



## International Journal of Organizational Analysis

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### Article information:

To cite this document:

Farveh Farivar Brenda Scott-Ladd , (2016),"Growing corporate social responsibility communication through online social networking in Iran", International Journal of Organizational Analysis, Vol. 24 Iss 2 pp. 274 - 290

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-03-2013-0651>

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# Growing corporate social responsibility communication through online social networking in Iran

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This purpose of this paper is to investigate Iranian manager's perceptions towards the use of online social networking (OSN) for improving corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The websites and Facebook pages of 23 companies that had won National Excellence Awards for CSR were reviewed in 2011, and 15 managers from across these participated in a survey, to assess the extent these companies used online facilities to develop CSR practices. These interviews raised awareness of the potential of OSN, so company websites and Facebook pages were reviewed again in 2013 to assess changes to CSR and OSN practices.

**Findings** – Despite recognition for their high level of awareness and implementation of CSR practices analysis of the initial surveys indicated that OSN uptake among the respondent companies was poor in 2011. Managers saw little value in using OSN to promote and engage with CSR; however, the level of engagement and uptake had substantially increased by 2013.

**Originality/value** – This study is one of the first to evaluate the use of OSN to improve CSR in a developing country. The study examines managers' perceptions of the effect of OSN on CSR. Findings suggest that once management became aware of the value of social networking, they used it to engage with stakeholders from the marketplace, community and workplace to promote their business and for CSR-related issues. This rapid uptake demonstrates how quickly OSN technology can be implemented once its potential is identified.

**Keywords** Iran, Facebook, Corporate social responsibility, Online social networking

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

This study investigates the uptake and use of online social networking (OSN) for promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication amongst high CSR Iranian companies. Many companies worldwide have been quick to adopt OSN technology because of its ability to provide instant feedback and allow for two-way communication (Colleoni, 2013). Since the 90s, company websites have been acknowledged as a key strategic channel to enhance CSR communication (Esrock and Leichty, 1998) and promote awareness of initiatives and benefits to customers (Du *et al.*, 2010). The development of web 2.0 collaborative technologies, such as blogs and social network sites (SNS) provided new instruments for companies to display their CSR standards (Kavanaugh *et al.*, 2005; Beaudoin and Tao, 2007; Moreno and Capriotti, 2009). Opportunities for connecting with stakeholders have led many businesses to make use of SNS such as Facebook and Twitter to increase the communication channels to broadcast their CSR activities (Gomes and Chalmeta, 2011); however, few studies



have evaluated the use and value of this new media (Chen, 2009; Chau and Xu, 2012; Moreno and Capriotti, 2009). This paper is the first to investigate the extent of the uptake of web 2.0 platforms in Iran.

Iran was of interest because the development of CSR consciousness has arrived later than in some other developing countries. Economic policy in Iran has moved away from state control over the past decade through privatization process (Dezbakhsh, 2004). This change has created a shift of responsibility from public expectation to private corporations so that social, environmental and economic responsibilities have devolved to the private sector. As the economy has become more competitive, company profits have increased, and social expectations have risen, bringing greater prominence for the need for CSR. In other words, there is a shift from purely ethical motives to strategic concerns that CSR has an undeniable impact on reputation, trustworthiness and company's brand (Rim and Song, 2013). Because of increasing environmental and social problems, companies are assessed against more than their products and financial dimensions (Blombäck and Scandelius, 2013). Therefore, CSR is important to consumers; many are interested in understanding what companies are doing and how they deal with CSR issues (Schmeltz, 2012). Companies can utilize the web and social networking to manage their risk and reputation (Bebbington *et al.*, 2008).

The benefit of OSN for developing CSR has been the subject of some research, although this has not extended to developing countries (Belal, 2001; Jamali and Mirshak, 2007; Hilson, 2012). National, economic and socio-cultural environments influence CSR (Jones, 1999; Belal, 2001; Jamali and Mirshak, 2007; Hilson, 2012); thus, it is timely to evaluate the uptake of improving CSR in a developing country like Iran (The International Statistical Institute, 2013). This study concentrates on the uptake of CSR among Iranian companies that have received awards for meeting European standards of CSR. The purpose was to evaluate the extent of engagement these companies had with stakeholder groups via their websites or whether they had adopted the two-way communication strategies offered through OSN. This study unfolds in four steps; first, it provides some background information on Iran and current approaches to CSR; then it reviews the literature on CSR. Next, the methodology and sample are described, prior to a discussion of the results and findings.

## 2. Background

The Iranian government has applied pressure on Iranian companies to be more accountable to society; for example, they have implemented The Customer Reverence Act<sup>[1]</sup>, anti-monopoly laws, anti-corruption laws and drafted CSR standards (Omidvar, 2009). The extent of the government's commitment to CSR is seen in such initiatives as "Social Accountability 8,000" – by the Iran Standards and Industrial Research Institute, the National Development of Decent Work program (from the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs) and the Protection of Consumer's Rights and Respecting Consumer's Rights Certificates supplied by the Ministry of Commerce (Omidvar, 2009). Despite government efforts, early research into CSR adoption (Salehi and Azary, 2009; Omidvar, 2009) reports there is a large gap between society's expectations and the level of CSR standards in Iranian companies. Although Iran is an Islamic country, Iran is not considered as an Islamic theocratic country because in an Islamic theocratic country (e.g. Saudi Arabia), Quran (Holy book of Islam) is considered as the national constitution, but Iran has its own constitution and national rules. For example, "interest" is acceptable in the

Iranian banking system and financial system, but interest is not acceptable in the Islamic banking system. There are some limitations through the filtering of websites and information coming into a run; however, this does not influence OSN and CSR communications between companies and consumers within the country. For example, Facebook is filtered in Iran, but Facebook membership is not illegal, so many Iraninans have active profiles in Facebook through unfiltering software (IRNA, 2013).

Similar to other countries worldwide, Iranian organizations are adopting social networking, although like CSR, OSN is still a young concept within the country, so there is no information related to the extent that Iranian organizations use OSN to improve CSR communication, but prior to this, it is important to discuss how OSN can improve CSR.

### 2.1 CSR and OSN

Understanding whether organizations are proactively using OSN to communicate their CSR standards and manage their corporate image is an area that is starting to attract research attention (Gupta, 2011; Rim and Song, 2013). This study uses sensemaking and sensegiving theories to explore the relationship between OSN and CSR. Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) suggests that managers gain a better understanding of what is going on in their environment via conversations and exchanging ideas with others (Nijhof and Jeurissen, 2006), so having a “sense” of the organization’s internal and external environment is productive and beneficial for relationships with stakeholders (Morsing and Schultz, 2006). The sensemaking process articulates an abstract image of organizations that are enhanced by sensegiving, which is an attempt to influence and control the way other parties understand, or make sense of the organization (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). This means that sensemaking and sensegiving enrich the awareness of mutual expectations among the organization and external stakeholders, which attracts stakeholder support for CSR practices (Morsing and Schultz, 2006).

The opportunities to share information provided by the advent of the World Wide Web and particularly OSN benefits customers, employees and other stakeholders and changes companies’ traditional role as gatekeepers. The constant upgrading of information technology has fuelled a rapid growth in personal and commercial online communications (Kasavan *et al.*, 2010) and transactions that reduce business costs (Willard, 2009) and more importantly allow dialogue among all stakeholders (Kent and Taylor, 1998). On the one hand, websites are excellent for disseminating information, but the company has control over the content and message (Sones *et al.*, 2009); however, OSN allows stakeholders to join the dialogue. Public consultation has increased as consumers can collaborate and add information to the content of the organization pages (Bonson and Ratkai, 2013) and so become co-creators and partners (Chau and Xu, 2012). In addition, public consultation boosts company image and raises the profile of social responsibility (Esrock and Leichty, 1998).

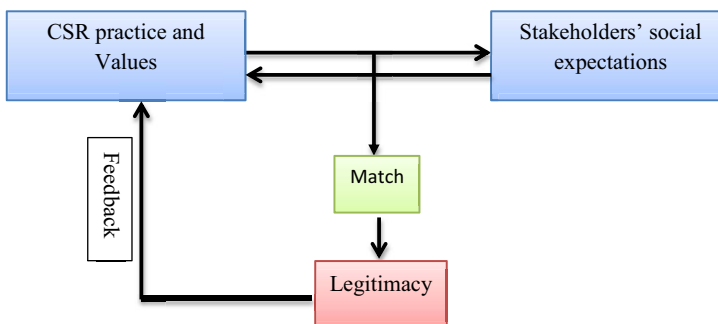
Social media is growing rapidly in its popularity. In 2011, 68 of the top Fortune 100 companies identified that the number of first time visitors to the company websites decreased by 40 per cent, whereas first time visitors to their Facebook pages increased by 40 per cent (Haigh *et al.*, 2013). A study conducted across the USA showed that 30 per cent of costumers communicate with companies through social networks (Rim and Song, 2013). The increasing popularity and low cost of OSN (Boyd and Ellison, 2008) provides an opportunity for CSR policy makers understand constituent reactions and for managers to differentiate their business. Corporate legitimacy is enhanced if

communicated messages are congruent (Morsing and Schults, 2006) and in turn, the discourse can modify CSR practices and the firm's values (Morsing and Schults, 2006), as depicted in Figure 1.

Based on the work by Colleoni (2013), companies can be classified into two different groups based on their online CSR communication strategies: self-centered companies and dialogical companies. Self-centered companies use OSN for self-presentation, whereas dialogical companies use online communication to build a cohesive network and interaction with their stakeholders, which forms and changes CSR practice (Colleoni, 2013). A study by Rim and Song (2013) demonstrated how a manager's active bidirectional communication through blogs has a positive effect on company's CSR, even if the company has a negative prior reputation because it increases perceived company sincerity.

Companies are aware of the importance of increasing their visibility on the Internet with some reports suggest OSN can be a "mixed blessing". On the one hand, social networking allows interactions, sharing of information and is an excellent forum for sharing good news and promoting CSR. On the other hand, information gives consumers and other parties more power through a stronger, accessible voice, to provide both positive and negative feedback, even if this is not always accurate. Transparency can work both for and against the organization. In other words, within the context of Stakeholder Theory, the Internet enables consumers and other parties to penetrate the barriers around organizations, so they are no longer controlling the flow of information between the stakeholders (Snider *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that managers have an awareness and knowledge about the properties and features of new media like social networks to apply effective CSR communication that represents a strong social commitment (Rim and Song, 2013). The upshot is that online consumers are well informed, so open and active communication is critical for reputation management (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

OSN also refines sensemaking and sensegiving processes because members of social networking sites (SNS) serve dual roles as both the suppliers and consumers of content. For this reason, an online discussion, or blog as it is referred to, encourages stakeholder engagement, which is valuable for improving CSR (Fieseler *et al.*, 2010). Dialectic features of OSN and blogs facilitate interactive communication, and therefore assist companies to build and maintain long-term relationships with their customers (Yang and Lim, 2009; Rim and Song, 2013). For example, an online study of 256 respondents from 30 countries found that stakeholders like to have both real and online relationships



Source: Adopted from Colleoni (2013)

Figure 1.  
Corporate legitimacy  
communication  
model

with companies, and to have updated information about their non-financial performance, especially regarding the environment, social targets and technical practices (Fieseler *et al.*, 2010).

A good example of a company utilizing OSN to improve CSR sensegiving is “Target”, the Australian retail company that is part of the Wesfarmers group of companies. This company has demonstrated a long-term commitment to education and support for schools and has developed an educational research series on its Facebook page to support employees’ children staying active during the summer (Gupta, 2011). Feedback received from employees identifies this helpful program has a positive impact on children’s development. While it demonstrates the company’s commitment to education, it also helps to create local solutions to the national cause of improved health through activities. Establishing personal contact with parents through social media allows the company to do this in a timely and innovative manner (Gupta, 2011). Yet another example is Intel’s use of Facebook and YouTube to broadcast environmental consciousness and promote charitable activities to improve its reputation. For example, posts show Intel’s efforts to empower girls and women around the world, which are community-focused CSR activities (Intel, 2013).

### 2.2 CSR in Iran

Interest in CSR in Iran relates to the growth of competition within both national and international markets (Valmohammadi, 2011). Service and manufacturing organizations recognize that an improved corporate identity will boost market share and improve their image management. Two main reasons suggest that the enactment of some practices of CSR in Iran may differ from CSR practices in Western countries. First, in practice, many Iranian organizations still rely on traditional forms of CSR, such as charitable donations and being responsible employers (Omidvar, 2009). Secondly, the Iranian approach to ethics is based on the Zoroastrianism[2] belief that good thoughts, good words and good deeds are essential to guarantee happiness; in this context, ethical and social responsibilities must come to the attention of managers and stakeholders. This source of CSR aligns to Islamic principles of justice that are embedded in cultural and religious beliefs (Nejati and Ghasemi, 2012).

To determine the level of CSR take up in Iran, Salehi and Azary (2009) conducted a survey of 480 stakeholders from different backgrounds; these included internal and external auditors, investors, accountants, bankers and academics. The study investigated whether companies had strategies in place to meet the needs of customers, suppliers, employees, the community and the environment. These included strategies such as recycling and decreased wastewater for the environment, purchasing ethics and social consciousness for suppliers, community investment and sustainability for the community, equal opportunity and developing skills for employees and services and product safety for customers. The results identified a gap between the level of CSR standards and third parties’ expectations.

Companies in Iran are urged to achieve a National Excellence Award[3] based on the European Foundation Quality of Management Excellence (EFQM). This self-evaluated CSR program meets EFQM standards, although the results of the CSR assessment are rarely documented on company websites or published. The majority of Iranian companies has various International Organization for Standardization (ISO) accreditations, such as ISO (OHSAS18001, ISO14001) certifications related to



environmental protection, or ISO 9,000 certification in quality management, which indicates companies are following some CSR strategies under these various headings.

A national survey among 50 companies by the CSR Centre of Iranian Companies in 2009 found that 90 per cent of Iranian companies believe that CSR raises their financial efficiency. On this basis, workplace-related activities are the most popular fields of CSR among Iranian companies: 75 per cent of companies concentrate on workplace-related activities such as further training, welfare activities and improving the emotional and physical environment of the workplace. Marketplace activities were the second most popular (40 per cent), followed by community activities (35 per cent) and the environment (20 per cent). Only 15 per cent of companies focus only on complying with legal obligations (Omidvar, 2009).

Due to the transitional nature of the Iranian economy and the short tenure of many managers in the private sector, companies concentrate on short-term goals, rather than focus on a longer-term vision. Social and economic activities remain under government supervision, and there is a common belief that environmental protection is also government responsibility. Even so, it is difficult to accept that companies have not yet given the need for longer-term planning about the environment any consideration. At present, volunteering, gift giving and donations are more common, as corporations often provide cash to charities and for employee and community development (Omidvar, 2009). In addition, compulsory laws pressurize companies to pay taxes to support hygiene and educational projects.

In addition, studies have shown Iranian companies currently believe relationships with customers are more important than relationship with suppliers or business partners, because this is more likely to enhance their reputation and profitability (Salehi and Azary, 2009; Omidvar, 2009), which might also suggest some limitations in their understanding of CSR. Efforts so far have focused on raising awareness by holding international and national conferences, CSR training courses offered by government departments and the establishment of awards for CSR standards; however, more education is still needed. This brief review of the literature leads to the following question:

*RQ1.* To what extent do leading socially responsible companies in Iran incorporate OSN as part of their CSR communications?

### 3. Research methodology

The present study adopted a mixed method approach – sequential embedded design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007) as one qualitative and one quantitative studies had been conducted at in 2011, following with another wave of collecting qualitative data in 2013. The nature of the investigation is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Two waves of data were collected for this study. In the first wave, a qualitative and a quantitative study were simultaneously conducted to collect both quantitative and descriptive data. After 20 months, in the second wave of data collection another qualitative study was conducted to identify if change occurred.

In 2011, the first wave of data collection was conducted in two separate parts. At first, a review of the websites and Facebook pages of all 23 Iranian companies named as National Excellence Award winners in the CSR report of Iran in 2009. The review of the companies' website was undertaken to firstly identify if these companies provided 24-hour communication facilities for customers, such as the ability to track problems,

post comments, upload and download files associated with outstanding problems or questions, order products and provide feedback. Secondly, to identify if online training facilities were available for employees and, thirdly, to assess whether companies released information on how they deal with CSR responsibilities, such as providing CSR reports or information about CSR standards. To identify the proportion of companies with active Facebook pages, companies' profiles in Facebook were investigated. The total number of "likes" received and the number of "wall posts" measured the level of this activity.

Simultaneously, to investigate the managers' perception towards the effect of OSN on CSR communication, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed among companies' managers through face-to-face meetings. The questionnaire was designed based on the Awareness-raising questionnaire (CSR) developed by the [European Commission \(2011\)](#). The questionnaire was composed of 17 questions and focused on four key stakeholder groups affected by CSR practices; the marketplace (four questions), the workplace (four questions), the community (five questions) and the environment (four questions). The marketplace refers to long-term ethical relationships with customers, suppliers and business partners ([Whysall, 2008](#)) and safe and desirable products for the community ([Panapanaan et al., 2003](#)). Philanthropy can be directed to the community and can be monetary or non-monetary, or can relate to promoting basic human rights, or seeking a local improvement ([Carroll, 1999](#); [Welford, 2002](#)). The workplace category includes health and safety at work ([Carroll, 1999](#)), the broader concepts of employee empowerment ([McWilliams and Siegel, 2000](#)) and work-life balance ([Berg et al., 2008](#)). Responses were gathered using a three-point scale (Don't Know = 0; No = 1; Yes = 2) and an open text box was provided to include comments.

The workforce dimension questions were classified into three groups that related to employee training and development, regular safety training and strategies that improved the emotional and physical environment of the workplace. An example of a question from this grouping was, "Can you improve your training plan to develop your employees' skills via online social networking?" Questions about the workplace were also divided into three groups: respect for customers, control over the negative effects of products or services on the environment and treating suppliers as partners. An example of a question in this section was "Can you use online social networking as a tool to register and resolve complaints from customers, suppliers, and business partners?" The environmental dimension focused on the use of clean energy, pollution prevention and recycling. An example question from this section being, "Can you use online social networking as a tool to consider the potential environmental impacts when developing new products and services?" Finally, the community dimension was evaluated by identifying volunteer programs, charitable giving and involvement in community projects, such as education and training outside the organization. The reliability analysis of the questionnaire returned a 0.7 Cranach's alpha score for 15 respondents.

In the second wave of data collection in 2013, another investigation of the websites and Facebook pages was undertaken. The purpose of the second wave was to investigate changes over time.

### 3.1 Sample

The companies are Iran based and present Iranian products or services. Information technology and telecommunication companies were excluded because their high



involvement with telecommunications technologies could possibly bias the response. The companies in the study operate across a range of different industries that are illustrated in [Table I](#).

Thirteen companies were categorized as large (>500 employees), seven companies were categorized as medium sized (100 > employees < 500) and three companies were considered small (<100 employees). Regardless of their public, semi-public or private sector status, all were profit driven. Respondents were Chief Operating Officers or executive board members. Fifteen of the 23 of the managers who were contacted responded, providing a response rate of 65 per cent. All managers participated in the survey were men and over 50 years of age. The data were analysed by Chi-square test using SPSS 21 software.

#### 4. Results

The first Internet search of the 23 companies' websites revealed 2 of 23 had some form of online customer care such as a forum where customers could raise a problem or comment publicly. Twelve companies (52 per cent) had a registration section for customers to receive electronic newsletters and announcements about new products and/or services. One company held an online contest and provided some gifts for the customers with the best ideas for improving a product design through its website, suggesting the company was seeking to develop a relationship between the company and customers. Ten companies' websites had a "Contact us" section to receive customer feedback, but only half of these were active in that a message could be sent or information could be obtained.

In addition, only 8 per cent of the companies had an online communication space on their website to provide helpful instructions for each of their products and/or services, or so customers could speak with a technical consultant to gain assistance with a problem. Two companies had a Yahoo ID, which provided a form of access to communicate with their respective customers. All companies used their websites to release information about their history and activities and provide news about their new products and/or services. It is worth noting that while OSN websites are filtered in Iran, Internet use in the country is high and the majority of the population are OSN users[4]. Companies that did use Facebook limited their use to introducing the company and its products. No company had a CSR report section, although six companies published information related to CSR activities, such as their charitable activities, in the "About us" section of their respective websites. The results are shown in the [Table II](#).

| Industry                          | No. of companies |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Food manufactures                 | 3                |
| Distributors                      | 2                |
| Oil and gas                       | 4                |
| Automobile and related industries | 5                |
| Detergent and pharmaceutical      | 2                |
| Accounting                        | 1                |
| Transportation                    | 1                |
| Metal                             | 2                |
| Textile                           | 3                |

**Table I.**  
Sample information

This table illustrates that Iranian managers who participated in the survey believed companies could use OSN to improve their impact on the community and marketplace dimensions of CSR. Interestingly, at this stage they did not think that OSN could help to improve their standards in relation to environmental factors of CSR. Similarly, 10 of 15 managers believed that OSN had no meaningful impact on improving the workplace criteria of CSR.

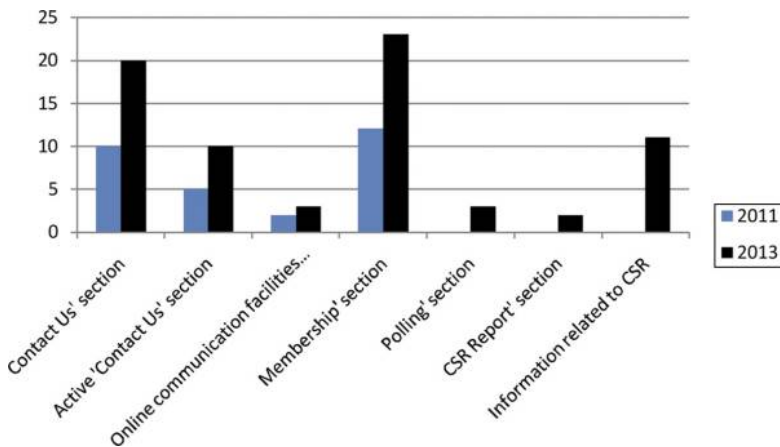
The follow-up analysis of the company websites conducted 20 months later in 2013, returned considerably different findings as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 demonstrates the number of companies with online “contact us” sections that allowed for messages and feedback had doubled between 2011 and 2013. Thirteen per cent of the companies had an online communication facility where a technical consultant could answer customers’ questions. An online “Polling” section was added to the website of three companies to gather their customers’ opinions on questions related to plans and programs. While none of the companies had a “CSR” section at the first wave of data gathering, two companies had instituted a “CSR” section to display their CSR activities clearly by 2013.

**Table II.**  
Perception of managers about the effect of OSN on CSR dimensions

| CSR dimensions | Response   | Observed <i>N</i> | Expected <i>N</i> | Residual | Chi-square value    | df | Sig.  |
|----------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------|---------------------|----|-------|
| Community      | Yes        | 11                | 5                 | 6.0      | 11.200 <sup>a</sup> | 2  | 0.004 |
|                | No         | 3                 | 5                 | -2.0     |                     |    |       |
|                | Don't know | 1                 | 5                 | -4.0     |                     |    |       |
| Workplace      | Yes        | 5                 | 7.5               | -2.5     | 1.667 <sup>a</sup>  | 1  | 0.197 |
|                | No         | 10                | 7.5               | 2.5      |                     |    |       |
| Marketplace    | Yes        | 13                | 7.5               | 5.5      | 8.067 <sup>a</sup>  | 1  | 0.005 |
|                | No         | 2                 | 7.5               | -5.5     |                     |    |       |
| Environment    | Yes        | 3                 | 7.5               | -4.5     | 5.400 <sup>a</sup>  | 1  | 0.020 |
|                | No         | 12                | 7.5               | 4.5      |                     |    |       |

**Note:** The significance of “a” in the Table is  $p < 0.05$



**Figure 2.**  
Companies' communication facilities in their websites in 2011 and 2013

Almost half of the 23 companies published information on all four dimensions of their CSR activities, albeit that these were under different headings.

In addition, the second wave of the research into Facebook use indicated that OSN among the sample companies had increased to 26 per cent. Figure 3 compares the increasing popularity of Facebook among these Iranian companies between 2011 and 2013.

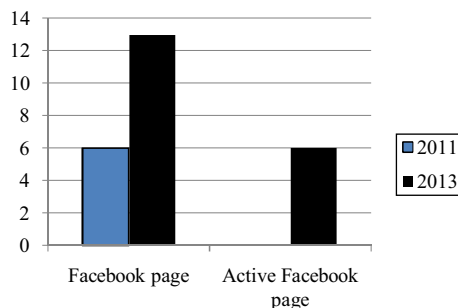
Four dimensions of CSR, which have been adopted from Bonson and Ratkia's (2013) study, were used to assess the level of companies' social legitimacy via SNS. These include the number of wall posts about environmental issues, social/human resource/career issues, financial reporting and transparency issues and governance issues. Online activities on Facebook were also investigated to assess whether the companies used OSN to improve CSR communications. The majority used OSN to facilitate communication with their customers, yet few used this method to improve CSR communication. For example, one company listed the company safety awards on Facebook, and another company provided extra tips and information about the importance of safety when using its products, or the same products from other companies. In addition, this company reported on consumer accidents because of carelessness, indicating safety and health were important to them. Another company provided information and advice about recruitment for the industry, which could be classified as a public service.

## 5. Research limitation

There are some limitations to the study that should be addressed in future studies. The first of these is the possibility of bias, given that these were award-winning companies who were predisposed towards implementing CSR, and the small sample size. Although the sample size was small, it did represent 60 per cent of the targeted population (23 Iranian companies listed as National Excellence Award winners for CSR in 2011). Secondly, although given the opportunity, respondents did not provide any written qualitative feedback or information, which may have added richer insights. Finally, transferability of the results may be limited because of unique economic and cultural attributes in Iran, although the country is now working hard to become part of the global community.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

This study was designed to test the perception of managers towards the link of communication via OSN and CSR dimensions. The manager's initial perceptions were



**Figure 3.**  
Facebook  
membership among  
companies between  
2011 and 2013

that OSN was not of significant value in communicating or fostering CSR awareness. Our results demonstrate that the respondents' attitudes have changed significantly over the past two years, which is a very positive indication in terms of the government's agenda for promoting greater CSR. This research indicates that there has been a significant change in Iranian company's attitudes towards the use of web-based technology and OSN for engaging with CSR practices in the last two years. This change may in part be attributed to the awareness of this opportunity through participating in the original survey in 2011, or the increasing use of OSN in other spheres of the company's activities such as the use of for company marketing purposes. Companies were aware that web-based platforms support building relationships with their customers and community, but had not equated this as an opportunity to communicate CSR.

In the decade prior to 2011, the Iranian government's attempts to improve CSR awareness and implementation had made slow progress, and the findings of this small study suggest that CSR was still a new concept to Iranian companies in 2011. The availability of OSN clearly has the potential to change this and the uptake of two-way communication technologies is exhilarating and gaining momentum. Although the companies were not using social networking at the time of the first wave of the study, the respondents did agree that OSN could have a strong impact on two out of four aspects of CSR, these being the community and marketplace. In effect, the companies already had the tools in place and just needed to further develop and broaden the use of OSN for CSR purposes. One issue that did arise and was identified in the first wave of the study was that the leaders of the participating companies were old males, who might not have been as exposed to this technology and therefore not as aware of its potential benefits. The results demonstrate this is not the case.

Our findings are consistent with the [Omidvar \(2009\)](#) and [Salehi and Azary \(2009\)](#) findings in that Iranian corporations were aware of the impact interaction through their websites had on their reputation and financial gain. However, it is clear that two years later in 2011 they were not familiar with the full capacity of OSN for enhancing CSR. It also must be pointed out that the companies that did participate in this study are companies that are recognized nationally as having the best CSR standards within Iran, so it is likely that these companies would be more proactive in their approach to CSR. On the one hand, these trendsetters will set higher benchmarks that will help to raise the standard among other companies. On the other hand, they are considerably ahead of their competitors and more sector wide and government-supported education is needed to broaden the understanding of the potential that OSN offers for building CSR awareness and engagement.

From a practical point of view, there are some fundamental obstacles to creating online dialectic features for Iranian companies. One is the need for additional staff to assist with the associated services, which leads to increased costs. Another possible barrier is the investment in keeping websites up-to-date in terms of infrastructure and knowledge about the issues; for example, customers and members of the community can search for information from sites worldwide, and can sometimes have the resources and opportunities to access more up-to-date information than a company can provide. In addition, given the Iranian economy is in transition there are other technological problems such as a low-speed Internet and ongoing pressure, from owners or political

groups where, for example, filtering of information makes it difficult to publicize information that may be considered politically contentious.

### *6.1 Contributions to theory and practice*

A primarily theoretical contribution is that this study is one of the first to evaluate the use of OSN to improve CSR in a developing country. Although there is recently some research focused on the use of new communication technologies to develop communication CSR, there is no definitive answer as to how managers think about the effect of OSN on CSR dimensions. This study examines managers' perceptions towards the effect of OSN on CSR practice. This study commences a new dialog that can be modelled through further studies to increase an understanding of the relationship between OSN and differing CSR practices.

From a practical point of view, as this study is conducted in a developing country, it would be important for organizations in developing countries to note the linkage between a stronger OSN contribution and more effective CSR communication. The present study demonstrates how OSN can be used not only as a marketing tool, but also as a tool for promoting and engaging stakeholders in a range of CSR-related issues in the marketplace, community, environment and the workplace. This study also confirms the accelerating rate of adoption of this technology and the untapped potential it offers. Finally, this paper demonstrates how rapidly managers' perceptions can change, when they have a commitment to improve CSR and understand the benefits that OSN can offer.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that a number of things are happening together to engender changes within the Iranian business environment in regards to CSR. The drivers behind the change include the strong government emphasis on CSR to match the growing expectations of society in respect to the adoption of greater levels of CSR by Iranian. The review of the company websites in 2011 and the survey have indicated that this is still very much a process in its infancy; however, the momentum is gaining! The increase in the number of companies using OSN is growing quickly and competitive pressures will in turn force other companies to follow suit. Overall, this should be heartening for the government. It also bodes well for Iran in its attempts towards making a remarkable transformation with respect to a demonstrable uptake of CSR and the role this has to play in the globalized world. Future studies can be conducted to establish a model presenting how OSN can affect CSR practices through improving CSR communication.

### **Notes**

1. The Iranian government in 2002 passed the Customer Reverence Act to improve the quality services of all public, semi-public organizations and private companies to improve the satisfaction of their customers.
2. Zoroastrianism is an ancient Iranian religion and a religious philosophy that was Persian formal religion in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE (Boyce, 1975).
3. Based on EFQM, the National Excellence Award was designed by Ministry of Industries and Mines in cooperation with the Institute for Productivity and Human Resource Development in 2001. The aim is to increase the chance of Iranian organizations being able to enter global markets and obtain comparative advantages.

4. According to an online research conducted by Chimigi company, Iran's first online research company, three of five Iranian Internet users have an active Facebook page, 37 per cent use Google+, 14 per cent use Cloob.com (an Iranian SNS), 12 per cent use Twitter and 12 per cent LinkedIn. One-third of respondents (2,300 individuals) spend more than one hour per day on online social networking activities, and one of four Iranian Internet users has a personal weblog (Bhatia, 2010).

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