

Leveraging Social Reports to Communicate Corporate Purpose.

Abstract

Businesses are increasingly engaging with social issues, yet they often face criticism for being woke. Given these challenges, social reporting seems to emerge as a more transparent and trustworthy communication method. This study seeks to explore whether and how social communication has evolved within these reports. Focusing on a leading company in the market, known for its strong social role, we analyzed two social reports from 2017 and 2022, comparing them to uncover both similarities and differences. The results show that communication through reports has changed significantly in just a few years, emphasizing the specificity of actions, focusing more on the external community (vs. internal), and, above all, using more common and collective-oriented language. This study offers interesting insights for future research and is a useful guide for practitioners in developing and structuring a clearer and more transparent social report.

Keywords Social Reporting • Corporate Purpose • Social Communication • Corporate Social Responsibility • Community Engagement

Introduction

Stakeholder pressure on companies to contribute to social well-being has become increasingly intense in recent years (Beji et al., 2021), often considered them more capable of addressing issues than policymakers or other institutions (Radanielina Hita & Grégoire, 2023). However, these high expectations often result in consumer dissatisfaction, allegations of greenwashing or wake-washing, and boycotts (Ahmad et al., 2024; Sobande, 2019).

The growing strategic significance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Albuquerque et al., 2019) has also been closely monitored by policymakers, who have developed increasingly detailed regulations for social reporting (Filipeanu et al., 2024). In this regard, the European Union has been a pioneer (Schwoy et al., 2024). Social accounting is considered one of the most effective tools for enhancing transparency, credibility, and legitimacy for companies that aim to play a social role (Crane & Glozer, 2016). Indeed, the lack of information remains a critical issue for companies seeking to establish themselves as socially responsible (Boiral, 2013), and this issue is even more pressing for companies operating within complex and lengthy supply chains

(Vadakkapatt et al., 2021). Therefore, this study explores whether and how communication through social reports is evolving, using Conad, the leading retailer in Italy (Bertoletti, 2021), as the research setting. The research question guiding our study is: *RQ. How has social communication evolved over recent years?*

Theoretical Background

CSR has become a key element in corporate strategy (Albuquerque et al., 2019), recognized as crucial for boosting customer loyalty and engagement (Chernev & Blair, 2015), brand reputation, and generally, gaining a competitive advantage in the market (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2009). Many scholars consider CSR a win-win strategy (Mahmud et al., 2021), enabling companies to pursue their economic and financial goals while simultaneously benefiting society (Alkaraan et al., 2022), by answering the logic of “do well by doing good” (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988).

The concept of CSR has evolved significantly, moving from purely philanthropic roots to encompassing a wide range of social, environmental, and economic considerations (Carroll, 2021). This shift reflects the ongoing debate about the role of businesses within the current capitalist system. Nowadays, CSR is a broad and deeply multidimensional construct that aims to meet the expectations of a company’s key stakeholders (Filipeanu et al., 2024), both internal and external. Responsible companies prioritize the protection of human rights, the well-being of their employees, environmental issues, and the communities in which they operate (Beji et al., 2021).

A company’s social actions are usually linked to its core operations (Kotler & Lee, 2005), such as its products, services, or production processes (Craddock et al., 2018). Typically, CSR initiatives do not address controversial issues (Cammarota et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020), but they involve an economic commitment from companies (Bhagwat et al., 2020), which may take the form of direct donations or support through cause-related marketing strategies (Tao & Ji, 2024). Thus, CSR is a dynamic concept that captures societal changes, rising expectations toward businesses, the growing urgency of major challenges, and the unpredictability of events. Companies are increasingly called upon to stay attuned to their communities’ social and environmental needs while ensuring profitability (Hoque et al., 2018), which is essential for survival.

However, one of the main challenges related to CSR concerns measuring social actions and, more importantly, communicating these actions to stakeholders (Filipeanu et al., 2024). This remains a critical issue, particularly regarding the source of information, which is often the determining factor in the success or failure of a CSR communication strategy (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). Consequently, communication through social media platforms or mass media advertising may often be perceived as inauthentic.

By contrast, social reports appear to be one of the most rigorous and authoritative tools for communicating CSR (Fuoli, 2018; Crane & Glozer, 2016). This is especially true in light of the increasing demand for transparency from consumers and policymakers, which has also led to more stringent regulations regarding social reporting. As argued by Mancur Olson (1970), social reporting involves the systematic collection and dissemination of non-financial information, which should reflect true social facts through various formats such as quantitative data, narratives, or visual media, fostering dialogue on social responsibilities and enhancing stakeholder engagement (Lessem, 1977). Specifically, information should be detailed and involve the company's environmental and social impact, focusing on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) matters (Bronzini et al., 2024).

Social reporting may help enhance companies' reputation, build credibility, distinguish them from competitors (Boiral, 2013), and mitigate the risk of being accused of greenwashing or woke-washing. However, social reporting remains largely unregulated in most parts of the world; in this regard, the European Union (EU) is undoubtedly a pioneer in sustainability regulation (Schwoy et al., 2024). **Table 1** reports the main legislation provided by the EU regarding social reporting. The first EU Directive, 95/2014, attempted to pursue the comparability of non-financial and sustainability information; however, it had some limits in establishing mandatory standards for non-financial and sustainability reporting (La Torre et al., 2018). In fact, the EU Directive (n.95/2014) was revised by the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG). EU sustainability reporting standards will be produced through a rigorous, comprehensive, and consultative approach, according to a EFRAG report. The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, which would require organizations to adhere to the requirements, was proposed by the European Commission in April 2021. The European Union's block and numerous non-EU companies who trade with the EU will have uniform sustainability reporting criteria thanks to EFRAG's ongoing public consultation processes and efforts.

Table 1. Summary of the primary EU social reporting legislation

Legislation	Jurisdiction	Scope	Focus Areas	Reporting Framework
Non-Financial Reporting Directive	European Union	Companies with > 500 employees	Environmental, Social, Human rights, Anti-corruption	GRI, Global Compact, ISO 26000

(NFRD) ¹				
Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) ²	European Union	All large and listed companies (from 2024)	Detailed sustainability disclosures; digital reporting, sustainability, Climate change, Governance	ESRS, GRI, TCFD
Legislative Decree N. 254/2016 ³	Italy	Companies with > 500 employees	Environmental, Social, Human rights, Anti-corruption	GRI, Global Compact, ISO 26000

Source: Authors' elaboration

Method

This study has an exploratory aim, adopting a qualitative approach to answer *how* and *whether* questions (Eisenhardt, 1989). Specifically, Gummeson (2017) highlights the importance of case studies in exploring empirical reality in business and management. From this perspective, the single case study helps to deeply uncover a phenomenon and extract its details (Yin, 2017). This research aims to understand if and how the communication of social reports has changed over the years, as it is a fundamental tool for conveying corporate purpose and engaging stakeholders (Vila & Moya, 2022).

Conad was chosen as the research setting to address the study's objective, as it is the leader in the large-scale retail distribution sector and the largest retailer in Italy (Conad Official Website, 2024). According to its official page (2024), this leadership results from actions based on sustainability, participation, and inclusivity. Since 2017, Conad has published annual social reports for its stakeholders, providing insight into its social, environmental, and economic impact. This study aims to understand the evolution of Conad's communication strategies and corporate reporting by comparing two key reports: the 2017 and 2022 social reports.

¹ Non-financial Reporting Directive; European Parliament [Non-financial Reporting Directive | Think Tank | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#) consulted 21/08/2024

² Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive; European Parliament [Directive - 2022/2464 - EN - CSRD Directive - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#) consulted 21/08/2024.

³ Transposing the European Directive NFRD; Gazzetta Ufficiale [*** ATTO COMPLETO *** \(gazzettaufficiale.it\)](#) consulted 21/08/2024

Data collection has been performed between April and June 2024. Conad's first social report (2017) and the latest available online at the time of data collection were selected. The data relevant to ESG criteria were reported in an Excel matrix. The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to extract the main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), specifically to identify the actions Conad took and communicated in the reports and the main keywords used.

Findings and Discussion

Findings reveal a significant transformation in Conad's approach, moving from a primarily economic focus to a more integrated framework that emphasizes sustainability and social responsibility. Specifically, for greater clarity, the three dimensions are outlined separately below, highlighting the themes that emerged from the 2017 report and those that emerged from the 2022.

Social Dimension

In 2017, Conad's social report primarily emphasized economic aspects, particularly the management of resources and the distribution of profits, focusing on supporting local economies. Social and ethical initiatives, while present, were less structured and fragmented. These activities largely reflected a traditional view of corporate responsibility, with limited engagement in broader social issues.

By contrast, in 2022, a notable shift had occurred. Conad adopted a more comprehensive approach to social responsibility, emphasizing employee well-being, diversity, and inclusion. The company implemented structured programs to promote work-life balance and mental health, communicating the importance of a healthy and satisfied workforce. In line with societal trends, Conad introduced initiatives aimed at fostering gender equality and promoting diversity across the organization. Furthermore, its commitment to community engagement evolved from supporting local producers and cultural initiatives to leading strategic, large-scale social projects. These projects focused foremost on social inclusion and food security, highlighting Conad as a social commitment company.

Environmental Dimension

The environmental focus 2017 was centered on operational efficiency, with particular attention to reducing energy consumption in logistics and product distribution. Conad streamlined transportation processes, cutting energy usage and greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, the company implemented energy-saving technologies and waste management programs to reduce its environmental footprint while promoting

sustainable consumption through responsible product sourcing, such as local and organic products.

By 2022, Conad had significantly expanded its environmental efforts. The company adopted a broader sustainability strategy, extending beyond internal operational improvements to include community and supply chain initiatives. A key example is the “Forestiamo insieme l’Italia” project, which aimed to plant 20,000 trees. Conad also invested heavily in renewable energy and energy-efficient infrastructure, including installing photovoltaic systems in its stores and facilities. Moreover, sustainable mobility became a priority, with Conad introducing hybrid and low-impact vehicles for its fleet and encouraging eco-friendly commuting options for employees. This expanded focus on environmental education and community engagement reflects a more mature and integrated approach to environmental stewardship.

Economic Dimension

In 2017, Conad’s economic reporting focused on financial performance, operational efficiency, and profit-sharing with its stakeholders. The company highlighted its support for local economies and internal policies prioritising employee well-being and growth. The 2017 report reflected a traditional economic model with limited integration of sustainability into its business practices.

By 2022, Conad had fully integrated sustainability into its economic strategy, demonstrating a commitment to long-term economic growth that balances financial success with social and environmental responsibility. Investments in renewable energy, sustainable technologies, and process innovation were central to this strategy. Conad also maintained its focus on local economic development, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises while promoting ethical and environmentally friendly consumer practices through loyalty programs. Financially, the social report reports that Conad achieved a turnover of €18.49 billion in 2022, marking a 15% market share, all while reducing its overall environmental impact through optimized logistics and responsible resource management.

Moreover, besides the actions that have become increasingly detailed and specific over the years, as highlighted in the 2022 social report, the keywords used to communicate the company’s social role have changed significantly. **Table 2** lists the keywords characterizing the 2017 report and those of the 2022 report for each dimension.

Table 2. Main keywords for each dimension (2017-2022)

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2022</i>
<i>Social</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employee Well-being - Employee Growth - Gender Balance - Inclusive Work Environment - Active Dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community Support - Youth Employment - Social Investments - Integrated Sustainability Approach - Cultural and Creative Initiatives
<i>Environmental</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Green Logistics - Waste Management - Energy Efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainability and Circular Economy - Green Packaging - Focus on Biodiversity - Reduction of CO2 Emissions - Food Waste Reduction
<i>Economic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial Health - Stakeholder Engagement - Economic Value - Local Sourcing - Market Positioning - Follow Market Trends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial Health - Investment in Human Capital - Collaborative Alliances - Community Engagement - Green Infrastructure - Social Responsibility Investments

Source: Authors' elaboration

These differences in keywords show how, over the years, the company has increasingly adopted a community-oriented perspective, particularly emphasized in the social dimension, by embracing and addressing external stakeholders. In contrast, in 2017, the focus seems to have been more on internal stakeholders (e.g., employees).

Similarly, in the environmental dimension, we find more keywords indicating a stronger commitment across various topics. Finally, in the economic dimension, the theme of community reappears with the keyword “community engagement”, signaling a desire to involve stakeholders even in profit-related matters. The themes of “Social Responsibility Investment” and “Green Infrastructure” also emerge strongly, absent in 2017, as well as the importance of collaboration, another new theme. This greater focus on certain topics is more evident when comparing Figure 1, which shows the main keywords from the 2017 report, and Figure 2, which shows the main keywords from the 2022 report.

Market

Employee

Well

Growth

Gender

Inclusive

Work

Balance

Dialogue

Health

Local

Sourcing

Active

Management

Engagement

Logistics

Waste

Efficiency

Green

Energy

Distributed

Financial

Value

Follow

Stakeholder

Trends

Generated

Positioning

Economic

Source: Authors' elaboration using Word Cloud Generator

A word cloud visualization of the 2019 WRI Global Footprint Report. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'Sustainability' and 'Community' at the top, 'Investment' in the center, and 'Reduction' and 'Social' at the bottom. Other words include 'Circular', 'Human', 'Cultural', 'Integrated', 'Emissions', 'Approach', 'Collaborative', 'Financial', 'CO2', 'Alliances', 'Creative', 'Infrastructure', 'Waste', 'Economy', 'Focus', 'Green', 'Food', 'Employment', 'Engagement', 'Initiatives', 'Youth', 'Health', and 'Responsibility'.

Source: Authors' elaboration using Word Cloud Generator

Conclusion and Implications

The social report is a crucial tool for communicating and building the image of a purpose-oriented company (Filipeanu et al., 2022). However, it remains necessary to understand how to structure social communication better through these reports and ensure that it resonates with different stakeholder groups (Watts et al., 2019). These stakeholders often accuse companies of being woke which may fuel significant firestorms, negative word-of-mouth, and social media boycotts (D'Arco et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024).

This study is explanatory in nature but offers important insights. From a theoretical perspective, it highlights a clear difference in themes and, particularly, in the language used by the company. It would be interesting to research to determine whether actions and communications that are more community-oriented and thus directed at external stakeholders are perceived more favorably than those aimed at internal stakeholders. Furthermore, Conad has intensified its social role over the years, in line with a mission declared in 2013, "People Beyond Things." In this regard, it would be valuable to explore whether the increased specificity and diversity of actions have influenced the sentiment of consumers and/or investors and whether this has had an economic and financial impact.

Future research should examine the social reports of other companies in the same sector to assess whether Conad's leadership in retail can also be attributed to its social role. Additionally, with some large companies beginning to scale back their social commitments on issues like *diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)*, such as Jack Daniel and Harley-Davidson (Cuomo, 2024), as research should investigate how these actions are supported by management, ownership, and employees within a company and foremost perceived by consumers. Lastly, this work offers a guide for practitioners, highlighting key areas of intervention for a leader and how these can be communicated in social reports. The Conad case may serve as a benchmark for companies in the retail sector, offering an overview of the actions and communication strategies of a retailer that has built its leadership through social engagement and a focus on people and communities.

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