these themes, aside from 'inclusive pattern designs' seem to remain relatively vague. There are also participations in communal charity activities presented: for instance, Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) provides training for farmers in Marimekko's supply chain to care for the environment and respect their workers' rights and wellbeing.

Analyzing Marimekko's CSR practices, one can point out that the largest attention is given to the environmental topics. Ambitious aims of reducing production waste, water usage, and gas emissions, as well as increasing procedures of recycling are consistently supported with numbers, percentages, and rational figures that as a rule reveal for the reader both the goal and the present condition of the topic. When it comes to customer-related CSR acts, the intentions are made tangible by for instance offering customers manifold, concrete guides how to take care of their products and thus prolong their lifespan. It is also told that longer lasting and higher quality products are constantly being developed, yet with meagre fact-based elaborations of how it is done. According to Marimekko's website, the share of annual quality claims since 2017 has been as low as 0,4 % (Marimekko.com: Timeless design), which indicates products of high quality.

Table 4: Marimekko's CSR practices classified into three dimensions of CSR.

Diversity of CSR issues acknowledged at Marimekko		
Environmental	**Social**	**Economical**
Avoiding mechanisms harmful to the environment: - Recycling in production and package materials - Pollute prevention - Reducing usage of water - Reducing carbon emissions - Adopting better alternatives for production: textiles (Econyl, recyclable nylon; Ioncell, fabric from birches), and natural dyes **Embracing natural capital:** - Carbon neutrality: reforestation project in Uganda, CO_2 compensation measures	**Internal stakeholders:** - Training and proactive health services to employees - Diversity encouraged at workplace **External stakeholders:** - Better Cotton Initiative - Amfori BSCI - Supplier Code of Conduct - Official partnership with Helsinki Pride - Contribution to Plan International's project in young women's education in Africa	**Physical capital:** - Long-term investments on the in-house printing factory an Marimekko house in Helsinki **Human capital:** - Training of employees **Intellectual capital:** - Enhancing personnel commitment - Work towards embracing diversity and inclusion

Analyzing the *cross-sector partnerships,* there are also some collaborations announced on Marimekko's website and sustainability report 2020. Targeting especially their advocacy work to creativity, women and children, the company currently maintains human-related collaborations with Helsinki Pride, Plan International in Ethiopia and Uganda, and National Association for the Advancement of Color People in US (NAACP).

On their sustainability report from 2020, Marimekko states 'organizations, such as NGOs and charities', as one of their seven most important stakeholders. In addition, they report to have received and answered several questionnaires from 'various NGOs' regarding the originality of their cotton and the transparency of their sustainability communication. However, not much about these collaborations or replies to questionnaires are being elaborated: alongside 'partnering' or 'contributing' projects with NGOs, it remains quite unclear for the reader, what exactly, in a concrete manner, has been done. Has it been financial aids, share of their knowledge and competences or some other form of support?

Along with 'namedropping' NGOs that Marimekko has partnered in some ways in the past year, it would be beneficial for the company to clarify the nature of their cross-sector partnerships and thus in this respect, make the CSR communication more effective.

Displaying *company commitment to CSR* by embedding it to key company statements is another way of bringing CSR tighter into the company's operations and thus boosting the credibility of the practices. In their corporate website, Marimekko announces "Profitable growth by reaching a broader target audience" as their main focus area of strategy in 2018-2022. The focus point is divided into seven sub-targets, of which in one is CSR present: in the fifth one, to "further develop sustainability of Marimekko across value chain". (Marimekko.com: Strategy and financial goals.)

Responsibility can also be found in two of the company's six key values: by "Living, not pretending", Marimekko reports to encourage everyone, their workers and customers included, to genuineness and following their own path. "Fairness to everyone and everything", on the other hand, calls for sustainability for both people and environment. Quite interestingly, while environmental themes were found to be very visibly present in Marimekko's sustainability communication, in the company's values environmentalism is left to a minor role and main focus in on the social themes. (Marimekko.com: Strategy and financial goals.)

Marimekko's vision is to "be the world's most inspiring lifestyle design brand renowned for bold prints". While this statement strongly represents the brand image they are willing to create, CSR is not represented in Marimekko's future statement.

As stated on their website, Marimekko's mission is to:

> Empower people to be happy as they are and bring joy to their everyday lives through bold prints and colours (Marimekko.com: Strategy and financial goals).

One can observe that CSR as itself does not stick out from the mission, but 'empowering people to be happy as they are' could be a statement connected to their human-related CSR actions regarding *Positive change*.

Marimekko presents their strategy key points in a visual illustration portrayed in Figure 5 next page. In the image, there are key points of company strategy represented; in addition, megatrends Marimekko has identified as the most impactful, are introduced in

the rainbow. As can be seen from the megatrends, CSR-related themes have been identified as key trends impactful for Marimekko's business in the future.
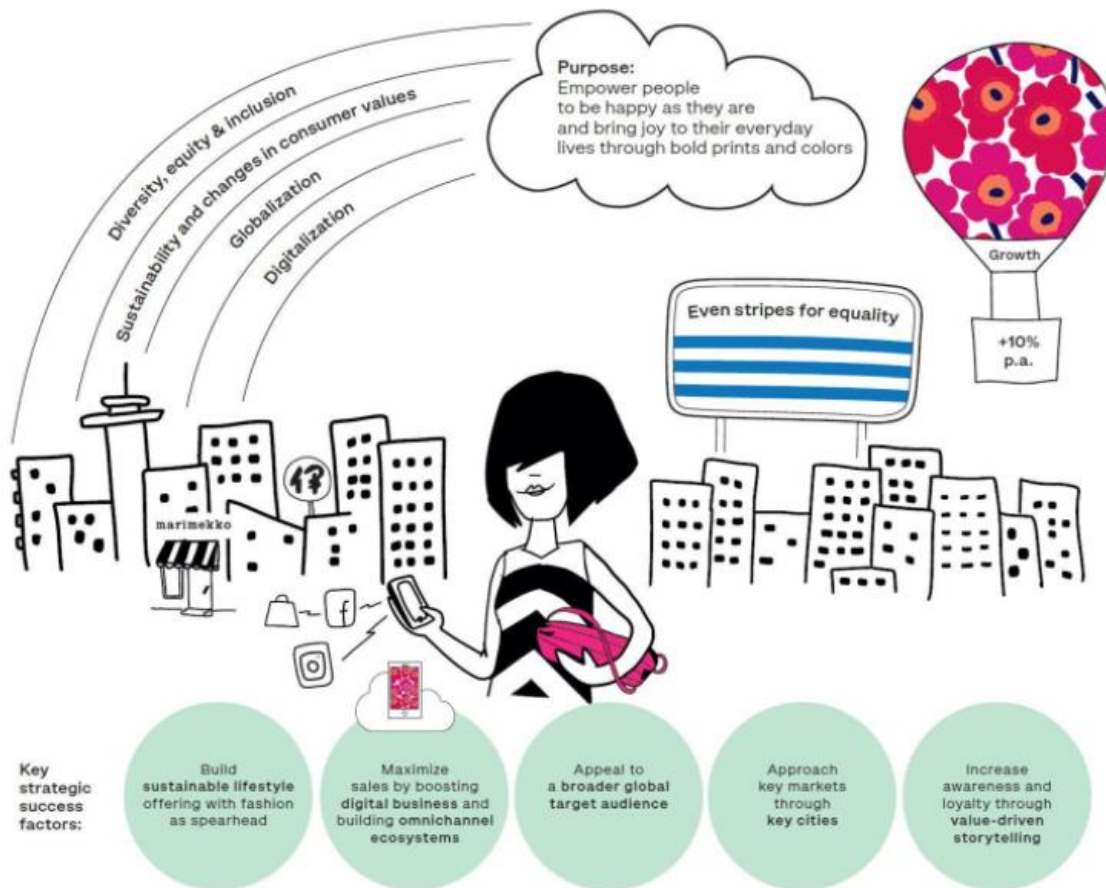
Figure 5: Marimekko's strategy 2018-2022 (Marimekko: Sustainability report 2020, 13).

In general, CSR and related themes were found to exist in most of Marimekko's key business statements: in strategy, company values, and mission, as well as identified as one of the most impactful megatrends for the company in the future. However, in the vision CSR was not present. Therefore, it is justifiable to state that CSR has been implemented into Marimekko's strategy relatively well.

Overall, Marimekko has acknowledged and committed to the three dimensions of CSR quite well: CSR activities regarding environmental, social, and economic dimensions are all represented in Marimekko's sustainability strategy, yet clear emphasis was detected on the environmental themes. Since the company operates on textile production and thus potential threats may occur particularly on the environmental sector, this choice seems reasonable. Social responsibility is also considered in the light of the customers and employees in the company's retail sector. However, actions regarding Marimekko's

employees in production, working in its factories and mills – another sector prone to potential abuse – seems to be completely lacking, except for the participation in Better Cotton Initiative. To improve their CSR practices, Marimekko could next ensure their CSR activities cover their entire value chain. Furthermore, information on their cross-sector partnerships was found weak. Alongside mentioning names of certain NGOs the company apparently has tied partnerships with, description of these collaborations was really vague and provided practically no concrete information. To better indicate the importance of CSR through their partnerships, Marimekko could elaborate on what kind of collaborations the company is actually committed to.

5.1.2 ISS

In general, ISS considers all three bottom lines of CSR in their responsibility strategy. The company has even built their latest sustainability report in line with the three: following the introductory chapters, there are *Planet*, representing the environmental section, *People* standing for social aspect, and two individual chapters *Prosperity* and *Principles of Governance* lifting the economical and organizational themes, yet also somewhat overlapping topics regarding social and environmental bottom lines. Observing the structure of the sustainability report, it is discernible for the reader that Elkington's three bottom lines of CSR have been present in the development of ISS' CSR strategy. Furthermore, there are total of six of the United Nations' Social Development Goals the company announces to have particularly committed to: *5. Gender equality, 8. Decent work and economic growth, 10. Reduced inequalities, 12. Responsible consumption and production, 13. Climate action,* and *16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions* (ISS sustainability report 2021, 10). The chosen SDGs are presented on their own slide at the beginning of the sustainability report but are not connected to the CSR activities further on.

ISS, working on the service industry, reports to cause environmental impacts primarily by its transportation, energy consumption in buildings, and chemicals and other resources used in their cleaning services. Different from the other two case companies, ISS does not operate on production field, but takes care of other companies' facilities. Thus, many of their environmental actions actually take place in their customers' properties. Out of the major polluters, only transportation lies solely in the company's own hands, and energy consumption and chemical usage are affected secondarily, through their partners

and customers. Therefore, it seems quite reasonable that environmental bottom line plays relatively smaller role in ISS' own CSR practices.

Based on their report, even though working on a service industry and thus not causing similar environmental effects than production companies, ISS seems to have nevertheless acknowledged their responsibility and power to positively impact other actors in their value chain. Thus, the company has concentrated their environmental activities on reducing their footprint by minimizing their environmental effects in collaboration with their partners in supply chain. They have, for instance, launched a project called Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) in collaboration with one of their strategic suppliers, to systemically assess the chemicals used in their daily services, such as cleaning. The goal of the project is to gain understanding on the environmental impact of the products ISS uses, make better choices, and thus cover the sustainability targets.

In addition to optimizing and in collaboration with their partners, finding better ways to conduct their services, ISS has set targets for reducing their footprint on emissions, waste, and water usage, that today appear to be more or less customary for any multinational corporate. What seems to be completely missing, however, are the actions embracing the natural capital: alongside switching their products to more environmentally friendly options, at the moment, there are no preventative, proactive actions taken to protect the diversity of nature.

Policies
- ISS Code of Conduct
- ISS Corporate Responsibility Policy
- Group HSEQ Management System
- ISS Safety Rules
- ISS Tax Policy
- ISS Global People Standards
- ISS Supplier Code of Conduct
- ISS Supply Chain Policy

Foundation

Our values – Honesty, Entrepreneurship, Responsibility, Quality and Unity, and the ISS Leadership Model

Our purpose - Connecting people and places to make the world work better

Our strategy – OneISS

Group Health, Safety, Environment and Quality and Corporate Responsibility

Central & Southern Europe

Northern Europe

Asia & Pacific

Americas

Figure 6: ISS framework for corporate responsibility (ISS sustainability report 2021, 11).

Since ISS' main 'product' are its employees and the services these people produce, it is rather natural that particularly the social bottom line is highlighted in the company's CSR

practices. There are several policies and projects on regarding ISS' employees: alongside emphasizing social sustainability, diversity and inclusiveness, the company has launched programs around the world to employ immigrants and disabled groups. Ambitiously, they also announce to aim at providing an opportunity for training for instance for literacy, numeracy, and IT skills for every one of their employees by 2025.

Overall, ISS acknowledges all three bottom lines in their CSR practices, as applicable. The main attention is directed to social themes, specifically to their employees and their human and intellectual capital, but also to social issues on a wider scale. These topics appear to be also in general the most prominent themes in ISS' CSR activity. Interestingly, there is some variation in the progress: in Finland, for instance, ISS has tied an official partnership with Helsinki Pride and speaks up equality and inclusiveness themes on a very visible manner. Such advancement has not, however, yet reached the company on an international level.

It is worth noting that like other two case companies' tables in this chapter, the table presented below does not exhaustively list every single CSR action implemented at ISS, but rather presents an overall picture of the activities and their diversity, as well as the division between and within the three bottom lines of CSR.

Table 5: ISS' CSR practices classified into three dimensions of CSR.

Diversity of CSR issues acknowledged at ISS		
Environmental	**Social**	**Economical**
Avoiding mechanisms harmful to the environment: - Life cycle assessment (LCA) - Reducing emissions - Aim for carbon neutrality - Waste reduction - Collaboration with suppliers to develop more environmentally friendly chemicals and products **Embracing natural capital:** - ?	**Internal stakeholders:** - Speak Up policy - Employment programs of immigrants and disabled groups - Focus on education: all employees offered training by 2025 **External stakeholders:** - UN Women's Empowerment principles - Official partnership with Helsinki Pride (in Finland) - Health and Safety program - Mentoring Refugee Women -initiative	**Human capital:** - Social sustainability - Speak up policy **Intellectual capital:** - Employee engagement activities - Diversity & Inclusion strategy - ISS Leadership model - Gender Balance by annual measurements

ISS names NGOs as one of their seven key stakeholders: according to their sustainability report "proactive and constructive communication with media and NGOs" is implemented on a "broad variety of platforms" (ISS sustainability report 2021, 16). As listed on the CSR practices table above, there are several collaborations with NGOs ISS participates on national level: for instance, in collaboration with a global nonprofit organization Catalyst, ISS takes part in Mentoring Refugee Women -initiative in Middle Europe, and in Finland, the company signed as an official partner of Pride. Such *cross-sector partnerships* ascertain ISS' will to make a positive impact and increase the overall legitimacy of their CSR practices. In the analysis, ISS' commitment to cross-sector partnerships was found to be strong.

To measure how deeply a company has in reality adopted the principles of CSR and *committed* to the theme, it is worth examining its key business statements: strategy, purpose, vision, and values. As stated on their website, OneISS strategy, launched in December 2020, aims at *Stronger, Simpler, and Closer* ISS. In practice, this means strengthening their position in the markets, enhancing key account strategy, and bringing the services closer to customers. Thus, CSR does not appear directly on the company strategy.

ISS does not announce mission and vision on their marketing communication but instead, speaks about their purpose and promise. ISS' purpose is "Connecting people and places to make the world better". Though the statement does not literally involve CSR or any related terms, there are interlinear references to such ideas. As in their marketing communication overall, 'People' referring possibly to their employees, customers, and humans overall, are very present in the purpose, located at the beginning of the phrase. On the other hand, the expression 'to make the world better' communicates the universal idea of making a positive impact and thus is closely connected to CSR.

ISS' promise is a 'Sustainable business model that supports the world we live in'. While the adjective 'sustainable' is in this connection used primarily to message the steadiness of their business operations, the word serves also as signaling the company's orientation to sustainability. Again, the topic is also present between the lines: 'the world we live in' forwards the reader the responsibility we all carry on the future of our globe. Therefore, CSR could be seen to be strongly present on ISS' business promise.

There are total of five key values at ISS: *Honesty, Entrepreneurship, Responsibility, Quality, and Unity.* By unity, the company refers to creating equality and inclusion, as well as learning from one another, connecting thus closely to the social dimension of CSR. Entrepreneurship encourages employees and ISS as a company to act, finding better ways of working and posing actions when needed, while responsibility aims at nurturing overall health and well-being of people, communities and working environments. Quality and honesty strive for delivering business promises and embracing open communication within the company and with their customers. Looking at the five ISS' corporate values, it can be seen that CSR themes are actively present in every one of them. Like ISS' CSR practices overall, greatest attention is directed to the social responsibility themes, while environmentalism is involved with less attention.

Overall, CSR was found to be present in ISS' key company statements relatively well. While the theme was not present at all in the current company strategy *Stronger, Simpler, and Closer ISS*, in their purpose, CSR was found to lie between the lines. In the promise and company values CSR was found to be strongly present, which also makes their CSR communication appear more credible.

As a whole, ISS' coverage of CSR issues was found strong and quite comprehensive. While the three dimensions of CSR were found to be covered versatilely, the biggest

target for development arises in the actions to embrace the natural capital, that in this analysis appeared non-existent. Delightful finding, on the other hand, was the diversity of the company's cross-sector partnerships and the concreteness of the information on these collaborations.

5.1.3 Equinor

Equinor, being the largest oil production company in Norway, does by nature evoke some contradictions when speaking especially about environmental responsibility. Even though operating on a controversial industry themselves and actually causing environmental harm by their own actions, Equinor manages to acknowledge the three dimensions of CSR on a rather comprehensive manner, announcing a variety of responsibility initiatives on environmental, social, and economic sustainability. In addition to *Introduction* and *Appendixes*, Equinor's CSR portfolio in their latest sustainability report 2021 has in total eight sections: *Sustainability in Equinor* referring to their preventative actions regarding environment, *Getting to net zero, Protecting the environment, Health, safety and security, Workforce for the future, Respecting the rights of people, Socio-economic impact,* and *Integrity and anti-corruption.* There are six United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals Equinor announces to have particularly committed to: *4. Quality education, 7. Affordable and clean energy, 8. Decent work and economic growth, 13. Climate action, 14. Life below water,* and *17. Partnership for the goals* (Equinor sustainability report 2021, 15). Out of the six goals three is particularly linked to environmental sustainability, to which Equinor as a company could be seen to most negatively contribute to.

Equinor announces to have set ambitious goals for reducing its emissions in the coming years and decades. The company reports to act for zero greenhouse and methane emissions and also to invest in developing new types of renewable low-carbon systems for their operations. Alongside avoiding mechanisms harmful to the environment, there are initiatives to embrace the natural capital: Equinor reports to aim at 'net positive impact' for biodiversity and nature and announces to establish plans to reach that goal on various fields of their business. However, no concrete information on their actions towards net positive impact is revealed neither on their website nor in the sustainability report 2021.

Practices regarding social dimension of CSR provide most concreteness. Equinor was found to run delightfully varying initiatives aimed both at their internal stakeholders, as

well as the society around the world. Delightful finding was that beyond taking care of their own employees, the company runs programs regarding the safety and well-being of their contractors and other people in their value chain. In addition to constant screening for forced labor, Equinor also wants to act as a responsible taxpayer and reports annually their tax contribution. Monetary aids and sponsorships are also granted to societies and organizations around the globe.

Thinking about the negative impacts Equinor causes by their business, environmental sustainability supposedly would be the field in which the company has to most to work on. Environmental actions and targets are raised to the very top of their sustainability report, positioned at a notable place at the beginning of the executive summary of key actions in 2021. Energy transition plan 2022 and climate actions are also the primary topics on the *Sustainability*-section of their corporate website. However, a more careful analysis on Equinor's CSR practices reveals that despite the great attention given to the topic, the real actions in the environmental dimension seem to remain relatively scarce and abstract. Examining the table 5 next page, as well as comparing to the CSR practices of the other two case companies in this study, one can see that Equinor's environmental practices fall behind as rather sparse and one-sided. Overall, the *diversity of CSR issues addressed* was in Equinor's case found to remain moderate.

Table 6: Equinor's CSR practices classified into three dimensions of CSR.

Diversity of CSR issues acknowledged at Equinor		
Environmental	**Social**	**Economical**
Avoiding mechanisms harmful to the environment: - Target at zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 - Cutting flaring and methane emissions to zero by 2030 - Development of new, low-carbon systems **Embracing natural capital:** - "Establishing a plan to demonstrate net positive impact" for biodiversity - Norway Energy Hub: an initiative to support the energy transition	**Internal stakeholders:** - 'Safety roadmap 2025' – a program for developing the safety of employees and contractors - Women in Equinor, Differently Able, Black in Equinor, Pride Makers - Talent programs for graduates with focus on diversity - Gender pay reporting **External stakeholders:** - Product safety initiative - Screening of supply chains for forced labor - Tax Contribution report - Sponsorship program in universities, e.g. in Tanzania and Norway - Donations to societies around the world: four-year contractual social investment in Suriname, American Red Cross Hurricane fund, Norwegian Business Association India	**Financial capital:** - Driving innovation and thus economic growth **Human capital:** - Security training for all employees **Intellectual capital:** - Measurement of Diversity and Inclusion index scores

Equinor reports to participate in "wide range of relevant sustainability associations and industry initiatives". Altogether, 15 NGOs are listed in Equinor's sustainability report as their key sustainability associations. These partners include quite notable large-scale operators acting on a global level for the sake of sustainability, such as United Nations Global Impact, Oil and Gas Climate Initiative, and the International Emissions Trading Association. According to their sustainability report, there are also "partnerships with specialist human rights organizations", though these collaborations are not much elaborated in text. In addition, Equinor has taken part in charitable projects and granted donations for societies around the world. Overall, *cross-sector partnerships* were found to be delightfully blooming and active at Equinor. Such activity indicates that CSR plays a significant role in the company's operations.

With key company statements, companies can express their orientation and display topics they find most meaningful. Equinor announces company purpose, vision, values, and strategy that all guide their operations in business. Equinor's purpose is "Turning natural resources into energy for people and progress for society". Analyzing the contents of the purpose, the reason why company exists, one can see that Equinor has indeed very efficiently removed any references to their actual field of business in oil production and instead directs attention to more fashionable 'natural resources' and 'progress for society'. Such contents of the company purpose could be seen to indicate a reference to CSR themes, but in this case, the evident diversion of attention from operating on a controversial industry, does undermine the legitimacy of Equinor's sincerity on *CSR commitment.*

"Shaping the future of energy" is Equinor's vision. While the phrase acknowledges the energy field Equinor operates on, it also indicates the emphasis Equinor points towards tomorrow's solutions. Between the lines of the company vision, positive association with CSR may be observed.

Equinor's values are Open, Courageous, Collaborative, and Caring. According to the company, these values "embody the spirit and energy of Equinor at its best" (Equinor book 2022, 16). On the company website nor on the sustainability report there were no further explanations for these values provided, but from the latest Equinor book (2022) one can learn that there are vague, verbal explanations for the values: for instance, by being 'Courageous' Equinor states: "We are curious, innovative, and commercial. We continuously improve. We use foresight, identify opportunities, and manage risk." (Equinor Book 2022, 17.) The company values therefore remain on a rather abstract level distant from real actions, and with shaky connection to CSR practices.
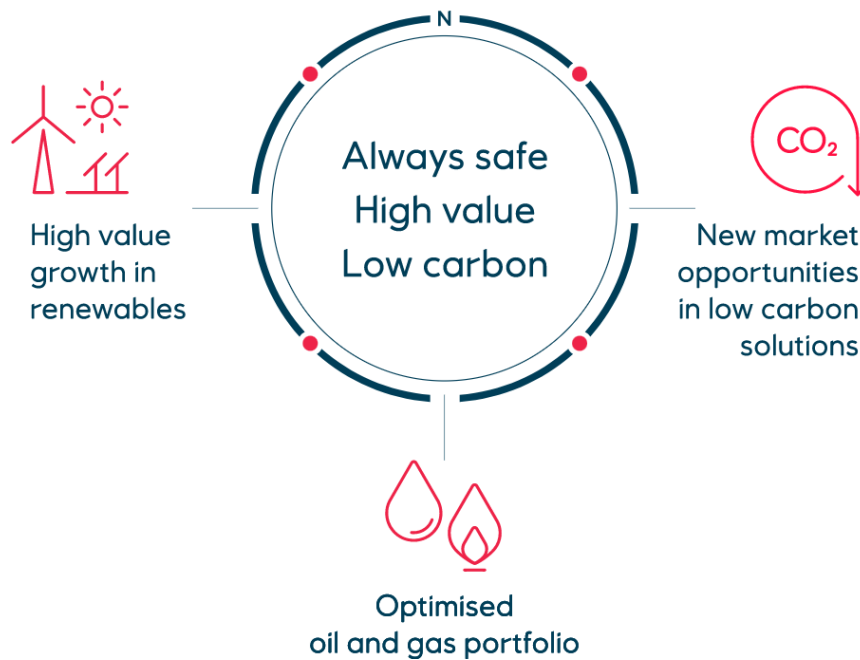
Figure 7: Visualization of Equinor's strategy (Equinor sustainability report 2021, 11).

Equinor's strategy is to be *Always safe, high value, low carbon.* This three-pillar strategy could be seen to represent the three dimensions of CSR: Always safe referring to working for the safety and wellbeing of their people ("We work hard to reduce risk and avoid incidents and injuries, both among our own employees and those of our suppliers."), high value indicating economic stability and growth ("Our growing oil and gas cashflow will enable our transformation and ensure value for our shareholders and society."), and finally, low carbon pointing to environment ("Equinor's long-term ambition is to become a net zero company by 2050. We have set interim ambitions for our portfolio, to establish a pathway to net zero."). (Quotations from Equinor.com: Strategy.) Therefore, CSR could be seen to guide the strategy of Equinor quite strongly.

Out of company purpose, vision, values, and strategy, CSR was found to be somewhat present on three of the four, leaving only values completely outside. However, not very strong connections to CSR could be drawn here overall since there were no direct indications of CSR but rather interlinear references with relatively low level on concreteness involved in the statements. Thus, assessing Equinor's true *commitment to CSR* based on their key company statements comes out as rather challenging.

Overall, the CSR practices of Equinor were found to be the most controversial of the three companies in the analysis. In general, Equinor reported to have committed to various CSR practices, naming activities on all three dimensions of responsibility. However, it is

questionable whether their actions on environmental sustainability correspond with the negative impact their business potentially causes to the environment. Furthermore, based on this analysis on Equinor's online CSR communication, it remained rather unclear what are the concrete actions implemented behind 'aiming at net positive impact for biodiversity and nature' or 'establishing plans to reach zero impact'. The same issue occurred in the company's key statements: while CSR could be seen to be present in three of the four key company statements, the real connection was anything but clear. Therefore, Equinor would potentially benefit for bringing more concrete actions to their environmental sustainability agenda and thus to their CSR communication.

5.1.4 Synthesis of CSR practices in case companies

The case companies' CSR practices were evaluated in the analysis with a 5-step scale: proceeding from "Non-existent", "Weak", "Moderate", "Good", to "Very good". The same scaling was used when grading both 'CSR practices' as well as 'CSR communication' further on in the analysis. Delightfully, in none of the case companies was any aspect of CSR practices evaluated as "Non-existent". The assessment scale is introduced in more detail in Figure 8 below.
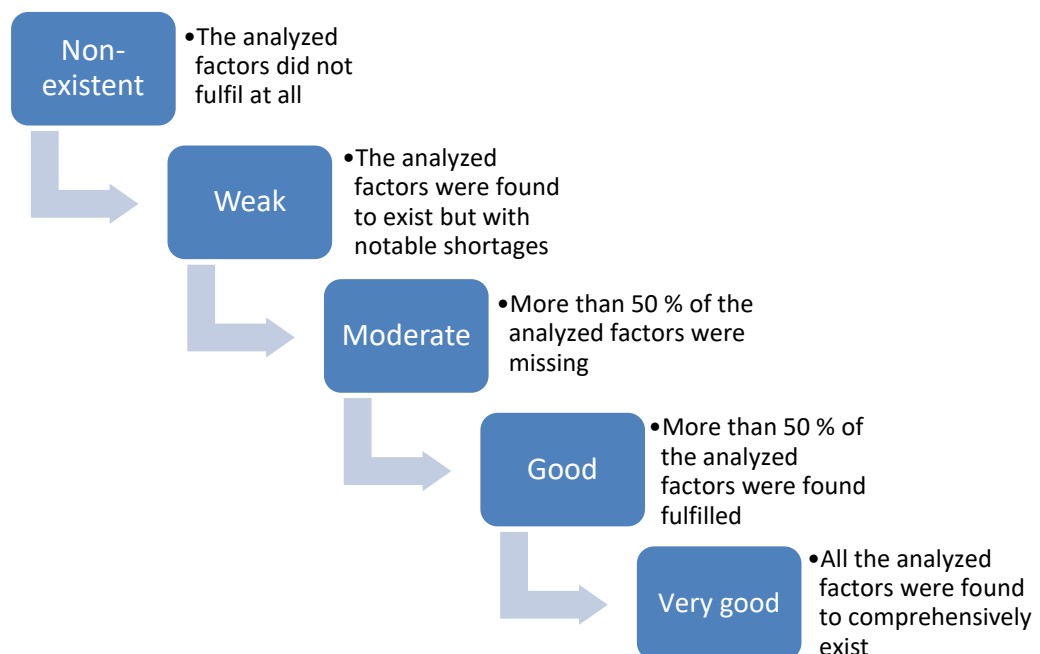

Figure 8: 5-step scale of the analysis.

The 5-step assessment scale was based on the case companies' performance in the section, according to the theory-based measures used in this study. The best possible grade "Very good" indicates that case company was found to fulfil all the aspects of the section in question: for instance, in 'Coverage of CSR issues' the company managed to successfully acknowledge and implement all three dimensions of CSR and their subparts. In the social dimension, that would mean concerning both internal and external stakeholders, and in the environmental dimension, committing to both avoiding harmful mechanisms and embracing the current natural capital. Correspondingly, the lowest grade "Weak" implies that there were some attempts or mentions regarding the topic detected. However, they were notably minor or had some serious shortages on their information. The grade "Moderate" indicates better performance than "Weak", even though still lacking more of the factors analyzed in the analysis than fulfilling them, while "Good" on the better side of the scale displays quite strong execution, performing more of the factors in the analysis than lacking them. The complete list of factors analyzed in this study, regarding both CSR practices and CSR communication, may be found in Appendix 1.

Table 7: Synthesis on CSR practices in the case companies.

Companies	Marimekko	ISS	Equinor
Coverage of CSR issues	Good	Good	Moderate
Cross-sector partnerships	Weak	Very good	Good
Company commitment to CSR	Good	Good	Moderate

The results of the first part of the analysis are put together in Table 7. As one can see from the table, there is mostly slight variation between the case companies. While *coverage of CSR issues and company commitment to CSR were found to be good or moderately good in all case companies, the strongest variation occurred in cross-sector partnerships, where the evaluation varied from weak to very good.* Overall, the three dimensions of CSR, economic, environmental, and social, as well as cross-sector partnerships and company commitment to CSR were all found to be acknowledged quite well in the case companies, yet plenty of room for development still exists in all three case companies as well. Especially practices embracing natural capital were found particularly sparse or even non-existent.

5.2   CSR communication in the case companies

5.2.1 Marimekko's CSR communication to stakeholders

Generally, the accessibility of CSR information on Marimekko's commercial and corporate websites is really good: *Sustainability*-headline is on a visible page on both sites' front page (see figure 6 below), and one can easily find their way to the CSR themes with a single click. On the corporate page, the company's sustainability report 2020 is also only two clicks away from the front page and available in PDF-format for download in English and Finnish. In addition, Sustainability is also headlined as one of the four 'Popular shortcuts' at the bottom of the commercial page along with 'Find a store', 'Gift cards', and 'Care guide', the latter also representing one of Marimekko's sustainability procedures. Being visible on several parts of Marimekko's website, sustainability is indeed lift as one of Marimekko's key messages with similarly notable visibility as their newest product collections and brand book.
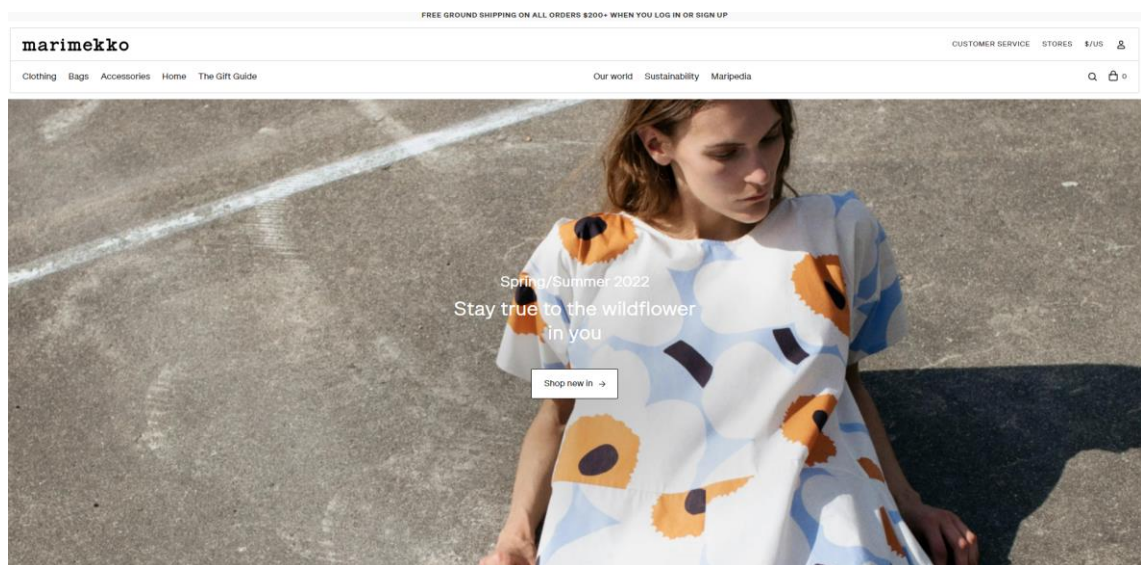
Figure 9: Marimekko.com front page: Sustainability located on the front page (Marimekko.com)

Overall, the information is presented in a clear, understandable, and reader-friendly way and complemented with images, charts, and other elements in compliance with the brand style. Comparing the Finnish and the English sites, the information in both sustainability pages is identical and thus accessible to great audiences outside Finland too. Therefore, the *accessibility of CSR information* supports the argument that CSR has been effectively

implemented into Marimekko company strategy and that CSR information is available for different stakeholder groups.

Figure 10: Sustainability is communicated on clear, accessible way with lively, brand-loyal illustrations. (Marimekko.com: Sustainability)

The *media richness,* referring to the utilization of various multimedia technologies, such as graphics, videos, animations, games, and other applications, in order to raise the overall effectiveness of communication on Marimekko's sustainability site, was found low. While visually very rich expression is highly characteristic for Marimekko, at the moment, the usage of multimedia is confined solely to images picturing Marimekko's famous patterns, and graphic illustrations.

On social media, Instagram and Facebook are clearly the most important channels where Marimekko is actively almost on a daily basis and utilizes the platforms as showcasing their product portfolio. On Twitter and LinkedIn the activity is notably more occasional and is restricted mainly to sharing official, organization related news. Marimekko also has an account on YouTube, where one can find their seasonal commercial videos, but alongside them, other contents are not very popular with only a few hundred views per video. On all the social media platforms Marimekko is present, they only have a single, internationally serving account and thus there is no country-based differentiation in their social media contents. Even though the company has managed to commercialize their channels especially on Instagram and Facebook, CSR-related content on their profiles is really minor: on Instagram, out of the 74 posts published in the analysis period between

the beginning of March and end of May 2022, only 11 had a connection to CSR themes with keywords such as *sustainable* (for the launch of new, sustainably produced swimwear collection) or *equality*. On Facebook, of 60 posts published in the analysis period, eight were vaguely linked to CSR. Of seven posts on LinkedIn, only one referred to sustainability on its copy text. Finally, on Twitter, none of the five posts published on the analysis period had anything to do with CSR.

Positive finding is that there is a delightful amount of two-way communication present especially in Marimekko's posts on Instagram and Facebook: not only are the praising comments of consumers acknowledged regularly with smiling emojis and hearts, but questions are also answered. On the posts in the analysis period, people have asked in the comments for instance about Marimekko's contribution to help Ukraine in war, possible production of vegan leather bags in the future, as well as more collections designed unisex or for men. The corporate account has properly responded to all visible questions. What is more, no glaringly negative comments were detected. However, one must bear in mind that companies have an option to hide unfavorable comments from everyone's eyes on social media, so lack of them might not tell the whole truth. Overall, Marimekko's presence and utilization of two-way communication on social media was found as really strong and thus enhancing the credibility.

While the accessibility of CSR was found in Marimekko's case strong, rather surprising finding was their low utilization of media richness and social media activity in terms of CSR. Marimekko, whose marketing communication otherwise seems to rely strongly on visuality and utilizes video contents regularly on their website and social media, could potentially increase the coverage of their CSR communication as well by making the most of newer applications of media.

5.2.2 Tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism at Marimekko

There are numerous charts and percentages provided besides Marimekko's CSR communication, especially on themes regarding environment. This supports the next element of the analysis, *concreteness* of the CSR communication. Altogether, most of the subpages of Marimekko's Sustainability-theme under their commercial website have some kind of 'hard numbers' on them to support the message, communicating for example the number of audited suppliers or share of Better Cotton used in their production. However, for the most parts, concreteness only seems to apply to the

environmental topics, while social issues and developments are left with less attention and concreteness. There is also not much of real-life examples of Marimekko's CSR activities introduced in the text: rather than giving readers concreteness on the previously implemented actions, the attention in the sustainability report and on the commercial and corporate websites are directed clearly to the coming years and future.

As noticed earlier when analyzing the cross-sector partnerships, while Marimekko proudly mentions names of their NGO collaborations, not much about the nature or the content of those partnerships is revealed. Another quite conspicuous destitution on their sites and sustainability report is the scarcity of external sources or analyses were provided. Seeking information from Marimekko's website about their CSR actions, one is left to rely on company's own narrative with no outside verification. Hence the information from independent sources remains non-existent.

Alongside only giving voice to their own narratives of their CSR acts, the accounts of Marimekko's sustainability are sure to told in a carefully polished, positive manner. In their Sustainability report from 2020, Marimekko evaluates its own targets regarding CSR and how those targets were reached on a three-step scale in 2020. Out of the total of 24 targets presented in the report, only one (1) is reported as 'annual target not achieved', while six (6) are under status 'progress made' and the rest, seventeen (17) stand on the highest score with status 'progressing according to plan'. To increase the credibility of their CSR communication, *self-critique* could also be presented along with the successful developments. For a reader, going through Marimekko's website and sustainability report gives a sign that the company is doing excellently well in CSR – almost so excellently, one might start wondering what is left untold.

In Marimekko's overall marketing communication, there is a strong narrative of happiness-seeking, independent and vigorous company that exists to 'spread joy'. The same style applies to the CSR communication as well: when speaking of their sustainability targets and developments, the language is friendly and lively:

> "If the last seventy years has taught us anything, it's that positive change doesn't happen by chance but by inspiring others and leading by example. So when it comes to the pressing and all-important issues of sustainability and running a responsible company, we come well prepared and ready to lead." (Marimekko.com: sustainability.)

In addition to the approachable style of speaking, the company's founder, Armi Ratia is brought strongly present and quoted on several occasions on the Sustainability section of the website. Such emphasis on the founder figure and the origins of the company reinforces the narrative and acts as an effective device for enhancing the credibility of the message. In other respects, however, utilization of emotions was not detected in Marimekko's CSR communication.

As analyzed in the CSR practices, Marimekko's commitment to CSR seems to apply relatively well across the company. This naturally increases the credibility of their CSR communication: going through their webpages, the message is repetitious, uniform, and consistent. However, providing more concreteness and real-life examples throughout their webpage and sustainability report could make Marimekko's CSR communication appear more credible. Quite shockingly, any information from independent sources was found non-existent In an intrinsic CSR communication, one should not be too afraid of revealing their targets for development as well.

5.2.3 ISS' CSR communication to stakeholders

On the front page of ISS corporate website, there is no link provided to CSR information. This lack of direct guidance makes it rather tricky for a site visitor to find their way to the responsibility themes: to go to the CSR page, one must realize to look for sub-heading 'Corporate responsibility' under the 'About' header, one of the six topics highlighted at the top of ISS' front page (see figure 9) both on global (English) and Finnish site versions. Likewise, no CSR-related linkage is positioned to the shortcuts at the bottom of the front page neither. Corporate responsibility does appear, however, possibly by chance currently on the topical articles on the front page of the global site: from the article *Response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine* one can learn about the concrete actions the company has taken in order to help those affected by the war. The latest corporate responsibility report from the year 2021 can also be found on the front page from the 'Latest financial documents' section.

On the Finnish site version, no such links or other CSR related information are provided on the front page. However, the Finnish organization has dedicated an own url-address to their latest corporate responsibility report: *issyritysvastuuraportti.fi* compiles comprehensively all the CSR information with illustrative graphs and real-life case stories under the page, which indeed makes the information very accessible for anyone visiting

the corporate responsibility site. Quite interestingly, there is link provided to the page on the official ISS corporate website, but the link to issyritysvastuuraportti.fi is only distributed on the company's own social media channels for instance on LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook.
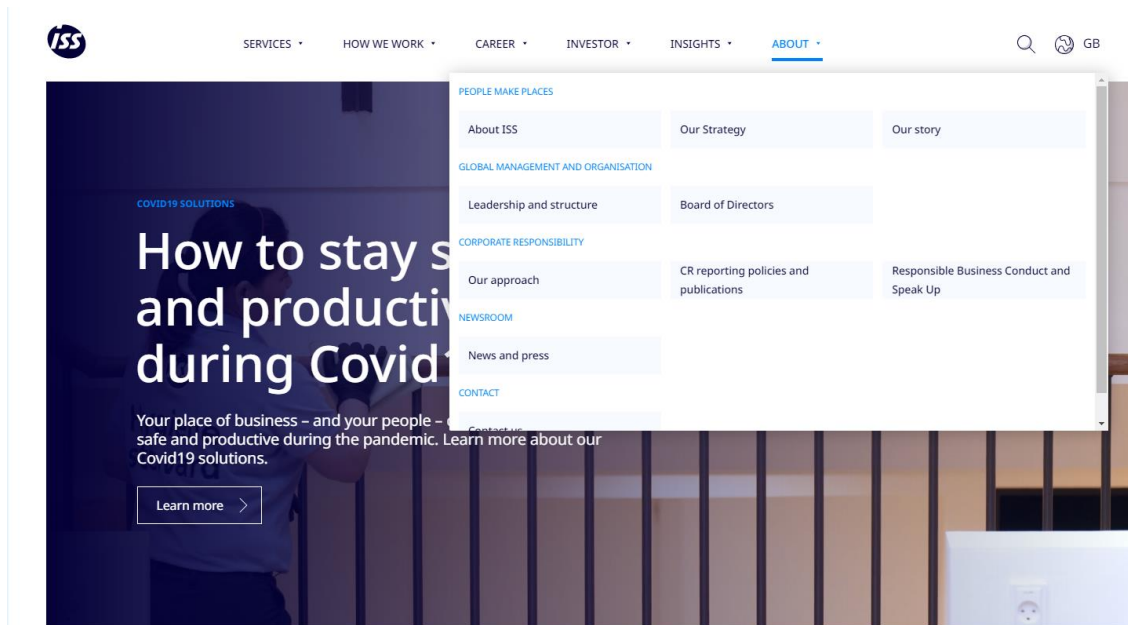
Figure 11: Issworld.com front page: corporate responsibility is located under *About*-subheading (Issworld.com).

Overall, the lack of guidance to the CSR themes from the front page weakens the *accessibility of CSR information:* compared to other topics such as ISS' operational services and career opportunities, corporate responsibility seems to be left behind with less attention. On the other hand, the information on the actual corporate responsibility page is presented in an understandable, well-structured manner that brings forward the consideration of all three dimensions of CSR. Timely examples of CSR actions are also presented in the news articles. Thus, the accessibility of CSR information on ISS' corporate website was evaluated as relatively good.

The *media-richness* on ISS' website was found sparse. Alongside photographs and occasional graphics among the text, the use of multimedia in the CSR communication is non-existent.

On both their international and Finnish webpages, ISS has links to their global LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts all named with a title *Issworld*. Apart from YouTube, ISS global is actively present in all its other three social media channels.

Analyzing the content of ISS' global *social media activity*, the positive finding is that CSR themes are present there on a very regular basis: out of the 21 posts ISS made on LinkedIn in the past three months, 15 were found to contain CSR-related information with keywords such as *environment, climate, inclusion*, and *diversity*. On Twitter, out of 15 posts published in the past three months, eight were related to CSR. On Facebook, the corresponding numbers were 17 CSR-themed posts out of the total of 27. Therefore, ISS' social media activity regarding CSR was found to be very recurring. At the beginning of June, known internationally as the Pride month, the company promoted Pride and inclusivity themes related to it in a very visible manner in all its social media channels, having for example switched their profile pictures temporarily to rainbow colors promoting Pride on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, which could be considered on a multinational corporation level as a very bold move. CSR is therefore strongly attached to ISS' social media presence. Delightfully, making the CSR communication also appear more credible, responsibility does not serve on only one of their social media accounts, but strong emphasis on CSR is given on all ISS' active channels Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. However, while there are posts on CSR published on a regular basis, not much two-way interaction between the company and their followers was detected. There are likes, shares and some (mainly glowing) comments on the CSR-posts, but no real discussion between stakeholders is implemented. Worth noting is, however, that ISS operates completely on business-to-business -environment, which is why it is possible that relatively less attention is directed to their operations from private individuals on social media in the first place.

The most notable targets for development in ISS' case were detected in the scarcity of their media richness and lack of two-way communication in social media, as well as in difficulty of accessing CSR related information on their corporate website. While the two first are relatively new phenomena in corporate communication overall and could be possibly secondary for a company operating on B2B markets, better accessibility of CSR information on their front page could be a quick and efficient fix for ISS to enhance their CSR communication.

5.2.4 Tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism at ISS

ISS' communication on their CSR activities was mainly found as delightfully explanatory, supplemented with a praiseworthy number of real-life examples and case

stories on how the company has put their CSR activities into practice around the world. Therefore, the level of *concreteness* in ISS' CSR communication is really good. In addition to graphs, numbers and percentages indicating ISS' CSR process, the activities are also taken from abstract expressions into concreteness by clarifying their meaning in the text:

> We embrace and encourage diversity and inclusion in their broadest terms, including ethnicity, race, age, gender, gender identity, disability, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, language, cultural and educational background (ISSworld.com: Corporate responsibility 2022).

 Positive finding was also that concrete information is provided equally on environmental and social matters. By bringing their CSR communication to such creditable level of concreteness, ISS can reduce the skepticism among its stakeholders.

Closely linked to their cross-sector partnerships, *information from independent sources* is to some extent provided on ISS' website. While no specific voice is given to external resources in the sustainability report, whilst bringing forward their partnerships, the requirements and authorizations by independent organizations are also presented. What is more, ISS has also included independent auditor's assurance report (Deloitte) at the end of their sustainability report 2021.

Two-sided messages convey both positive and negative information and can thus boost the credibility of a company's overall CSR communication. Stories indicating such *self-criticism* were found to be delightfully present in ISS' CSR communication: both on their website and corporate responsibility report 2021, the company brings forwards numerous examples on detected imperfections on their operations and how they have acted to fix them, from payroll frauds detected inside the company to the number of reported fatalities in company operations. In the corporate responsibility report 2021, ISS' main objectives regarding *People, Planet, and Prosperity* are collected into a table along with an evaluation of their progress: out of the total of seven key trends, six are reported as progressing 'On trend', whereas one, 0 fatalities, has not been reached yet. Fatalities, a target not yet reached, indeed come out as goal for development: in the sustainability report, the number of deceases (5) is mentioned on different contexts in five different pages, and the locations of these accidents are also expressed. The incidents are referred in text with proper seriousness:

> Tragically we suffered five work-related fatalities in 2021 (three in 2020). This is unacceptable. (--) We are deeply affected by the fatalities and the impact this has on their families, friends and colleagues. We have investigated the incidents to ensure we determine the root causes and take corrective actions to ensure they are not repeated. (ISS Sustainability report 2021, 8.)

By bringing out their failures in workplace safety in such an undisguised manner, ISS does make a rather bold move in revealing its imperfections. However, such honesty, alongside other presented, still in-progress activities of their CSR journey, together create a convincing impression of integrity and thus overall manage to enhance the credibility of the company's CSR communication.

Along with factual-based, hard information relying in numbers and figures, ISS relishes their CSR communication with various case examples and real-life stories of their own employees. These stories, while transmitting the informative message of ISS' company operations, also appeal to the readers' emotions and thus make the communication more memorable. Relatable real-life cases of for instance a lady moving on her career from a service manager in cleaning all the way up to leading the nationwide cleaning and multiservice business unit, or individuals from indigenous peoples finding their career paths on ISS, are brought forward both on ISS corporate website as well as their corporate responsibility report 2021. Thus, the use of *emotional communication* on ISS was found to be strong.

In CSR practices, *implementation of CSR* in ISS' key company statements was found to be relatively strong. This enhances the credibility of their overall CSR activity. Being visibly present on either within or between the lines of ISS' key company statements, CSR appears to truly have taken its place as a significant leader of ISS' operations and thus enhances the overall credibility of their CSR communication.

Overall, ISS was found to utilize communication tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism in a very good manner. While the company very efficiently uses self-critique, concreteness, and emotional aspect on their communication, the utilization of independent, third-party sources could potentially be increased.

5.2.5 Equinor's CSR communication to stakeholders

There are two ways to find sustainability information on Equinor's corporate website: one has to either scroll down to the very bottom of the front page and under the 'Explore'

heading click 'Sustainability' as one of the four shortcuts (Investors – Careers – Sustainability – To get there. Together), or alternatively, click the 'Menu' on the front page's right top corner and choose 'Sustainability' from the total of seven headings (Energy – Sustainability – Where we are – News and media – Careers – Investors – About us) in the menu (see Figure 12). Clicking 'Sustainability' from the bottom of the page leads reader to Equinor's Sustainability page highlighting several topics regarding the theme. If opened from the main Menu-button, there opens another dialogue box with shortcuts to several subpages dealing with sustainability. From this menu, one can also click to the Sustainability-page: illustration of the sustainability menu below in Figure 12. Apart from the two displayed paths to the Sustainability page, there is no other way provided from the front page to the sustainability information.
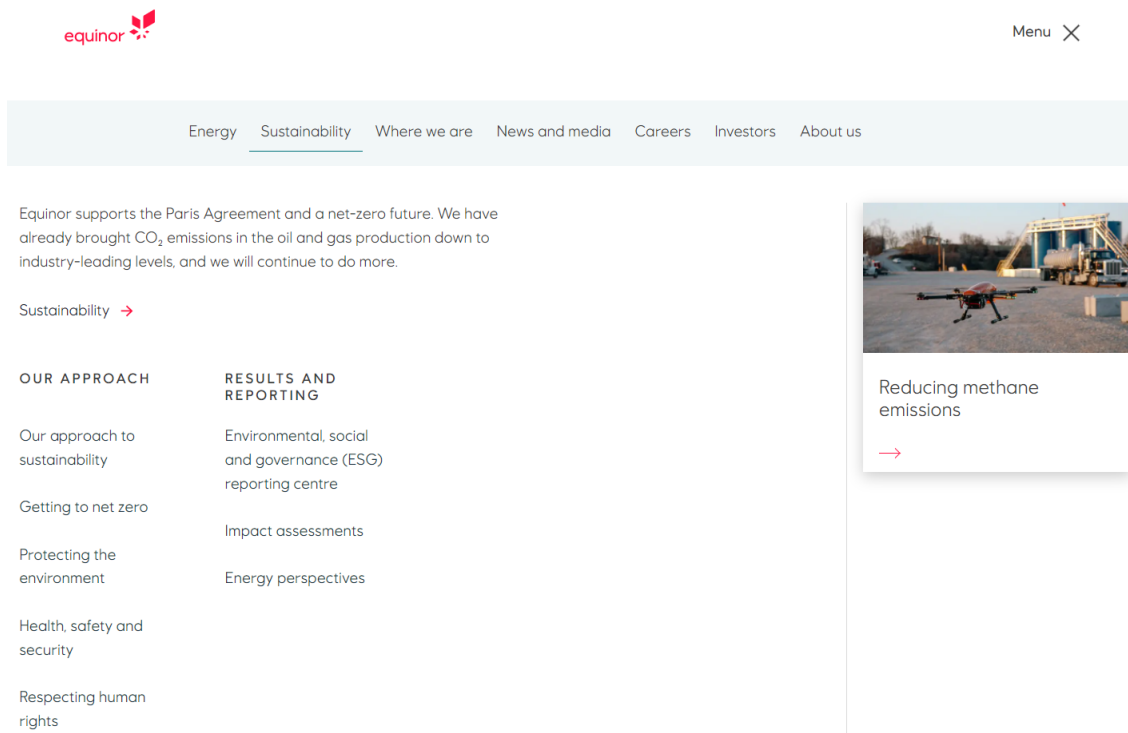
Figure 12: Sustainability on Equinor's front page (Equinor.com).

Quite interestingly, there is no direct linking to the company's sustainability reports on either on the shortcuts from the menu or on the actual Sustainability page. To get access to the pdf-report, one must find their way to 'Sustainability reports archive' – a page dedicated to Equinor's various reports from the past years: for instance, sustainability reports from the past 20 years, their annual Carbon Disclosure Project reports since 2012, and UK gender pay gap reports since 2018. While these reports indeed provide readers

valuable, concrete knowledge on Equinor's actions, it is very confusing how difficult they are to find. Instead of placing a direct link to the reports archive on the Sustainability page or even on the front page of the corporate website, for some reason, Equinor has chosen to provide a link to this archive only on separate 'Respecting human rights' and 'Our approach to human rights' subpages found under the Sustainability site. Even though containing some clearly relevant information, from environment-related sustainability subpages there is completely no linking to the report archive or even to the latest sustainability report.

Like one has to struggle to find their way to the sustainability reports, forming an overall picture on Equinor's CSR activity based on their website seems to be equally difficult. Under the Sustainability page and its dozens of subpages, the CSR information is scattered to numerous different pages and articles. While there seems to be more than enough information the company's CSR activities on these pages, at the same time, finding the relevant points from the sea of information appears to be purposedly or by accident surprisingly challenging for a reader.

Very similarly to the two other case companies in this study, Equinor accompanies their text-based CSR communication with some photos and visual graphics. However, no usage of other forms of multimedia, like videos or animations, was detected on the website or on the sustainability report; on the company's social media account, some video material was also uploaded. Interestingly, Equinor has utilized gamification: to present the work they do and to train people on safety, the company has come up with a game application called "Play me – Safety". The game was distributed on Equinor's social media earlier this year, though it does not seem to hold a permanent spot on their website. Nevertheless, utilization of such new multimedia technology was a delightful finding in the company's CSR communication and therefore, *media richness* on Equinor's website was found moderate.

Equinor has international social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Aside from YouTube, the company is actively present in all its other channels and posts on their feed on a regular basis. Analyzing the contents of their *social media activity*, one can see that CSR-presence is rather moderate on the company's posts: on the three-month analysis period from March 1st to May 31st, six of the totals of 20 posts on Facebook contained some CSR-related information, such as key terms

renewable, to reduce emissions, equitable, diverse, net-zero, sustainable. On Twitter, six of the totals of 16 posts in the past 3 months was CSR-related. Instagram, that clearly serves as a platform for a more informal employer branding rather than an information channel like the other social media accounts, had in three months' period eight posts, of which two were connected to CSR. On LinkedIn, 12 posts out of 38 contained CSR-related information.

While there are hundreds of reactions to almost all Equinor's posts on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn and dozens of likes and retweets on Twitter, *two-way communication* remains really low in all the channels. Especially private individuals comment on the company's posts very actively. There are both positive and negative comments: while some people seem to enthusiastically support the company in their comments ("*An excellent company, I really love it!", "Very nice project! It was nice to be part of it!", "Equinor, together we are strong!",* applauding emojis, heart emojis), others take a clearly more critical stance on Equinor's posts (*"So you are just going to ignore scientific warnings and burn the planet for $$.", "When you really hate the planet and everything on it and discovered that you can use that hate to earn some money.", "Please can you tell me which year you'll invest more in renewables than fossil fuels? (-*
-) You've known for decades the damage GHGs [greenhouse gases] *cause!*
#greenwashing"). While there are both positive and negative comments visible on the posts, analyzing the comments field, again, there is a possibility that some of the comments may have been hidden by the company for one reason or another. Equinor has responded to few comments regarding for instance searching jobs from them or trying to reach them via email. This indicates that they do follow the comments on social media on regular basis but have decided to refrain from participating on more active two-way communication.

As a whole, certain points arise in Equinor's CSR communication particularly calling for improvements. First of all, the CSR information provided on the website calls for more accessibility and clarity. While there is no clear, foreseeable pathway to sustainability reports or other CSR information related to some specific topic, a reader of Equinor's current website could totally benefit from better structured information and grouping of the subpages. Secondly, Equinor has currently chosen not to engage with their stakeholders on social media on CSR related topics. Should they want to interact more with their stakeholders in direct, two-way communication, social media would be an

efficient platform to implement that. Additionally, to diversify their CSR communication and thus better reach their stakeholders, Equinor could also increasingly utilize video, gamification, and social media contents in their communication.

5.2.6 Tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism at Equinor

Providing *concrete information* is an effective method to increase the credibility of CSR information. In Equinor's case the success in concreteness is twofold: while company manages to use active verbs and present figures and percentages on their work on human rights and employee diversity and equity, the same level of concreteness is missed when speaking about their environmental impacts. Regarding use of energy and handling gases, the company reports to be 'working on' and 'investing' on better alternatives, and they 'expect to see a further strengthening of global biodiversity', as well as are 'maturing their understanding on circular opportunities' (Equinor.com: Sustainability report 2021, 33, 36, 37). However, more concreteness in the communication of the actual actions the company has committed to, would make the overall message more credible.

Throughout the sustainability report, there are 'external voices' presented. These voices are professional from different fields of business, giving their own comments on Equinor's sustainability journey. According to Equinor, these comments are independent and people presenting them have not been remunerated. Such comments from external sources give an interesting add to the report, even though analyzing the titles of these commentators, it is evident that they all are attached to Equinor's business in one way or another. On Equinor's website, there are also numerous awards and ratings presented that the company has received from independent actors for 'their sustainability performance'. In addition, the latest sustainability report has been checked and validated by an individual accountant, Ernst & Young AS. Therefore, there is delightfully plenty of *information from independent sources* available to overcome stakeholder skepticism, even though in certain cases, the independence of these sources might need to be double-checked.

 At first glance, Equinor seems to have a good amount of *self-criticism* in their CSR communication. In many contexts regarding for instance their targets on 'Protecting the environment', 'Governance and transparency', and 'Caring for people and society', according to their own words, the performance in the past year has been no better than 'Satisfactory', 'Improvement needed', or 'Improvement required'. Out of the 24

measurable objects presented in their sustainability report, Equinor announces to have met the targets in 14, have a 'plan in place' in six, and has not met their target on four of their priorities. However, operating on a controversial field, the most prominent question on Equinor's operations and evident negative impacts of drilling oil, seems to receive surprisingly little attention.

Equinor does acknowledge that producing oil causes emissions, and reports to be working on reducing those emissions on their operations. However, other disadvantages are neither mentioned nor reportedly worked on. On the contrary, Equinor announces that "Oil and gas will remain in our long-term energy-mix, but we will prioritize high-value upstream projects with a low CO_2 intensity" (Equinor.com: Sustainability report 2021, 23).

In their marketing communication, Equinor uses terms such as 'People' and 'Society' on a regular basis: for instance, on the front page of their website, there is a notable announcement: "We energize the lives of 170 million people. Every day." Stories of Equinor's employees and news from their oil platforms are shared on a friendly manner especially on the company's social media channels. Stories are not used as a means of communication per se on Equinor's website or on the sustainability report, but there are characteristics of sentimental storytelling on the company's tone of voice: "Some people are still disputing global warming. We're acting on it." (Equinor.com: Sustainability.) In addition, safety and ambitious goals on emission reductions are repetitiously present in the communication: the word 'emission' appears in the sustainability report 252 times in total, whereas the word 'safe' generates in search 101 results. For comparison, the company's main product 'oil' is mentioned in the report 118 times, less than half the mentions of emission. Even though working on a controversial industry that is rather far from people's everyday life, Equinor seems to aim at building a humane, approachable organization quite ambitiously. By such strategy, the company can succeed in not only making their communication more memorable in the minds of consumers, but also make their controversial business more acceptable. Overall, the use of *emotional communication* in Equinor's case was found to be strong.

As concluded in chapter 5.1.3 on Equinor's CSR practices, CSR was found to be somewhat present in the company's key statements purpose, vision, values, and strategy. This supports the supposition Equinor has *committed to CSR*. However, the connection

was found to be quite shaky and therefore did not fully justify the credibility of their CSR communication. Even though Equinor's best performance in the analysis was detected in this particular part of overcoming stakeholder skepticism, especially the concreteness of their CSR information and use of self-critique could still be improved.

5.2.7 Synthesis of CSR communication in case companies

Synthesis of the CSR communication in the case companies can be viewed on Table 6. Here, the parts of the analysis were evaluated using the same scale as in the synthesis of CSR practices: the scale proceeds from "Non-existent" to "Weak", "Moderate", "Good" to the best option, "Very good". A more detailed explanation of the assessment scale may be found on Chapter 5.1.4 on page 65.

Table 8: Synthesis on CSR communication in the case companies.

Company	Marimekko	ISS	Equinor
Accessibility of CSR information	Very good	Moderate	Weak
Media richness	Weak	Weak	Moderate
CSR on social media	Weak	Good	Moderate
Two-way communication on social media	Very good	Weak	Weak
Information from independent sources	Non-existent	Moderate	Good
Emotional communication	Moderate	Very good	Very good
Self-critique	Weak	Very good	Moderate
Concreteness of the CSR information	Moderate	Very good	Moderate

As can be seen from Table 6, *there is notably more variation between the case companies when it comes to their CSR communication than there were in CSR practices detected.* Especially *media richness* was found to be on a relatively weak state on all of the case companies; on the other hand, utilization of *emotional communication* was delightfully found as very good on two of the case companies and moderate on the third one. In other parts of the analysis, the case companies' results were found to vary notably from non-existent to very good.

To conclude, *no remarkable differences stand out from the synthesis of the case companies' CSR communication.* A significant thing to point out here is the fact that the case companies were indeed pruned based on their CSR communication *before* involved in this analysis, so overall strong performance was somewhat expected.

6 Summary and conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate the characteristics of corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication used in companies today especially in the context of overcoming stakeholder skepticism. The topic was further divided into the following sub-questions:

I. What kind of a role does CSR play in the business of companies today, according to the case companies?

II. In what ways is CSR communicated to stakeholders in the case companies?

III. What kind of tactics do the case companies use in their CSR communication to overcome stakeholder skepticism?

The topic was examined in a case study through a theoretical framework formed on the bases of previous academic literature.

As CSR has become an increasingly important part of today's business, companies' ability to communicate their CSR activities in a credible and intrinsic manner to their stakeholders is highlighted. A failure to do so could result in not only losing CSR's positive effects on the company's business, but also, as previous studies have proven, even gaining negative perceptions on one's brand image through stakeholder skepticism. Prior research has shown that due to the fear of gaining such negative effects on their business, companies may even refrain completely from communicating their CSR practices. Thus, better understanding of stakeholder skepticism as a phenomenon as well as understanding the use of effective means in order to overcome it, becomes vital.

This study was structured as follows: firstly, the background for this study, along with key concepts and motivation for the research were presented. Secondly, the prior related theories of CSR and stakeholder skepticism were introduced and the theoretical framework for the study formed. Next, the methodological approach of the study was represented. Also, the selection of case study approach and the case companies were reasoned, followed by the results of web page analysis of case companies Marimekko, ISS, and Equinor. Finally, conclusions, implications, and limitations of the study were provided, and the purpose of this study answered.

In the empirical part of the study, it was found that companies do commit to a variety of CSR activities, acknowledging all three aspects, economic, environmental, and social dimension of CSR. However, consideration of the three dimensions was not found to distribute evenly in the case companies, but clear emphases were given on either environmental or social themes. Comparing the CSR practices to the CSR communication, signs of potential greenwashing were also detected.

Overall, the case companies' CSR communication to stakeholders was found to be rather effective. Analysis indicated that tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism are used versatilely in case companies, which enhances the credibility of their CSR communication. However, there is still plenty of room for improvement. None of the case companies was found to effectively implement all means of effective communication included in this analysis. Especially the interactivity could be highly improved in all case companies.

As a concluding note must be stated that there is no single universally applicable form of CSR communication. More likely, companies should pay attention to their own CSR practices and stakeholders and identify the most effective means of CSR communication suitable for them.

6.1   Main findings

The purpose of this study was to identify, *what are the characteristics of CSR communication strategies used in companies today to overcome stakeholder skepticism.* To answer to the main research question, three sub-questions were presented:

1. *What kind of a role does CSR play in the case companies?*

2. *In what ways is CSR communicated to stakeholders?*

3. *What kind of tactics are used in the case companies to overcome stakeholder skepticism?*

To begin with, the sub-questions will be answered, proceeding to answer to the purpose of this study. To answer the first sub-question, it was concluded that *CSR seems to play a remarkable role in all three case companies. Each company was found to commit to various CSR activities acknowledging all three aspects of CSR: economic, environmental, and social bottom lines. However, development opportunities for CSR were detected in*

all case companies. Overall, commitment to all three dimensions of CSR in the case companies was not found even but varying, potentially affected by the differing fields the case companies operate on. Marimekko, operating on production, had strongest emphasis on environmental themes whereas ISS, working on a service industry, put great importance on social themes. Interestingly, Equinor was found to have most initiatives on social dimension of CSR as well, despite the fact that since working on an oil industry, the most severe consequences of the company's operations will potentially realize on environmental sector. Case companies were also found with varying intensity to have embedded CSR into their key company statements, which indicates high importance given to the topic. Especially in Equinor's case the true significance of CSR remained a bit unclear.

Secondly were investigated the ways in which CSR is communicated to stakeholders. In the analysis it was found that *case companies rely strongly on traditional means of communication, when it comes to communicating CSR: pictures and graphs are used actively, whereas newer forms of communication, such as multimedia applications or social media, are utilized in relatively small extent.* While all three case companies were found to communicate CSR quite comprehensively on their website, the accessibility of the information varied. Interestingly, no clear link between the accessibility of CSR information on the corporate websites and the significance given to the topic was found – despite the accessibility was found varying from "Weak" to "Very good", the role of CSR was detected strong in all three case companies, as concluded on the prior sub-question.

Newer forms of communication, such as multimedia applications and utilization of social media, were found sparse. While Marimekko and ISS had no other forms of media than pictures and graphs on their Sustainability pages, Equinor had in addition to the two developed a game promoting workplace safety. This relatively weak result was surprising especially in the sense that of the three case companies, Marimekko operates on consumer markets. Thus, stronger commitment to media richness could have been anticipated from the company.

Each company was found to have active social media accounts and promotion of CSR topics on those platforms varied from Marimekko's very occasional posts to ISS' impressive contribution. Analyzing the two-way communication on social media

platforms, Marimekko was the only one detected with active presence, yet it most cases, the topics were not particularly linked to CSR. ISS' and Equinor's two-way communication on social media platforms were close to non-existent. Since both companies operate on business-to-business environment, it is possible that social media is not considered as important a platform for communication for them as it is in consumer market.

The third sub-objective seeks to analyze the tactics used in case companies to overcome stakeholder skepticism. In the research, it was found that *versatile tactics are used in case companies the enhance the credibility of their CSR messages. However, the use of these tactics was found to vary between the case companies.* While ISS was found to have a very good hold on almost all the tactics analyzed in this study and utilized emotional communication, self-critique, and concreteness of the information all as effective means to boost their credibility, Marimekko's utilization of these tactics was surprisingly low: only concreteness of CSR information and emotional communication were found to appear in moderate amounts. Equinor was found to utilize emotional communication as their strongest means of credibility, and information from independent sources was also utilized effectively.

Having outlined the sub-objectives of this study, the purpose of the study may now also be answered. The purpose of this study was to find out what are the characteristics of CSR communication strategies used in companies today to overcome stakeholder skepticism. From the results of this study one can conclude that today, *CSR communication strategies are used in the case companies in a versatile way. Some tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism were utilized in all case companies, yet the use of these tactics could be more multifaceted to enhance the credibility of the communication.* None of the case companies stood out as a paragon of effective CSR communication, yet all three had acquired at least some tactics to enhance their credibility. On the other hand, none of the tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism analyzed in this study was found to be neither very well nor poorly adopted by all three case companies: if anything, there was rather notable variation on which tactics companies had consciously or unconsciously decided to utilize in their communication.

In this study, the utilization of effective communication tactics in the context of CSR communication was analyzed. Since none of the case companies was found to utilize all

these tactics even at least on a moderate level, it appears that knowledge of such tactics might not be very good in companies. To be better able to gain the full positive effects of CSR on their business, companies could benefit from familiarizing more with the existing tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism and identifying the most effective tactics for them.

As has been concluded earlier in this thesis, today, CSR has become more or less an insistence for any internationally operating company. In this case study, three companies from three different fields of business were analyzed in terms of their CSR practices and CSR communication. Positive finding is that in all companies, CSR practices and CSR communication were found to be at least on a moderately good state by average. These findings give promising signals on the significance given to CSR in companies today. However, one must bear in mind that the case companies in this study represent relatively large, notable actors on their field and were even found to have abundant amount of CSR communication on their website, before included in this study. Thus, it is very probable that these companies do not represent the actual average on their fields of business today, but potentially, score above average in terms of their CSR communication.

6.2 Theoretical contribution

As it was stated in the introductory chapter of this thesis, CSR has been quite widely researched especially in the past years. However, stakeholder skepticism in the context of CSR is still a relatively new concept, and thus calls for more research. In this study, it was aimed to examine the ways how companies communicate CSR today and the tactics used to enhance the credibility of CSR messages and thus overcome stakeholder skepticism. To conduct the research, a framework based on earlier theoretical works was formed and through the conducted case study, earlier theories thus embedded into practice.

With the help of the formed theoretical framework for the study, it could now be concluded that the results of this study go along with the findings of earlier studies: CSR indeed plays a remarkable role in today's business, and the theme is showing no signs of fading off – quite vice versa, actually. In the study, CSR was found to play a notable role in case companies regardless their field of business. However, some inconsistencies in CSR practices and CSR communication were detected, particularly in the case of Equinor.

This affirms the arguments on greenwash and supports the finding that in many senses, CSR communication could and should still be improved in companies.

Despite the signs of greenwash identified in this study, it was also found that in many ways, companies want to commit to and communicate about CSR. However, the findings indicate that companies might not always understand or have the means to communicate their CSR activities effectively, while avoiding the impression of bragging. Such problem has been identified in the earlier studies as well and calls for more research and understanding of stakeholder skepticism and ways of overcoming it.

6.3   Managerial implications

In the empirical part of this thesis, it became evident that not always is CSR communication in line with the true actions made. Greenwash is thus present in the context. However, positive findings were also made: in the analysis, it was found that *CSR is indeed given a major role and companies implement versatile practices in terms of all three dimensions of CSR* – economic, environmental, and social. Delightful finding was that for the most part, the understandability of CSR communication was rather good, and it was also at least moderately accessible on company websites. However, it was found *that companies should pay attention to accessibility of their CSR information on their websites by for instance positioning the sustainability site more prominently and ensuring all related information is constructed on a clear and understandable way*.

Another key finding of the study is that *companies need to pay careful attention to concreteness on their CSR communication*. In the empirical research, two of the case companies were found to provide concreteness only moderately on their CSR communication. Lack of concreteness can lead to stakeholders' difficulty in getting a grip on companies' CSR activities, which, in turn, potentially causes stakeholder skepticism. On the other hand, positive finding was that use of emotional communication for effect of credibility was found strong in case companies.

Previous studies have indicated that performing self-criticism can lead to better credibility on companies' CSR communication. This argument was also supported in this analysis: *companies that have identified their targets in CSR and were able to report their progress honestly and openly in them, appeared overall as more credible on their CSR communication*. What is more, companies with good level of self-criticism in the analysis

were found to perform better in other tactics to overcome stakeholder skepticism as well, compared to the company with low level of self-criticism on their CSR communication. This indicates that companies should not be afraid of also revealing their setback in their CSR communication.

The utilization of newer technologies in CSR communication seems to still be in its infancy. Therefore, it was found that the *use of social media and interactive tools could be improved.* Aside from Equinor's gamification application, the use of multimedia remains very sparse in context of CSR communication. Despite high activity in social media posting, CSR topics were communicated varyingly. Also, use of social media as a platform for two-way communication was very active in one company and close to non-existent in the other two companies. The active two-way communication in Marimekko's case, however, gave promising indications that consumers respect the opportunity for open interaction social media platforms provide and may potentially form a more positive brand image of such companies. Therefore, *companies should put effort in being reachable by their stakeholders.*

Final significant notion of the empirical research of this thesis arises in the notion that none of the case companies was found to effectively utilize all factors investigated in this analysis. This indicates that *companies might benefit from a more strategical approach to CSR communication that acknowledges the previously identified means of enhancing the credibility in overcoming stakeholder skepticism.*

6.4 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

In this study, the research was only directed to the web pages, social media activity, and other relevant online material of case companies. This should be noted as the most significant limitation of this study, since web pages and social media only represent few channels through which communication and information are offered from companies to consumers and in some cases, vice versa. Therefore, an analysis of corporate websites' communication does not necessarily offer a comprehensive picture of the company's CSR communication. In order to do so, a new analysis, including all communication channels used in case companies, should be performed. In addition, it should also be noted that the data used in this study was collected from the Internet web pages in March – June 2022 and might alter or even be removed at later dates of inspection.

The time frame of this study sets into year 2022, the aftermath of Covid19. While there is no direct connection with the disease and CSR in the companies, in the past two years, the pandemic obviously has in one way or another affected business all over the world. Thus, it is worth noting that certain effects of Covid19 might occur in the findings of this study too, compared to 'normal' times without the effect of the pandemic. To inspect the effects and possibly caused changes in the CSR activity and related communication, a corresponding study could be carried out in a similar manner at a later date, after concluding the extraordinary times caused by the pandemic.

In this study, only companies originating from Nordic countries were analyzed. This geographical limitation was set in order to minimize the effects of the companies' origin countries to the results of the study. This geographical limitation has potentially affected on the results of the study, as has the fact that the final selection of the case companies was implemented by using the so-called convenience-factor: the companies were chosen to this study based on their above-average performance on CSR communication.

Noteworthy is also that this study examined only a small sampling of three case companies and their CSR communication practices. To form a more comprehensive picture of CSR communication in the Nordics, more breadth would be needed in the study to gain more extensive understanding of the topic.

The findings of this study provide interesting premises for future studies: to gain a more comprehensive image of CSR communication today, more companies from altering fields of business and geographical locations could be investigated. Also, to form a more holistic understanding on the CSR communication as a whole, the research could be extended beyond company websites to all forms of CSR communication. To expand the understanding of stakeholder skepticism, the viewpoint of stakeholders and their perceptions on CSR communication could also be involved in research by for instance conducting interviews or focus group discussions.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1 LIST OF CODES

CSR practices

Coverage of CSR issues

- Practices on environmental dimension
    - Actions avoiding mechanisms harmful to the environment?
    - Actions embracing the natural capital?
- Practices on social dimension
    - Actions with positive impact on people inside the company / employees?
    - Actions with positive impact on people and societies outside the company?
- Practices on economic dimension
    - Acknowledgement of different kinds of capitals in CSR strategy – physical / human / intellectual / financial capital?

Cross-sector partnerships

- Are there any cross-sector partnerships announced?
    - Concrete examples of actions taken together?

Company commitment to CSR

- Is CSR included in the key company statements: strategy / vision / mission / values…
    - If mentioned in key company statement, is the connection to CSR 'natural' and real? Is it in line with company's other statements?

CSR communication

Accessibility of CSR information

- Is the CSR information easily found on company's website
    - Is there a shortcut to CSR themes from the front page provided?
    - Are company's sustainability reports easily found and downloadable on their web page?
- Is the CSR information and its structuration clear and easily understandable?

Media richness

- Are there videos, podcasts, games, etc. newer forms of media utilized in CSR communication?

Social media activity

- Does the company publish CSR related content on their social media accounts?
    - In 3-month analysis period (March-May 2022) share of social media posts including sustainability related keywords, in relation to their other social media activity

- o Example of keywords used in the analysis: *sustainable, sustainability, renewable, net-zero, environment, climate, equality, inclusion, diversity.*
- Is there any two-way communication on the company's social media?
  - o Are there any outside comments on the company's posts? Has the company responded / reacted to these comments?

Information from independent sources

- Are there any 'external', independent voices present?
  - o Are the displayed independent sources relevant to company and its CSR activities?

Emotional communication

- Are there stories / people / other forms of emotional communication used?

CSR implementation to company strategy

- See "Company commitment to CSR" in CSR practices

Self-critique

- Is the company honest on their improvement points?
- How are targets for development communicated? Is there any plan for improvement announced?

Concreteness of information

- Are there examples / 'hard numbers' / actual verbs used in CSR communication?