

Food communication of food industry corporations in the context of sustainability

A reconstructive analysis

Tina Bartelmeß, Jasmin Godemann

Abstract

The starting point of the following study is that a narrow understanding of corporate food communication, as a nutritional-centred topic of marketing or corporate health management, is not sufficient to capture different roles and functions of food communication in the context of sustainability. In the context of corporate responsibility for sustainable development, food communication provides additional functions besides increasing sales and promoting the health of employees. These various roles and functions of corporate food communication identified by a qualitative comparative case study with two German food corporations are presented. The results demonstrate that corporate food communication is more thematically comprehensive and also addresses actors in the non-economic environment, for example political actors. The study results indicate that a socially-oriented perspective as an extension to a reductive conception of food communication is more promising in showing the diversity of food communication in society.

Keywords: food communication, corporations, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, qualitative research, food system

Introduction

Usually, food communication (FC) is equated with the communication of general recommendations on population nutrient intake. The main emphasis here is the transmission of information from professionalized actors to lay people with the goal of health maintenance and health promotion. Studies investigating such a reductively understood FC are mostly concerned with (health-oriented) non-profit organizations, such as consumer advice centers or the German Nutrition Society (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ernährung*, DGE) [1]. Compared to this perspective, FC can also be understood as a social understanding process that takes place with the involvement of different communication actors in different contexts and at various levels of society [2].

With sustainability as a current reference frame, the diversity of communication actors and contexts related to food in society has become particularly prominent. The path to a sustainable development of the food system requires understanding processes in many contexts and at various levels of society about what sustained food action might involve. In these understanding processes, social actors only consider relevant sections of food from their specific action fields and focus on different aspects of sustainability.

In the communication of economic organizations of the food system, whose primary function is the provision of food products to society, the thematic references of FC expand and other, more economically relevant aspects gain in significance over the health dimension.

Currently, the socio-political demand for the assumption of responsibility by the economy for sustainable development is of great importance. Thus, food industry corporations are faced with the challenge of addressing aspects of sustainability along with the produc-

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tion and distribution of food. This also involves demonstrating their responsibility in the processes of sustainable development through various corporate communication (CC) tools. However, previous studies have only approached the topic of "corporate food communication" through the thematic relation to health, so that corporate FC was conceived only within the framework of corporate health management or marketing, where it is primarily intended to fulfill economic-instrumental functions.

To broaden this perspective, the central assumption of the present study is that corporate FC with sustainability as a comprehensive thematic reference and as the overall target of communication has novel specifics. The aim is to show these specifics of corporate FC.

The study focuses on producing food corporations in Germany and considers their communication in the context of sustainability from the perspective of social food communication research [3]. The study revolves around the question of which roles of corporate FC can be identified in sustainability-related CC and which functions these roles should serve in the processes of sustainable development. The findings obtained will contribute to a broader understanding of social FC and will shed more light on CC as a specific area of societal debate on sustainability-related food issues.

Sustainability as a central reference point for corporate responsibility and communication

The food industry is publicly credited with a significant role in the sustainability debate, as it is seen as both a relevant starting point for sustainability problems and as a key player in resolving them [4].

In corporate practice, issues of economic responsibilities for sustainable development of the food system are addressed under the intensively discussed concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR). The assumption of corporate social responsibility is accompanied by the introduction of long-term concepts and programs that anchor CSR strategically in the corporation.

In this context, communication is of special significance: On the one hand, CSR requires the disclosure of concrete activities as an expression of sustainable corporate behavior and the comprehensive reporting on economic, social and environmental performance indicators [5]. On the other hand, responsible and sustainable corporate action is inseparably linked to social interaction and refers to social contexts in which the corporation is involved through its actions. Thus, responsible corporate action is inseparably interlinked with communication [6] and communication an integral dimension of CSR.

Relationships between CSR and food communication research

CSR communication by food corporations directly or indirectly always refers to aspects of food related to sustainability in the respective corporate action field, or sometimes even beyond (e.g. Consumer Social Responsibility), and can be understood as corporate sustainability-related FC.

With reference to the distinction of FC by Rössler [7], the corporate reference points of CSR communication can be roughly

divided into product-related communication (food as communication objects) and process-related communication (e.g. cultivation, transport, processing, production, sale, purchase, preparation, consumption, disposal). Research on CSR communication usually only takes aspects into account related to communication *about* food products and processes, such as providing information on healthy eating [8], identifying the main topics of reporting [9] or the impact of communication on sustainability-related food topics on consumers' willingness to pay [10, 11], the increase in trust or the reputation of corporations [12, 13].

Few studies take into account that communication *of* food (understandings) also takes place [3], where in product-specific or process-related FC always specific ideas are constructed, what is to be understood, for example, as food responsibility or as sustainability [14–16]. Likewise, little attention is given to communication *through* food [3], which – in the case of food industry corporations – is primarily expressed through the mode of production and the nature of the goods produced. For example, by adhering to specific organic farming, fair trade or tolerated food processing standards, corporations indirectly define certain sustainability values related to food products or sustainable production values.

If one approaches corporate FC in the context of sustainability with this broad understanding of food communication (food as a subject which is communicated *about*, *that* is communicated and which is communicated *through* [3]), corporate FC becomes thematically more comprehensive and can be located in social food communication research.

Approaches of food communication research to corporate communications

In order to systematize various roles of corporate FC in the context of sustainability within CC, and to show functions of communication that go beyond economic-instrumental functions, an engagement with general theories of CC is required.

CC [17, 18] can be differentiated into the areas:

- internal communication (task-oriented, within the organization)
- market communication (transaction-oriented, market environment)
- public relations (interaction-oriented, social and political context).

Data material	Ecopreneur		Multinational		period
	amount	scope	amount	scope	(year/s)
semi-structured interviews	3	255 minutes	5	183 minutes	2017
sustainability reports	4	434 pages	7	383 pages	2007–2016
websites	1	108 webpages	2	261 webpages	2017
customer magazines	3	69 pages	5	179 pages	2011–2017

Tab. 1: Data corpus

Detached from the thematic relation to sustainability, the focus of previous scientific discussions on corporate FC can be classified into the areas of internal CC (corporate health management) and market communication (marketing) and food can be re-conceptualized as a topic of CC, which is communicated *about*. This communication fulfills functions at the level of the corporation and serves higher-level economic-instrumental purposes. For instance, within the framework of corporate health management, FC is to serve the preventive securing of task fulfillment by employees and FC as part of market communication serves sales promotion through product-related marketing.

More social functions of CC can be found in Public Relations (PR). PR conduces the relationship management primarily in the non-economic socio-political environment and thus aims to secure scope for corporate action and legitimization of corporate strategies. CC in the field of PR fulfills various functions, for example, the insertion of corporate strategy into areas of social action such as politics, science, etc., and the introduction of potential contradictions and societal demands into the corporate decision-making system [17].

This area of CC is to be understood as an essential negotiation context of corporate responsibility and a relevant platform of CSR communication, but is not yet discussed in food (communication) research. In the context of sustainability, this area of CC offers starting points for social food communication research, as it highlights those communication processes that are located on the societal level and are not primarily subject to economic-instrumental control. Against this background, such functions of corporate FC can be brought to the forefront of analysis, which serves processes of sustainable development of the food system in the social interplay at the macro level [17] and relevant roles of corporate FC in the context of sustainability can be identified.

Study design

As there is currently no scientific knowledge in the area of social FC of corporations in the context of sustainability, a qualitative research approach is chosen in this study. Due to the low level of knowledge on the research subject a quantitative approach is not appropriate and, by using a standardized procedure, not able to capture communication processes of corporate FC and to understand them in the context of the perception of CSR [19].

As a research design, a qualitative comparative case study was chosen with two contrasting corporations of the German food industry: an organic-pioneer (in the following, "Ecopreneur") and a multinational corporation (in the following, "Multinational"). Case studies are particularly suitable for describing new, undescribed phenomena thus making them accessible to scientific discourse [20].

The basic idea of the principle of the contrasting sampling method is to represent the heterogeneity of the research field in case selection. This is given when the cases are maximally different with respect to certain features. On the one hand, Ecopreneur and Multinational are similar because they have their or rather one main headquarter in Germany, produce food and have a geographically similar sphere of influence in the value chain in product-specific terms. On the other hand, however, the two cases are maximally different, as they vary widely in size, structure, organization and responsibilities within the organization and operate in different market segments (organic versus conventional).

In such a procedure, the research field is opened up by the margins in order to gain an understanding of corporate FC for the broad field of corporations of the German food industry [21]. The insights gained on corporate FC in the context of sustainability can be critically examined and contrasted by differences and similarities of the cases.

In spring 2017, semi-structured interviews on corporate responsibility and communication for a sustainable development of the food system were conducted with corporate representatives from both cases, who are responsible for corporate governance, CSR and/or CC. In addition, documents in the form of texts were collected and archived, which thematically deal with aspects of food in the context of sustainability, such as articles from customer magazines, sustainability reports and web pages (♦ Table 1).

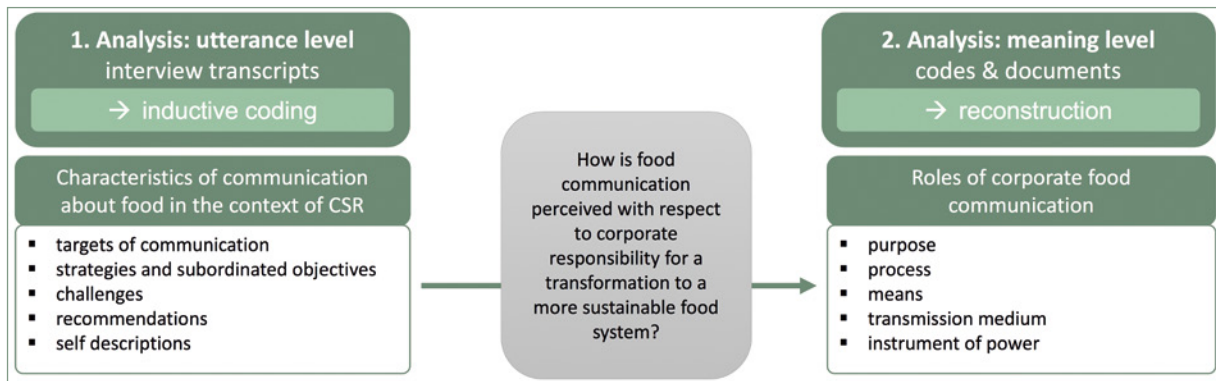


Fig. 1: Procedure of data analysis
CSR = Corporate Social Responsibility

The interviews were transcribed and compiled with the documents in a project file using the MAXQDA 2018 software for computer-aided qualitative data analysis.

Reconstructive analysis

The different roles that corporate FC can take on in the context of sustainability and the roles it should serve are not defined directly by the corporations themselves, but are documented in the descriptions of the interviewees and in the CC documents [22]. In order to investigate how FC is understood in the corporate assumption of responsibility for the transformation to a more sustainable food system, a reconstructive analysis was conducted. ♦ Figure 1 gives an overview of the data analysis procedure.

In the first step of the analysis, the interview transcripts were structured and summarized in terms of content analysis with regard to descriptions of the status and perception of communication about food in connection with CSR [23]. For this purpose, similar descriptions across the cases were assigned to categories, paraphrased in Excel, condensed and, thus, inductively derived to categories that aggregate to the characteristics of FC in the context of CSR.

Hence, in the first step, the analysis moves on to the content analysis or utterance level [24] and deals with the description of the manifest communication content with reference to corporate FC in the interview transcripts. The aim of the second, reconstructive step of analysis is to uncover the latent structures and functions of corporate FC in the context of sustainability. Here, the question of the value of communicative corporate action for the corporations themselves and for society in the context of a sustainable development of the food system is at the center.

In order to reconstruct this value, the meaning structures existing behind the utterances had to be determined [24] (meaning level). The basic assumption of reconstructive analytical methods is that behind the "purely spoken", a further sense is also transported [25].

In order to work out what the interviewees themselves did not say, but their statements on corporate FC imply, the derived categories from the first analysis step, along with their respective condensed paraphrases, were inserted into the MAXQDA project file in the form of a table (including those for both cases). This table was then analyzed in terms of how FC is perceived with respect to corporate responsibility for transforming the food system into a more sustainable one. For this purpose, superordinate functions of corporate FC were first derived from the condensed paraphrases and compared with the coded text passages of both cases. At the same time, the documents were analyzed with regard to the perception and function of these various roles of FC, and assigned corresponding passages. In this way, even if the identified roles and functions of corporate FC were the same, the analysis revealed differences in the perception of FC as a responsibility dimension between the two cases.

Results

Roles and functions of corporate FC

Five different roles of corporate FC have been identified, which differ in their function in the perception of CSR for processes of a sustainable development of the food system. The roles of FC can also be characterized in terms of the main content communicated as well as the social addressees or interaction partners of the communication (♦ Figure 2). Since the different roles of FC in the data partly overlap and occur in different constellations, this differentiation should only be understood as an analytical categorization.

Food communication as a purpose

FC serves the purpose of forming and stabilizing relationship networks and partnerships. This FC is mainly aimed at economic actors, such as growers or suppliers. In interaction with differ-

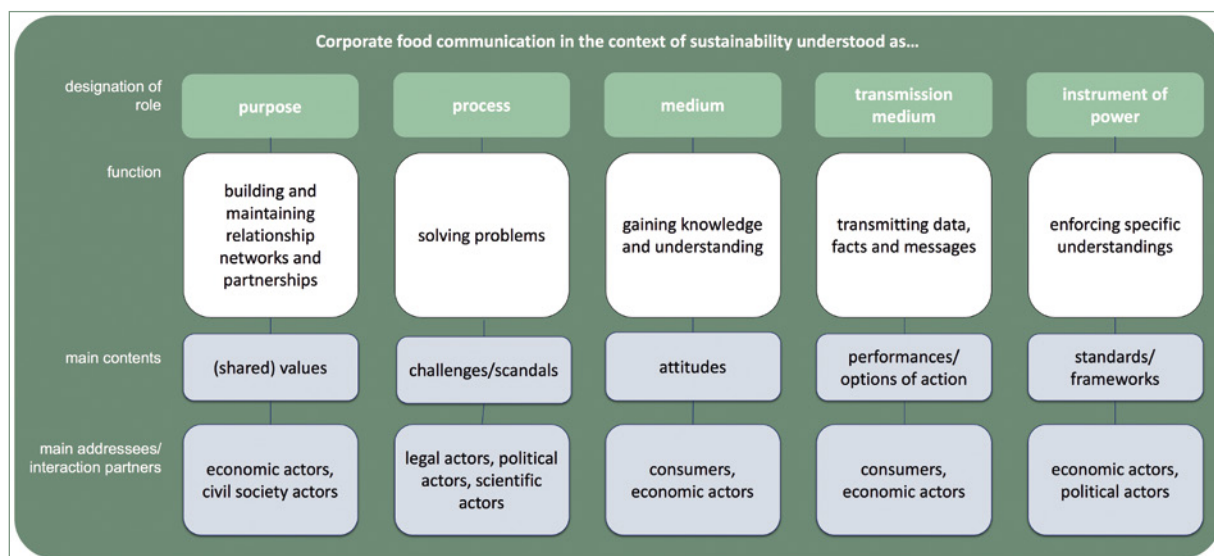


Fig. 2: Roles, functions, contents and addressees of corporate food communication in the context of sustainability

ent actors, understanding processes regarding shared values in relation to quality criteria of sustainable food (production) takes place, and the agreement is subsequently decisive for the establishment of exchange relationships.

In addition, FC is intended as a purpose to interest and industry associations as well as to civil society actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to build communication relationships and to collectively occupy socially relevant topics.

"We have our advisory boards, with which we increasingly engage in joint communication. Topics that are a common concern, so one issue currently, for instance, is the topic of 'food waste' – this is to have joint projects and to go as a common sender in the communication. And to mutually support the channels that exist, and thus also to support the message."¹ (Multinational, Public Affairs Manager 1)

In order to address the complexity of issues, to increase their social visibility and underline the credibility of corporate messages, communication relationships are established and these relationships are stabilized and sustained through long-term collective work on issues. FC as a purpose can, thus, be interpreted both as an understanding process with actors in the upstream value chain and in a more instrumental way for building strategic communication relationships.

Food communication as a process

FC as a process aims to specific societal actors, for example, from the political, scientific or legal system, to trigger certain follow-up actions in order to solve challenges and problems in connection with sustainability or initiate new solution strategies.

For example, the Ecopreneur, through the use of a new, more environmentally sustainable packaging film, is calling for other social actors in charge of the waste and recycling system to develop and implement structures to properly and sustainably recycle this film.

"Because the waste disposal companies cannot identify this material, we had to tell our customers to dispose the film in the residual waste.

(...) First of all, we are the ones who even throw it on the market and if there are more people doing it then the recyclers will also be dealing with it. Or at some point there will be a communication between the recyclers and the manufacturers of such films to install any coding so that they can recognize this with any technology. We can no longer influence that. But if we do not use it, no recycler will ever take care of it." (Ecopreneur, CEO and Founder)

By addressing sustainability challenges at other levels of the food system and other social function systems, function-specific problem-solving processes are to be initiated that can contribute to a more sustainable development.

Food communication as a means

FC as a means serves to gain knowledge and understanding. Both cases take on this role of FC, with the Ecopreneur focusing on communication with actors in the upstream value chain, while the Multinational uses it primarily for communication to consumers. With FC as a means, one-sided communication about attitudes, thoughts and habits regarding food takes place with the function of gaining knowledge and understanding useful for business decisions.

For example, the Ecopreneur has developed an interrogation tool that, when becoming acquainted with a potential cultivation partner, helps to identify the attitude of the cultivation

¹ Original German citations: see German article in issue 6/2019

partner towards sustainable agriculture and partnership. The Multinational on a regular basis conducts studies that assess the attitudes and habits of consumers about food, how they understand food quality, or what the diet of the future may look like to them.

The findings then support decision-making processes in the corporation. On the Ecopreneur's side, they help to make decisions about contracting with growers, and on the Multinational's side the insights are used for future product development, more targeted marketing, or the further development of sustainability strategies. For instance, a consumer survey on the understanding of food quality has contributed to the Multinational's implementation of a new sustainability strategy based on the survey's findings referring to an extended understanding of food quality by the consumers.

Food communication as a transmission medium

FC as a transmission medium serves the transmission of data, facts and messages on food and/or corporate achievements for a sustained development of the food system. The communication and demonstration of corporate achievements for a sustainable production of food products takes place in the context of classic CSR communication mainly through sustainability reports or on websites and is aimed primarily at economic actors, such as food retailers, or critical social observers of the economic system. With regard to communicated messages, such as options for action, FC, in its role as a transmission medium, focuses primarily on consumers.

The Ecopreneur communicates, for example, recipe suggestions that combine seasonal and regional foods with the spice blends offered by the corporation, provides his or her staff in the corporate canteen only with dishes with organic food, which are adjusted in terms of seasonality and regionality, and, thus, transmits its ideas of sustainable action in terms of nutrition.

In the case of the Multinational, beyond recipe suggestions further recommendations are communicated in order to transmit its idea on how, for instance, a "sustainable" or "healthy" diet is composed. This includes communication activities such as recommendations for feeding children during the first 1,000 days, or statements and recommendations on specific diets and trends designed to inform and educate consumers.

The employees of the Multinational are also offered training sessions on healthy nutrition as part of corporate health management, in which scientifically-based knowledge of food will be transmitted.

Many of the findings of these recommendations are based on are generated by the Multinational through a research institute affiliated with the corporation and the Multinational considers passing on this knowledge as a service to employees and consumers as part of its responsibility.

Food communication as an instrument of power

FC as an instrument of power should enforce certain understandings of sustainable action in other contexts of the food system. For this purpose, the corporations often enter communication relations with other actors in order to strengthen the assertiveness behind the understandings to be implemented.

"So, for instance, we're in the European Brand Association, along with Unilever, McDonalds, Coca Cola and so on. There is a working group, in this working group we communicate together to our suppliers that we jointly demand certain ethical audits in production sites, commonly agree on them and drive them forward together. There we try to exert pressure together." (Multinational, CSR Manager 2)

The (collective) power of corporations is used as a leverage by formulating certain understandings of sustainable action in food cultivation, transport etc. in standards and guidelines and making them binding for actors in the upstream value chain.

The Ecopreneur also perceives FC as an instrument of power. It forms interest groups, is a member of associations and thereby tries to influence the political design of frameworks for a sustainable development of the food system.

"It's politics, it's forums where there's an exchange with politics that has meaning. But they are also associations. Say the exchange with other corporations. In order to have an influence on politics, on frameworks and legislation and so on." (Ecopreneur, Sustainability Officer)

While the Multinational with FC as an instrument of power rather addresses economic actors, the Ecopreneur focuses on political actors as addressees and interaction actors.

Discussion

Social significance of corporate food communication

The identified roles of corporate FC illustrate that, in contrast to the classic conception of FC, which mainly addresses recommendations for nutrient intake and is aimed at non-professionals to maintain and promote health, FC in the context of sustainability can have many functions, contents and addressees. The results thus complement previous approaches of corporate FC, which considered FC only within market communication as product-related marketing or in internal communication as corporate health management. The possibility to distinguish the different roles of FC is due to the fact that both cases have a very broad understanding of food, which particularly takes the up-

stream stages of the value chain and the social environment of food value creation into account. As a result, the content of the communication refers to various aspects of food and, in addition to the "eating individual", other addressees and interaction actors come to the fore.

"For us, we translate food directly into the raw materials that are found in the food we produce. And there we combine two things. And the first key question is 'Where does it come from?' And the second key question is 'How is it produced?' And everything we do revolves around these questions." (Multinational, CSR Manager 2)

Based on an understanding of CC, which in addition to internal communication and market communication also includes PR, as communication with the socio-political environment, not only economic goals but also socially oriented functions of FC can be brought to the fore as well as communication processes that take place in the non-economic business environment.

In order to formulate and realize successful sustainable strategies, for corporations it is necessary to coordinate a variety of divergent actions and interests [17]. In the context of sustainability, this process of co-ordination through FC processes takes place mainly in the context of PR in the socio-political environment of corporations and makes a significant contribution to the definition and fulfillment of responsibilities in the processes of a sustainable development of the food system.

The results show that FC within the framework of corporate responsibility also in the areas of internal communication and market communication takes place with reference to sustainability. Instead of nutrients and health, other communication content is gaining in importance, such as options of action for sustainable food. The direction of FC is also changing, and the integration of societal concepts of sustainable food is gaining in importance and is even being used as a basis for the development of corporate sustainability strategies, which is referred to as stakeholder engagement in strategic communication management [26, 27].

As the results show, corporate FC assumes different functions depending on the role and has different effects on development processes towards a sustainable food system in the corporation itself as well as in the social environment. For example, due to corporate FC relational networks being built in order to work on sustainable food issues and FC serves to build and stabilize common values, solve problems and generate impetus, acquire knowledge, and realize certain notions of sustainable action through the exercise of communication power. Thus, food is understood as a broad topic of communication:

- which is communicated *about* in a variety of contexts relating to responsibility for sustainable food (production),
- *that* is communicated in the form of standards or options of action, and
- which is communicated (*through*) by living shared values of sustainable food (production) and acting according to certain attitudes considered as sustainable.

Thus, through various roles of FC with its specific addressees and interaction partners, corporations in the various task areas of CC can sensitize for a need for sustainable development, create awareness and further develop themselves according to social requirements.

The results underline that corporate FC is taking place not only at different stages of the value chain [28], but also at different levels of the social food system. For example, corporate FC addresses consumers as well as growers, scientific or political actors. Both corporations attribute great importance to contributing economically influenced understandings of food to social understanding processes about the future design of the food system.

"Because food is a huge factor. Eating is an agricultural activity. You can take society with you by showing how food is produced, what's behind it, what you are doing and what you can achieve at the corporate level right now in order to have good food." (Ecopreneur, Corporate Communications)

However, the economic system always looks at sustainability challenges from the perspective of its societal function for the food system [2]. For social FC as a whole, corporate FC thus contributes to placing relevant topics of a sustainable development of the food system from an economic point of view in the social discourse and to underline that they have relevance and require economic as well as social solutions [29].

For the societal future-oriented discussion about food, the participation of all social function systems is necessary in order to facilitate an understanding of the specific problem perceptions, systemic options for action and design possibilities from the respective perspectives and thus to create the basis for a shared sense of responsibility [30]. The communicative scope of corporations is limited to the respective reference groups in the corporate environment and, therefore, the corporate responsibility with regard to a sustainable development of the food system and the associated FC only represents one part of the necessary social dispute.

Conclusion

Responsibility for food is often treated in a one-sided way in food discourses and shifted to the consumers who are supposed to make more responsible consumer decisions as a result of communicative measures to increase nutritional competence by professional institutions [31]. The responsibility of corporations as providers of food products for the

future of the food system is only becoming more prominent in the course of the discussions on sustainable business and CSR.

This responsibility, increasingly socially ascribed to corporations, has created a new field of research for FC and has received little attention so far [32]. For the first time, the study systematically shows different roles of FC that have not been subject of scientific research. The findings put up the widespread assumption that FC is mainly governed by professional actors and institutions for discussion, and point to the need to focus on the definitional power of other major actors of FC in society. Food itself is a multi-referential system that addresses a variety of social contexts. Future research on FC will also need to include related aspects of food production and food-related understanding processes at different levels of the value chain and the food system in order to demonstrate the diversity of FC in society.

With sustainability as a thematic reference frame, FC has novel specifics in society. FC of actors and organizations of specific social action contexts is important for a shared definition of responsibility for a sustainable development of the food system. CC and the communication of and between other actors and organizations of different social functional systems as well as everyday actors should therefore rather be made an explicit subject of food communication research in order to generate insights into their social roles and functions and their relationships to individual and organizational food action.

Tina Bartelmeß, M. Sc. Food Economics^{1,2}

Prof. Dr. Jasmin Godemann¹

¹ Department of Communication and Engagement in
Agricultural, Nutritional and Environmental Sciences
Justus-Liebig-University Giessen
Senckenbergstr. 3, 35390 Gießen

² Tina.Bartelmess@fb09.uni-giessen.de

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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