

**Let's Talk Good:**  
**How do Third Sector organisations communicate social responsibility internally?**

*An exploratory study into the understanding, development and execution of internal communications regarding social responsibility policies in the Third Sector.*

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*January 2020*

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#### Abstract

*Third Sector organisations, such as voluntary associations, charities, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) etc., are increasingly under pressure to be more transparent in regards to their social responsibility practices, yet there is very little research focusing on non-profit social responsibility communication, with the majority choosing to focus instead of corporate social responsibility (CSR). At the same time, the internal communications of non-profits in academia have also been somewhat neglected despite the Third Sector employing millions of people across the globe. Therefore, this research aims to explore how Third Sector organisations in the Netherlands understand, develop, and execute social responsibility communications internally. In order to investigate this issue, a qualitative approach was utilized whereby 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees, managers, volunteers and/or interns who worked with or around social responsibility within 9 different non-profit organisations of varying size and sector. The research showed that understandings of social responsibility, and its communication thereof, vary with factors including personal perception and size of operation playing a part. It was also found that among the barriers facing non-profits, lack of professionalization, time, and lack of organisational structure were the most common regardless of size of industry. Finally, organisations with an understanding of social responsibility as being intrinsic and therefore engrained in their organisation found internal communications of the subject far easier to implement than those who perceive it as external task.*

**KEYWORDS:** Social Responsibility, Third Sector, Internal Communications, Social Responsibility Communications

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## 1. Introduction

In the past decade social responsibility has become a hot topic. This is not only due to (inter)governmental organisations and institutional publications such as the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (About the Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.) or the European Union's Circular Economy Package (Circular Economy, n.d.) which have set the agenda for governments and industries to improve both the planet and people's lives. An increase in education levels and better awareness has led to an outcry from individuals demanding more be done environmentally and socially (Rahim et al, 2011). The Third Sector describes the industry made up of any organisations that are non-profit, non-governmental, and are pursuing a common good, and is a massive sector in its own right employing approximately 13% of the entire European workforce (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2018). Being a large sector brings influence, with companies and governments increasingly turning to Third Sector organisations to help develop and communicate their social responsibility policies (den Hond et al, 2015; Fontana, 2018; Lodsgård & Aagaard, 2017). The result of which means that Third Sector organisations not only have some effect over the public perception of social responsibility (Fontana 2018) as well as the political and industrial perceptions (Boström & Hallström, 2010), but are also having a growing influence on the actual definition, shape, and reporting of social responsibilities (den Hond et al, 2015). In light of this, social responsibility of Third Sector organisations has been under scrutiny with many organisations throughout the world being criticized for; violating people's rights via sexual misconduct, misappropriating funds received by paying CEOs too much, or not travelling in environmentally friendly ways (Brass, 2018; Gayle, 2018; Hope, 2015; Varner, 2016). This had led the reputation and trust in third sector organisations to be only a few percent higher than that of corporations (Binder, 2018). It is clear that the Third Sector social responsibility policies and the communications of them thereof, especially to their own employees, are becoming increasingly essential for the reputation, employee loyalty, and survival of the Third Sector around the world.

There has been sharp increase in the number of studies showing the multitude of benefits for social responsibility communications within corporations (Falck & Heiblich, 2017; Khan et al, 2012; Rahim et al, 2011; Zu & Song, 2009) but Third Sector organisations are not companies, they are not profit driven but mission driven (Dimitrov, 2008) and therefore are unique (Salamon & Anheier, 1997), which has led to the subject being underexplored. The studies which do touch upon social responsibility communication in the Third Sector tend to do so from three perspectives. The first is that of accountability communication, which can be an organisation communicating their social impact (Polonsky et al, 2016) or reporting on their sustainability (Haque & Irvine, 2014; Crespy & Miller, 2010). The primary focus is that of communicating externally as well as the

consequence on those outside actors for example, Crespy and Miller (2010) measuring the perceived legitimacy according to the public in response to organisations sustainability measures, or Polonsky et al (2016) identifying the problems of marketing non-profit organisations' social achievements. Agyemang et al (2017), when researching upward accountability among Third Sector organisations in Africa, found the importance of volunteers being a part of the conversation which is slightly more internally focused, but examined on basis that it will better relationships with the public. The second focus in respect to the Third sector social responsibility communication is collaboration, there are numerous studies that examine the budding relationships between corporates and organisations' in the realm of social responsibility with some studies researching from the perspective of how a collaboration can create value for the business either by generating internal benefits (Lodsgård & Aagaard, 2017) or by examining the positive effects the collaboration has on their consumers and therefore future profits (Rohwer & Topić, 2019). These kinds of studies occur when examining partnerships from the side of the corporates including that of their communications, and say little of the organisations they pair with. Other scholars, in a bid to rectify this, research collaborations as relationships and therefor explore from the standpoint of the organisations as well. Fontana (2018) found that NGOs and companies factor in resources when choosing each other and that NGOs will communicate away from their mission statement if future resources are at stake. Sthapitanonda and Watson (2015) found cultural factors also influence how NGOs and corporates communicate their partnerships or works. In respect to Third Sector social responsibility communications, collaborative studies focus primarily on businesses or external communications, with little debating the internal discussions of the organisations. The final perspective is that of the effect Third Sector organisations are having on social responsibility understanding. Winston (2002) examined the effect large NGOs had had on shaping social responsibility for large corporates, whilst Skouloudis et al (2015), despite studying from the NGOs perspective, looked at the importance organisations place on corporate social responsibility and its communication.

Whilst literature of social responsibility communication in Third Sector organisations repeatedly returns to corporate or business value perspectives, studies that look at Third Sector organisations in the broader sense, do so from the non-profits viewpoint and therefor offer organisational insight. A multitude of scholars have explored the phenomenon of communications of the Third Sector finding it distinctive to other sectors with unique challenges such as limited time, finances, and even trained staff (Hume & Leonard, 2014) leading to what some have claimed as non-strategic, informal, ad hoc communications (Wiggill et al, 2009). Even within larger organisations who have increased resources, many organisations fail to understand the strategic importance or benefits of communications and therefore are reluctant to put time or energy into its

development (Wiggill, 2011). In this same instance though, a minority of organisations are slowly becoming professionalized. Professionalization of the Third Sector has been defined by many academics over the past 2 decades from Goodall (2000) whom defined it as an organisation that reflects the private sectors productivity and commercial mindedness to the more recent study by Damic et al (2019) whom simply measured professionalization as the ratio of paid employees versus volunteers. Combining multiple definitions James (2016) outlined professionalization of the Third sector using four dimensions; specialisation of knowledge, establishment of the profession as a livelihood, organisation and institutionalisation, and legitimacy and authority. All these elements have led to an increase in organisations having more trained staff, business-like approaches, strategies and understandings (Haddad et al, 2015). The professionalization of the organisations and that of their communications has been done using, again, business framing which is difficult with the mission led nature of non-for-profits, the strain of trying to apply business practices whose aim is to maximize profit to non-profit driven organisations has created tension (Markowitz & Tice, 2002; Ganesh & McAllum, 2012). It is permanent tight-rope whereby organisations do their best when communications are mission focused rather than business-like, but need the benefit of a business attitude (Dimitrov, 2008).

It is clear that the Third Sector is an industry in its own right with 29.1 million full time employees in Europe alone (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2018), and in regards to its internal communications there are challenges specific to the sector. At the same time social responsibility communications has been explored in depth but primarily from the private sector point of view. Therefore, this study attempts to fill a disparity in the literature by exploring and identifying patterns and/or structures in regards to the development and execution of internal social responsibility communication in Third Sector organisations. In order to bridge the gap in research, this study will involve interviewing multiple former and current managers, employees and volunteers from the Dutch third sector. To achieve this the following research question was formulated:

*RQ1: How is social responsibility communication understood, experienced, and practiced internally in Dutch-based Third Sector organisations?*

In order to answer the research question in-depth and with comprehensive understanding, sub-questions were formed. In line with the instrumental, relational, and constitutive perspectives outlined in the literature (Chaudhri, 2016) the very nature of social responsibility and the communication within the organisation needs to be explored.

*SQ1: How do organisations in the Third sector understand and/or define social responsibility?*

*SQ2: How do organisations in the Third sector perceive and value social responsibility communication?*

*SQ3: How do organisations in the Third sector communicate social responsibility in practice?*

*SQ4: What are the barriers and challenges of social responsibility communication internally?*

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter seeks to give a standing point for the exploratory study through scrutinizing previous studies of Third Sector social responsibility communications. This is done by breaking down the literature into three sections; the exploration of the terminologies of social responsibility and the Third Sector, the academic approaches in regards to social responsibility communication, and the tools and strategies of social responsibility. Firstly, a brief history and definition of the Third Sector as well as an examination of the term social responsibility shall be outlined. In order to understand better the complex nature of social responsibility (SR) the history of the term needs to be revisited. Historically, the defining, analysing, strategizing, and implementation of social responsibility has been purely from a corporate standpoint with research focusing on corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Sacchetti & Tortia, 2017; Pope et al, 2018). In recent years however, due to the scope, legitimacy and accountability of Third Sector organisations, new studies have emerged using the established CSR frameworks and practices to analyse the third sector (Pope et al, 2018), and while some academics have attempted to create new terminology such as organisational social responsibility (Marcandella et al, 2012), others have taken the step to analyse non-profits using CSR frameworks (Sachetti & Tortia, 2018). In light of this, it is important that literature on various understandings of social responsibility be studied from both the private and Third Sector in order to garner a holistic understanding. In the second section, the theories behind social responsibility communications will be explored using the framework of *instrumental*, *relational* and *constitutive* (Chaudhri, 2016), that is critiquing literature that theorizes social responsibility communications as a tool, as a two-way discursive and relationship building concept, or as a self-defining social construct. In the third section the literature exploring the practical side of internal social responsibility communications will be explored by looking at the tools primarily identified in previous studies, as well as the numerous strategies that have been examined and/or applied by organisations when attempting to communicate their social responsibility.

### **2.1 The Development of the Third Sector and Social Responsibility**

#### *2.1.1 The Third Sector*

The Third Sector is an umbrella term whose name is derived from it being 'distinct from the public and private sectors' (Salamon & Anheier, 1997, p. 1). The term Third Sector is an evolution of

the traditional pre-World War 2 idea of the Civil Society, everything from individuals to their households that didn't come under private or public was considered the civil sector (Willets, 2002). After World War 2 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) were formed, they were part of the civil sector as they were neither government nor profit driven, but they were also professionalized, with employees and were then operating on both a national and international level (Götz, 2008; Martens, 2002). Coinciding with this, was the growth and professionalization of other civil sector organisations such as voluntary associations and charities who became recognized as an industry worthy of its own research (Billis & Glennerster, 1998; Kendall, 2003). Up until the 1990s research was split by terminology according to the field of study or even geographical nature of the organisations, with some academics referring to NGOs, others to Non-Profits, Voluntary Associations, Civil Society or other varying definitions (Lewis, 1998; Corry, 2010; Lecy, Schmitz, & Swedlund, 2012). Due to the variety of terms as well as the organisations themselves, the Third Sector has been described as big and messy (Corry, 2010), but thanks to the introduction of the overarching term, the Third Sector, communication theorists were finally able to compare and contrast previous studies from a multitude of disciplines to discover cohesive factors that define the third sector as an industry with 'unique communication dynamics' (Lewis, 2005, p. 241). Despite the size and diversity of the organisations there is a distinctive aspect not shared with the public or private spheres, Third Sector organisations are not profit driven but operate using the value-based motivation and dedication of their workers, volunteers and members (Brett, 2000; Fisher, 1994; Lewis, 2003; Najam, 1996; Uphoff, 1993). In culmination with this history, the modern definition of the Third Sector is organisations and institutions who are private, non-profit, non-governmental, independent, to varying degree voluntary, professionalized, and who strive for a common good (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016).

### *2.1.2 Social Responsibility*

There is yet to be a standardized definition of social responsibility (Schwarz & Carroll, 2003, p. 503), but there have been numerous contexts used to break down the meaning. In 1953 Henry Bowen published a book titled *Social Responsibilities of the Business Man* where, for the first time the private sector looked, not at its financial obligations but at its social practices (Bowen, 1953), an idea that had been traditionally relegated to the individuals that made up the then known Civil Sector. Archie Carroll built on Bowen's work by creating the *Pyramid of Social Responsibility*, primarily focused on businesses. The first responsibility outlined was to economically create and

sustain itself financially, it also outlined social obligations such as the legal responsibility defined as the societal responsibility to obey all regulation stipulated upon your organisation, an ethical responsibility to go beyond the law and behave in a way that respects societal moral norms and principles, and a philanthropic responsibility to do more than that is expected of them legally or principally (Carroll, 2016). Carroll's definition originated before globalization and there has now been a blurring of the lines between some of the responsibilities Carroll stipulated, for example, now Third Sector organisations are international with an increasing number of organisation's who may be based in one continent but whose focus is in another and with large amounts appearing in countries with difficult legal structures (Ehie 2016; Visser, 2005; Yurtoğlu, 2018), which means practically speaking legal responsibilities bleed over into ethical responsibilities as you must choose which law to obey. What was key to Carroll's pyramid was that responsibilities stated were not obligatory but to be considered by all managers voluntarily (Carroll, 1991). Numerous other academics and institutions, in the pursuit of understanding social responsibility, do so by emphasizing segmented voluntary responsibilities, primarily social and environmental (European Commission, 2001; van Marrewijk, 2003; Piacentini, 2000). By sectioning social responsibility off and allowing for organisations to decide for themselves, voluntarily, when to act or what to focus on you can, theoretically, set sustainability as a goal to work towards. Inspired by Carroll's pyramid of social responsibility, Elkington created the measure of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) whereby an organisation looks at its success from a financial, social, and environmental viewpoint, also known as the 3 Ps; People, Planet and Profit (Elkington, 2013). This measuring technique has been proven popular by the private as well as the Third Sector (Slaper 2011) inspiring reports on sustainability, diversity, community impact, and more. In addition to the aforementioned measurements, reporting in the Third Sector has been done using mission statements, which are the socially legitimate goals of the organisation, and vision statements which are the aims of the future for positive outcomes (Pope et al, 2018). The voluntary action perspective of social responsibility as something external that can be measured and aimed for, though useful for reporting in large Third Sector organisations and can be valuable for improving an organisation's reputation (Orlitzky, et al, 2011) does not capture some of the elements unique to the third sector such as organisations' intrinsic value based pursuit of a common good, meaning that social responsibility for many Third Sector organisations cannot, by definition, be externalized but has to be internalized.

Another school of thought on the subject is that of social responsibility being integrated within an organisation, this has stemmed from stakeholder theory whereby 'the nonprofit is now constructed as a responsible citizen' (Pope et al, 2018, p. 1312) and must take into account not just primary stakeholders such as employees, but also that of the community as whole (Martínez et al, 2016). Interestingly, one of the few social responsibility definitions published, which is solely

dedicated to non-profit organisations rather than corporates, states that social responsibility is operating 'according to the impact of its decisions and activities on the society and environment' (International Organisation for Standardization, 2010) by taking into account all stakeholder expectations. Some scholars take this one step further, by arguing that the definition is not fixed but determined by the stakeholders of each individual organisation (Marcandella et al, 2012). The main issue that can arise from seeing social responsibility as subjective to organisations' stakeholders is that Third Sector organisations have higher resource dependency on their stakeholders than their for-profit counterparts, due to continuously strained incomes and therefore reliance on donors, as well as the utilization of volunteers. One study found that NGOs would even operate away from their mission statements if their reputations to their donors were at risk (Gent et al, 2015).

In summary, social responsibility can be a subjective term in the Third Sector for a multitude of reasons and therefore exploring and establishing the understanding and sense-making of social responsibility within any particular Third Sector organisation is essential before a study can be made of the communications on the subject.

## **2.2 Social Responsibility Communication in Theory**

Social responsibility communication is as important as it is complex with a great amount of research exploring both its nature, value, and development, as well as how to execute it effectively (Chaudhri, 2016; Du et al, 2010; Golob et al, 2017; Fifka et al, 2018). In Elving et al's editorial the focus was on the development of social responsibility communication followed by the practice (Elving et al, 2011), an understanding that has been shared by other scholars in their investigative techniques (Chaudhri, 2016; Ellerup & Thomsen, 2018). Elving et al approached social responsibility communication using two frames, the first being social responsibility communication as beneficial to an organisation such as employee loyalty and the second being social responsibility communication being used to further share an understanding (Elving et al, 2011). Put simply, social responsibility communication can be a means to an end or it can be a two way communication to reflect on social needs. Chaudhri's article shares this framing but uses the term instrumental instead of means to an end, and relational, in place of shared understanding. Chaudhri also included a third term, constitutive, which explains social responsibility communication as being part of organisational communication and therefore intrinsic (Chaudhri, 2016).

### 2.2.1 A Comparison of Instrumental, Relational, and Constitutive

The idea that social responsibility communication should be used as a means to an end stems primarily from literature focused on corporates, with numerous studies showing the benefits of CSR communication for shareholders (Zu & Song, 2009; Khan et al 2012), corporate reputation (Aksak et al, 2016; Kim et al, 2015) and even employee loyalty and trust (Slack et al, 2015; Kim et al 2016). *Instrumental* social responsibility communications, despite primarily being focused on businesses does not negate Third Sector organisations from approaching social responsibility communications as a perceived means to an end. There are a multitude of studies that look at the effect of social responsibility communications in terms of benefits to its stakeholders, employees, volunteers and reputation, Lin-Hi et al explored how *perceived negative social responsibility activities* can be harming to the trust public have in Third Sector organisations (Lin-Hi et al, 2015). Gazzola & Colombo found the need for Third Sector organisations to engage in social responsibility communication in regards to actions of accountability and transparency, in order to obtain social legitimization (Gazzola & Colombo, 2011). Following on from that study, Gazzola, Ratti and Amelio stated that sustainability reporting, a form of social responsibility communication, of non-profits should be done 'to avoid or mitigate environmental and social risks that might have material financial impacts on their activities' (Gazzola et al, 2017, p.372). CSR frameworks were used in many of these studies when analysing Third Sector organisations which may be why, deliberately or unknowingly, they took an *instrumental* approach, this allows for an easy translation of theory into practice with some research stating that non-profit organisations existence relies on their ability to do social responsibility communication such as Greenpeace (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Unfortunately, it excludes discussion about communications that isn't deliberate, if Third Sector organisations are intrinsically socially responsible, then discourse on the subject may not be intentional or strategic, but as an organic consequence.

Social responsibility communication framed as *relational*, a two-way dialogue, has primarily been investigated from a corporate perspective. Crane & Glozer divided social responsibility communications literature using stakeholder theory, divvying up research spanning 15 years into four sections; *integration*, which focused on internal communication of social responsibility activities and practices with employees, *interpretation* which focused on how managers created social responsibility narrative internally, *identity* which focused on communication with external stakeholders, and finally *Image* which focused on external communications of social responsibility outside of stakeholders such as the general community around them (Crane & Glozer, 2016). The 4 typologies mentioned above overlap in places, for instance, how to identify external stakeholders

versus non-stakeholders. As Dawkins makes clear, and as the very basis of social responsibility communications, society is a stakeholder and therefore no-one can be excluded (Dawkins, 2005). As well as this, in regards to the internal practices, if a manager of a Third Sector organisation wishes to create an internal social responsibility communication strategy which would come under the category of *interpretation* (Crane & Glozer, 2016), and it is enacted as it is in many cases by having a dialogue with non-managerial employees, maybe even stemming from employee recommendations or practices, then that would overlap with *integration*. Another issue arising from a *relational* understanding is that it relies on interpretation of meaning into the practical which can be hindered by differing values, skillset, commitment, and understanding (Pedersen, 2006). The studies that have taken a *relational* view of, specifically, Third Sector organisations investigated the development of meaning through partnerships between corporates and non-profits who wish to create and communicate effective social responsibility policies (Lodsgård & Aagaard, 2017; Scandeliuss & Cohen, 2016; Trapp et al, 2014) which also found problems translating meaning into practice. The focus should not necessarily be with whom you have this two way dialogue, but the fact that sense-giving and sense-making of social responsibility communication is occurring (Morsing & Schultz, 2008), an understanding found in Cramer's study which states that you 'must communicate social responsibility internally to ensure social responsibility activities are integrated into the organisational culture' (Cramer, 2005, p.32). This also highlights the other issue which is the blurring of lines between *instrumental* and *relational* as in the case of Cramer's study, social responsibility communication is being used as a means to an end but that end is relational.

The concept of *constitutive* communication foregrounds 'the role of language and communicative processes in the construction ... of meaning' (Chaudhri, 2016, p.420). This is a meta-theoretical approach which sees organisations themselves as communication structures (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2015; Koschmann et al, 2015). Looking at organisations through a discursive lens looks at the process of ambiguous terms being translated into real world objects and events (Deetz & Eger, 2014) with social responsibility communications being an extension of this. Many scholars argue that *constitutive* communications goes hand in hand with organisational identity, whereby discourse, hyper textuality, and the symbolic representations of socially responsible actions and existence both create and define an organisation (Chaudhri, 2016; Chenhall et al, 2016; Hendersen et al, 2015). Naturally, this becomes quite complex as everything can potentially be seen as socially responsible communications, deliberate or otherwise.

### **2.3 Social Responsibility Communication in Practice**

The remaining of the literature focuses on the execution of social responsibility

communication internally from a practical standpoint. Though there's limited research specifically covering social responsibility, there have been a few studies to explore the common use and strategic value of internal communications in general within non-profits. Hume & Leonard scrutinized 5 such cases of large international NGOs in a bid to identify if internal communication was being utilized on a strategic level. Common problems identified were; lack of time and resources, lack of skillset or understanding about the importance of internal communications, as well as stakeholder pressure (Hume & Leonard, 2014). Though Hume and Leonard only focused their study on large multinational non-profits, challenges such as limited resources or lack of understanding due to non-professionalized workforce of volunteers, have been identified with other authors (Fitzpatrick, 2018; Orgad, 2017) with Wiggill et al going as far to say that 'NPOs do not always have the requisite knowledge of the value of strategic communication' (2009, p. 52). Academics that have attempted to explore internal communications of Third Sector Organisations do so from the perspective of either examining their tools and techniques, or that or their strategies as a whole.

### *2.3.1 Tools for the Execution of Social Responsibility Communication*

What is also associated with the practice of social responsibility communication is that of comparing and contrasting of tools and techniques. With such a large focus on the digitization of the Third Sector in the last decade, much of the previous literature has looked at electronic tools utilized by organisations for internal communication of social responsibility and more. Hackler and Saxton found that the most common tool used to boost mission-related outcomes internally was email (Hackler & Saxton, 2007). Unsurprisingly, as the advent of web 2.0 took over the Third sector started to embrace a multitude of digital tools. Krohling Peruzzo, just two years later, segmented all digital tools into two levels. Level 1 as interactive processes such as face-to-face contact, blogs and video clips and level 2 as creation of communication channels such as websites, letters and memos (Krohling Peruzzo, 2009). In the last decade, however, social media has gone from something new to a necessity of many organisations (Jenkins et al, 2018), causing recent studies of Third Sector communications tools to focus on the use of Facebook, Twitter and/or Instagram (Wilde et al, 2017; Raja-Yusof et al, 2016). Social media has been both a determinant of social responsibility communication strategy due to the transparent and quick-fire nature of social media (Ali et al, 2017), as well as a storytelling tool which allows you to engage with multiple stakeholders including employees (Kent & Taylor, 2016). The drawback of literature honing in on tools is that, by their nature, tools are only as good as their user which means an un-professionalised staff without strategy or skills, possibly due to age based digital divide (Eimjellen et al, 2014), may not be able to

properly utilize them. Multiple studies have found misuse of social media when communicating social responsibility, stating that communication was one way and informational rather than two-way, interactive and relationship building (Kent & Taylor, 2016; Cortado & Chalmeta, 2016).

### *2.3.2 Strategies for the Execution of Social Responsibility Communication*

Communication strategy at its heart is the framework used when linking an organisations mission with that of their communication plans (Steyn, 2004). Scholars, when attempting to examine social responsibility communication strategies do so from three different perspectives; legitimacy, branding, and stakeholder.

Legitimacy refers to the general expectation that the actions of an organisation are socially desirable and proper (Ellerup Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018) and therefore a legitimacy strategy is reactive by nature to the whims of external stakeholders. Crisis communication is one part of legitimacy strategy and is explored in regards to communication of social responsibility, Arvidsson (2010) found social responsibility communication as something that needs to be done to avoid negative impacts on the organisation. Legitimacy strategies used to mitigate risks to reputation were also explored by Sisco (2012) on non-profit organisations and found crisis communication in particular to be successful in so that it eased reputational consequences. The effectiveness of these strategies is measured from a purely external and one-way perspective, which is simplistic, but also excludes stakeholders such as employees/volunteers (Ellerup Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018). It can also discount other factors that contribute to social responsibility communication strategy. Shim & Yang (2016) found that legitimacy preservation strategies in regards to social responsibility blunders, only work when the reputation of the organisation is already good if it is bad it can actually harm the organisation further. This means that there are potentially other influences to the social responsibility communication strategy.

Branding strategy is a form of social responsibility communication that is proactive, it is about recognizing the value of social responsibility communication and establishing the story around that (McElhaney, 2009). Keller et al (2010) examined the use of brand communication in three major non-profits in the USA emphasizing the need for communications to reflect the mission statement and not to exclude the broader audience such as volunteers, unfortunately the study focused primarily on the logos of organisations and neglected other aspects such as the text and content of the communications essential in branding (Penttilä, 2019). The contents of the communications should be consistent and effective (McElhaney, 2009) and reflect the ongoing

social responsibility actions of the organisation (Mark-Herbet & van Schantz, 2007). The branding strategy of social responsibility communications, though it can be influenced by external factors, is reliant on communication managers (Mark-Herbet & van Schantz, 2007) but does not take into account other employees/volunteers or specify the use of particular communication contexts/channels.

Stakeholder strategy is where an organisation identifies the numerous internal and external stakeholders, engages with them in a two way dialogue with the aim of *sense-making* (Morsing & Schulz, 2006) which, in the case of social responsibility communication, means shaping communication strategies around the expectations of those involved. Du et al (2010) explored the use of stakeholder strategy for social responsibility communication and found that it aided in identifying communication context and channels. Du et al (2010) also found that external stakeholders can become sceptical of ulterior motives. Du et al's (2010) observations focused on corporations whose stakeholders' perceptions and/or expectations vary to that of their Third Sector counterparts, whose motives are usually understood to be the pursuit of a common good (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016). Stakeholder theory is primarily used by corporates (Wiggill, 2011) but in application, communications of social responsibility is dependent and even shaped by all stakeholders both external and internal (Sweeney & Coughlan, 2008). Despite Third Sector organisations having unique stakeholders to corporates, such as volunteers and donors, and experience different expectations of those stakeholders there is a very little research applying stakeholder theory to social responsibility communications for the non-profit sector.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

An interpretive approach was utilized in this research to explore how Third Sector organisations understand, develop and execute social responsibility communications internally. The study examined a group of Dutch based Third Sector organisations varying in sector and nature. A broad selection was needed in order to identify common themes as a sector rather than isolate by activity or professionalization. Adapting a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews running an average length of 60 minutes were conducted with employees, volunteers and interns, managerial and non-managerial, all of which have had dealings with creating, enacting and/or managing communications.

The topic of social responsibility communications within the Third Sector is underexplored in literature and as qualitative methods can be levied to investigate new topics (Hennick et al, 2010; Tracy, 2019), it is the best suited for this study. To delve into how Third Sector organisations experience, develop, and execute social responsibility communications, it is imperative to first examine how they understand social responsibility as that perception will shape how they see its communications. By identifying what an organisation deems as social responsibility communication, then the practices, tools, and strategies around it can be investigated. A qualitative method facilitates the translation of people's experiences and surroundings into meaning, in other words interpreting observations to find core meanings or patterns (Babbie, 2013; Tracy 2019). Semi-structured interviews, in particular accommodate the detailed experience of an individual whilst being open enough to allow for flexibility and introduction of new concepts and ideas (Edwards & Holland, 2013). By applying qualitative methods, a comprehensive and thorough insight into what Third sector organisations consider social responsibility, its communications, how they value those communications, and how they determine execution, strategy, and possible success.

#### **3.2 Operationalization**

To capture information for this study, qualitative interviews offered the benefit of adaptable processes while simultaneously accommodating a thorough analysis (Babbie, 2013). This helped enrich the theoretical understanding of social responsibility communication in the Third Sector. The unrestricted nature of semi structured interviews allowed for the interviewees to employ their own knowledge, experience and expertise, as well as reflect on it (Galetta, 2013). All

of which contributes to a much deeper analysis of the subject (Edwards & Holland, 2013). In order for all topics to be researched an interview guide was put together with a list of prepared questions, all of which were open ended to allow for an organic arise of new information.

The interview guide (see Appendix A) was sectioned into 3 parts, the first being demographic questions about the interviewee and questions about structural nature and mission of the organisation which was used to compare and contrast themes between organisations of varying sizes and nature, as well as establish whether the organisation had formal/informal communications channels and/or strategies internally or otherwise. The second section asked about the understanding of social responsibility and communications from the view of the individual as well as the organisation, in accordance with the literature social responsibility can be subjective and stakeholder dependent (Marcandella et al, 2012) and allows for the interviewee to start conceptualizing what may constitute communication of the aforementioned topic. Within this section, the interviewee is probed in regards to the value of social responsibility communications, how do organisations understand and/or define social responsibility? How do understand social responsibility communication? How do they communicate social responsibility in practice? This was in line with the literature which explored social responsibility communications for its value, opportunities, meaning and more (Chaudrhi, 2016; Cramer 2005; Morsing & Schulz, 2008). The final section looks at the practical elements of social responsibility communication, how it operates in respect to tools, management, communication processes, as well as what the interviewee may consider as good or bad practice, these questions draw upon the literature surveying social responsibility communications in a purely functional matter (Eimjellen et al, 2014; Hackler & Saxton, 2007; Krohling Peruzzo, 2001; Wilde et al, 2017).

Each interview started with a rehashing of the nature of the study outlined at the start of the interview guide (see Appendix A), that same interview guide was used for all participants but with probes and follow-up questions applied (Edwards & Holland, 2013) which allowed to the interviewee to further consider the topic and for the researcher to have a more holistic grasp of the concepts due to the diverse dialogues. At the end of each interview the interviewee was asked if they would like to add anything in response to the discussion they had had, as well as encouraged to ask their own questions.

### **3.3 Sampling**

For the purpose of this study twelve participants (N=12) from eight different Dutch-based Third Sector organisations were interviewed. As this is an exploratory study focused on internal communications of social responsibility then information-rich interviewees were key and therefore

purposive sampling was imposed. Purposive sampling, sometimes referred to as judgement sampling is a form of non-probability sampling whereby participants are selected by certain criterion (Robinson, 2013). In the case of this study all participants had to have worked/volunteered/interned within a Dutch-based Third Sector organisation either creating or managing communications and/or social responsibility policies. Establish criterion through purposive sampling ensures ‘that all the key constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered’ (Ritchie et al, 2013, p.79). The necessity for the interviewees be from Dutch-based organisations is because, though Third Sector organisations tend to be more international, where an organisation is based can influence how they perceive social responsibility (Peng et al, 2012). The need for them to work within the organisations stems from the research aim of exploring internal communications.

Interviewees were contacted via email with an explanation of the study and a request for an interview either in person or by video-chat. Utilizing video chat as option not only provides flexibility for otherwise busy schedules of the interviewees (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010) but also provided a relaxed setting for the participants which in turn contributed to a more genuine discussion but had the drawback of reliance on stable internet (Hamilton, 2014). Once an interviewee agreed and a date was set, the consent form (see Appendix B) was sent over prior to the interview and the participant was asked to read carefully before signing. Both the description of the study and the rights of the individuals were repeated to the interviewees before recording started. All twelve interviewees requested anonymity of themselves and the specific names of organisations and therefore both the organisations and the participants were given codes (see Table 3.3.1). Only 1 interviewee declined to be recorded and therefore their responses were caught in note form via a report. 3 were conducted face-to-face and 9 were over Skype or Facetime. All data was gathered between 20<sup>th</sup> May 2019 and 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2019, due to the nature of Third Sector organisations some interviews were moved due to last minute projects around the globe and therefore interviewing took longer than predicted.

**Table 3.3.1**

<b>Organisation Code</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Interviewees</b>
TSO1	Education and Research	Large	Interviewee A – Current Manager of Creative Copy and PR
TSO2	Environment/Advocacy	Large	Interviewee B – Former Head of

	and Politics		Communications
TSO3	Philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion/Health	Large	Interviewee C – Internal consult for communication, strategy and campaigning
TSO4	Social services	Small	Interviewee D – Head of Promotions
TSO5	Philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion/Education/International	Medium	Interviewee E – Senior Program Developer Interviewee F – Volunteer Coordinator Interview G – Volunteer and Fundraiser
TSO6	Social Services	Medium	Interviewee H - Replacing Director and Head of Fundraising
TSO7	Business and professional associations	Medium	Interviewee I – Communications Intern Interviewee J - Communications Intern
TSO8	Culture and recreation/ Social services	Small	Interview K – Content Creator
TSO9	International	Large	Interview L - Head of Marketing & Fundraising

With the aim of the research to explore internal social responsibility communications, interviews conceptualization and understanding of social responsibilities communication needed to be observed, along with their experiences or development and execution. Additionally, contact with knowledgeable participants within Third Sector organisations meant that actual process and

specific procedures involved in social responsibility communication could be explored.

Though not the primary intention of this research, classifying organisations into either; culture and recreation, education and research, health, social services, environment, development and housing, law, advocacy and politics, philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion, international, religion, business and professional associations, and unions, as per the internationally recognized groupings of non-profit organisations, international specifically means that they enact development programs in less developed part of the world (Salamon & Anheier, 1996). Though some organisations make come under several groupings, it will allow for the comparing and contrasting of organisational perspectives relative to their goals. The organisations were also categorized based on size of organisation in accordance with the OECD's (2019) framework whereby size is determined based on number of full-time employees, this was extended to include full-time volunteers in order to adapt to Third Sector organisations.

### **3.4 Analysis and Coding**

Thematic analysis aims to distinguish frequent themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as this study looked to identify common understandings, thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate technique. The process of thematic analysis comes in three stages; open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, with the aim of segmenting fragments of data, interpreting and reconsolidating them into meaningful perceptions (Boeije, 2009). To achieve, upon completion of the interviews, the 11 recorded interviews were put through speech recognition software and then cleaned using intelligent verbatim transcription as stated by Kawahara (2007) 'the deletion of disfluencies and redundant words ... correction of colloquial expressions and recovery of omitted particles ... segmentation of sentences and paragraphs' (p. 1). This simultaneously segmented the data and prepped it for analysis. As some of the interviewees were not English natives, some words were translated and appear in brackets in the transcripts and finally, as videoconferencing was utilized, dialogues about the failing internet connection were excluded but brackets indicate the breaks. All organisations and interviewees were assigned codes (see Table 3.1.1) in order to protect their anonymity.

Once the researcher had become familiarized with the data, the systematic method of thematic analysis was applied in order to seek out common 'ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). The data was segmented and categorized by theme (Guest et al, 2011). This was repeated until the data no longer provided new themes, also known as data saturation (Boyatzis, 2009). Open coding, the first step of the process, involved

systematically identifying segments of data that is noteworthy of the study and applying labels, this allows an overview of the relevant data (Braun et al, 2017). From there axial coding was used to recognize overarching topics by comparing and combining codes. The researcher referred back to the sub-research question for guidance in identifying the connections between codes as well as sub-themes. Selective coding is the last stage whereby the researcher, in a bid to identify logical patterns, reviewed each theme, filtered it and elected it to said pattern (Boyatzis, 2009). This final stage concluded the list of (sub-) themes in order to verify a precise set of data (Braun et al, 2017).

The conclusion of the process involved the procedure of forming a basis for reporting whereby, all assigned and labelled themes were attributed to the overarching topics found in the literature review. The sub-research questions were used as guidance when reporting the results.

### **3.5 Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity are essential 'for attaining rigor in qualitative research.' (Morse et al, 2002, p.13). Qualitative research is characteristically interpretive therefore special attention must be paid to assuring both validity and reliability.

For a qualitative study to be reliable it must have the possibility of being replicated (Crescentini & Mainardi, 2009) as well as insuring the 'accuracy and inclusiveness of the research data' (Silverman, 2016, p. 414). This study secures its reliability by its purposive sampling, establishment of topics through literature and then exploring those same topics in interview as presented in the interview guide (see Appendix A).

The validity of the study is the testing of 'the credibility of the analytic claims that are being made' (Silverman, 2016, p.414) from the data. This was mainly achieved by sourcing eight different Third Sector organisations in establishing a meaning and experiences, as well as ranging across sectors to get an industry overview.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Understanding of Social Responsibility in the Third Sector

The concepts that came forth from the thematic analysis in regards to the understanding of social responsibility in the Third Sector are stated in Table 4.1. These concepts derive from the interviewees general perceptions of social responsibility, how they understood social responsibility within their own organisations, as well as comparing and contrasting them in respect to the nature of their organisations.

Table 4.1 Category and Concepts related to SQ1

Categories	Related Concepts
Understanding Social Responsibility Personally	Social Responsibility as Undefined Social Responsibility as Holistic Social Responsibility as Actions
Understanding Social Responsibility Organizationally	Social Responsibility as the Mission Social Responsibility as Intrinsic Social Responsibility as a Project

When asked about their personal understanding of social responsibility the majority of interviewees spoke about it in a holistic fashion using broad descriptions like, *'taking ownership of the world around you'* (Interviewee A), *'make things better for one another and build a better world'* (Interviewee G), and *'think about the future generation'* (Interviewee L). These descriptions are reflective of individuals making ad hoc decisions with a general notion guiding them. This is in contrast to the participants who refer to social responsibility through specific action such as Interviewee F who stated *'find someone who needs help and help them'*, Interviewee H who used the anecdote of the time they went to Africa and saw the poverty rates and came back to the Netherlands to volunteer to help the poor, or interviewee E, who similarly having worked in education for 20 years wanted to use education to help people and whom identified educating as being socially responsible. There were only two interviewees whom were reluctant to define it, Interviewee D who stated that they never really thought about it and Interviewee C, the only participant to have worked in multiple large Third Sector organisations who said that the term social responsibility is *'a blur'* and *'overused'* (Interviewee C). What was intriguing about these findings was that the participants representing smaller regionally specific organisations had

narrower definitions than their multi-locational international counterparts.

The organisational understanding of social responsibility had the majority of definitions referring back to their mission statements with all three participants from TS05 referring to their organisational social responsibility as making the world and its children better through education (*Interviewee E; Interviewee F; Interviewee G*) which is a form of their mission statement. TS05 is small, only based in the Netherlands, and is concerned with gathering Dutch student volunteers to help with education in developing countries. TS04 is similar in that it is also only Dutch based, also small and is concerned with helping refugees in the Netherlands, the interviewee for TS04 also stated the social responsibility of the organisations is to help refugees, again referring to the mission statement. This same pattern appears with interviewee H who represents a solely based Dutch organisations (TS06) and declares their social responsibility to *'care for people who are too poor to buy food'* (*Interviewee H*), incidentally is also a varied version of their mission statement. Comparing this to their larger organisational counterparts whose offices are one of many throughout the world then the definitions broadens, Interviewee B who represented a large international environmental organisation talked about their organisation being social responsible through *'small problems or projects'* (*Interviewee B*). TS08, also an organisation with multiple branches around the world had its social responsibility described as the project of looking at *'who to work with and who not to'* (*Interviewee I*). However, in this same organisation (TS08) when the other participant was asked what social responsibility meant to TS08, they stated:

*'I guess they really wanted it to mean a lot because they were in water, so that's a big part of the environment. They really wanted to be socially responsible for their client because that's important for them. So I guess they really wanted to have a vision of this.'* (*Interviewee J*)

This is a much more intrinsic view of social responsibility within organisations as something that is a part of them and not a project to be done. Interviewee L, whom also represented a large organisation (TS09), shared this vision actually explaining that making it intrinsic instead of *'a project to be completed'* but rather an *'internal consciousness'* (*Interviewee L*). This tied into the repeated theme of an organisations obligations, Interviewee J, Interviewee L and even Interviewee K all referred to the accountability of the organisations *'you're under scrutiny and you're getting pressure everywhere'* (*Interviewee K*). This idea of accountability went hand in hand with an intrinsic understanding of social responsibility.

Another interesting correlation was that of the nature of the organisations and the individual understanding of social responsibility. Participants who represented volunteer organisations would talk about looking after people like *'make things better for one another'*

(Interviewee G) and *'find someone that needs help and help them'* (Interviewee H) or would recommend volunteering as a socially responsible action (Interviewee H), but those whose organisation was environmental by nature would refer to the world or your actions for example *'think about the consequences of your actions'* (Interviewee B). Interviewee C worked for an organisation specializing in human rights, whilst stating their belief that social responsibility *'for all of [the Third Sector Organisations] meant different things'* (Interviewee C) repeatedly referred to enacting employee rights within organisations as an action constituting social responsibility in general. Though the participants were asked for their personal understanding of social responsibility before thinking about their organisations it does not mean that one leads to the other, but there could be more of a two-way understanding or even influence between the organisation and the individual than first anticipated.

Examining on a deeper level in respect to the positive and negative representations of social responsibility, from an individual standpoint all but one participant (Interviewee D) considered social responsibility as important, positive and for everyone, Interviewee D stated that they *'never thought about it,'* but that seemed to change when probing into their organisations social responsibility organisations, especially in those who are smaller in regards to how many branches or in a more regional setting. The negativity seemed to stem from lack of resources such as:

*'We tried, we tried to be as green as possible but it took a lot of time and money and basically it better go to the other focus'* (Interviewee H).

*'[There was] a company who would like to give us donations, rather big amount of donations and it's a company that's working on second hand clothes [...][manager says] 'it's not really a big problem the second hand clothes in Africa' but I'm working there a lot personally and I think it really is. The management said, 'no, we need the money' so we accept the donation in this.'* (Interviewee E)

The negative reactions to social responsibility policies seemed to stem from lack of structure:

*'It was very difficult because the inside structure was not really structures to be socially responsible. [...] As far as I know there were no real policies.'* (Interviewee J)

As well as the organisation itself deeming itself socially responsible enough with its primary activities and therefor lulling themselves into a false sense of security:

*'It seems like in every place ... social responsibility confronts you with ethics and values, and*

*sometimes a lot of organizations don't have that as clear as they think they do. Sometimes they say, 'Oh no, we know our goal. We know our mission.' And then it gets a little bit blurry.'* (Interviewee C)

It can also be effected by varying priorities amongst staffers:

*'... reluctance sometimes because some people were just not into sustainability, focusing and putting energy into things like this. When the management team member was someone who was dependent on the food crate him or herself, they would just have one focus, make the crate as big and as beautiful as possible.'* (Interviewee H).

Or even dependence on smaller branches and volunteers with Interviewee L explaining that volunteers in other part of the country did not see social responsibilities as priorities, they just wanted to get on with fundraising and helping (Interviewee L)

It has indeed been shown in the data gathered, that social responsibility is subjective to an organisation and possibly even in connection with the individuals' views. It is defined by both the stakeholders and the community, in this case the employees and volunteers of the organisation are the stakeholders, and the community is the sphere in which they work, for example with refugees. Interviewee's created their own definitions which is in line with Marcandella et al's (2012) study which states that social responsibility understanding is dependent on stakeholders of individual organisations. Those definitions in the regional Third Sector organisations continually referred back to the mission or goals of their organisation when defining social responsibility, which could be argued as allowing the community they serve to help shape their characterization of the subject which is exactly what Martínez et al (2016) found. What was most intriguing, is that though the subjective nature of social responsibility was found in all organisations, only the regional organisations defined using the community. What is also interesting is the additional uniquely Third Sector factors that have contributed to their classification of social responsibility; dealing with volunteers who may not be professionalized, coping with resource dependency on donors or volunteers, scarcity of time, money, energy, or lack of common understandings which effect social responsibility policy priorities, were all elements found in all organisations of every size and is in line with the examination of Third Sector organisational problems identified by Hume & Leonard (2014) and Wiggill (2011). The problems identified by the interviewees all hinge on an understanding that social responsibility is something external, something to be done, which can be found in interviewees continuously referring to actions taken such as Interviewee H who stated repeatedly in their personal and organisational definition of social responsibility *'do what you can'* (Interviewee H) that is more in line with Elkington (2013) and Slaper's (2011) understanding. On the other side of this, there are organisations who understand and treat social responsibility as

something intrinsic and therefore do not need to spend extra energy or time, but it is something that is part of the organisations' construction, to behave in such a way as to reflect upon the consequences of their actions, this was evident in two organisations (*TSO2 & TSO9*) which lined perfectly with Pope et al's (2018) theory. There again was a division between regional and international Third Sector organisations whereby the smaller organisations consider social responsibility as something external and therefor an extra drain on their resources, whereas the larger organisations saw it as intrinsic and no need to expend extra resources as social responsibility is considered an ideology and another variable to be considered in all decisions perfectly summed up as the '*internal consciousness*' (*Interviewee L*).

## 4.2. Perception of Social Responsibility Communication

The concepts that came forth from the thematic analysis in regards to the understanding of social responsibility communication and how it is valued within the Third Sector are stated in Table 4.2. These perceptions derive from how the interviewees identified and used social responsibility communication in light of their organisational experiences. It is important to note that many interviewees had a multidimensional understanding of social responsibility communication and therefore used, knowingly or not, multiple related concepts in their descriptions.

Table 4.2 Category and Concepts related to SQ2

Categories	Related Concepts
Social Responsibility Communications as Instrumental	A tool for employee/volunteer loyalty A tool to avoid negative consequences A tool for competitive advantage
Social Responsibility Communications as Relational	Social Responsibility communication as a construction of common understanding Social Responsibility communication as a call to action
Social Responsibility Communications as Constitutive	Social responsibility communication as intrinsic

### 4.2.1 Social Responsibility Communications as Instrumental

For social responsibility to be considered instrumental then the organisation needs to be

consider it a tool for a means to end, it should be used to garner an advantage or to serve some end goal (Chaudhri, 2016). Each of the interviewees were asked if there was value in social responsibility communication to their organisations, how important was it, and what was their understanding in that case, with six immediately describing positive outcomes that social responsibility communications has facilitated, and therefore from an instrumental perspective. *Interviewee's G* and *H*, when asked about the importance of social responsibility communication within their organisation immediately spoke about the effect it had on their loyalty:

*'That's the reason I wanted to volunteer for them and I still try to collect for them if possible,'*  
(*Interviewee G*)

*'I liked working somewhere where they, they think about this and talk about this, it makes them good. I still like giving, I still raise money for them.'* (*Interviewee F*)

Both *Interviewee G* and *H* worked for the same regional education charity and both as volunteers. They describe their loyalty in terms of returning to the charity to volunteer on repeat trips with *Interviewee F* actually going on to work as a coach to new volunteers. This translation of volunteer loyalty into organisational commitment was found. *Interviewee A* also started off as a volunteer for a year and then became an employee, when asked to describe their experience with social responsibility communication they described positively the *'open line of communication [...]. They respond well to it and do their best to make those changes when you can.'* (*Interviewee A*). There appears to be an element of trust that social responsibility communications is a positive tool for action which in turn creates employee loyalty which is the same consequence as discovered by academics researching corporate social responsibility communication benefits (slack et al, 2015; Kim et al, 2016). The unique follow on from this loyalty that seems to only apply to Third Sector organisation is that of fundraising loyalty; *'I still try to collect for them if possible'* (*Interviewee G*), *'I still like giving, I still raise money for them'* (*Interviewee F*). Collecting money for a charity is a unique trait of Third Sector organisations and their staff/volunteers, and appears to be a distinctive benefit of successful social responsibility communication.

Arvidsson (2010) described social responsibility communications a useful tool to mitigate crisis in the corporate world and it appears that may also be true in the Third Sector. When asked the value of social responsibility communication *Interviewee C* described the following:

*'You're under scrutiny and you're getting pressure everywhere. So you need to behave better than perfect in that sense, and you need to show the world what you're saying'* (*Interviewee C*)

Whilst *Interviewee E* when asked the same question went as far as to say:

*'In general you can say that the NGO method nowadays, there is a challenge and there is a big challenge and without your help there is no future' (Interviewee E)*

Both of these interviewees held high positions within their organisations; Head of Communications and Head of Programs respectively. Social responsibility communication as a tool to avoid negative consequences seems to surround that of both external and internal stakeholders with *Interviewee C* talking about showing *'the world'* and *Interviewee E* stating that without help the organisation has no future, but examining more in depth their responses differ in that one is a protective tool against external forces whereas the other is protecting from internal collapse. It is true that the Third Sector is under scrutiny (Brass, 2018; Gayle, 2018) which is what *Interviewee C* describes in their interviewee using the example of the effect of the #MeToo movement on the organisation, *'And that's why I was saying that an external pressure and the scandals MeToo light into 'that could happen.'* (*Interviewee C*). They describe social responsibility communication as a tool of protection from the world around them. Compare this to *Interviewee E* who explains that if communication of social responsibility is not done correctly than the continuation and future of the organisation can be a jeopardy in regards to recruiting the volunteers they need and therefore. Diving deeper between their constructions of social responsibility, the common denominator between both is social responsibility communication as a means for transparency and accountability, *'preaching, it's doable, actionable and its happening. So it's not a wish, it's a reality.'* (*Interviewee C*) which is in line with the interviewee's high positions within their respective organisations. Gazzola & Colombo (2011) stated the need for communicating transparency and accountability within the Third Sector and it appears to be shaped as thus by some managers.

Some of the respondents understood social responsibility communication as a means to distinguish their organisation from others in a bid to secure people or fundraising:

*'It had value because as I said I was head of the department for fundraising. It was very easy for me to find funding and food because our story was so clear and it was so determined to communicate it' (Interviewee H)*

*'For the NGO it's really important because lots of people are looking for companies who make the world a better place. So if you communicate your social responsibility strategies or whatever, then people will be attracted to the NGO.'* (*Interviewee J*)

Competition between Third Sector organisations is not unheard of with Aldashev & Verdier (2009) exploring the notion of organisations quashing other organisations as a consequence of their growth. Both participants represented medium-sized organisations and therefore fit the profile that

Aldashev & Verdier's study, but the real underlying trend appears to be that resource dependency, on people or money, which is underpinning the understanding of social responsibility communication as something useful. This is in-line with previous studies showing the struggles of Third Sector organisations in regards to communication (Leonard & Hume, 2014).

#### *4.2.2 Social Responsibility Communications as Relational*

Social responsibility communication as relational is whereby the understanding of communication as constructing a meaning via two-way dialogue (Chaudhri, 2016). There were two key themes amongst the four participants whom had relational stances; social responsibility communication as a construction of common understanding and social responsibility communication as a call to action:

*'...it's the bridge between the institution and everyone else, either the volunteers, the employees, anyone will hear this, how social responsibility works and what it entails via clear communication messages or setups. If you don't have that, it's a challenge. So I think it's crucial.'* (Interviewee C)

*Interviewee C*, perhaps due to that that they had worked in multiple Third Sector organisations actually defined social responsibility communication as both instrumental, a tool to avoid negative consequences, but also relational. Relational understandings of social responsibility communication are based on stakeholder theory (Crane & Glozer, 2016) and the key sentence of *Interviewee C* is that the value is that of *'the bridge between the institution and everyone else'* a common theme among the respondents. Social responsibility in this case offers a chance to construct a common understanding via debate, discussion and conversation between multiple actors, *'everyone was willing to cooperate'* (*Interviewee H*). The other side to relational perspectives is that of social responsibility communication itself as being a call for action. *Interviewee K* spoke about the importance of organisations *'if [they] have individuals who are not that keen or informed'* (*Interviewee K*) to communicate and discuss with individuals the social responsibility policies and construct reasoning, *'it's also about talking to others and seeing what they see as social responsibility because that's the only way you can consider it further. [...] To bring it further. To make something happen'* (*Interviewee I*). The common theme across all the interviewees (*Interviewee C*, *Interviewee H*, *Interviewee I*, *Interviewee K*) who used relational descriptors, is that they all had unstructured less formalized communications within their organisations, *Interviewee C* describes having free reign within her organisations due to their consultant status, *Interviewee H* was a full time-volunteer who describes communication as primarily being done face-to-face and informally, *Interviewee I* was a part-time volunteer for a small organisation, and *Interviewee K* outlined the

informal nature of communications within their former organisation. The larger an organisation gets the more formal its communications (Willets, 2018) which appears to hinder relational understandings of social responsibility communications of Third Sector organisations, as all the interviewees mentioned except for the consultant (*Interview C*) whom stated they were autonomous with their communications, stem from small-medium sized organisations.

#### *4.2.3 Social Responsibility Communications as Constitutive*

Social responsibility communications as constitutive refers to the intrinsic nature of communications, all organisations are their communications and social responsibility is an extension of that (Chaudhri, 2016). Surprisingly, just as the small and medium sized organisations understood social responsibility communications in an instrumental and relational manner, the three biggest organisations interviewed valued the communications as constitutive.

*'It is not a project, it is intrinsic [...] don't address it like a project but get it in the skin of people so they think about it constantly' (Interviewee L)*

*'Everyone has their own approach. It's nothing that's so set in stone. [...] It's on everyone's mind. Most people here are bleeding hearts for the environment' (Interviewee A)*

*'...so there was this kind of feeling that we had to address the culture within the organization [...] we spelled out a set of values about how we wanted to behave' (Interviewee B)*

The common factors being that it is constant, part of the culture, not a project, and if defined by all people internally. This is an intriguing theory to delve into when applying to Third Sector organisations as it could be argued that as non-profits are socially responsible intrinsically (Pope et al, 2018) and social responsibility communications is just an extension of that integration than constitutive social responsibility communication could potentially be more prevalent in the Third Sector than in the business world. Of course, this is all reliant on an advanced understanding of communications and social responsibility, it is no surprise that the interviewees (*Interviewee L, Interviewee B, Interviewee A*) are/were all head of communications of the large organisations, a stipulation that supports the professionalization of Third Sector communications.

### **4.3. Communicating Social Responsibility in Practice**

The concepts that came forth from the thematic analysis in regards to the understanding of

social responsibility communications in practice including that of tools, strategies and challenges, are stated in Table 4.3. These perceptions derive from the practical experiences of each of the interviewees when discussing the development and implementation of social responsibility communications.

Table 4.3 Category and Concepts related to SQ3

Categories	Related Concepts
Social Responsibility Communications Tools	Formalized Communication Channels Informal Communication Channels
Social Responsibility Communications Strategies	Social Responsibility Communications Framed as Legitimacy. Social Responsibility Communications Framed by multiple strategies

#### 4.3.1 Social Responsibility Communications Tools and Channels

All interviewees were asked what tools and channels were used to communicate social responsibility, which were seen as effective, and which were preferred. 'Formal communication uses channels such as e-mails, newsletters, staff meetings, blanks, etc., and the message has a clear direction. Non-formal communication is non-systematic, uses any channel (mostly face-to-face), and stretches in all directions' (Král, & Králová, 2016, p. 5172). Upon examination it appeared that the smaller the organisation the less formalized the channels, with many of the small and medium organisations referring to informal meetings, word of mouth, or impromptu communications via digital/non-digital tools:

*'I can say it was sometimes quite informal. Sometimes you heard it by some other team member' (Interviewee D)*

*'Talking but sometimes maybe emailing. With a lot of people, with a lot of people in and out of the office and many volunteers then, sometimes email worked but talking also worked.'* (Interviewee F)

Two former interns from the same medium sized organisation explained that social responsibility communications was done through impromptu *'Meetings, a lot of meetings'* (Interviewee J), *'old documents from the board, and even post-it notes'* (Interviewee I). These informal ad hoc communication channels, though commonly used in smaller organisations were not the preferred

implementation, *'everyone [was] all over the place, I think the organisation wasn't much in place. I personally wouldn't fully know where to go with that.'* (Interviewee I) even when using a digital channel like email, Interviewee F explained that emails about social responsibility should be sent to everyone including volunteers but don't get sent out, whilst Interviewee H stated that emails are sent to everyone sporadically and just aren't read, and that it is unfortunate that they can only communicate social responsibilities face-to-face. On the other hand the larger corporations have a range of digital tools such as intranet, scheduled emails, newsletters, and social media, and are being pushed to use more formal communication channels:

*'Yeah, in terms of the tools that we used, we were quite big on our intranet. I always preferred email for this stuff, but we eventually had a policy of very clearly not sharing information on email. The idea was to drive everyone to the intranet.'* (Interviewee B)

Despite their preferences to maintain informal communication channels, Interviewee A makes a monthly newsletter for updates but still likes the Whatsapp group of the organisation where people are welcome to share impromptu information. Departmentally, social responsibility communications appear to fall onto the shoulders of Human Resources/Office Management in smaller organisations, but the Communication Management was in charge of it within larger organisations.

The professionalization tensions of Third Sector organisations attempting to adapt formalized practices referred to in literature (Markowitz & Tice, 2002; Ganesh & McAllum, 2012) has been found prevalent in the analysing of the tools and channels of organisations. Lack of professionalization in smaller organisations leads to lack of formal communications that can allow flexibility but can also potentially be an organisational detriment. Professionalization in larger organisations has led to a whole host of options, tools and channels for employees and volunteers alike, but there is pushback. It appears a combination of formal and informal channels is preferred within the larger organisations as pointed out by Interviewees A, B and C whereby a formal channel such as a monthly meeting or yearly forum discussing social responsibility and communications is established, but then it's up to a group of volunteers to move forward. This could be interpreted not as a tension but as an opportunity for Third Sector organisations to have the best of both worlds, whereby you keep the business attitude but not the practices (Dimitrov, 2008).

#### *4.3.2 Social Responsibility Communication Strategies*

Each participant was asked if their organisation had a strategy for developing their social responsibility communications, what the value was of it, and how the process began. For the larger organisations there were set procedures but the majority of the participants from small to medium organisations stated that there were no fixed strategies. In these incidences the interviewees were probed about particular social responsibility communications they had mentioned earlier in the interviews. From there they described the procedure from first inspiration, to development and execution, which allowed for insights into both the deliberate and the organically formed strategies of the Third Sector.

Legitimacy communication strategy is a response to external expectations of society and is generally ad hoc with organisations reacting to a potential threat (Ellerup Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018). When asked about the starting point of their social responsibility communication strategy there was a common theme of transparency:

*'For instance, when we put out communication moments and we have to walk a really fine balance. Because we're a very transparent organization. We always want to update our followers.'*  
(Interviewee A)

*'Then you have a huge and global demand for transparency, but you also have a very real need for due process and respecting the rights of people.'* (Interviewee B)

In both cases they refer to the external stakeholders of 'followers' and 'global demand' as well as emphasizing the lead role transparency takes when communicating social responsibility. This became particularly apparent when probing interviewee C who had worked at 3 major international Third Sector organisations. When asked the difficulty of communicating social responsibility reports that may be negative such as lack of diversity in their organisation, they responded:

*'we really wanted transparency and clarity. So we got engaged to help out and to provide what we knew. [...] I think in a corporate sector it's different, because you're doing money, and you take care of the brand, because if not, you will lose money. In this sector, you're there usually, not everyone, for the change and on a superior way.'* (Interviewee C)

Responding to potential external threats, the professionals referred social responsibility communications strategies as less embedded but rather a device to maintain their organisations integrity and credibility. Interviewee C when referring to the loss of credibility when communicating their social responsibility stated 'And when you lose that, it's really hard to turn around' showing that, even though many may not have fixed strategies the value of the communication is high.

*'In general you can say that the NGO method nowadays, there is a challenge and there is a big challenge and without your help there is no future for that challenges' (Interviewee E)*

Another theme that emerged was that of organisations utilising multiple strategies. TS01 stated that they had neither a social responsibility strategy nor a strategy for the communications of it, but when probed about how they dealt with the communications of items that did come under social responsibility such as switching to a sustainable coffee, the strategies they were describing did not stay within a legitimacy framework, but rather had elements that overlapped with stakeholder strategy depending on the stage of the development. Stakeholder strategy has numerous stakeholders engage and create an understanding of social responsibility communication (Morsing & Schulz, 2006). For instance, the communication strategy as mentioned above by *Interviewee A*, is legitimate by nature in its early stages as the company wants to prevent a crisis by maintaining transparency with their external stakeholders. Once the conversation begins, the strategy shifts and the organisation uses a stakeholder strategy to further develop their social responsibility communications.

*'More and more people come, and it becomes a conversation, and so, they do make the changes.'* (*Interviewee A*).

Another combination of strategies found was stated by the head of a large international organisation whom stated that the social responsibility communication, *'May "dilute our message" if you put other CSR messages it can get a mix'* (*Interviewee L*). Unpacking this further, the respondent identified two types of social responsibility communication, mission related communications and non-mission related communications. The strategy used for non-mission related social responsibility communications was legitimacy, that is, they will proactively communicate about it. Whereas mission-related social responsibility communications were dealt with using a branding strategy. A branding strategy is more intrinsic by nature as an organisation makes social responsibility communication an integral part of their story and brand, and is therefore more proactive and less dictated by the whims of external stakeholder priorities (McElhaney, 2009). For mission related social responsibility, the communications were inherent to the organisation and part of their story and message.

Only the large international non-profits had, in part or in full, a legitimacy framework for their social responsibility communication strategy. This is not unexpected as Third Sector organisations have become increasingly concerned by their reputations (Gent et al, 2015) which has led to trust in them lowering (Binder, 2018). Having the theme of transparency was also not

unexpected as, for many years, scholars have linked legitimacy issues of Third Sector organisations and that of transparency (Lehr-Lehnardt, 2005), as communicating their social responsibilities becomes more important. TSO1 who appeared to partially use stakeholder strategy described their internal communications as horizontal whereas, TSO2 exclusively used legitimacy strategy when outlining their social responsibility communication development whilst describing a top down approach to information dissemination *'A lot of organizations I work with have an internal network of information where they post their own materials'* (Interviewee, C). There is a possible connection between the organic social responsibility communication strategies and that of how their internal communication structures are shaped, but as there were so few organic strategies this cannot be a conclusive result. What can be concluded is there are more factors than first considered, that can effect which strategy for internal social communications each organisations choose or organically develop. What can be concluded currently, is that the majority big or small see a great deal of value in social responsibility communications which has led to either deliberately or organically developing a reactive legitimacy approach rather than that of a proactive approach.

#### 4.4 Social Responsibility Communications Barriers & Challenges

The concepts that came forth from the thematic analysis in regards to the challenges and barriers of social responsibility communications in are stated in Table 4.3. These perceptions derive from the practical experiences of each of the interviewees when discussing the development and implementation of social responsibility communications.

Table 4.4 Category and Concepts related to SQ4

Categories	Related Concepts
Resource Barriers & Challenges of Social Responsibility Communication	Time Money
Professionalization Barriers & Challenges of Social Responsibility Communication	Lack of Knowledge Lack or Organisational Structures Threats to Legitimacy

All participants were asked about the challenges and barriers they had experienced or witnessed when developing and executing internal social responsibility communications. There

were a range of challenges that stemmed from both internal concerns such as resources, professionalization, and organisational, as well as reputational. The differences found seemed to correlate to the size of the organisation with larger organisations worrying more about reputation whilst smaller organisations struggled with untrained staff.

#### *4.4.1 Resource Barriers & Challenges of Social Responsibility Communication*

The most common challenge found across both the large and small organisations was that of lack of resources. Resources did not just mean money but also staff or even time (Hume and Leonard, 2014). The issue of organisations not having enough time for social responsibility communication was found across the majority of organisations.

*'Time was always the big one. 'Do we have time to do this, we've got to save the world.' 'We're busy.' 'People should just get on with it.' That kind of thing is a constant pressure. What else were some of your lists?' (Interviewee B)*

*'It's all about work load. No time to read emails' (Interviewee L)*

*'Well, time and money, that's always a problem' (Interviewee D)*

Time is a resource that no one appears to have enough of, *Interviewees B and L* both work in large organisations with much more money but count lack of time as just as much a challenge as *Interviewee D* who represented a relatively small non-profit. Discussing a lack of time as a problem for social responsibility communication depicts social responsibility as an additional task rather than intrinsic to the organisations. *Interviewee B*, interestingly spoke about their organisations utilizing voluntary committees for social responsibility communication which would put time as a constraint on the employees.

Money was also a resource that was deemed as necessary for social responsibility communications in some organisations, but was lacking in smaller organisations

*'You, in general we agree, but when it comes to decisions people would like to use the money from their part of the program.' (Interviewee, E)*

Interestingly, money was not mentioned as much as other resource issues compared to time, even

amongst the smaller entities. Though this may be due to the nature of non-profits and their reliance on external funding means lack of money in general can always be an issue during decision making. Therefore when asked about the specific issues in regards to internal social responsibility respondents who did mention money spoke of their particular experiences and then state money as a general issue once they had listed the other individual barriers. An example being *Interviewee D* who listed problems from professionalization to society but had to be probed before they spoke of money, *'money, that's always a problem'* (*Interviewee D*).

#### *4.4.2 Professionalization Barriers & Challenges of Social Responsibility Communication*

Professionalism is made up of four elements, 'specialisation of knowledge; establishment of the profession as a livelihood; organisation and institutionalisation; and legitimacy and authority. (James, 2016, p. 186). When asked about the barriers and challenges for internal social responsibility lack of knowledge, lack of organisational structures, and threats to legitimacy came up time and time again. With many organisations dissemination of information became difficult due to untrained staff or volunteers.

*'it was also quite difficult to talk to everybody in the organisation for the reason of sometimes people didn't have any email or they didn't want to read email so we had to print hard copies. We then took a bundle of copies to the distribution centre and then two weeks later we found still on the desk, nothing happened with it, so yes it was very difficult to deal with'* (*Interviewee H*)

*'Yeah. It's not about that they were blocking the presentations. It's that they used communication in the worst possible way.'* (*Interviewee C*)

Specialisation of knowledge within an organisation refers to persons whom have received trainings, qualifications, and ever referrals to academic journals (James, 2016) within their subject, but many organisations deal with staff/volunteers who are neither communication professionals nor social responsibility specialists but who have to deal with internal social responsibility communication. When *Interviewee H* describes later in the interview that many of the volunteers do not care, or at least do not recognize the importance of strategic communications it reflects what Wiggill (2011) describes as a main difficulty in the Third Sector.

Organisation and institutionalisation refers to the mechanisms and processes that should be established within an organisation that is deemed professional (James, 2016). Lack of organisational structure was the most prolific problem across all the organisations regardless of industry or size. There were issues in regards to lack of internal communication processes such as

lack of meetings *'Not being able to talk in person is a barrier, obviously face-to-face communication is easier and smoother and things don't get lost in translation as oppose to email or other forms likes texting or something like that.'* (Interviewee K), as well as lack of dissemination of information processes:

*'But then we had to try and get is on our website which was our first challenge, there were always other people working on the website and it was very tough for us to get things where we wanted to, so we sort of misused the right people to do that'* (Interviewee H)

Interviewee I and J both represented the same medium sized international organisation and both spoke of the lack of processes in terms both internal communication and social responsibility communication:

*'I think that there was everyone all over the place, I think the organisation wasn't much in place. I personally wouldn't fully know where to go with that.'* (Interviewee I)

*'The structure of the company [...] It was a little all over the place, as I said in the beginning. But also I guess mostly the board.'* (Interviewee J)

All of these organisational barriers created big issues for communications. Social responsibility communication is a very new area for non-profits and maybe over time structure may appear, but for the time being lack of procedure remains the most common issue.

The final issue that participants expressed solely effected the large international organisations. James (2016) refers to professionalization of non-profits to include legitimacy and authority. It has already been mentioned when examining communication strategy that Interviewee L referred to the problem of communication social responsibility as something that *'May "dilute our message" if you put other CSR messages it can get a mix'* (Interviewee L).

*'So this is concern that what we're going to communicate internally is going to find its way into the outside world and people aren't happy with it. That, in turn, could do damage to the organization. Back then, it's difficult to speak completely candidly about everything that's going on.'* (Interviewee B)

*'I think, sometimes in my experience, organizations really take care of the outside not as a facade of what they're doing. They're so invested on the course that sometimes the duty of care with their own employees gets a little bit blurred.'* (Interviewee C)

This reflects what academics have found which is that Third Sector organisations are becoming more and more concerned with their reputation as their legitimacy is threatened (Gent et al, 2015). Yet discussing your internal Performance and accountability are key parts of legitimacy (James, 2016) and it has been found time and time again that non-profits who report on their social responsibility externally as well as internally can improve their reputation (Orlitzky, et al, 2011). This perception by the larger organisations that they shouldn't discuss internal social responsibility so as to avoid reprisal is actually not reflective of the consequences. Not communicating your social responsibility can lead to negative impacts on the organisations (Arvidsson, 2010).

## **5. Discussion**

The current research was concerned with exploring how Third Sector organisations understand, develop, and execute their social responsibility communications internally. With a focus on analysing how social responsibility is understood within the organisations, how they valued the communication of social responsibility, what factors do they consider relevant for the appropriate communication channels, which communication strategy is their social responsibility communication filtered through, and finally what hinders the strategy, a discussion on the theoretical and managerial implications follows. All implications are made with regards to the Third Sector within which the study was conducted, with consideration of the uniqueness of Third Sector organisations, but also understanding that they have some similarities with their fully professionalized private sector neighbours. Due to lack of literature related to internal social responsibility communication within the Third Sector, this study adds value to the industry and calls for further investigation of the topics investigated in the research.

### **5.1 Theoretical Implications**

As the Third Sector and all various types of organisations that come under it continues to be explored by researchers, it is imperative that more research be focused on the unique internal organisational structures that create and impact their internal social responsibility communications. Firstly, this study adds value to the current academic understanding of how Third Sector organisations understand social responsibility. Traditionally, and even up until recently, social responsibility understanding has been a corporate affair with multiple studies being focused from a private sector point of view debating whether it should be voluntary or mandatory, whether it's something intrinsic or additional (Elkington, 2013; Gent et al, 2015; Piacentini, 2000; Pope et al, 2018; Schwarz & Carroll, 2003; Slaper, 2011), but within this research it was found that the mission based nature of non-profits attracts personnel who themselves think about social responsibility from a different standing point, and appears to possibly influence how organisations as a whole understand it. This opens up a realm of opportunity to explore in the future. The second insight found, was in regard to how social responsibility communication within the Third Sector is studied. The Third sector is looked at as one industry with distinctive communication practices (Lewis 2005), but the majority of the studies focus on large and/international non-profits (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Gazzola & Colombo, 2011; Lin-Hi et al, 2015). This study found apparent differences between regional and international non-profits, which warrants further study into the factors that influence

an organisation's social responsibility communications. Finally, this research warrants further study of social responsibility communication strategies within Third Sector organisations, as professionalized non-profits appear to be curating unique, organically developed internal communication strategies that do not fit into the established frameworks in academia. In conclusion, many scholars are missing the opportunity to consider this non-profit industry as something worthy of its own frameworks and understandings. Everyday there are new pressures on organisations as they succumb to scrutiny of their activities, and not just externally but internally as well, and study of their communication mechanisms is important for the future of the industry.

## **5.2 Organisational Implications**

Several practical implications can be drawn from the current research in relation to internal social responsibility communications within the Third Sector. Being socially responsible is, arguably, part of the intrinsic nature of Third Sector organisations due to their influence over other industries social responsibility practices, their defined pursuit of a common goal, and/or that they are under ever increasing from scrutiny from their stakeholders, it is crucial that they should be able to communicate their social responsibilities effectively internally. This section elaborates on the practical and managerial implications that can serve Third Sector organisations, as well be a consideration for other members of the non-profit industry outside of the Netherlands.

First, it is imperative that Third Sector organisations recognize the importance not just of external but of internal communication of their social responsibility. With many managers caught up in the selling of their mission, they fail to recognize the wide array of stakeholders from volunteers to interns, who consider themselves purpose driven and may rely on these communications so they can feel positive that the outside image matches in the inside.

Secondly, it is necessary for a dialogue to be opened among stakeholders to establish what social responsibility means to their organisations. Social responsibility has been found in many cases, including that of this study, to be subjective. Lack of clarity and alignment were found to be issues when internal social responsibility communication was being enacted. The non-profits that considered it intrinsic to their organisation had the easiest time with this particular kind of internal communication, whereas those who pictured social responsibility as extra ad hoc tasks such as implementing a printing policy without discussing and creating meaning within their teams, struggled to communicate it internally.

Finally, an open discussion about the best internal social responsibility communication tools

is also needed within organisations. Within this study it was clear that participants had preferences and those preferences could have influence over their willingness to engage with social responsibility communications, but again every organisation is different and therefore needs to establish the most favourable tool for their internal staff or volunteers. What was made slightly clearer from this study is that a mix of formal and informal communication tools, regardless of medium, were the most popular among staff/volunteers/interns for internal social responsibility communication, as it allowed for flexibility and encouraged participation.

## 6. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the standing point for Third Sector organisations, based in the Netherlands, in regards to their internal social responsibility communication. There is currently limited literature exploring social responsibility in the Third Sector in general, let alone explorations of their communication strategy thereof. In order to investigate this particular subject matter the main research question was conveyed: *How is social responsibility communication understood, experienced, and practiced internally in Dutch-based Third Sector organisations?* To be able to answer this question, a qualitative approach which utilized in-depth interviews was chosen. A purpose sampling method was applied whereby twelve former/current volunteers, interns, and/or employees from nine different organisations of varying industries and sizes were interviewed.

This study offered the opportunity to begin to explore the relationship of social responsibility communications and Third Sector organisations. The existing studies surrounding the topic of internal social responsibility communications are predominantly from a business's perspective and even when they focus on a non-profit, they utilize corporate managerial frameworks to do so. To begin with, this research has shown that the majority of Third Sector organisations' understanding of social responsibility is subjective and influenced by; individuals personal ideas and understanding, the community or mission the Third Sector organisation focus on, external branches of volunteers or regional offices, and even size of the organisation. When exploring the actual understanding of social responsibility, there appeared to be a division between the larger international and the smaller regional organisations, in that the larger non-profits explained social responsibility as something intrinsic to their organisations and therefor there was no need for further resources to dedicate to it, whereas the smaller organisations consider it as an external task or project to be done which may take up resources. There were similar divisional lines when delving into the perception and value of social responsibility communication, whereby smaller regional organisations mainly understood social responsibility communication as a means to an end and even if the participant considered it important they expressed the lack of value their organisation as a whole put on it. However, many of the larger organisations tend to understand social responsibility communications in a more constitutive sense, in other words it was an extension of their core operations and intrinsic to what they do. In practice, professionalization of communication practices was the key element dictating which tools were utilized. Smaller organisations had less formalized practices compared to their larger counterparts which lead to some difficulties in dissemination of information, but this also allowed for more flexibility with

interviewees of larger organisations expressing concern over fixed tools being a constraint for effective internal social responsibility communication. Due to lack of internal social responsibility communication, smaller organisations organically evolved their strategies using either stakeholder strategies, legitimacy strategies or a combination of both, this was possibly due to the informal nature of their communications as stakeholders had room to speak. Larger organisations were more prone to using a reactive legitimacy strategies as their concern for reputation was more than that of their smaller counterparts. This same concern for reputation came up as a common challenge for larger organisations in enacting their social responsibility communication with some even noting a fear that what they discuss internally may be exposed externally. Other challenges and barriers found revolved around lack of resources, in particular time, but that was only reflective of the non-profits views of this particular kind of communication; if the organisation perceives social responsibility communication as an external project and/or tool then they see lack of time as an issue whereas those who see it as intrinsic and/or sense-making do not consider time as an issue. Professionalization was found to be a barrier in regards to both the organisational structure of internal communication or lack thereof, as well as the inability to coordinate due to lack of training of the volunteers/employees in the realm of social responsibility and communication.

## **6.1. Limitations of the Research**

The aim of this study was to explore how social responsibility communication was understood, experienced, and practiced internally in Dutch-based Third Sector organisations. Its aim was to investigate the currently underexplored arena of Third Sector internal communications, by way of seeking knowledge from the employees/volunteers within the organisations. The primary limitation of the study concerned the lack of varying participants within the organisation, though a variety of organisations themselves participated, many were only represented by one participant. To garner a full picture of the strategy of internal social responsibility communications, it would have been advantageous to have multiple participants within the organisations. This in turn would have made for more generalizable results in regards to creating a holistic picture of their organisations.

The second limitation lies with the expertise of the participants. As stated in the literature review Third Sector organisations are not always professionalized, and therefore do not always see the strategic importance of communications (Wiggill, 2011). The smaller organisations in particular have limited resources and the people dealing with communications may not be trained

professionals. What this meant for the study was that, though it was very important to include a wide variety of organisations size-wise, and despite the participants all being the best persons to talk to within their organisations, the expertise of the representatives of the smaller organisations were neither communications nor social responsibility. Though this added another layer to the analysis by being able to contrast volunteers and paid employees as well as international versus local organisations, the participants did struggle to understand some questions.

The third limitation is concerning the medium of the majority of the interviews, due to time constraints the majority of participants opted for video calling via Skype or Whatsapp Video. This meant there were occasional drops in connection which lost some of the flow of the conversation.

The final limitation is the novelty of Third Sector organisations dealing with social responsibility communications. Though the very large organisations are having to deal with it in one respect or another, the medium and smaller non-profit don't have it necessarily on their radar. Though it was interesting to see that social responsibility communication was being enacted within all organisations, even if not identified by the participants, some respondents considered it unimportant within their own organisations and something that gets in the way of their work.

In conclusion, as social responsibility is a complex topic in itself, professionalization of Third Sector organisations can be limited, and participants were from a wide variety of positions within their organisation meant that some of their answers were aimed at trying to provide a correct response. In these situations the researcher reassured the participants that there are no wrong answers and it is up to them to interpret. Despite the existing limitations, this study still presents significant findings that add to current literature, as well as providing guidance for future research on the topic.

## **6.2. Possibility for Future Research**

The recommendations outlined in this section are focused on having future research continue to explore the new avenue of Third Sector organisational internal social responsibility communications, by building on the current literature of non-profit communication and non-profit social responsibility.

Based upon the results of this study, the understanding of social responsibility leads to its communication of it thereof, therefore it is recommended that future research explores what social responsibility means to the Third Sector. It would be of interest not only to explore the differences in understanding between the Private and Third Sector, but also delve deeper into how they

exercise and/or communicate it. The aim would be to define a catered Third Sector framework for social responsibility conceptualisation.

The second recommendation is in regards to internal communications of Third Sector organisations. So far the literature has heavily explored external communications, but only lightly brushed the surface of internal communications. One of the challenges identified in this study was the effect of bad internal communications on dissemination of knowledge in regards to social responsibility. Again, Third Sector organisations also have varying, often horizontal structures that may not fit the current internal communications literature which focuses on corporations. A further exploration of the topic of internal organisation communications is needed for the Third Sector, with the aim of creating a distinctive understanding of a unique sector. By researching internal communications for non-profits, future research can control for internal communication structures when exploring niche topics such as social responsibility communication.

The third recommendation concerns social responsibility strategies. Much of the current literature, as with other subjects, focuses on corporations. The private sector is profit driven and that has led to studies looking at tangible benefits and effects of communication strategy. The third Sector is mission led and therefore the goals and effects of communication strategy vary. Further research into different internal/external communication strategies of non-profits in regards to their social media is needed. The goal of the research should be to identify the determinants of social responsibility communication strategy success in the Third Sector as well as identify what are positive effects on its employees and volunteers.

The final recommendation is to investigate further the effectiveness of communication tools in the Third Sector. Many different tools both digital and analogue were identified in this study with participants openly sharing their preferences, and what they perceive as effective. Research in the future should explore this further, maybe comparing and contrasting the results of different sized organisations to see which is most effective.

In conclusion, this study critiqued the understanding of social responsibility in the Third Sector, and explored the internal communications of it thereof, and therefore recommends that further studies closely examine Third Sector internal social responsibility communications.

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## 8. Appendices

### Appendix A – Interview Guide

This is an exploratory study which seeks to identify how organisations identify with and communicate their social responsibilities policies internally. The interview is divided into sections, the first section is just to give me some context so general questions about how your organisation is structured and communication routes within, then I want to see what you yourself think about social responsibility along with how you see it in your organisation, then how you communicate social responsibility, and finally, in culmination of everything we've discussed, a few questions about specifically internal communications. There are no wrong answers and feel free to ask your own questions.

#### 1. Demographics and General Information

- a. Can you please state your name, job title, and the name of your organisation?
- b. What is the focus of your organisation?
  - i. What are its goals?
  - ii. Who does it serve?
- c. How is your organisation structured/organized?
  - i. Do you have employees? Volunteers? Interns?
  - ii. Do you have departments?
  - iii. Do you have a chain of command?
- d. What are your key responsibilities?
  - i. Probe: Do you generally deal with communications internally or externally?
  - ii. Probe: Are you involved in the development of social responsibility policy, strategy or communication?

#### 2. Social responsibility Meaning

- a. What does social responsibility mean to you?
  - i. Probe: What Key words do you associate with social responsibility?
  - ii. Probe: What actions for you constitute social responsibility?
- b. Who should be concerned with being socially responsible?

- i. Probe: Is social responsibility just for companies or can people or organisations be responsible too?
- c. What does social responsibility mean to your organisation?
  - i. Probe: What does your organisation do for society beyond its primary goal and legal obligations?
  - ii. Probe: Do you recycle? Are you philanthropic?
  - iii. Probe: Is there a mission statement?
  - iv. Probe: Is there a vision set forward?
  - v. Is there a social responsibility strategy?
  - vi. Do they have a sustainability report?

### 3. Social responsibility Communication

- a. What does social responsibility communication mean to you?
- b. What is the value of social responsibility communication?
- c. What opportunities does social responsibility communication offer?
- d. What role, if any, do you take in social responsibility communication?
  - i. Probe: Do the managers ask for your opinion or guidance?
  - ii. Probe: If you had issues with social responsibility communication do you know who to talk to?
- g. What do you think is the key barriers or challenges for your organisation and its social responsibility communication?
  - i. Probe: Time?
  - ii. Probe: Money?
  - iii. Probe: Understanding or skillset?
    - i. Probe: Intercultural Communication?

### 4. What is the value of SR communication to your NGO?

- i. Which parts of SR do you communicate most?
  - 1. Probe: Mission statement? Other charities? Sustainability Reports?
- ii. What opportunities does SR communication offer?
- iii. What tools do you use to develop your SR communication strategy?
- iv. How do you develop your SR communication strategy?
  - 1. How are decisions made?

- v. What role, if any, do the employees take in SR communication?
- vi. Do you get resistance when developing your SR communication strategy?
  - 1. Probe: From other decision makers?
  - 2. Probe: From employees?
- h. Are there any barriers or challenges you face when developing your SR communication strategy?
  - ii. Probe: Time?
  - iii. Probe: Money?
  - iv. Probe: Understanding or skillset?
  - v. Probe: Protection of image?

#### 5. Internal social responsibility Communications

- a. How does information about social responsibility policies normally spread within your organisation?
  - i. Probe: Is it top down? Horizontal?
  - ii. Probe: When do you first hear about them?
  - iii. How often do you hear about social responsibility?
  - iv. When you hear about social responsibility, is it positive or Negative?
- b. What tools are used to communicate social responsibility internally?
  - i. Probes: Memos? Events? Meetings? Social Media?
- c. Are their formal and informal internal communication channels, if so what are they?
  - i. Probes: Line communication? Parallel communication? Word-of-mouth?
- d. Is internal social responsibility communication highly transparent in your organisation? If so, what makes it transparent? If not, why it isn't?
- e. Does the social responsibility policies communicated to you or lack of thereof effect how you perceive or relate to your own organisation?
- f. Based on everything discussed so far, what would you like to see for social responsibility communication?
  - i. Would you like to be involved in the communication strategy?
  - ii. Which department should be responsible?

- iii. How would you like to be communicated with in terms of social responsibility?
  - a. Probe: What tools?
- iv. What would you like to be communicated in terms of social responsibility?
- v. How often would you like to be communicated with in terms of social responsibility?

Any additional comments or questions in reflection of what we've discussed today.

### Appendix B – Consent Form for Interview

This study looks to explore how Dutch-based NGOs communicate their social responsibility internally. If you are happy to participate then please complete and sign the form below:

*Please Initial  
box:*

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before or during the interview without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

I understand that my identity and that of my organisation will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that my name nor the name of my NGO will not be linked with the research materials, and will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

I agree for this interview to be tape-recorded. I understand that the audio recording made of this interview will be used only for analysis and that extracts from the interview, from which I would not be personally identified, may be used in any conference presentation, report or journal article developed as a result of the research. I understand that no other use will be made of the recording without my written permission, and that no one outside the research team will be allowed access to the original recording.

I agree that my anonymised data will be kept for future research purposes such as publications related to this study

after the completion of the study.

I agree to take part in this interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

[Georgie Olivier](#)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Interviewer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

*To be counter-signed and dated electronically for telephone interviews or in the presence of the participant for face to face interviews.*

For further information please feel free to contact Georgie Olivier via email: [352503go@eur.nl](mailto:352503go@eur.nl) or telephone: +31 636064183 .

**Copies:** *Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the main project file which must be kept in a secure location.*

