

## **Legitimizing CSR discourse on Facebook during the pandemic: A comparative analysis of Romanian food retail companies**

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**Abstract:** Crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, determine organizations to reshape their way of communicating with stakeholders. Facebook is one of the communication channels used by food retail companies to transmit CSR messages during the pandemic. Approaching the quantitative content analysis, the current paper reveals the themes and legitimation that emerged from Facebook posts about corporate social responsibility made in the first year of the pandemic by the food retail companies Carrefour Romania, Kaufland Romania and Lidl Romania. The analysis is centred on 289 posts from the Facebook pages of the three companies, published between March 2020 and February 2021. According to the results, the most common communication topic used by Lidl and Carrefour was responsibility towards customers. In the case of the Kaufland company, the most frequent topic was that of responsibility towards medical personnel, patients and health institutions. The findings additionally reveal that Kaufland and Carrefour, the companies that outline the objectives and methods for implementing CSR initiatives, primarily employed the strategy of rationalization legitimation. Lidl employed authority legitimation as its most common strategy, citing authorities in the fields of public health and corporate social responsibility.

**Keywords:** legitimation strategies, CSR discourse, food retail companies, Facebook, pandemic.

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has gained momentum in recent years, as the specialized literature shows (Istudor & Suciu, 2020; Paliwoda-Matiolanska et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022), and people are increasingly interested in the products they buy and their origin or the impact that producers have on the environment (Quiles-Soler et al., 2023). Bittner and Leimeister (2011) state that corporate social responsibility communication constitutes an important part of corporate reporting, having a significant impact on the organizational image and on the relationship with stakeholders. Research (Caruana & Ewing, 2010; Öberseder et al., 2013; Hetze, 2016) also shows that people are interested in the social responsibility actions of organizations and inquire about what companies do before buying their products. CSR communication on social media has been analysed (Mandviwalla & Watson, 2014; Paliwoda-Matiolanska et al., 2020; Jiang &

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Park, 2022; Topor et al., 2022) and studies show that communicating CSR projects on social networks positively influence companies' reputation or people's perception and online presence gives organizations the opportunity to build long-term relationships with the public.

The pandemic context has brought major changes in terms of companies' communication strategies, organizations being forced to adapt their communication regarding CSR actions, to be attentive to the needs of consumers and to respond to these needs through transparent and fast communication. As stated by Mileti and Fitzpatrick (1991, in Moreno et al., 2020), in the context of a pandemic, the public needs to receive and understand information, risks and actions to take, as well as to make decisions and be able to act on the information received. Topor et al. (2022) say that companies are willing to adapt their discourse according to the expectations and needs of the communities. Thus, (inter)national organizations focused their actions and corporate social responsibility initiatives on coronavirus related campaigns during the pandemic.

The purpose of this study is to outline the communication themes and legitimation strategies that were employed in the discourse surrounding corporate social responsibility (CSR) from the Facebook posts of three Romanian food retail companies during the first year of the pandemic: Carrefour Romania, Lidl Romania and Kaufland Romania. Organizations from the food retail sector were selected because they have a direct impact both on the consumers who come into contact with their services and products every day and on the environment, through the influence they have on the choice of sustainable products, food waste, plastic in packaging or the gases resulting from the transport of goods. Also, this field was heavily publicized since the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania in terms of the safety of customers or employees and food stocks in supermarkets.

This paper aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Which topics did the three organizations cover in their pandemic-related Facebook posts regarding corporate social responsibility?

RQ2: In the pandemic setting, how did the three corporations, between March 2020 and February 2021, discursively legitimize their CSR initiatives on Facebook?

RQ3: Which of the legitimation strategies of the three organizations were the most prevalent in the pandemic-related CSR discourse based on their Facebook posts?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Corporate social responsibility discourse and legitimation strategies**

Suchman (1995) says that legitimation is understood to be the compliance of companies to a collection of societal standards, definitions, values, and beliefs. Furthermore, the author states that organizational legitimation relies on the communication of actions between companies and stakeholders. van Leeuwen (2008) created a framework for examining legitimation strategies in discourses. It includes four discursive strategies of

legitimation: authorization, which refers to “legitimation by appeal to the authority of institutions such as legislation, conventions and traditions, or the institutionalized authority of a specific actor” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 105), moral evaluation, which refers to “discourses of value” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106), rationalization, which refers to “the goals and uses of institutionalized social action and to the social knowledge that endow them with cognitive validity” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106) and mythopoesis, which refers to “narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106). A new legitimation strategy, normalization, was introduced by Vaara et al. (2008) and it corresponds to conformity from authorization category in van Leeuwen’s framework. This strategy refers to legitimation by reference to normality.

In the literature, we find some research about the legitimization strategies used by companies in various communication media. In the wake of an oil platform accident, Breeze (2012) investigated legitimation strategies in the letters sent to shareholders by five oil companies. To determine the primary themes in these letters, the author developed a coding scheme that includes nine categories: mentions about the risks from industry, mentions about the accident, mentions about exploring new areas, mentions about environmental responsibility, mentions about social responsibility, mentions about substitute technologies, legitimation of the petroleum sector, statements regarding workers and monetary outcomes.

Starting from the theories about the communication of inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility (IDEA), Zhang (2022) analysed the CSR communication on Facebook of 48 American companies from various fields of activity, including the top Standard & Poor's, regarding the four aspects: inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility (IDEA). Using quantitative content analysis, the author states that, in terms of legitimation strategies, companies motivated or justified their actions most often with references to performance, values and audiences, and less often with references to consumer activism or crises.

Hahn and Lülfs (2014) started from the theories based on the economic reports made by companies and from the socio-political theories of the reports made by organizations to analyse the CSR reports made according to the GRI (Global Reporting Initiative) model of the companies listed according The US Dow Jones Industrial Average and the German DAX Index. Thus, regarding the level of responsibility that companies assume according to legitimization strategies, the research results of the authors Hahn and Lülfs (2014) show that legitimization through abstraction within the moral evaluation involves companies evading responsibility, given that negative incidents are attributed to larger entities, such as the entire industry (Hahn & Lülfs, 2014, p. 27). Likewise, legitimation through rationalization involves the transfer of negative events onto other institutional practices, such as the pursuit of economic growth (Hahn & Lülfs, 2014, pp. 28-29). Regarding legitimation through authorization, Hahn and Lülfs (2014, 29) state that this strategy involves associating negative aspects with personal or impersonal authorities that have a higher status.

## **2.2. The corporate social responsibility discourse in the pandemic context**

He and Harris (2020) state that one of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was the acceleration of the development of long-term CSR strategies by organizations which are aware of the balance they must maintain between profit and consumer needs. Companies were also forced to adopt much faster response strategies in this crisis, given the unpredictable evolution of the pandemic from one day to the next, and to develop their online communication strategies while physical interactions being limited. Regarding consumers, the authors state that the pandemic has an impact on them in terms of awareness of consumption behaviour, both on their own person and on society.

Analysing the communication strategies, communication channels and types of messages sent by the Spanish authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, Moreno et al. (2020) state that stakeholders' need to seek information is greater during a crisis. To find out how companies managed CSR communication on social media in this context, Yang et al. (2022) analysed how US Fortune 500 companies communicated their CSR measures in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic on their Facebook pages and how online users responded to their posts. Three themes were identified: updated data for the online users, businesses response to the crisis and company contributions. The results of their research show that the posts about proactive CSR initiative during the coronavirus pandemic received more comments and shares from online users and companies in industries severely affected by the pandemic (such as retail, transport or wholesale) received more comments with an intense emotional component. Also, the posts about actions for external stakeholders received more positive reactions than those for internal stakeholders. Yang et al. (2022) state that in the case of a long-lasting crisis, companies must pay attention to the fact that the needs of communities can change, and organizational strategies must be adapted. These studies emphasize how crucial it is to recognize and comprehend the topics covered in CSR communication in order to examine how businesses discursively validate themselves when addressing these issues.

## **2.3. Food retail companies and corporate social responsibility communication**

Istudor and Suciu (2020) state, in the context of CSR reporting by food retail companies in the European Union, that activities that can bring a competitive advantage in a society include adopting sustainability measures in accordance with current international standards.

Regarding the reporting of CSR results, Istudor and Suciu (2020) conducted a study of the sustainability reports of six food retail companies in the European Union, drawn up according to GRI standards. Mentioning the link between CSR and these organizations, the authors emphasize the importance of food retail companies in terms of the impact they have on the economic, social and environmental fields in the nations where they conduct their businesses, given the fact that, due to the structures of their supply chains supply, they can influence product quality and have an impact on food waste. Furthermore, Istudor and Suciu (2020) state that food retail organizations can support the production of organic food and sustainably sourced products.

Regarding the CSR policies of companies in the food, soft drinks and packaging industries, Topic et al. (2020) showed that organizations in the food industry had the highest number of CSR policies described on their websites. The most common CSR policies were about managing waste and recyclable packaging, diversity in the workforce and supporting local communities.

Further, analysing how the food retail company Lidl incorporated CSR messages in its corporate and marketing campaigns in the UK and Croatia, Topic and Tench (2016) demonstrate how Lidl's communication strategy in Croatia was based on social situation analysis and promoted job opportunities in an environment where employee rights and workplace harassment were discussed. Regarding the determination to implement CSR campaigns, the authors mention that in Croatia, the Lidl company was motivated by European Union programs that rewarded organizations that applied social responsibility programs, and CSR was invoked as a justification to increase sales and customer satisfaction.

Regarding CSR campaigns, Hartmann et al. (2015) state that cause marketing has positive effects on consumer trust in food retail companies. However, regarding the communication of cause-related marketing campaigns, the authors state that organizations that carry out such actions must communicate transparently with the public, providing details about the impact they have by purchasing the organization's products and supporting the campaign. Otherwise, the impact on consumer trust in companies can be major, negatively influencing organizational reputation and customer loyalty.

In addition to the fact that food retail companies can have a great influence on sustainability by choosing sustainable products or avoiding food waste, they must communicate CSR actions and measures taken, given the growing concern of consumers in terms of social responsibility. Also, through communication campaigns, reporting and CSR actions, organizations can strengthen their relations with the public, but inaccurate or non-transparent communication can lead to damage to reputation and consumer trust.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Corpus**

The corpus consists of 289 Facebook posts from Kaufland Romania, Carrefour Romania and Lidl Romania that were published from March 2020 until February 2021. The selection of the corpus was made according to the following criteria: first, the Facebook posts published by the three companies on their pages the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania first started (i.e., March 2020) during one financial year (i.e., February 2021) were selected, then, from the posts addressing CSR topics were selected. Lidl Romania had 148 Facebook posts, Kaufland Romania, 57 and Carrefour Romania, 84. The posts were collected using CrowdTangle (<https://www.crowdtangle.com/>).

In relation to the frequency of the CSR Facebook posts published during March 2020 and February 2021, the Lidl Romania company published most of them in September, namely 37, then 16 in December and January. Kaufland Romania

organization published the most Facebook posts in October, namely 10, then nine in February and eight in September. Carrefour Romania company published the most posts in January, namely 16, then 15 in March and 12 in April and November, being the only enterprise among the three organizations under analysis which published the most CSR posts during the pandemic's first two months.

### 3.2. Research methods

Thematic analysis was performed using quantitative content analysis. This includes two categories from the analysis schemes developed by Yang et al. (2022): organizational contribution for society (renamed in this analysis as responsibility to communities or NGOs) and organizational crisis response for internal stakeholders (renamed in this analysis as responsibility towards employees). Also, the coding scheme for thematic analysis includes two other categories from the analysis scheme developed by Nistor (2023): actions for health institutions and patients (renamed in this analysis as responsibility towards medical professionals, patients and health institutions) and actions for customers (renamed in this analysis as responsibility to customers). Moreover, three other categories for the thematic analysis were developed and adapted for this research according to the specifics of the analysed corpus, as environmental responsibility, responsibility towards suppliers/ partners, awards/ distinctions.

Then, another coding scheme was created to determine how retail food organizations legitimized their CSR initiatives. This comprises three of the four legitimation strategies outlined by van Leeuwen (2008): authority legitimation, moral legitimation and rationalization legitimation. The fourth strategy, namely mythopoesis, was not present in the corpus under analysis and, thus, was not incorporated into the coding schemes. Nistor (2023) previously developed this coding scheme to identify the legitimation strategies from press releases of food retail companies in the pandemic context.

The analysis was conducted using the categories below:

- responsibility towards medical professionals, patients and health institutions - this category contains measures for medical professionals, healthcare facilities, and coronavirus-affected patients. The following subcategories were found within this category:
  - financial or medical equipment donations: this subcategory contains references to medical supplies that organizations have given to healthcare facilities;
  - food donations for medical staff: mentions of providing food to medical staff are included in this subcategory.
- responsibility towards customers – this category contains elements pertaining to how organizations present the actions they did for their clients. The following subcategories were found within this category:
  - tips for combating food waste: this subcategory includes posts in which companies gave their customers advice to combat waste;
  - measures taken for customers in the context of the pandemic: posts in which the organizations mentioned any kind of actions taken to protect

customers from the effects of the pandemic (e.g., disinfection of common spaces or implementation of home delivery services).

- responsibility towards employees – posts that discuss the pandemic-related measures companies have taken for their employees fall under this category. The following subcategory was found within this category:
  - actions made for workers in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic: posts in which the companies mentioned any kind of actions taken to protect employees from the effects of the pandemic (e.g., actions taken by companies in offices and stores for employees or monetary benefits that organizations provided to their employees).
- responsibility towards communities or NGOs – posts that discuss the CSR initiatives that organizations have done for specific NGOs or the communities in which they operate fall under this category. The following subcategories were found within this category:
  - food donations for disadvantaged people: references to corporate donations of food to individuals living in underprivileged areas impacted by the pandemic;
  - measures taken to support education: posts in which the companies mentioned the actions taken to support the education of students in Romania;
  - donations to NGOs that help animals: posts about donations made by companies to NGOs that helped animals in shelters;
  - donations for NGOs working to limit the effects of earthquakes: posts about donations made by companies to help NGOs to limit the effects of earthquakes;
  - donations for NGOs that facilitate the digitization of Romania: posts about donations made by companies to NGOs which carried out digitization programs of the country;
  - financial donations to NGOs or disadvantaged communities: posts about financial donations made by organizations to NGOs or disadvantaged communities;
  - measures to support tourism: posts about programs undertaken by companies to support tourism;
  - tips for healthy eating: posts in which companies offered clients advice on healthy eating;
  - blood donation: posts about the blood donation campaigns in which the companies have been involved;
  - measures to protect the falls from the national heritage: posts about actions to protect heritage;
  - donations to NGOs that facilitate village lighting: posts about donations made by the organizations to NGOs that facilitated village lighting.
- environmental responsibility – posts in this category highlight the steps businesses have taken to safeguard the environment. The following subcategories were found within this category:

- measures to combat food waste: this subcategory includes posts in which the companies mentioned the actions taken to combat food waste;
- measures to combat pollution: this subcategory includes posts in which the companies mentioned the actions taken to combat pollution;
- sustainably sourced or local products: this subcategory includes posts about sustainable or local products;
- collection of used oil: this subcategory includes posts about the used oil collection campaigns.
- responsibility towards suppliers/partners – posts that discuss the CSR initiatives that businesses have carried out on behalf of their partners or suppliers fall under this category. The following subcategories were found within this category:
  - measures taken for suppliers or partners in the context of the pandemic: it consists of posts in which the companies mentioned actions taken for suppliers or partners within the framework of the COVID-19 outbreak;
  - measures taken to support local producers: this subcategory includes posts in which the companies mentioned measures taken to support local producers.
- awards/ distinctions – posts that discuss awards that businesses have received for their CSR initiatives or campaigns fall under this category.
- other (no concrete facts specified) – this category includes other CSR topics that could not be included in the categories above.

Starting from van Leeuwen's framework (2008), Nistor (2023) developed an analysis scheme for discursive legitimation strategies in CSR communication from press releases of food retail companies. Using this previously developed coding scheme, the current analysis scheme contains the following categories and subcategories:

- authority legitimation, with the following subcategories:
  - conformity: refers to posts that include sentences showing “what most people do” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 109);
  - tradition: refers to posts that include sentences showing that the actions taken by the companies were justified by the fact that this is “what they have always done” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 108);
  - personal authority: refers to posts that include sentences showing “the status or role of people in a particular institution” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106);
  - impersonal authority: refers to posts that include sentences about “laws, rules or regulations” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 108);
  - expert authority: refers to posts that include sentences containing explicit expertise “by mentioning credentials” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 107) or implicit expertise, where “the expert is well known in the given context” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 107);
  - role model authority: refers to posts that include sentences about “role models or opinion leaders” that “may be members of a peer group or media celebrities imitated from afar” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 107).



- moral legitimation, with the following subcategories:
  - evaluation: refers to posts that include sentences containing “evaluative adjectives” that “communicate both concrete qualities of actions or objects and commend them in terms of some domain of values” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 110);
  - abstraction: refers to posts that include sentences presenting practices “in abstract ways that moralize them” in connection with “discourses of moral values” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 111);
  - positive comparison: refers to posts that include sentences showing comparisons “associated with positive values” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 112);
  - negative comparison: refers to posts that include comparisons “associated with negative values” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 112).
- rationalization legitimation, with the following subcategories:
  - instrumental – goal orientation: refers to posts that include “purposes of an action” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 114);
  - instrumental – means orientation: refers to posts that include sentences showing “the means by which an action is achieved” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 114);
  - instrumental – effect orientation: refers to posts that show “the outcome of actions” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 115);
  - theoretical – experiential: refers to posts that include sentences about “commonsense knowledge”, formulated through “proverbs, moral maxims and wise sayings” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 116);
  - theoretical – scientific: refers to posts that include sentences containing “scientific information” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 117);
  - theoretical – definition: refers to posts that include sentences where “one activity is defined in terms of another” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 116);
  - theoretical – explanation: refers to posts that show descriptions of “one or more of the actors involved in the practice” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 116);
  - theoretical – prediction: refers to posts that include “predictions based on expertise” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 116).

The sentence served as the unit of measurement in the coding scheme, and the coding tables indicated which categories were present by 1 for a present category and 0 for an absent category.

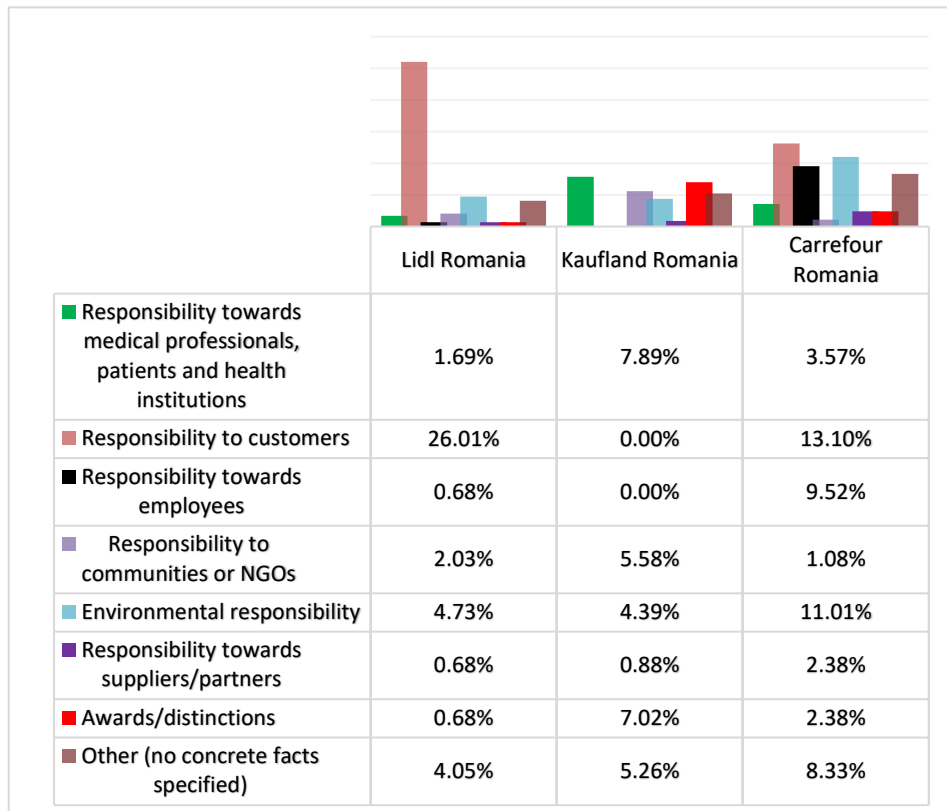
## 4. Results

### 4.1. Topics on the corporate social responsibility of food retail companies in Romania

The frequency of topics is shown in figure 1. As observed, the most frequent topic used by Lidl Romania was responsibility towards customers (26.01%). The company

frequently posted tips on combating food waste for customers. The second most popular topic (4.73%) was environmental responsibility, focusing on measures and campaigns for combating pollution. The least frequently used theme was responsibility towards employees, responsibility towards suppliers/partners and awards/distinctions.

Kaufland Romania employed responsibility towards medical professionals, patients and health institutions (7.89%) as its most used topic, mentioning financial or medical equipment donations that the company has made. Next, the organization shared information about the prizes or distinctions it obtained for CSR campaigns and actions (7.02%). Responsibility towards suppliers/partners was the subject that Kaufland company communicated the least (0.88%), this theme being present in one Facebook post about supporting local producers. Additionally, two topics were absent from the Kaufland Romania company's examined posts, namely the responsibility to customers and responsibility towards employees.



**Figure 1.** Topic frequency in the CSR Facebook posts of food retail companies in Romania, March 2020–February 2021

The most frequent topic used by Carrefour Romania was responsibility to customers (13.10%), namely the measures taken by the company to protect customers in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic. The organization shared information regarding environmental responsibility (11.01%). The company frequently posted about measures

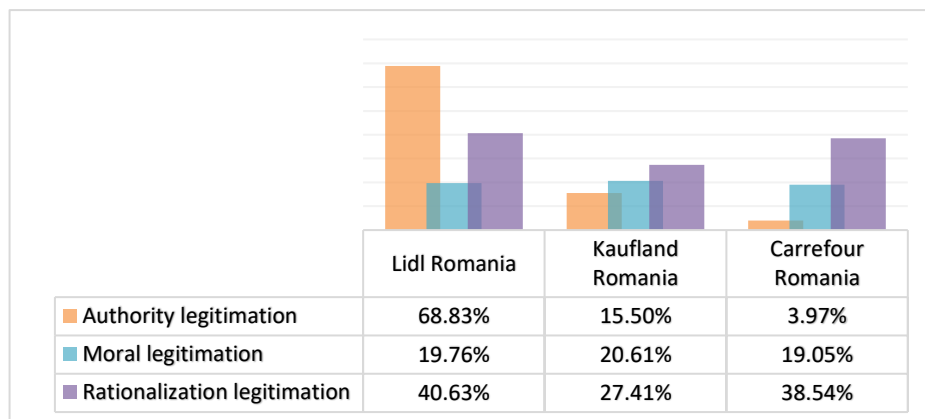
for fighting pollution and local or sustainably obtained products. The organisation communicated the least about responsibility to communities or NGOs (1.08%). Within this category, the company posted about food donations made to disadvantaged communities.

Therefore, Lidl Romania and Carrefour Romania communicated most often about responsibility to customers, highlighting the measures they have taken for them in the context of the pandemic or offering advice to customers to combat food waste, while Kaufland Romania had the most recurring theme, namely that of responsibility towards medical professionals, patients and health institutions, mentioning food donations for medical personnel or financial and medical equipment donations. Additionally, during the period under analysis, Kaufland Romania did not communicate on the topic of actions for customers or employees, in contrast to Lidl Romania and Carrefour Romania, which communicated measures taken for these categories of stakeholders to prevent or reduce the negative effects of the pandemic communicated.

#### 4.2. Legitimation strategies present in Facebook posts on the corporate social responsibility of food retail companies

RQ2 and 3 focused on examining how frequently the three food retail companies used legitimation strategies in their CSR Facebook posts in the pandemic context.

Figure 2 illustrates that Kaufland Romania and Carrefour Romania used rationalization and moral legitimation as discursive legitimation strategies more frequently. Additionally, Lidl Romania employed authority and rationalization legitimation as its most common discursive legitimation strategies.



**Figure 2.** Legitimation strategies in the CSR posts of retail companies (March 2020 - February 2021)

We examined which subcategories were most commonly used by food retail companies for each legitimation strategies. As observed in table 3, within each legitimation strategy, the two most used subcategories were the same for the three companies, namely: authority legitimation was present most frequently in Facebook posts about CSR through expert authority and tradition, moral legitimation was achieved most

frequently through abstraction and evaluation subcategories and rationalization legitimation was present most often through instrumental – goal orientation and instrumental – means orientation subcategories.

**Table 3.** Frequency of the two most prevalent subcategories within each legitimation strategy category in the CSR Facebook posts (March 2020 - February 2021)

Legitimation strategy	The most frequent two subcategories from each legitimation strategy		
	<i>Carrefour Romania</i>	<i>Lidl Romania</i>	<i>Kaufland Romania</i>
<i>Authority legitimation</i>	Expert authority (75%)	Expert authority (64.15%)	Expert authority (64.15%)
	Tradition (10%)	Tradition (17.92%)	Tradition (22.64%)
<i>Moral legitimation</i>	Abstraction (53.13%)	Abstraction (52.99%)	Abstraction (65.96%)
	Evaluation (45.31%)	Evaluation (42.74%)	Evaluation (34.04%)
<i>Rationalization legitimation</i>	Instrumental - goal orientation (28.19%)	Instrumental - goal orientation (28.9%)	Instrumental - means orientation (30.4%)
	Instrumental - means orientation (28.19%)	Instrumental - means orientation (27.03%)	Instrumental - goal orientation (29.6%)

#### 4.2.1. Authority legitimation

Figure 2 and Table 3 above show that authority legitimation strategy was used most frequently by Lidl Romania (68.83%) than by Kaufland Romania (15.50%) and it was the least used by Carrefour Romania (3.97%). In the posts of all three companies, expert authority and tradition were the most present subcategories within the authority legitimation strategy.

In the subcategory of expert authority, the companies mentioned persons or institutions with expertise in a certain field. The expert authority subcategory was used most often by Carrefour Romania (75%). The organization highlighted the collaborations it has with reputable organizations in the industries where it had carried out social responsibility initiatives. Words like the following demonstrate this: “County Committees for Emergency Situations” (Carrefour Romania, 2020, March 13), “Directorate of Public Health Bucharest” (Carrefour Romania, 2020, April 14) or “the civic group Geeks for Democracy” (Carrefour Romania, 2020, June 23). Then, with the same frequency (64.15%), Lidl Romania and Kaufland Romania employed the subcategory of expert authorization. Lidl Romania made reference to professionals, including authorities or organizations that it worked with to carry out CSR initiatives, such as “The S.M.U.R.D Foundation” (Lidl Romania, 2020, April 8) or “Cluj Food Bank” (Lidl Romania, 2020, April 15) and Kaufland Romania mentioned institutions with expertise such as

“Foundation for the Development of Civil Society” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, August 11) or “Blood Transfusion Center from Bucharest” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, August 14).

The companies demonstrated, on the one hand, through explicit expertise, that their campaigns were endorsed by organizations with health, social or CSR expertise, entities that can get directly involved in helping underprivileged communities or mitigating the effects of the pandemic, and on the other hand, through implicit expertise, that they collaborated with well-known NGOs.

Within the tradition subcategory, the companies mentioned either the continuity of actions or campaigns started in the past, or their experience in the communities in which they operate. This subcategory was the most frequent in the Kaufland Romania company's posts (22.64%) and was reflected in sentences such as “For two years, Kaufland Romania has been supporting Romania in good condition” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, August 11), “For 15 years we have been making the story a reality” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, September 18) or “for the third year in a row, we got first place in the list of the most sustainable companies in the country” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, November 19). Then, in the posts of Lidl Romania, the subcategory of tradition was present most often (17.92%) through sentences such as “We continue to act #ForABetterFuture and get involved in the communities we are part of” (Lidl Romania, 2020, September 18) or “SMURD turns 30 today! We are happy to be with them for 5 years and support their projects” (Lidl Romania, 2020, September 25). Carrefour Romania used the tradition subcategory (10%) in its Facebook posts, through statements such as “We continue to be with communities that need help” (Carrefour Romania, 2020, September 1) or “The Carrefour Foundation celebrates 20 years” (Carrefour Romania, 2021, January 28).

These examples suggest that the organizations have close connections with the communities, and they have the necessary experience to understand their needs. Also, by mentioning the continuation of supporting certain CSR projects, the companies strengthen their status as socially responsible organizations, and show transparency.

#### **4.2.3. Moral legitimization**

As observed in Figure 2 and Table 3, the moral legitimization strategy was used most frequently by Kaufland Romania (20.61%), followed by Lidl Romania (19.76%) and Carrefour Romania (19.05%). All three companies employed abstraction and evaluation more within the moral legitimization strategy.

The food retail companies presented practices in the abstraction subcategory highlighting traits of moral principles. This subcategory was most frequently encountered in the posts of Kaufland Romania (65.96%), using phrases like “vulnerable communities” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, May 6), “frontline medical personnel” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, May 13) or “to overcome the negative effects caused by COVID-19 more easily” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, June 19). Carrefour Romania (53.13%) and Lidl Romania (52.99%) used abstraction as well. In the Facebook posts of Carrefour Romania, abstraction was present through structures such as “the most exposed categories during this period” (Carrefour Romania, 2020, March 19) or “we act together, #fromCare for those who care” (Carrefour Romania, 2020, April 9). In the posts of Lidl Romania, we find this subcategory in phrases such as “we supply responsibly” (Lidl Romania, 2020,

April 2) or sentences such as “The refrigerator and freezer are our basic allies in the fight against food waste” (Lidl Romania, 2020, June 30).

The three companies appealed to the emotional side of people through these phrases emphasizing the abstraction subcategory of moral legitimation. This could affect the people to whom the messages were addressed and persuade them to participate in corporate social responsibility campaigns or implement the company’s COVID-19 pandemic recommendations.

Within the evaluation subcategory, the communities referenced in the CSR initiatives within the framework of the pandemic were bestowed with certain evaluative adjectives by the food retail corporations. Carrefour Romania used the evaluation subcategory within moral legitimation (45.31%), using evaluative adjectives in phrases like “The measure of protection is actually the measure of care towards customers and employees alike” (Carrefour Romania, 2020, March 19) or “You know you're shopping safely when you keep your distance” (Carrefour Romania, 2020, March 21) to describe the actions that people had to do to be safe, in the context of the pandemic. The evaluation subcategory was also employed by Lidl (42.74%) and by Kaufland (34.04%). The companies described the stakeholders affected by the pandemic through expressions such as “critical patients” (Lidl Romania, 2020, April 8) or “exposed due to poverty and social exclusion” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, May 22).

As we can see, within the evaluation subcategory of moral legitimation strategy, the retail companies highlighted how the pandemic affected the stakeholders for whom they carried out corporate social responsibility initiatives. They also identified the stakeholders that these initiatives affected and the people who benefited from them.

#### **4.2.4. Rationalization legitimation**

Rationalization legitimation was more present in the posts of Lidl Romania (40.63%), followed by Carrefour Romania (38.54%) and Kaufland Romania (27.41%). The most common subcategories found in the rationalization legitimation strategy across all three companies were instrumental – goal orientation and instrumental – means orientation, as shown by Table 3.

Within the instrumental – goal orientation subcategory, the three food retail companies explained the goals of their CSR campaigns, so as to obtain the support of communities or clients and to openly discuss the rationale behind their actions within the framework of the pandemic. The instrumental – goal orientation subcategory was used by the three companies in phrases such as “with the aim of stopping and collecting the waste brought by the water” (Lidl Romania, 2020, June 5), “so that the magic of the Holidays reaches the less fortunate” (Kaufland Romania, 2020, December 22), or “we want to be able to deliver every order as quickly and safely as we can” (Carrefour Romania, 2020, March 22).

In the case of campaigns in which organizations have encouraged communities to get involved in CSR actions, presenting the goals could bring more transparency and positively influence the communities’ decision to get involved in the companies’ actions.

Within the instrumental – means orientation subcategory, the three companies described in their posts how they carried out specific actions or corporate social

responsibility campaigns. In Kaufland company's posts, this subcategory (30.4%) was present through phrases such as "we brought the holiday spirit home to 100 seniors by delivering food packages to their homes" (Kaufland Romania, 2020, April 21), "More than 75 volunteers mobilized to clean the waste from the Defileul Oltului area" (Kaufland Romania, 2020, September 4) or "Kaufland Romania supports the expansion of the Donorium network in 15 cities, reaching a total of 22 blood transfusion centers in the country" (Kaufland Romania, 2020, September 23). Carrefour Romania and Lidl Romania explained how they implemented measures to mitigate adverse consequences, in the pandemic framework, through expressions such as "protective panels are installed at cash registers in all large supermarket chains" (Carrefour Romania, 2020, March 19) or "We support Romania's ability to treat critical patients, covering the costs of the country's first mobile intensive care unit" (Lidl Romania, 2020, April 8).

Using rationalization legitimation strategy to explain how they got involved in actions for communities or for health institutions and patients, the companies showed transparency in communication, presenting concrete figures and data.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

This study attempts to look into the ways that food retail companies Carrefour Romania, Lidl Romania and Kaufland Romania posted information about their CSR initiatives on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article aims to show what themes emerged in their posts on Facebook during a fiscal year, following the onset of the pandemic in Romania, as well as the legitimation strategies employed.

In light of the Coronavirus pandemic, the main research question (RQ1) aimed to pinpoint the topics that the three organizations covered in the CSR-related Facebook posts. The findings indicate that the theme of responsibility to customers was the most present in the posts of Lidl Romania and Carrefour Romania through measures taken for them in the context of the pandemic or through advice to combat food waste. Instead, Kaufland Romania communicated most frequently about responsibility towards medical professionals, patients and health institutions and did not discuss responsibility to employees at all.

The research of Yang et al. (2022) can be connected with these findings regarding communication themes. By examining how businesses shared information about their corporate social responsibility initiatives on Facebook during the pandemic, the authors were able to identify three main communication themes: company contributions, organization responses to the crisis, and actualized data for online users. In line with Yang et al.'s study (2022), this article also showed that the most frequent communication themes were centred on internal stakeholders, i.e. employees, and on external stakeholders, i.e. clients and communities, by communicating the actions taken by companies to limit the negative effects of the pandemic. Moreover, comparing the results with those of Zhang's (2022) research, we can see, on the one hand, that both focus on topics that include audience references. In the case of this article, the audience that was mentioned most frequently was made up of customers of food retail companies. On the other hand, Zhang's (2022) research shows that topics about activism or crises

were the least communicated within the companies they analyzed, while in this research, these were the main themes. Furthermore, Topic and Tench (2016) showed that the CSR communication strategy is based on understanding the social situation, as in the current research, where the understanding of the pandemic context was essential. Also, the research of Topic and Tench (2016) showed that CSR helped to boost consumer confidence or sales, and comparing this result with the current research, we can observe a common point, namely the use of CSR communication to increase customer trust. This can be seen by the fact that one of the most frequent communication themes in the three companies' posts was responsibility towards customers, through messages showing the safety measures taken by the organizations for the safety of customers when shopping.

The second and third research questions sought to demonstrate how, within the framework of the COVID-19 outbreak, the food retail organizations discursively legitimized their corporate social responsibility initiatives in their Facebook posts. The results showed that Lidl Romania and Kaufland Romania used rationalization legitimation the most often, followed by authority legitimation. This strategy was achieved through the subcategories instrumental – goal orientation and instrumental – means orientation, the two companies explaining on Facebook why they engaged in certain CSR activities and need community or client support, and the ways in which they carried out these actions. Lidl Romania employed the expert authority subcategory to deploy legitimacy through authorization more frequently than Kaufland Romania and Carrefour Romania. Lidl Romania has enhanced its reputation with clients and partners by frequently mentioning individuals or organizations that possess knowledge and stature in the fields of CSR and public health.

These findings on legitimation strategies are consistent with Breeze's (2012) study, where the discursive legitimation strategies from the letters to shareholders in the annual reports of oil companies during a crisis context were examined. References to social responsibility from Breeze's research can be associated with authority legitimation by expert authority from this article, mentions about employees from Breeze's research can be associated with moral legitimation by evaluation in this paper, legitimation of the industry from Breeze's research can be linked to authority legitimation by tradition from current research while mentions about financial results from Breeze's research can be associated with rationalization legitimation by effects from the current article. We can see that although the media analysed in the two researches are different, there are legitimization strategies that coincide. An explanation could be the fact that both papers analyse a corpus from a crisis context.

Moreover, when it comes to one of the most frequently encountered strategies in the Romanian retail companies, namely instrumental legitimation through rationalization, we can see a correlation with Hartmann et al.'s study (2015). The authors show that communication transparency is essential when organizations want to receive support from communities in CSR campaigns, providing details about the impact they have by purchasing the organization's products and supporting the campaign. In the Facebook posts of the three food retail companies, we identified the frequent communication of the goals and effects of CSR campaigns in which people were encouraged to donate food for the communities affected by the pandemic. This was achieved through the transparent communication of the donation campaigns outcomes.



A connection can be observed between the communication themes present in the Facebook posts and the legitimation strategies. When the organizations communicated about responsibility towards communities or NGOs, mentioning donations or supporting disadvantaged personnel, the legitimization was achieved through expert authority and tradition. The experience of the companies in the communities, the continuation of some actions with tradition or the collaboration with NGOs with notoriety and expertise in the field of CSR were mentioned to reinforce transmitted messages. When companies have communicated about responsibility towards medical professionals, patients and health institutions, mentioning donations of medical equipment or financial support, rationalization legitimization strategy was present by explaining the goals, means and effects of the actions taken by the organizations.

The present findings indicate that the companies have changed their communication strategies in response to the unique requirements of corporate social responsibility in light of the COVID-19 epidemic. They have taken actions with the aim of protecting employees and customers or with the aim of helping communities affected by the pandemic, and communicated them in Facebook posts. As stated by Yang et al. (2022), in the context of a long-lasting crisis, companies must pay attention to the fact that the needs of communities can change, and organizational strategies must be adapted. Therefore, we can observe that the three Romanian retail companies have adapted their communication strategies to the pandemic context.

This study can contribute to the research of CSR communication of organizations in the context of a crisis, with focus on social media discourse. Also, this study can contribute to the research about the legitimation strategies used in CSR communication, highlighting the specificities of a certain field, namely food retail. Moreover, this study may serve as a foundation for the tailoring of social media CSR communication strategy by communication experts from different organizations that carry out corporate social responsibility activities.

Regarding the limits of the research, this paper focuses on a single communication platform, namely Facebook, but future research can comparatively analyse CSR communication from several media to see what the similarities and differences between them are. Another limitation is that this article solely examines company-published postings rather than user-generated comments. Further research may examine individuals' comments on CSR-related Facebook postings.

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