

Sustainability-Related Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Communications in the Canadian
Grocery Industry

By

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A Major Research Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Sustainability
in
The Faculty of Social Sciences

Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

August, 2020

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Abstract

As consumers become more socially and environmentally aware, organizations provide in-depth corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports, sustainability reports, and communicate about CSR on various social media channels. This study consists of an exploratory content analysis of sustainability-related CSR social media communications from Canada's three largest grocery retailers, including Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys. The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which sustainable business practices are being discussed through social media postings. The findings demonstrate that the retailers include more content related to sustainable business practices on Instagram as compared to Facebook and LinkedIn. Additionally, the results demonstrate that two out of the three retailers within the study do not communicate their CSR initiatives in alignment with previous research that provides best practices for CSR communications. These results have valuable implications for grocery managers, public policy writers, and researchers.

Key words: Corporate social responsibility, social media, grocery, sustainability, Canada

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Acknowledgements

First, an immense thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Todd Green, for always supporting my passion for corporate sustainability and how it relates to the Canadian grocery industry. I am grateful for your inspiring wisdom, your time, and your patience as I navigated the research process. I would also like to extend a thank you to my second reader, Dr. Kai-Yu Wang, for providing me with social media expertise and an important research perspective.

To the staff and faculty of the SSAS program, thank you for accepting me into this program with open arms and being so supportive of my academic and personal growth throughout my time in the program. I will always be thankful for the knowledge I learned by either attending your classes or working alongside you. I am committed to applying everything I've gained from the program to my career and beyond.

I would also like to thank my SSAS cohort for being a wonderful group of sustainability scientists that allowed me to understand large issues through varying lenses in order to generate intersectional solutions. Your smiles and teamwork helped me get through it all.

Lastly, I want to thank my incredible parents for believing in my decision to pursue my passion for environmental sustainability and for cheering me on from the very beginning. I will always be extremely appreciative of your endless encouragement, positivity, and love.

1. Introduction

This study explores sustainability-related corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications published on social media by Canada's three largest grocery retailers, Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys. The grocery industry is important to focus on in terms of sustainability because plastic food packaging generates approximately one third of all Canadian households' waste (Government of Canada, 2018). Additionally, every year 35.5 tonnes of food are wasted in the Canadian food production process, which leads to an increase in CO₂ emissions (Janus, 2019). In fact, retailers such as Loblaw have admitted to being Canada's largest contributor of CO₂ emissions through food waste, producing, and distributing their products (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2018). Therefore, the large amounts of waste the grocery industry produces annually has prompted retailers to create sustainability reports and discuss sustainable initiatives in their annual reports. Moreover, consumer concerns for climate change and the environment is steadily increasing, which is proving to be a key predictor of their purchasing behaviours (Wunderlich, 2017). The current research consists of a content analysis of the grocery chains' social media accounts to identify any mention of sustainability-related CSR actions and initiatives within the organization.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to actions aimed at "serving people, communities, society and the environment in ways that go above and beyond what is legally required of a firm" and has become a prominent aspect of the global corporate agenda (Harjoto and Jo, 2011, p. 352; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen, 2010). CSR activities can vary depending on the company, but there are generally three main categories of CSR undertakings that an organization can engage in: philanthropy (i.e., donating to a charity), self-oriented product-

related (i.e., health benefits associated with the consumption of organic foods), and business practices (i.e., reducing waste or emissions in the production process) (Peloza and Shang, 2011). Initiatives related to a firm's business practices proved to be the second most common CSR category in Peloza and Shang's (2011) systematic review and business practices that focus on environmental protection represent the most popular form of practice.

For many businesses, engaging in these sustainability-related initiatives means investing large sums of money towards green energy, alternatives to plastic packaging, reducing emissions, and implementing complex waste management systems. In fact, every year, organizations of all sizes spend hundreds of millions of dollars on CSR efforts related to their firms' development of green products, charitable donations, and the reduction of its environmental impact, to name a few (Green, 2019). These CSR initiatives, projects, and activities are posted about on social media and in traditional advertisements, as well as reported annually in companies' CSR reports, sustainability reports, or annual report to show investors their commitments to the betterment of the planet and the communities in which they operate. For example, consumer-packaged goods giant, Unilever, launched a 2020 CSR campaign on social media discussing their commitment to protect one million trees in Brazilian and Indonesian rainforests, which is part of their overall commitment to reduce their environmental footprint on the multiple continents they operate in. Additionally, Soda Stream sells machines that make sparkling water which eliminate the need for purchasing plastic bottles and the organization created a new social media campaign on Earth Day of 2020 to showcase their commitment to eliminating 67 million plastic bottles by expanding their business and changing their water enhancer containers from plastic to metal. Firms engage in this not only to show the

public that they are making a difference socially or environmentally, but because they know that there “multi-faceted business returns” to reap from doing so effectively (Du et al., 2010). For example, being a responsible corporate citizen provides organizations with the ability to generate consumer loyalty and further “turn consumers into company or brand ambassadors” who engage in advocacy behaviour, including “positive word-of-mouth, willingness to pay a price premium, and resilience to negative company news” (Du et al., 2007). Additionally, sustainability-related CSR is becoming increasingly important as high pressure on the bottom line and on leadership teams have been linked to environmental catastrophes driven by unsustainable business practices that have caused disasters such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska (Ng and Burke, 2010). Since stakeholders are increasingly expressing concern over how corporations conduct themselves in terms of sustainable business practices (i.e., Gray et al., 2014), sustainability (or CSR) reporting and communication has become an integral part of managing relationships with stakeholders (Cho, Laine, Roberts, and Rodrigue, 2016). Sustainable business practices can include a variety of activities, but the definition used for this study is “a holistic an integrated approach to sustainability which encompasses the economy, environment, and society”, which is consistent with the United Nations (2002) declaration on Education for Sustainable Development (Ng and Burke, 2010, p. 604).

Notably, our world is facing a sustainability challenge and it is clear that organizations have an obligation to reduce their environmental impacts through sustainable business practices (Fang et al., 2018). Sustainable business practices are crucial to implement in order to address the planet’s sustainability challenge because geographer Richard Heede’s research shows that nearly two thirds of global anthropogenic emissions originated from 90 large companies or

government-run industries (Starr, 2016). To understand what sustainable business practices entail, it is important to first comprehend what is meant by environmental sustainability. In his seminal paper, Kates (2011, p. 19450) concludes that sustainability science is primarily use-inspired and that there are “significant fundamental and applied knowledge components, and commitment to moving such knowledge into action”. A way that organizations can move knowledge about their impact on the environment into action is through engaging in CSR activities related to sustainability and communicating their positive contributions through CSR communications which will be discussed in the next section.

Interestingly Impact ROI, a consulting firm focussed on studying the business case for sustainability, conducted research on companies engaging in CSR programs that are being managed separately from their other business activities versus companies that fully integrate their CSR initiatives within their operations (Kline, 2018). The results of their “Project ROI” study show that “sustainability can deliver tangible financial return on investment (ROI) and wider bottom line results” (Impact ROI, 2018). That being said, simply engaging in sustainability initiatives is not enough, as it must be done in a meaningful and integrated manner within the organization as a whole. Impact ROI states that companies must find areas of CSR that fit with their products, services, strategies, and operations, while making a commitment to dedicating organizational resources to CSR projects (Kline, 2018). Organizations that followed these recommendations to improve their CSR initiatives benefited from increased sales by as much as 20%, reduced employee turnover by 50%, increase the company’s share price by up to 6%, and were able to create a “reputation dividend” which translated into up to 11% of market capitalization (Impact ROI, 2018; Kline, 2018). Therefore, this in-depth study demonstrates that

engaging in and communicating about CSR has many internal and external benefits that organizations should not ignore as sustainable business practices not only help the planet, but their bottom line as well.

Over the past few decades, retailers have started to implement practices that consider aspects of environmental harm and/or sustainable development, including single-use plastic, reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and product packaging to name a few (Lavorata and Sparks, 2018). Grocery chains such as Tesco and Walmart have already met ambitious sustainability goals such as reducing carbon emissions and “greening” their supply chains through innovation and technology (Sullivan, 2010). In more recent years, Tesco has committed to contribute to the United Nation’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals by matching one organizational target to each goal. Although Tesco has already reduced their greenhouse gas emissions by 26% since 2015/2016, their updated goal to address the UN’s 13th goal of Climate Action and to “reduce absolute carbon emissions from operations from 2015 levels: 35% by 2020, 60% by 2025 and 100% by 2050” (Tesco, 2018). Additionally, American giant Walmart has been selling groceries since the late 1980s but has now expanded to delivering food to customers’ doors while pledging to reducing one gigaton of CO² from their global supply chain and diverting 88% of their waste from landfills, for example (Walmart Canada, 2019). These commitments to environmental sustainability in the grocery industry demonstrate that supermarkets and retailers have significant power and that they can either be a positive or negative force when it comes to sustainable business practices (Cole, 2010). This industry provides large brands with strong buying power over suppliers as well as market dominance, which allows large chains to drive sustainability initiatives internally and externally through

changing their consumers' buying behaviour (Sullivan, 2010). Canada's largest grocery retail chains are following suit by engaging in ambitious sustainability projects to ensure that they are being corporately responsible while increasing market share, positive word-of-mouth, and stakeholder engagement, to name a few.

In Canada, the grocery industry is a 100-billion-dollar industry and it was chosen for this study due to its large size, high volume of plastic and food waste as well as the emissions it creates annually (Canadian Grocer, 2018). As previously mentioned, food packaging (predominately from grocery stores) accounts for one third of an average Canadian household's annual waste (Government of Canada, 2018). Only 20% of that waste is recycled, meaning that 80% of packaging from food goes directly to landfills, polluting the planet and communities located near landfill sites (Government of Canada, 2018). An investigation conducted by CBC Marketplace in 2019 found that Canada sends a large portion of their recycling to illegal landfills in countries overseas such as Malaysia, which has been called the "world's trash bin" due to Canada's and many other countries' poor recycling practices. The CBC's examination of illegal landfills in Malaysia found plastic products from No Frills (owned by Loblaw) and Sobeys waiting to be burned, which demonstrates that Canadian grocery retailers are contributing to plastic pollution and the release of toxic emissions not only in Canada, but overseas. Additionally, over 33% of Canada's food production never gets eaten and is thrown out due to inefficiencies in the production, processing, and distribution of food (National Zero Waste Council, 2016). This industry is crucial to explore in terms of sustainability-related CSR activities because the organizations within it are an important part of the problem but can also play a significant role in the solution for a reduction in plastic waste, food waste, and emissions

to name a few. Evidently, the food system which is controlled by large grocery retailers is significantly contributing to global environmental damage and even causing health complications for certain communities in Canada and abroad (Baldwin, 2015).

Additionally, from a consumer perspective, the average Canadian household spends approximately \$6,000 on groceries every year and the majority of Canadians would be surprised to know the damage caused by their local grocery retailers as well as where the plastic and food waste from well-known retailers are ending up (Statistics Canada, 2017). This annual expense accounts for approximately 10% of Canadians' median income, therefore it is important to further investigate what these billion-dollar organizations are engaging in to be better environmental stewards to protect Canada's communities and the ones overseas (Statistics Canada, 2017). To address these issues of unsustainability within their industry, grocery chains have begun to communicate their environmental initiatives on social media and through annual reports. For example, Sobeys eliminated all plastic checkout bags from their stores nation-wide as of January 31st, 2020 and replaced them with recyclable paper bags. To communicate this to stakeholders (e.g., investors, employees, and consumers), Sobeys placed a "Goodbye Plastic Bags" message on all receipts in the month of January and reminded customers to bring reusable bags on four different Instagram posts (Sobeys Inc., 2020).

The ultimate goal of sustainability within the food (and specifically grocery industry) is to "produce and consume food in a way that supports the wellbeing of generations" (Baldwin, 2015, p.2), and the current Canadian system falls short of doing so, which is why its CSR communications must be explored further. Although proponents of sustainability and CSR

reporting believe that it allows corporations to be accountable and transparent about their operations' local and global impact, there is increasing criticism that organizations report these types of accomplishments to simply manage consumers' impressions, and not because they genuinely care about the environment (Cho, 2016). Since many researcher have emphasized that sustainability and sustainable development of business models in a corporate context is associated with various positive values, it is "an elastic concept that everyone can give a different meaning to", which is why it is crucial to determine how Canadian grocery chains are acting in alignment with sustainable business practices (Aggeri, Pezet, Abrassart, and Acquier, 2005, p.2). This study specifically examines the sustainability-related CSR communications of three major Canadian grocery store chains, Loblaw, Metro and Sobeys to gain a greater understanding of the CSR initiatives being communicated.

Loblaw was founded in Ontario in 1919 and is Canada's largest employer with over 2000,000 employees in their corporate office and independently owned stores across the country (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2020). The organization has over 2,000 stores representing their various divisions such as No Frills, Loblaw Market, Shoppers Drug Mart, Real Canadian Superstore, President's Choice Financial, and Joe Fresh. Additionally, Metro was founded in Quebec in 1947 and operates in Ontario and Quebec with 90,000 employees. Their other banners include Metro Plus, Super C, Food Basics, Jean Coutu, and Food Basics Pharmacy. Lastly, Sobeys was founded as a family business in Nova Scotia in 1907 and they are one of Canada's largest employers with over 123,000 employees. They currently operate over 1,500 stores in 938 communities across the country and their major banners include IGA, Safeway, Thrifty Foods, Foodland, FreshCo, Lawtons Drugs, and many more (Sobeys, 2019). Since there are over 10

banner brands under Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys, this study solely focusses on the social media platforms of the larger, overarching brands to ensure consistency throughout the research. The following sections will include the research questions, a literature review of CSR communications, the methodology applied, the study's findings, the discussion of the findings, the conclusion, as well as limitations and opportunities for future research.

2. Research Questions

To gain a deeper understanding of the CSR communication strategies related to environmental sustainability employed by Canada's largest grocery retailers, the research questions explored in the study are as follows:

- 1) To what extent is sustainability-related CSR being addressed through social media marketing communications by the grocery industry's leaders including Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys?
- 2) Based on the Du et al. (2010) CSR communication framework, what sustainability-related CSR initiatives are Loblaw, Metro and Sobeys communicating to their consumers, including:
 - a. What sustainability issues are being communicated by each retailer?
 - b. Which sustainability issue is the most important to address according to each retailer?
 - c. What are the retailers' level of commitment to the given sustainability issue?
 - d. Are the retailers addressing the economic, societal, or environmental impact of its engagement in a sustainability initiative?

Although CSR within the grocery industry has been explored in European countries (e.g., Ng and Burke, 2010), little attention has been brought to the way in which sustainability-related corporate social responsibility is communicated with a Canadian perspective in the grocery industry. Since Canadians spend an average of \$6,000 on grocery bills in a year, it is important to fill this gap and understand to what extent Canadian grocery chains are engaging in and communicating about sustainability-related CSR. This research addresses the important gap in the literature by offering practical contributions for marketing managers seeking to communicate their CSR efforts more effectively as well as for public policy makers striving to implement sustainable practices into their respective governments. The research additionally provides theoretical contributions as it applies the CSR communications framework from Du et al. (2010) to determine how and if it is being used in the Canadian grocery industry. In the following sections, the researcher provides an overview of the current literature on CSR and CSR communications. Next, the researcher presents the proposed methodology that will inform the study, provide the results of the content analysis of CSR communications by Loblaw, Sobeys and Metro, and discuss the implication of these results for marketing managers, researchers, and public policy makers.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Corporate Social Responsibility

There are many ways in which corporate social responsibility has been defined in the literature. First, Murray and Vogel (1997, p. 142) define CSR as an exchange process, “the exchange is one in which the firm offers something of value – typically a social benefit or public service – to an important consistency and in turn, anticipates receiving the approval and support”

from stakeholders, for example. Additionally, CSR is defined by Frederick (2018, p. 4) as what occurs when a firm “consciously and deliberately acts to enhance the social wellbeing of those whose lives are affected by the firm’s economic operations”. Another widely cited definition of CSR is the one of Wood (1991, p. 693) “...a business organization’s configuration of principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsiveness, and policies, programs, and observed outcomes as they relate to the firm’s social relationships”. Although there are many definitions of corporate social responsibility in relation to its effects on society and the environment, the definition of CSR adopted for this study that is focussed on corporate environmental sustainability is as follows: “serving people, communities, society and the environment in ways that go above and beyond what is legally required of a firm” (Harjoto and Jo, 2011, p. 352). This definition is most appropriate for the research on sustainable business practices at Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys due to their current CSR projects as well as the organizations’ respective missions. For examples, Sobeys’ mission states that they are “a family nurturing families” as it is their passion and mission to “nurture the things that make life better, including great experiences, families, communities, and the lives of our employees” (Sobeys, 2019). Additionally, Loblaw explains that their purpose is to allow their consumers, who make one billion trips to the store every year, to “live life well”, which supports the needs and social or environmental wellbeing of Canadians (Loblaws, 2019). Lastly, Metro’s vision is to be “the best at what we do” from affordable food options to gourmet grocer offerings. All in all, it is evident that organizations within the Canadian grocery industry have embedded CSR as it relates to social or environmental causes into their visions and missions that guide the way in which they conduct their businesses.

Although achieving these missions and goals as an organization is not legally required of them, all three firms ensure that their products and corporate projects fulfill their visions. Moreover, this definition was used for this study because organizations in various industries, but especially in the Canadian grocery industry are moving beyond what is required of them in terms of regulations, laws, and compliance as they understand that the environmental sustainability of their business operations can be a competitive advantage over other brands. Additionally, the definition used in this study includes the important CSR pillar of the environment, which was missing in other scholarly definitions. Therefore, for these reasons Harjoto and Jo's (2011) definition of CSR is the one that is the most aligned with this study on sustainable business practices in the Canadian grocery industry.

When an organization actively invests in CSR initiatives and further researches effective ways to communicate their CSR practices, many positive outcomes can come from it which is why it is important to understand how and how often organizations are engaging in initiatives tied to CSR. In fact, MIT Sloan Management Review and the Boston Consulting Group conducted a survey of over 3,000 executives and managers from organizations around the world and their results state that "companies across all industries agree that sustainability is essential to remaining competitive" (Haanes et al., 2011, p. 25). This may be because engaging in CSR initiatives and communicating them to stakeholders is tied to the following outcomes: positive company evaluations, higher purchase intentions, resilience to negative press about the organization, stakeholders spreading positive word-of-mouth, and consumers willing to pay higher prices due to the organization's socially or environmentally responsible behaviour (Brown and Dacin 1997; Mohr and Webb, 2005; Pelozo 2006; Hoeffler and Keller, 2002; and Laroche et

al., 2001). Haanaes et al. (2011) state that managers of organizations that invest in CSR communications believe that it is essential for brand building potential, which remains a key objective of most managers, and this is their top reason for investment in CSR and its communications. Moreover, increased brand loyalty, purchasing more products, investing in the firm, and seeking employment with the organization are all what Sen et al. (2006) call “returns to CSR”. Organizations are increasingly understanding that there is a financial return associated with engaging in environmental or social responsibility. Additionally, they recognize that one of today’s “most important megatrends concerns environmental and social responsibility” and that business practices have an impact on consumption (Youssef et al., 2018). Ultimately, these positive marketing outcomes created by conducting business in socially or environmentally responsible ways “support enhanced firm financial performance” (Pelozo and Shang, 2011, p. 117).

Another important benefit from engaging in CSR initiatives shown in the literature is that by emphasizing more than just a product’s functionality, consumers can gain status benefits while purchasing a product or from a brand in general (Alhouti and D’Souza, 2018). For example, companies such as tentree and TOMS Shoes not only have a focus on their main products (apparel and shoes), but also on what purchasing their products do to help people and the environment. As their name suggests, with every purchase of any tentree product, 10 trees are planted, and consumers can even track the impact of their purchase by entering a code they received with their purchase on their website. This allows consumers to see exactly where the trees are being planted as well as their growing stages, which has the potential to provide consumers with a positive sense of status and ‘feel good’ emotions (Alhouti and D’Souza, 2018).

Additionally, TOMS Shoes is well known for their “one for one” policy wherein every purchase of a pair of shoes will provide a new pair for a child in need, but they have also made significant investments to help improve lives of the people living in communities all over the world with each purchase made. Exposing the social and environmental benefits of a product is a popular strategy because engaging in CSR initiatives and communicating them to consumers pays off financially. This is because 55% of consumers are willing to pay more for products from socially and environmentally responsible organizations, which could be because they feel a sense of wellbeing or global citizenship when purchasing from these types of organization (Nielsen, 2014). Therefore, the benefits that come with engaging in CSR do not only provide an organization with positive brand attributes but can make consumers feel good by helping society and the planet through their purchases.

3.2 CSR Communications

Corporate social responsibility communications in the context of sustainability refer to messages that an organization creates to illustrate the ways in which it has prioritized environmental sustainability through changing old and unsustainable business practices, supporting environmental organizations, and helping their stakeholders make more environmentally conscious choices, to name a few. As previously mentioned, effective CSR communications are crucial as they provide organizations with “multi-faceted” business returns such as seeking employment with the company and investing in the company (Sen, Bhattacharya, and Korschun, 2006). Additionally, investing in CSR communications is crucial for building relationships with consumers (Green, 2019), making them more brand loyal, resilient, and willing to spread positive word-of-mouth about the brand. Spending millions of

dollars on CSR activities and then communicating them to stakeholders has many rewards as seen in a 2017 Cone research study that reported that 87% of respondents would choose a product if a company advocated for an issue that was of importance to them”. Stakeholders receive information about organizations’ CSR initiatives through various means of communication, including press releases, corporate websites, annual reports, TV, billboard and magazine ads, social media posts, and in-store posters among others. Brand packaging can also be used by companies as a creative way to convey certain CSR initiatives. For example, Seventh Generation’s natural laundry detergent (sold at Loblaw) comes with a tag that says, “this laundry bottle uses 66% less plastic and is recyclable or compostable”. This demonstrates to their stakeholders that Seventh Generation takes sustainability and environmental consciousness seriously and their products rightfully reflect this.

Since successful CSR communications have the potential to financially reward a company, they are increasingly common, which explains why 92% of the 250 largest companies in the world released a CSR report to further communicate their good deeds, and why Fortune Global 500 firms spend \$20 billion annually on CSR initiatives as of 2018 (Meier and Cassar, 2018). Some recent examples of CSR communications related to environmental sustainability include IKEA’s ‘Steps’ campaign and Brita’s ‘#NoFilterNoFuture’ campaign. IKEA opened their most sustainable store to date in Greenwich, London in 2019 and it creates an “immersive experience” for customers that features a roof pavilion, garden, learning labs that offer workshops on how to reduce waste, and communal spaces for community activities filled with natural lighting (IKEA, 2019). Additionally, the building is the “most sustainable retailer space in the U.K.” and has a certified BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method)

rating of 90.44% with “solar panels, LED lighting, rainwater harvesting, and renewable construction materials” (IKEA, 2019). To communicate this achievement to their consumers, IKEA created ads in bus shelters that announced where their sustainable store was located as well as how they could reach the store in a sustainable fashion, i.e., by foot (steps) or by bus. Additionally, Brita’s 2019 ‘#NoFilterNoFuture’ campaign partnered with 21 social media influencers to illustrate what the oceans and beaches would look like in 2050 through photoshopped images. These images showed the potential reality if consumers and organizations do not act now and stop purchasing and selling single use plastic water bottles (Marketing Communication News, 2019). Naturally, this campaign was used to further promote their water filters by asking the influencers to pledge to reduce their use of single use plastic. Both of these examples clearly demonstrate that CSR communications are common and are executed by large, global organizations to show their stakeholders that sustainability is at the forefront of their corporate agenda.

3.3 Effective CSR Communications

Effective CSR communications depend on many variables such as awareness, motives and consumer skepticism which shape the way in which stakeholders understand and process the various CSR activities that an organization engages in. Since CEOs often classify consumers as their most significant stakeholder (Green, 2019), and state that CSR investments are made to primarily build brand benefits with consumers, having an effective CSR communications strategy is essential (Haanaes et al., 2011). In order to assess the effectiveness of CSR communications, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of what contributes to their success.

This section will outline two major keys to successful CSR communications, including stakeholder awareness and stakeholder skepticism.

3.31 Stakeholder Awareness. First, the effectiveness of CSR communications is evidently dependent on stakeholders' awareness of a firm's CSR investments and activities (Du et al., 2010). That being said, studies have shown that awareness of an organization's CSR activities among internal and external stakeholders (e.g. employees and consumers, respectively) is usually low, which explains this key challenge in organizations' missions to gain strategic benefits from its CSR activities (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Du et al., 2007; Sen et al., 2006). Additionally, as reported in the annual Harris Interactive Corporate Reputation Study published by the *Wall Street Journal*, people are mostly uninformed regarding corporate social responsibility. Moreover, questions that asked whether or not respondents knew whether an organization was environmentally or socially responsible had regular 'don't know' responses (Du et al., 2010). Evidently, awareness of CSR initiatives is vital to their success and once this is achieved, additional requirements must be met by firms searching to effectively reach stakeholders and showcase their corporate citizenship through CSR communications. The current study explores the extent to which three high profile grocery retailers communicate about their sustainability engagement. This provides insight into whether consumer awareness is simply an artefact of the lack of communication activity to consumers via social media channels.

3.32 Stakeholder Skepticism. Beyond stakeholders being aware of CSR initiatives, minimizing stakeholder skepticism to "convey favorable corporate motives in a company's CSR activities" is crucial to successful CSR communications (Du et al., 2010). According to Menon

and Kahn (2003), consumers are more likely to support organizations that engage in cause-related marketing, including communicating about environmental issues without promoting their own products. Additionally, Du et al, (2010) state that there are two general types of stakeholders' attributions of a firm's CSR motives, including intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motives are seen as doing something from a place of true concern for the given cause and stakeholders hold stronger attributions of intrinsic motives and tend to have a more positive perception of the company. In contrast, extrinsic motives refer to when organizations simply perform "good deeds" to attempt to increase its profits. Once stakeholders perceive that a company is using extrinsic motives, it leads to less positive stakeholder attitudes and consumption behaviour towards the organization (Forehand and Grier, 2003; Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, and Schwarz, 2006). That being said, Ellen et al. (2006) found that stakeholders have more a sophisticated attribution process and can have a mix of attributions instead of simply extrinsic or intrinsic. For example, as consumers learn more about companies and their CSR motivations, there is an increase in understanding towards the organizations as consumers start to believe that initiatives related to social or environmental causes "should serve both the needs of society and the bottom lines of the business" (Du et al., 2010, p.10).

Since previous studies have shown low levels of awareness and the possibility for high stakeholder skepticism when it comes to CSR communication, this study explores and analyzes CSR communications in the Canadian grocery industry using the Du et al. (2010) framework for effective CSR communication. Specifically, this CSR framework explores the different ways in which CSR communications can be analyzed including message content, communication channels, company factors, and stakeholder factors, which all influence the effectiveness of a

given CSR communication. Notably, the researcher focusses on the following four factors within Loblaw's, Metro's, and Sobeys' CSR communication message content: issue, importance, commitment, and impact. Issue refers to what kind of sustainability-related CSR is being discussed (i.e. plastic packaging or reducing greenhouse gases) on organizations' social media platforms, which will be coded accordingly (as discussed in the following section). Importance of the given issue was determined by the frequency of the code associated with the sustainability-related CSR issue on social media posts. Commitment refers to what the company is actually doing to address the issue, such as how long an organization will engage in a given CSR initiative or how much money they are pledging to invest in an initiative. Additionally, the impact is the result of engaging and committing to an issue, such as communicating to stakeholders that eliminating unnecessary plastic packaging in the produce section has reduced plastic usage in all stores by 20%. This coding strategy was used to clearly determine what type of sustainability-related CSR initiatives are being communicated by Canada's largest grocery retailers, how frequently they communicate their CSR initiatives, how they are committing to their initiatives, and how they communicate the results of engaging in sustainability-related CSR initiatives. All in all, using the Du et al. (2010) framework throughout this study has made it easier to identify the organizations that are communicating their sustainable business practices effectively in order to build better relationships with their consumers.

4. Methodology:

This research employed a qualitative methodology because CSR communications in the Canadian grocery store industry is relatively unexplored. Additionally, a qualitative approach is also appropriate as it will provide the researcher with answers to the two outlined research

questions: 1) To what extent is sustainability-related CSR being addressed through marketing communications by the grocery industry leaders including Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys?, and 2) What sustainability-related CSR initiatives are Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys communicating to their consumers? This was accomplished through an exploratory and discovery-oriented content analysis of sustainability-related CSR communications on firms' most recent annual or CSR reports for a pilot test, then on the firms' social media platforms for the remainder of the study. The researcher chose social media and corporate reports for this research because these channels offer an inventory of data that any person can have access to at any moment in the future (unlike TV ads that can be difficult to find if they are not online). Corporate reports and social media were also chosen for the pilot study and the main study (respectively) because they are increasingly important and effective ways for marketers to mass communicate CSR efforts to stakeholders of all types, including employees, investors, and consumers (Kesavan and Bernacchi, 2013). Content analysis is appropriate for this study as it provides researchers with "an unobtrusive measure without biases and self-presentation" (Webb and Weick, 1979; Green, 2019, p.11). Conducting an exploratory and discovery-oriented content analysis is beneficial for this study because speaking to marketing managers may skew the data regarding what organizations are doing to take action to be more sustainable. Additionally, since the majority of marketing managers would agree that CSR is important, a content analysis allows the researcher to go beyond the rhetoric and evaluate whether organizations truly prioritize sustainability-related CSR in their communications. Further, the dataset is readily available online and on social media providing an inventory of corporate communications. Lastly, content analysis has proven to be a valuable methodology when examining corporate social responsibility

performance through the review of company documents, such as marketing communications and annual reports (Maignan and Ralston, 2002; Pracejus et al., 2004).

4.1 Data Collection

An internet search on social media platforms was conducted to obtain sustainability-related CSR communications from Loblaw, Metro and Sobeys. Specifically, the researcher analysed the firms' sustainability-related CSR communications on the organizations' social media platforms from March 1st, 2019 to March 1st, 2020, included Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Twitter was not included because Metro joined the platform in 2014 but has yet to post a tweet. With the exception of LinkedIn, Loblaw and Metro have dedicated social media accounts for consumers in Ontario on all platforms (i.e., "@LoblawsON and @MetroON) and these accounts were used to conduct the social media content analysis on Facebook and Instagram. Sobeys has one main social media account for all provinces and that one was therefore used for the purpose of this research. Appendix A represents each social media channel per brand with their follower count to demonstrate the importance of using social media to measure CSR effectiveness.

4.2 Coding Scheme

Four themes related to the most used sustainable business practices at Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys were chosen based on a pilot study further described in the results section. Once these four themes were coded and organized, they were further coded to determine the extent to which Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys are communicating each sustainability-related issue. For example, after the issue was identified, its importance was determined based on how many times

the organization mentions this specific issue in the one-year timeframe. Next, their commitment to the issue was determined by seeking whether or not the organization is making a commitment to act upon a certain sustainability issue, and what type of commitment they are willing to make. This included three commitment codes: amount of input, durability, and consistency of support. Lastly, the overall impact of committing to a given sustainability-related issue within their business practices will be identified by assessing what the organization believes their commitment results in (i.e., 30% less emissions by lowering factory temperatures by 1 degree Celsius).

4.3 Data Analysis

Content analyses have been used in previous studies to facilitate in compressing large amounts of data found in text form through CSR messages into fewer content categories that are organized based on the research questions, which is why this data analysis method is appropriate for this study (Lia, Xia, Wu, Zhang, and Yeh, 2017). Therefore, once the data was gathered, to address the first research question, the percentage of total social media posts that discuss sustainability-related CSR initiatives was calculated versus the posts that do not mention these initiatives (i.e., store information, food, or recipe-related content). Additionally, to address the research question 2) a., the researcher determined which sustainability issues were being communicated on each retailer's platforms, then ran a chi-square test to determine if there is a significant difference in the way that organizations are communicating CSR in relation to the four chosen themes. Results from a chi-square test of significance help confirm or reject the existence of differences between brands in the Canadian grocery industry and this test has been used in many other CSR studies to determine differences between brands (i.e., Kadekova, Savov,

Kosciarova, and Valaskova, 2020). Additionally, research question 2) b. was addressed through calculating the percentage of social media posts related to sustainability when coding and analyzing the data, the researcher was able to determine which codes were the most prominent per brand. This demonstrated the sustainability-related CSR issue that organizations were focussing on, the commitment to each issue, and the importance of the initiative. Then, to address the research questions 2) c. and d. (respectively), the social media communications were coded to determine whether or not the retailers provided their levels of commitment to a given issue as well as the impact engaging in an issue has economically, socially, and environmentally. Further, the coded data was then broken down into categories that included the most common sustainability initiative per brand, the most common initiative across all brands, and the most committed to sustainability-related CSR across all brands. Lastly, metrics such as total followers per platform, percentage of CSR posts per platform, allocation of CSR posts per platform, and average engagement per platform were also analyzed to provide additional relevant content for the researcher and marketing managers at Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys.

5. Results:

According to the researcher's knowledge, no other study has explored whether or not organizations are communicating their CSR initiatives based on the Du et al. (2010) framework of successful CSR communication. For that reason, and the fact that the research explores social media activity specifically in the Canadian grocery industry, the results provided by this study are descriptive and contributory in many ways that will be explored in further sections. The results are structured in order to directly address the study's research questions and sub-questions. This section includes the results of the pilot study that was conducted, followed by the

results from each brand and concludes with a final comparison of all three companies through a qualitative examination of the results.

5.1 Pilot Study

To identify and further analyze the statements and postings that communicate sustainability-related CSR on each firms' three social media platforms, deductive thematic analysis was employed based on the researcher's analytic interest (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Based on a pilot test review of the most recent 2019 corporate and sustainability reports available on the Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys websites, there are four categories that represent the most commonly cited sustainability practices. Therefore, the code book created (Appendix B) encompasses four different themes of sustainable business practices within the Canadian grocery industry. These four themes were chosen as they were commonly found in the detailed corporate reports from Loblaw, Metro and Sobeys. The sustainability themes include messaging related to plastic packaging (mentioned 15 times), food waste (mentioned 18 times), sustainable food sourcing (mentioned 9 times), and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (mentioned 12 times). All statements related to sustainability from CSR reports and social media platforms will be assigned a code (1 through 4, respectively) that fits most appropriately with the CSR communication messaging used by the organizations in their reports, which will be detailed in the next section. Interestingly, the focus on plastic packaging, food waste, sustainable food sourcing, and greenhouse gas emissions are all areas of business in which Canadian grocery stores have been extensively scrutinized by Canadian Grocer and CBC Marketplace, to name a few. Additionally, these four sustainability themes are also aligned with the book *The 10 Principles of Food Industry Sustainability* as packaging, food waste, sustainable food consumption, and

environmental considerations in production of animals (including greenhouse gas emissions from livestock production) are all part of the 10 principles Baldwin (2015) states should guide the supply chain in order to meet the needs of consumers while protecting the environment. Lastly, the pilot study was successful since these four categories of sustainable business practices ended up being the only categories seen on all brands' social media platform and no post included sustainability-related content outside of the predetermined codes.

5.11 The 2019 Corporate Social Responsibility Reports. Loblaw's CSR report for the 2019 fiscal year is based on three important pillars set out by the organization, which all relate to sustainability in some capacity: Environment, sourcing, and community. On the first page of the report, Loblaw explains their commitment to reducing the environmental impact of their operations through waste management systems, energy consumption, packaging, transportation, and refrigerant efficiency, among others (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2019). In terms of sourcing, the organization commits to upholding their values within their supply chain by promoting sustainable products and supporting local Canadian suppliers (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2019). As for the pillar of community, Loblaw strives to make a difference in communities to help tackle issues such as child hunger, women's health, and funding research to advance sustainable food challenges (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2019). In relation to the aforementioned codes used throughout the current study, Loblaw pledges to reduce their carbon footprint (i.e., greenhouse gas emissions) by 50% by 2050 (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2019). They are also addressing the issue of food waste by reducing or diverting the waste they produce by 50% by 2025 (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2019). Additionally, Loblaw has a Plastic Steering Committee within their organization that conducts a quarterly review of plastic used within their business to help

eliminate or reduce their plastic usage (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2019). In 2019, Loblaw's Committee had over 100 plastic-related projects, including making it a priority to ensure that all President's Choice plastic packaging is 100% recyclable or reusable by 2025 (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2019). Lastly, regarding sustainable food sourcing, Loblaw commits to purchasing \$150 million of local food produce by 2025 in addition to commitments to source certified sustainable seafood and joining One Planet Business for Biodiversity (OP2B) to protect and restore biodiversity worldwide (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2019).

Metro's 2019 corporate social responsibility report is based on four guiding pillars: delighted customers, strengthened communities, empowered employees, and respect for the environment. Delighting customers includes offering responsible products, strengthened communities includes supporting local suppliers, and respect for the environment involves optimizing energy usage in Metro's buildings, managing waste, enhancing energy efficiencies in the transport of their merchandise, and optimizing packaging and printed materials (Metro Inc., 2019). Regarding the four sustainability-related codes in the study, Metro adopted best operating practices in energy efficiency for their transport fleet to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Metro Inc., 2019). Additionally, the organization has an overall waste diversion rate of 66% in their Quebec and Ontario stores, where they have reduced their total waste by 112,887 tonnes in 2019 (Metro Inc., 2019). In terms of addressing plastic packaging, Metro launched a line of Selection and Irresistibles branded sparkling water bottles in 100% recycled PET (polyethylene terephthalate) plastic that are completely recyclable (Metro Inc., 2019). Additionally, Première Moisson, one of Metro's banner brands, has removed decorative seals on jars of jam, which eliminated 190,000 plastic tabs in a year. Lastly, in terms of the 'sustainable food sourcing'

theme, Metro rolled out their Local Purchasing Policy in both Quebec and Ontario in 2019, which allow popular local products to be highlighted and sold next to non-local products (Metro Inc., 2019).

Sobeys' 2019 CSR report includes three highlighted categories that are integrated into the organization's sustainability strategy. Sobeys states that it is their responsibility to their customers, communities they serve, and the planet to operate more sustainability through these three categories, which include: better products, better communities, and better planet. Each category addresses all the sustainability-related codes identified in the pilot study. First, the "better products" category states that 100% of Compliments and Sensations products now contain Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO), which relates to sustainable food sourcing. Additionally, Sobeys has a partnership with LOOP, a company that uses rejected food to create juices, soaps, alcoholic beverages, and more. Through this partnership, approximately 36,000 kilograms of produce and 2 million liters of water were saved, which is tied to the pilot study's reducing food waste code. In terms of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, over 490 Sobeys stores participated in energy efficient lighting projects, which provided the organization with a 40% reduction in energy usage, which in turn reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Lastly, in 2019 Sobeys diverted over 1 million kilograms of plastic bags from landfills through recycling them with the Trex Recycling Program which turns post-consumer plastic packing into decks and outdoor furniture.

5.2 Loblaw

As of June 2020, Loblaw (@LoblawsON) has approximately 15,000 followers on Instagram, 64,504 followers on Facebook, and 125,468 followers on LinkedIn, most likely due to the fact that they are Canada's largest employer with over 200,000 employees. In terms of the first research question regarding the extent to which CSR is being communicated on social media platforms, Loblaw had a total of 109 social media posts on all platforms in the one-year timeframe, where 101 (93%) are non-CSR posts and 8 (7%) CSR posts dedicated to communicating the brand's sustainable business practices or sustainability initiatives. More specifically, five of those CSR posts were on Instagram (11% of total posts), one of them was on Facebook (4.17% of total posts), and two of CSR-related posts were on LinkedIn (5% of total posts). Therefore, Loblaw allocated 62.5% of sustainability-related CSR posts to Instagram, 12.5% to Facebook, and 25% to LinkedIn. Interestingly, the average engagement (likes and views) on posts that discuss CSR related to sustainable business practices across all platforms was 869.75, whereas the average engagement non-sustainability CSR posts was 584.43, which is approximately 1.5 times less engagement than CSR posts. On Instagram, the average engagement on sustainability-related CSR posts within the one-year timeframe was 1,282.2 on Instagram, 182 on Facebook, and 182.5 on LinkedIn. To put these metrics into perspective, the engagement rate (percentage of follower engagement) was calculated for each brand per platform by dividing the brand's average likes and views per platform by the number of followers per platform, then multiplied by 100. With that being said, Loblaw's follower engagement was 7.42% on Instagram, 0.06% on Facebook, and 0.22% on LinkedIn, demonstrating that their 15,000 Instagram followers were engaging (liking and viewing posts) at a much higher rate than their other two platforms with notably more followers.

Throughout the set timeline of data collection (March 1st, 2019 to March 1st, 2020), the importance of each sustainable business practice was identified as Loblaw communicated about sustainable food sourcing seven times, food waste twice, plastic packaging once, and greenhouse gas emissions once, which addresses the second research question's sub-question, 2) a. In regard to the sub-question 2) b. that aims to discover the type of sustainability-related CSR initiatives being communicated by the three brands, Loblaw had a clear focus on one of the four themes (plastic packaging, food waste, sustainable food sourcing, and greenhouse gases) determined in the pilot study. After reviewing all of the social media posts from @LoblawsON on the chosen platforms, Loblaw was most focussed on communicating about sustainable food sourcing, including local food options in their 2,000 stores nation-wide. When comparing Loblaw's social media CSR communications to the Du et al. framework of CSR communications to address research question 2) c. and d., Loblaw fell short of the recommended communication message content, including commitment, and impact. This is because only 25% of CSR posts mentioned the brand's commitment to the given sustainability issue within their organization. All commitment codes being observed for the study, including amount of input, durability, and consistency of support were mentioned as these CSR posts discussed monetary commitments, time commitments, and consistency commitments were made. The only platform that provided followers information about environmental commitments that they were making to be a more sustainable company was LinkedIn as they promoted their goal of reducing food waste by 50% by 2050 and linked their CSR report for more information. Additionally, the same 25% of social media posts that mentioned commitment also mentioned the impact that engaging in the given sustainability issue will have on the planet, the organization itself, or its consumers – demonstrating that these two crucial parts of CSR communications (according to Du et al., 2010)

go hand in hand. Although Loblaw saw an average engagement (likes and views) of 870 for CSR posts without commitment or impact codes and an average engagement of 183 for those mentioning either commitment and/or impact, this is most likely because there was too little of a sample size to represent messages that followed the Du et al. (2010) framework for effective CSR communication.

5.3 Metro

As of June 2020, the @MetroOntario social media accounts have 9,443 followers on Instagram, 141,400 followers on Facebook, and 47,750 followers on LinkedIn. In regard to the first research question concerning the extent to which CSR is being communicated on social media platforms, Metro has the largest number of total social media posts shared within the one-year timeline with 395 posts, 380 (96%) of them being unrelated to sustainability and 15 (4%) posts being dedicated to sustainability-related CSR. More specifically, six of those sustainability-related CSR posts (4.32% of total posts) were on Instagram, six (2.96% of total posts) were on Facebook, and three (5.66% of total posts) were published on LinkedIn. This translated into 40% of sustainability-related CSR posts allocated to Instagram, 40% to Facebook, and 20% to LinkedIn. In contrast with Loblaw, the average engagement on CSR posts across all of @MetroOntario's platforms is nearly three times less than posts unrelated to CSR with an average of 95 likes or views on CSR posts and 276 on non-CSR posts. Moreover, the average engagement on sustainability-related CSR posts within the one-year timeframe was 157.83 on Instagram, 31.33 on Facebook, and 96.67 on LinkedIn. To provide additional context to these metrics, @MetroOntario's total follower engagement rate was 4.56% on Instagram, 0.14% on Facebook, and 0.24% on LinkedIn. This intriguingly demonstrates that although their Instagram

following is their smallest one across all platforms with 9,443 followers, these followers are engaging with their CSR and non-CSR content significantly more often than their 141,400 Facebook and 47,750 Instagram followers.

In terms of the second research question, specifically 2) a. surrounding the types of sustainability-related CSR initiatives being communicated by Metro through the Du et al. (2010) CSR communications framework, Metro communicated about sustainable food sourcing fifteen times, plastic packaging three times, food waste twice, and greenhouse gas emissions twice. To address sub-question 2) b., the results show that Metro had an unparalleled focus on one of the four sustainable business practices observed. After a thorough review of all social media posts on @MetroOntario's Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn platforms, the organization most frequently communicated about their dedication to sustainable food sourcing practices as they have implemented a "Local Purchasing Policy" in all their stores. Unfortunately, the organization does not provide consumers with information about what their policy entails, and their website lacks concrete details for those who are trying to conduct additional research into their local purchasing program. When comparing Metro's social media strategy for CSR-related communications to address research questions 2) c. and d., the organization lacks the necessary mention of their commitment to the issue as well as the impact of them engaging in specific sustainable business practices can have on our planet, their consumers, the community, and the environment. Only 20% of CSR posts mentioned commitment and all of these posts were on LinkedIn, linking to CSR reports or press releases. All commitment codes were related to the communication of a newly published CSR report which evidently covered all three codes, including amount of input, durability, and consistency of support. Additionally, that same 20%

of social media posts regarding sustainable business practices also mentioned impact, demonstrating that mentioning commitment and impact went hand in hand for Metro as well. Lastly, Metro saw an average engagement of 95 for CSR posts without commitment or impact codes and an average engagement of 97 for those that included commitment and impact.

5.4 Sobeys

As of June 2020, the @Sobeys social media accounts has 24,400 followers on Instagram, 328,758 followers on Facebook, and 66,867 on LinkedIn. In terms of the first research question concerning the extent to which CSR is being communicated on social media platforms, Sobeys published a total of 208 social media posts from March 1st, 2019 to March 1st, 2020. Sobeys had the most CSR posts with 19 (9.2%) of them being focussed on sustainable business practices and 189 (90.8%) of them being generic food content. In particular, there were nine on Instagram (11.54% of total posts), 6 on Facebook (8.82% of total posts), and 4 (6.45% of total posts) on LinkedIn. Further, this translates into 47.37% of all sustainability-related CSR posts being allocated to Instagram, 31.58% on Facebook, and 21.05% on LinkedIn. Additionally, the average engagement on CSR posts was approximately 3.5 times greater than non-CSR posts with an average of 2,178.95 likes and views on sustainability-related CSR posts and 613.63 likes and views on non-CSR posts. Moreover, the average engagement specifically on sustainability-related CSR posts within the one-year timeframe was 1,343.44 on Instagram, 1,325.17 on Facebook, and 577 on LinkedIn. The organization's total engagement rate was 4.98% on Instagram, 0.15% on Facebook, and 0.31% on LinkedIn, demonstrating once again that although Instagram is their least followed platforms with 24,400 followers, the engagement is considerably higher than channels with 3-13 times more followers.

Regarding the second research question's first sub-question, 2) a., the organization mentioned their areas of focus on sustainable business practices such as reducing food waste twice, reducing greenhouse gases once, and sustainable food sourcing was interestingly never mentioned despite their focus on sourcing seafood responsibly as seen in their in-store displays. Therefore, Sobeys places a clear emphasis on reducing plastic packaging within their operations, which addresses sub-question 2) b. The social media channels mention this sustainable business practice 17 times throughout the one-year time frame, including many communications regarding the elimination of plastic checkout bags in all their stores. Sobeys also mentioned many times that they were actively working with organizations such as GoodWood Plastics to create store parking lots and accessible public seating made out of post-consumer recycled plastic bags. Sobeys is the only organization out of the three that is successfully communicating their CSR initiatives based on the Du et al. (2010) CSR communications framework. This is because the social media channels mentioned commitment to sustainable business practices 95% of the time when posting about a CSR initiative, which addresses sub-question 2) c. The most frequent commitment codes used were amount of input and durability, which were either spoken about alone or together. Consistency of support was not specifically mentioned in any post, most likely because many initiatives represented projects that had a start and end date instead of consistent, ongoing support. Additionally, similarly to Loblaw and Metro, all 95% of posts that discussed Sobeys' commitment to the sustainability issue also mentioned the impact engaging in the given initiatives would have on society, the planet, and its consumers, which addresses sub-question 2) d. Lastly, Sobeys saw an average engagement of 272 for CSR posts without commitment or impact codes and an average engagement of 2,239 for those that do mention commitment or impact.

5.5 Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys

The results of this study are meaningful in many ways that will affect various organizations, consumers, and potentially local and provincial governments as well. First, a chi-square statistical test was conducted to see whether there is a significant difference between the number of sustainability-related CSR posts versus non-CSR posts communicated by Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys. The chi-square statistic of this test is 7.4731 and the p-value is 0.02, which determines that the result of the test is statistically significant ($p < .05$). In other words, there is a notable difference between the three brands in terms of the number of sustainability-related CSR posts and non-CSR posts published between March 1st, 2019 and March 1st, 2020. As previously mentioned, Sobeys had the highest percentage of CSR posts in the given timeline with 9.2% of all posts being related to sustainable business practices, whereas 7% of Loblaw's overall posts were related to sustainability, and 4% of Metro's total social media posts discussed sustainability-related CSR that the organization was engaging in. Therefore, given the data available on social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn, Sobeys places the most importance on sustainability themed corporate social responsibility messaging. This may be because Sobeys was Canada's first large grocery retailer to ban plastic bags in the first month of 2020, which provided them with many opportunities to remind their consumers to bring their own reusable bags. That being said, Sobeys remains the company that not only communicated the most about sustainability to their social media followers but provided followers and consumers with concrete commitments and proof of impact that their sustainable initiatives had and continue to have on our planet, the community, and their customers. Lastly, across all brands, the most common sustainable business practice that Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys engaged in is sustainable food sourcing, which was mentioned in 22 out of 42 CSR posts.

Interestingly, despite their varying strategies and emphases on sustainability initiatives, there are certain results that all brands have in common. First, Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys all allocated the most CSR posts to Instagram with five, six, and nine posts respectively, even though Instagram is each brand's smallest platform in terms of number of followers. Additionally, the engagement rate was significantly higher across all retailers on Instagram, despite having three to over 14 times less followers on this platform than they do on Facebook and LinkedIn. In other words, even with notably less followers, Instagram attracted more sustainability-related CSR content from all brands, and more likes and views from followers. Previous studies align with these findings such as ones conducted in Miles' (2013) book, *Instagram Power: Build Your Brand and Reach More Customers with the Power of Pictures*. For example, Miles (2013) states that although Facebook purchased Instagram in 2012, both platforms remain competitors, which is still true in 2020 as well because Instagram remains the most visually pleasing platform after YouTube, which its users depend on for an enjoyable experience (Wally and Koshy, 2014). Although a 2020 report by Statista stated that Instagram has nearly 1.5 billion less users than Facebook, Instagram users are simply satisfied with sharing daily pictures with short descriptions, while Facebook users generally demand a more intensive participation by organizations present on the platform (Wally and Koshy, 2014). Instagram was also designed with a user-friendly and mobile experience in mind, which is why the aesthetic of the platform is clean, allowing users to consume content quickly as they scroll down their feed. Evidently, Instagram has the largest focus on pictures and videos instead of text, compared to Facebook and LinkedIn as users cannot post caption without images as is possible on the former and the latter. Lastly, an increase in engagement on Instagram may be linked to the ease of liking

photos or viewing videos as it only requires a “double tap” anywhere on the post from the user to engage with an organization’s content.

6. Discussion and Implications:

This study addresses the gap in understanding the sustainable business practices used and communicated by the Canadian grocery industry by providing managers, researchers, and public policy makers with important considerations to successfully communicate CSR messages. Since the industry produces a significant amount of plastic packaging and food waste, and is a large contributor of greenhouse gas emissions through processing and distributing food as well as creating the demand for farmed cattle, it is important to effectively communicate what is being done to find solutions to these global issues. The current study determined to what extent sustainability-related CSR is being addressed through social media marketing communications by Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys as well as which specific initiatives are being communicated through the lens of the Du et al. (2010) CSR communications framework. As previously mentioned, the results of the study found a difference in the extent and in the way in which Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys communicated their sustainability-related CSR messaging on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The study found four main categories of sustainable business practices implemented by Canada’s largest grocery retailers, including plastic packaging, food waste, sustainable food sourcing, and greenhouse case emissions. These results are similar to the findings of a European study conducted to determine sustainable development practices in food retailers as it determined that CO₂ emissions, plastic checkout bags, energy consumption, and sorting waste were key environmental indicators of sustainable development used by three French grocery retailers (Lavorata and Sparks, 2018). Sustainability-related

business practices only represented 4-9% of total posts on all three Canadian brand's total social media platforms, showing a relatively low level of importance placed on communicating about sustainability initiatives. That being said, sustainable food sourcing was the most communicated and important issue for Loblaw and Metro, which is consistent with a content analysis of Spain's grocery retailers that determined that it is common practice in grocery retailing to place an emphasis on the retailer's cooperation with local food suppliers (Lavorata and Sparks, 2018). On the other hand, plastic packaging was most important for Sobeys to communicate to their consumers which has been identified as a key environmental indicator in French retailing market, as previously mentioned (Lavorata and Sparks, 2018). Lastly, in terms of social media usage, the current study found that Instagram has the highest average engagement for CSR posts and that the platform was the most used to discuss sustainable business practices. These findings are significant because they can be used to inform influential managerial and public policy decisions while providing implications for CSR researchers, which will be discussed in the following sections.

6.1 Managerial Implications

The results are arguably most significant for the communications, marketing, and corporate social responsibility managers at Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys due to the thorough content analysis of their CSR communications on social media. This study's findings are informative for managers at Canada's three largest grocery chains because previous academic research has found that key stakeholders, including customers, are "increasingly likely to make purchase decisions that reward good corporate citizens and punish bad ones" (Du et al., 2010). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the success of CSR messages to ensure that consumers are rewarding

Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys for acting with the environment in mind. Additionally, the nature of this exploratory and discovery-oriented study provides managers at Canada's three largest grocery retailers insight into CSR strategies that do and do not work effectively when communicating through social media about sustainability practices. For example, the study's results are significant for managers because they clearly demonstrate the sustainability categories that are missing from their communications, the platforms worth spending more time on, and how the Du et al. (2010) framework could strengthen their CSR communications strategy.

First, Loblaw and Metro both place an emphasis on sustainable food sourcing, but would benefit from more frequently discussing plastic packaging, food waste, and ways they are reducing greenhouse gas emissions because these are all described at length in their most recent CSR and corporate reports. Additionally, Sobeys focusses on plastic packaging, but rarely mentions food waste, sustainable food sourcing, and greenhouse gas emissions even though those who read their sustainability report would know that they focus on all of those categories within their operations and supply chain. These findings align with Lavorata and Sparks' (2018) study on Spanish grocery retailers as their results demonstrate a lack of visibility of the sustainability initiatives that retailers implemented, particularly on their respective websites (their study did not explore social media communications). Since the consumer is typically the most important stakeholder to communicate CSR initiatives to, it would be beneficial for these firms to use their social media platforms more frequently to supplement the information in the corporate reports (often only read by investors), which would help effectively communicate their actions towards a more sustainable business strategy. Social media postings that represent a balanced approach to sustainable business practices would be more engaging for followers since

previous research has shown that consistency and transparency are regarded as crucial in CSR communications since they are essential to gaining stakeholder trust and making messages more credible (Coombs and Holladay, 2011; Du et al. 2010; Schleglmilch and Pollach 2005). In turn, this would allow consumers to have a more well-rounded view of an organization's authentic CSR mission instead of perceiving each brand as a single-use firm since there is a great imbalance between sustainability issues being communicated. Previous research also suggests that being authentic matters the most to Millennials (born between 1980 and 1996) with 90% of them stating that it is the most important brand attribute when choosing which company they support, but it is nearly equally as important for Baby Boomers (born between 1944 and 1964) and Gen X (born between 1965 and 1979) as 80% and 85% say that authenticity is the most important attribute, respectively (Stackla, 2017). Therefore, brands must communicate in an authentic and truthful manner to gain support from consumers in all generations, even if it means being transparent about what they are not currently doing in terms of sustainability and what their future plans include.

Second, the findings related to a high engagement rate on Instagram despite being the least followed platform that Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys are present on are significant due to the most active generation on Instagram. The millennial generation (born from 1980 to 1996) has often shown the most interest in sustainable lifestyles (i.e., tiny homes and zero-waste living), environmental activism (i.e., climate marches and Fridays For Future), and systemic change regarding climate change, and they have therefore proven to be willing to adapt their lives to protect the health of the planet (Folk, 2018). Additionally, in a 2017 global study, 81% of respondents said that it is extremely important for organizations to be actively implementing

programs that benefit the environment with younger generations, including millennials and Gen X, being the most supportive (Leger, 2019). If Loblaw, Metro, Sobeys used their social media platforms, such as Instagram, that nearly 70% of millennials use weekly, to promote all their environmental sustainability-oriented initiatives, partnerships, and programs, it could lead to stronger brand loyalty, recognition, and positive word-of-mouth, to name a few (Insights West, 2019). As previously stated, Instagram is the platform with the most engagement (likes and views) and it would therefore be wise to remain the most active on this platform to capture and further increase the valuable attention of followers. Since commitment and impact were rarely stated on Instagram, especially for Metro and Loblaw that only used LinkedIn to communicate their commitments and impact of engaging in a certain CSR initiative, it is crucial for managers to use more than simply LinkedIn to discuss these factual aspects of CSR. Additionally, past research has shown that a factual tone in a CSR message is important to minimize the recipient's skepticism and that messages without factual information (i.e., not including commitments or impacts of a CSR initiative) can be received as self-promotional, which increases skepticism (Kim, 2016).

Third, the Du et al. (2010) framework that was applied for the first time (to the researcher's knowledge) throughout this study to determine the effectiveness of Loblaw's, Metro's, and Sobeys' CSR communications strategy to shed light on how certain messages are falling short of what is recommended. The findings demonstrate that Loblaw and Metro in particular do not focus on factual CSR messaging as there is little explanation of the initiatives, their commitments towards achieving sustainability goals, and the impact doing so will have environmentally, socially, or even financially. The lack of detailed information on CSR posts on

the Loblaw and Metro social media pages are aligned with Du et al.'s findings that stakeholder awareness of CSR activities is typically low. Since creating stakeholder awareness towards an organization's CSR activities is a building block to reap the strategic benefits tied to investing in CSR, it's important for managers to truly understand the key aspects of CSR communication. According to Du et al. (2010), these aspects include what to communicate, where to communicate, and ensuring that CSR communications are based on facts. After a thorough review of social media accounts, communications related to impact and commitment, which includes amount of input, durability, and consistency of support were distinctly missing from the sustainability-related CSR posts on the Metro and Loblaw social media pages. Since only 20% of Metro's and 25% of Loblaw's sustainability-related CSR posts provided followers and customers with concrete facts about how the societal or environmental impacts of their programs, stakeholder skepticism can be strong. According to Du et al. (2010), it is important for a company to either mention their CSR commitment, impact, or both together for a factual message that raises awareness and reduces skepticism. Additionally, Metro and Loblaw would be able to reap highly coveted multi-faceted business returns from CSR initiatives if they increasingly mention their commitments to CSR programs and their impacts on the environment since doing so would allow them to strengthen and build stakeholder relationships, as determined by Du et al. (2010). Interestingly, when Metro and Loblaw mentioned the commitments to their CSR initiatives (i.e., time, money, food donations, etc.), they also mentioned the impact their initiatives would have on the environment and the communities in which they operate. In contrast, Sobeys mentioned both their commitment to their CSR causes as well as CSR impact in 95% of their sustainability-related CSR posts. Therefore, it is recommended that Metro and Loblaw incorporate the beneficial environmental or societal outputs and commitments related to

the CSR activities they are engaging in to minimize skepticism and increase positive brand attributions. This is because emphasizing an organization's CSR commitments and lasting impacts is an effective communication strategy since research has suggested that CSR communications should be factual and not give consumers the impression of bragging (Sen et al., 2009). Additionally, a 2017 consumer survey stated that 57% of consumers perceive less than half of the online content from brands as 'authentic', which aligns with the results that Metro and Loblaw are lacking factual and transparent information in their social media posts regarding sustainability-related CSR (Stackla, 2017). Although the data regarding average engagement metrics is relatively inconclusive due to small sample size of posts (with and without CSR commitments and impacts), it is interesting to see that Sobeys has a significant increase in average engagement (2,239 vs. 272 likes and views) and Metro has a slight increase in engagement (97 vs. 95 likes and views) for CSR posts that mention these important factual codes compared to the ones that do not. All in all, although an updated framework for social media would be beneficial, the Du et al. (2010) framework has been valuable to shed light on the key missing aspects of CSR communications from Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys, which could help managers develop stronger CSR messages to important stakeholders such as consumers.

6.2 Public Policy Implications

Since this study was based on reviewing social media platforms and messaging related to actions corporations are taking to reduce their environmental impacts and operate in a more sustainable manner, there are key takeaways for those implementing public policies. Analyses of sustainability and climate change communications have been increasing in academic journals since the late 1990s, yet carbon emissions continue to rise, making cities vulnerable to the

impacts of climate change (Nerlich, Koteyko, and Brown, 2009). Climate change adaptation plans have been put forward by governments in Ontarian cities such as Kingston, St. Catharines, and Barrie in hopes to effectively guide their communities to be more sustainable and assure them of their safety during the current climate crisis. Communicating about climate change or sustainability programs is not an easy feat for municipal, provincial, and federal governments, but can be done successfully if the study's important findings are taken into consideration. First, since it was established that Instagram has the highest engagement rate and 70% of millennials are on the platform weekly, it is necessary to place an emphasis on this social media platform to discuss public policy related to sustainability. Instagram campaigns are sharable with the click of a button, which can increase the population's awareness of the adaptation measures the government would like its citizens to take to help fight vulnerabilities resulting from climate change and extreme weather, for example. Additionally, the Du et al. (2010) framework could be used to minimize citizen skepticism of adaptation plans, new government propositions such as banning single use plastic, or viewing water as a basic human right and applying to become a Blue City. Although additional research needs to be conducted to truly find the value in applying the framework, it would be beneficial for all government campaigns related to the environment to clearly include the sustainability issue at hand, the commitments the government will make to fix this issue (amount of input, durability, and consistency of support), and the impact of proactively acting on a sustainability-related issue can have for the community's economy, environment, and overall wellbeing. Communicating this way will allow for only factual information to be communicated, which will result in reduced skepticism amongst citizens of the city or municipality as well as increase the potential for local climate action, which can in turn help governments tackle local sustainability-related issues.

6.3 Research Implications

The results of this study are especially significant for researchers in the CSR and communications fields because the Du et al. (2010) framework of effective CSR communication has not been applied to social media platforms to analyze the effectiveness of brands' communication strategies for sustainable business practices. Reviewing and further analyzing social media posts from a group of brands in an industry allows researchers to truly understand how the messages are being received by followers and consumers by comparing engagement to the message content (i.e., mention of issue, commitment, and impact). These results provide researchers with a steppingstone for future studies that examine the effectiveness of CSR communication strategies in various industries because the framework must be examined further to truly understand its effectiveness for evaluating online communications.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the social media CSR communications from Canada's three largest grocery chains, including Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys through an in-depth and exploratory content analysis of postings from March 1st, 2019 to March 1st, 2020. The study provided many interesting findings, including which social media platforms receive the most engagement, which organization communicates the most frequently about social media, and which sustainability-related CSR business practice is most common among each brand, to name a few. These findings have provided important building blocks for future studies that involve CSR communications from Canada's grocery retailers to further determine the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies. The study's results positively contribute to the knowledge of managers in various departments at Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys as well as those writing public

policy as it provides valuable information regarding what communication channels, demographics, and issues should be targeted to effectively communicate CSR efforts, initiative, and accomplishments. Although it is encouraging to see large Canadian retailers starting the conversation about their sustainable business practices with consumers on social media, it is only the beginning and retailers must continue to communicate about their sustainability-related CSR initiatives to ensure high stakeholder awareness, low skepticism, brand loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, stakeholder resilience during difficult times, high stakeholder engagement, and an increase in market share.

8. Limitations

There were a few limitations of this CSR communications study. First, since brands such as Metro posted significantly more than others, there was not always enough data to provide conclusive findings. Second, not all social media platforms could be considered for this study since Metro was the only brand without a Twitter account, which would have provided additional useful data for the study. Third, due to time constraints and scope, this study was not able to speak with followers and consumers of Canada's largest grocery brands to understand how they perceive the sustainability-related CSR communications being published on social media and whether or not they find the respective communication strategies effective. Additionally, this study only focussed on the umbrella brands (Loblaw, Metro, and Sobeys) of many smaller grocery stores that could have also been included in the study if it were not for time constraints, such as Real Canadian Superstore, No Frills, and Bruno's Fine Foods to name a few. Lastly, this study featured Canada's largest grocery retailers, but there are many others such as specialty grocers such as Whole Foods who are also committed to sustainability.

9. Future Research Opportunities

The results of this study provide valuable steppingstones for researchers to conduct additional analyses and in-depth studies on CSR communication within the grocery industry and beyond. There are many findings from this study that would greatly benefit from being examined further through future research studies. For example, future research could determine a new framework for the effectiveness of CSR communications specifically for social media as the Du et al. (2010) framework was created 10 years ago and does not account for the way in which organizations currently communicate and engage with stakeholders through online platforms. Moreover, a more systematic analysis that shows the comparison between CSR reports and social media would be valuable to understand the high-level differences between two key stakeholders, shareholders and consumers, and is necessary to further understand the way in which corporations are communicating their CSR practices to different stakeholders. Additionally, interviews could be conducted with marketing or CSR managers at Canada's three largest grocery retailers to compare their view on what is important to focus on in terms of sustainability with what is actually being communicated on social media. Another avenue for future research would be to include promotional emails into the dataset and code for the same four sustainability issues (plastic packaging, food waste, sustainable food sourcing, and greenhouse gas emission) to determine whether the organizations are providing consumers with additional information regarding sustainability initiatives by email. Although it is great to see some of Canada's largest firms investing in sustainable solutions to their own industry's problems, these future research opportunities would provide managers and policy makers with even more information to help strengthen their CSR strategies and overall sustainability-related business plans.

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Appendices*Appendix A: Number of followers on social media channels by brand*

	LoblawsON	MetroOntario	Sobeys
Facebook	64,504	141,400	328,758
Instagram	15,000	9,443	24,400
LinkedIn	125,468	47,750	66,867
Total	204,972	198,593	420,025

Appendix B: Sustainability-Related CSR Code book

Theme	Description	Example
1- Plastic packaging	The organization is decreasing their use of plastic packaging for their products or are introducing new ways to use reusable containers.	Metro customers will be able to bring reusable containers to purchase fresh food such as fruit, bakery items, and prepared foods (Metro Inc., 2019).
2- Food waste	The organization is minimizing food waste through various initiatives.	Loblaw takes food waste very seriously and has committed to reducing food waste by 50% by 2025 (Loblaw Companies Ltd., 2020).
3- Sustainable food sourcing	The organization is sourcing their food with sustainability in mind.	Some seafood from Sobeys' private label will have the Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) label on it, certifying that the seafood customers are purchasing comes from a sustainable farm (Sobeys Inc., 2019).
4- Greenhouse gas emissions	The organization is reducing their greenhouse gas emissions in various ways.	Loblaw commits to reducing its carbon footprint by 30% by 2030 (Canadian Grocer, 2016).

Appendix C: Frequency of Sustainability-Related CSR Codes

<i>Frequency of Codes by Brand (All Platforms) - "Importance"</i>			
	<i>Sobeys</i>	<i>Metro</i>	<i>Loblaws</i>
<i>1- Plastic Packaging</i>	17	3	1
<i>2- Food Waste</i>	2	2	2
<i>3- Sustainable Food Sourcing</i>	0	15	7
<i>4- GHG Emissions</i>	1	2	1