



**Special Issue associated with the 2nd University of Massachusetts Boston – EM
Normandie Business School Research Conference**

Call for Papers

Corporate Social Responsibility throughout the COVID-19 Crisis

Submission Window: 1st September - 30th September 2021

Background

The worldwide spread of COVID-19 has no precedent in the modern world as a health crisis that calls upon the unity of all constituents of our society. The moral imperative is to save lives. Concomitant to it is the challenge of mitigating the economic hardship that preventive measures (such as physical or social distancing) have caused (Altig et al., 2020). The deeply game-changing nature of this crisis (e.g., Grech, 2020; Mazzoleni, Turchetti, & Ambrosino, 2020) has prompted management and ‘business in society’ scholars to (i) address broad questions about whether an irreversible transition to a radically new business landscape is underway (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020), (ii) consider the implications regarding how CSR can be brought to a new level (i.e., made distinctively more genuine, authentic, exploitable as a measure of crisis management and perhaps not (mis)used as an instrument to profitability and shareholder value creation), and (iii) generate new insights on how progress towards business practices that contribute to a more sustainable society can be accelerated.

As scholars have only begun to explore the role of business organizations as ‘primary response agents’ (Hill, 2020), this special issue aims to assemble conceptual, theoretical and empirical studies of corporate responses to COVID-19. We are particularly interested in papers that explore their potential for generalizability as socially responsible management actions and individual competencies (CSR) that solve societal issues, sustain financial success and improve the capacity of organizations to address (future) crises without giving in to the temptation of ad hoc utilitarianism. Four patterns of (positive) corporate responses to COVID-19 seem to emerge that suggest interesting avenues for critical scholarly engagement: distinctiveness and connectedness at the organizational level, and selflessness and empathy at the individual level.

In Mazutis and Slawinski’s (2015) framework, distinctiveness and connectedness are dimensions of authenticity that influence stakeholders’ perception of CSR. ‘Distinctive organizations’, it is alleged, strive to live up to their purpose statements. In other words, their responses to societal issues reflect CSR initiatives that align with the core mission, vision, and values of the organization. One implication of aiming to achieve this type of alignment is that business organizations may (re-)orient themselves towards what is most morally valuable and material to them. Because the COVID-19 pandemic has put in full view the interdependence between organizations and the social fabric in which they are embedded, it is likely to have generated reflections about, and interesting developments related to, the challenge of distinctiveness in business. One striking example is that of the engagement of luxury companies (including LVMH, Kering and Hermès) in ‘emblematic’ initiatives (e.g., philanthropy, research fundings, production of hand sanitizers, procurement of face masks) for which they were

distinguished as highly agile, responsive and (unexpectedly to many) compassionate organizations (e.g., Elison, 2020; Wrathall, 2020). Empirical evidence of the positive impact of such responsible initiatives on corporate reputation, brand asset and market value (e.g., Bardos, Ertugrul, & Gao, 2020; Varma, 2020) suggest that companies can reap tangible benefits from engaging in the fight against the spread of COVID-19. It justifies that research is conducted to understand the extent to which the pursuit of distinctiveness is motivated by either ad hoc utilitarianism (as a problem that, Sandin (2008) argues, is prevalent in crisis management ethics) or the consolidation of CSR policies. It is also pertinent to investigate to what point the various stakeholders of the firm, including investors, recognize and appreciate firms' responses to COVID-19.

Corporate responses to COVID-19 can be further associated with a general desire for, or commitment to, connectedness (Salvador & Burciaga, 2020) and attention to the common good (Alexander & Buckingham, 2011) by business organizations. As a case in point, initiatives of the kinds found in the luxury industry are partly motivated by concerns about not letting competitors distinguish themselves by demonstrating superior virtue, resulting in an emulative spirit of togetherness in the fight against COVID-19. The desire for connectedness can be observed within and across various types of organizations seeking common grounds for integrated solutions (Pavlovich & Krahnke, 2012) to control the spread of the virus. Researchers might explore how such trends towards connectedness generate 'social innovations', 'frugal innovations' or 'business model innovations' that are not only meant to address COVID-19 but have the potential to be replicated/extended to address less immediate societal concerns, such as those related to sustainability.

The engagement of organizations in philanthropy and 'innovation of their business models' through distinctiveness and connectedness are accompanied at the individual level by a general demonstration of altruism and empathy towards direct and indirect business 'relatives' (Jenkins, 2020). Altruism is reported as one ostensible form of engagement by organizational agents in the fight against the spread of COVID-19 (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020), most distinctively illustrated by the selfless dedication of individual healthcare workers (Cox, 2020) and recourses to frugal innovations in healthcare provision (Harris, Bhatti, Buckley, & Sharma, 2020). Luxury companies are also portrayed by some commentators as exemplars of altruism (or humanism) judging from their engagement in philanthropy as well as their initiatives to 'repurpose' to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Doig, 2020; Wrathall, 2020). A recent briefing paper by NGO Oxfam recalls however that selfless altruism remains largely overshadowed in the corporate world by a trend towards a reckless profit-seeking orientation for shareholders giving (Gneiting, Lusiani, & Tamir, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis allows interested researchers to explore the potential decoupling of corporate (social) orientations (Jain, 2017) and investigate how selfless (and/or altruistic) corporate responses can be included as a dimension of authentic CSR or whether – again – they represent acts of ad hoc utilitarianism.

The fourth pattern of corporate responses to COVID-19 is empathy. It is often referred to as an attribute of leadership (e.g., Alonso-Almeida, Perramon, & Bagur-Femenias, 2017; Jain, Brennan, & Van Buren, 2020), ethical decision-making (e.g., Cartabuke et al., 2019; Mencl & May, 2009), or cognitive development (e.g., Martinez, 2019; Pavlovich & Krahnke, 2012) that enhance connectedness, dissolve barriers between self and other, stimulate benevolence, and enable business organizations to conform to, or exceed, stakeholders' expectations. The COVID-19 pandemic arguably sets the scene for interested researchers to investigate (i) how the demonstration of empathy as a mediator of ethical competence in corporate responses (Pohling, Bzdok, Eigenstetter, Stumpf, & Strobel, 2016) help organizations transcend tensions, and manage paradoxes, between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability (e.g., Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2018; Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2015) and ease anxieties in times of crisis (Simola, 2003), (ii) how it can be extended

to support relief efforts after the crisis, and (iii) how it permeates management actions that are not ‘perverted’ by the temptation of ad hoc utilitarianism (Sandin, 2008).

This special issue is approached as an opportunity for management scholars to take stock of, and appreciate, evidence that actors of the business community have the resources (distinctiveness, connectedness, selflessness and empathy) to rise above the individualist and reckless (im)moral behaviours that are often (legitimately) associated with them in the management literature (Bakan, 2004). We argue that lessons should be learnt from the fight against the spread of COVID-19 that can be extended to develop our understanding of how organizations manage crises through CSR, and eventually bring CSR to level at which it may foster a paradigm shift from shareholder primacy towards stakeholder and societal responsibility. Evidence from the 2008-2009 financial crisis corroborates the role of social capital as an insurance policy that pays off in the context of a severe crisis (Lins, Servaes, & Tamayo, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic broadens the scope of such disruptions and allows to study how corporate responses vary by measure of severity. Further research could explore the roles of distinctiveness, connectedness, selflessness and empathy in firms’ resiliency and market outcomes in a crisis.

Prospective themes

Research questions and themes related to this special issue include, but are not limited to:

- What can be learnt from corporate responses to COVID-19 that can be extended to improve our understanding of the extent to which CSR contributes to resiliency in crisis?
- Have business organizations manifesting strong CSR before the crisis been more resilient during the crisis than those who did not?
- To what extent do philanthropic responses to the COVID-19 crisis allow organizations to demonstrate the authenticity of their CSR policies?
- To what extent can business model innovations (e.g. production of masks, procurement of hand sanitisers) be associated with authentic CSR initiatives?
- Do corporate responses to COVID-19 of the kinds described in the call represent a course of action that can be chosen in a crisis (ad hoc utilitarianism) or an authentic demonstration of care and an opportunity to bring CSR principles to life?
- Can selfless and/or altruistic corporate responses to COVID-19 shape long-term CSR in lieu of constituting one-off crisis management actions?
- How do companies use CSR to simultaneously demonstrate strong crisis management capabilities, maintain business continuity and contribute to societal resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- To what extent are individual selflessness and empathy appropriate (or misplaced) as drivers for responsible business practices?
- Can the COVID-19 crisis act as a platform from which new distinctively more sustainable business (or CSR) practices can be developed? What are the similarities between the COVID-19 crisis and fully-fledged climate or biodiversity crisis?
- Do investors and other stakeholders recognize and appreciate companies’ responses to COVID-19?
- Are corporate responses to COVID-19 shaped by governance structures and executives’ individual characteristics, including gender and cultural background? Here we encourage cross-country comparisons of corporate responses to the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Can the CSR practices developed throughout the crisis, and notably those associated with ‘frugal innovations’ (or the necessity of ‘doing more with less’), durably improve the

compatibility between corporate ecological responsiveness and business performance?

Submission Instructions

Submission Window: 1st September - 30th September 2021

Submissions from a variety of theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary perspectives are welcomed, insofar as they relate to the theme of the special issue.

Author guidelines are provided on the website of BEER. Please note that all manuscripts need to be submitted through the journal's submission site (<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/beer>) whilst indicating that it is a submission to this special issue. If you have any questions about the fit of your research with that of the special issue, please contact the guest editors using the email addresses provided below.

Guest Editors

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Backgrounds of the Guest Editors

Fabien Martinez is an Associate Professor of Sustainable Development at EM Normandie Business School. He has published in various top ranked international journals in his field, including the Journal of Business Ethics, Business Strategy & the Environment, Organization & Environment, and Futures. He acted as co-editor of a case study handbook entitled 'The role of corporate sustainability in Asian development'.

Frank Figge is a Senior Professor of CSR and Sustainable Development at Kedge Business School. He has published in top ranked journals such as Journal of Business Ethics, Academy of Management Review, Organization Studies and Ecological Economics. He has also repeatedly acted as co-editor of special issues such as the thematic symposium on paradoxes in corporate sustainability in the Journal of Business Ethics.

Sylvaine Castellano is the Research Dean at EM Normandie Business School. Her research interests include institutional and competitive dynamics, especially in the wine and the luxury industry. Her publications are related to the concepts of reputation and e-reputation, legitimacy, status, heritage, and retro-industries. Her work was published in journals such as Journal of Business Research, IEEE, Journal of Technology Transfer, International Marketing Review, Management Decision. She also repeatedly acted as co-editor of special issues on various topics.

Atreya Chakraborty is a Professor of Finance at UMass Boston. His primary area of interest is agency costs, signalling and managerial decision-making. His research on various aspects of corporate actions has been published in *Journal of Corporate Finance*, *Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis*, *Financial Management*, *Journal of Financial Intermediation*. He was a co-convenor for the first UMASS Boston – EMN conference on CSR.

Lucia Silva-Gao is an Associate Professor of Finance at UMass Boston. She has published on topics related to corporate social responsibility in the areas of corporate finance and accounting, including in the *Journal of Corporate Finance*. She was a co-convenor for the first UMASS Boston – EMN conference on CSR.

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