



# The communicative constitution of academic fields in the digital age: The case of CSR

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## ABSTRACT

Although the digital transformation of knowledge production has put communication front and center in the production and recreation of academic fields, research on scientific communities still mostly promotes an actor-centric or institutionalist understanding of academic fields. This, we argue, points to the need for a digital transformation of our understanding of academic fields, one that does justice to the important role of communication in the production and recreation of academic fields. Therefore, in this paper, we draw on the “communicative constitution of organizations” (CCO) view to explore how academic fields are communicatively constituted. Our GABEK-based discourse analysis focuses on the communicative constitution of the academic field of corporate social responsibility. Our findings illustrate how academic fields are constituted through the enactment of three communicative practices: embedding, diverging, and converging. Furthermore, our results indicate how the communicative constitution of academic fields occurs through the sequential enactment of these practices. Our theoretical framework extends the literatures on scientific communities and CCO by beginning to develop a communication view of academic fields. These ideas also have implications for the digital transformation of social theory more generally.

## 1. Introduction

Ever since Kuhn's (1970) canonical ideas on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, scholars have been interested in how academic fields are organized as they produce and recreate social theory. Many of Kuhn's concepts gained traction. For example, the notion of “paradigms” has become a well-established term for describing the dynamics of scientific knowledge produced by academic fields (Shepherd and Challenger, 2013). Similarly, although less well-known, the author's writing on “scientific communities” has inspired many scholars to examine processes of organizing not just in and around organizations but academic fields. This practice has become particularly prevalent in management research. The widely observed fragmentation of this discipline (Durand et al., 2017; Hambrick, 2004; Whitley, 1984) has spurred thoughtful reflection on the organization of academic fields therein (e.g., Arend, 2016; Hambrick and Chen, 2008; Vogel, 2012).

Much of the literature on the organization of academic fields is actor-centric in that it conceives of scientific communities literally as groups of scholars, mobilizing metaphors such as “tribes” (Becher and Trowler, 2001), “guilds” (Battilana et al., 2010), “chapels” (Courpasson et al., 2008), and “colleges” (Crane, 1972) to reflect the ideological

character of these groups. This literature has been complemented by an institutionalist understanding of scientific communities, which foregrounds the legitimacy-building measures that are needed to establish academic fields (e.g., Biglan (1973); Bird et al. (2002); Hambrick and Chen (2008)). Although these approaches provide insightful descriptions and conceptualizations of scientific communities, they underplay an important post-Kuhnian idea: that scientific communities are constituted in and through communication (Vogel, 2012). Taking the central role of communication in the production and recreation of academic fields seriously is even more important in the contemporary “digital age” (Turkle, 2016) of knowledge production: Although scholars mostly focus on exploring the digital transformation of organizations and societies (e.g., Potstada et al. (2016); Rothmann and Koch (2014); Wenzel et al. (2017)), digitalization has also transformed academic knowledge production, making it easier to produce and consume research output through digital means such as online databases, word processors, video conferences, etc. (Kitchin, 2014; LeBaron, 2017). This has rendered communication as a primary mode of constituting academic fields (see also Roth (2017); Roth et al. (2017)) perhaps even more salient than ever before: If academic fields do not visibly communicate through journal articles that are accessible, e.g., via online

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databases, they do not exist (Marinetto, 2018). Thus, we argue that the digital age of knowledge production provokes a digital transformation of our understanding of academic fields, one that puts communication center stage. Therefore, we draw on the “communicative constitution of organizations” (CCO) perspective (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Schoeneborn et al., forthcoming) to explore the following research question: *How are academic fields communicatively constituted?*

To explore the communicative constitution of academic fields, we used a methodology that aids in coping with the digital transformation of knowledge production: a GABEK-based discourse analysis (Hielscher and Will, 2014; Zelger, 2000; Zelger and Oberprantacher, 2002). Specifically, we used this software-supported methodological approach to scrutinize journal articles that the academic field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has published in the five decades of its existence. Since its emergence in the early 1970s, this academic field has become well-established in management research (Crane et al., 2015). Yet, the academic field of CSR has always been contested, thus resulting in extensive and continuous debates on its core tenets (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Lockett et al., 2006). Given the visibility of this vociferous debate, the communicative practices (Schoeneborn et al., 2014) through which academic fields are constituted could be observed particularly well in this case.

Our results suggest that academic fields are constituted in and through three communicative practices: embedding, diverging, and converging. *Embedding* refers to situating an emerging academic debate as part of an established scholarly debate. *Diverging* relates to diversifying the academic debate and, in doing so, contributing to the detachment of this field from the broader scholarly debate. *Converging* involves contracting the academic field and, in doing so, contributing to establishing an independent academic field with proprietary debates. Our findings illustrate how academic fields are accomplished over time in and through the sequential enactment of these communicative practices. We synthesize these findings in a framework that suggests how academic fields are communicatively constituted.

Our results offer at least two interrelated contributions to prior literature. First, our study adds to a digitally-transformed understanding of academic fields. Specifically, our paper extends the mostly actor-centric (e.g., Battilana et al. (2010); Courpasson et al. (2008)) or institutional (e.g., Biglan (1973); Hambrick and Chen (2008)) literature on scientific communities by leveraging more fully and identifying patterns on the post-Kuhnian idea that communication plays an important role in producing and recreating academic fields (Vogel, 2012) and doing justice to the digital transformation of knowledge production, which ascribes an ever-more important role to communication in the evolution of academic fields (e.g., Roth et al., 2017). As we will explain, these observations have implications of the digital transformation of social theory more generally. Second, our study responds to calls to expand the boundaries of the CCO perspective (e.g., Schoeneborn et al., forthcoming) by illustrating how organizations that are not overtly conceived as such—i.e., academic fields—are communicatively accomplished. Taken together, our findings begin to develop a communication-centered understanding of academic fields, one that considers the formative role of communication by suggesting that academic fields are communicatively constituted.

## 2. Theoretical background: toward the digital transformation of understanding academic fields

### 2.1. Academic fields as scientific communities

In his seminal work, Kuhn defined academic fields as “scientific communities”, i.e., communally shared concepts that are grouped around a theory, phenomenon, ideology, or methodology (Kuhn, 1970). In doing so, Kuhn invoked the notion of “paradigm”, which relates to the system of values and assumptions in which a scientific community is embedded. Such a system, he argued, emerges as a scientific

community comes to agree on theoretical and/or methodological conventions and standards that define which modes of knowledge production are “better than its competitors” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 17) and, therefore, considered to be acceptable. As Kuhn specified, once such a consensus is reached, scientific communities enter a state of “normal science”, a mode of knowledge production that builds on and reproduces the shared paradigm.

By putting paradigms front and center in the analysis of scientific communities, communication is somewhat backgrounded in Kuhn's original ideas. While a widely-shared consensus on a paradigm, he argued, eases communication within scientific communities thanks to commonly-held conventions and standards, “communication problems [do surface] as problems of translation” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 175) between scientific communities, given that their communication patterns are based on different and, at times, incommensurable paradigms (see also Kieser and Leiner (2009)). These implicit, less direct references to communication have recently been picked up and extended by post-Kuhnian work. Specifically, Vogel (2012) demonstrated that communication plays a more prevalent role in the organization of scientific communities than Kuhn's original ideas suggest. As his empirical analysis indicates, communication is not just a derivative of pursuing paradigms, but serves as a primary, formative mechanism through which academic fields are produced and recreated as scientific communities.

Despite these insights, post-Kuhnian work on scientific communities has primarily promoted an actor-centric understanding of academic fields. Such work mostly uses metaphors that illustrate the ideological fragmentation of many academic fields and disciplines. For example, Vogel (2012) referred to academic fields as “colleges”, i.e., networks among scholars with shared interests (Vogel, 2012). In turn, Battilana et al. (2010, p. 695) illustrated knowledge production by describing academic fields as “guilds [that] live in groups of small cottages [and] all serve the same mission of training less experienced inhabitants in their craft”. Similarly, Becher and Trowler, (2001, p. ix) referred to academic fields as “tribes” that “inhabit and cultivate” knowledge domains. Gulati (2007) extended this idea by observing how scholars within “tribes” not only passively withdraw from broader academic debates through paradigmatic retrenchment, but also actively defend their domains through hostility against and the negligence of other academic fields. Relatedly, Courpasson et al. (2008, p. 1387) criticized contemporary knowledge production in that academic fields as groups of scholarly actors “establish their own chapel and [...] convince people that it is better than the neighbouring chapel”.

Other post-Kuhnian work extended these insights by promoting an institutional perspective on the evolution of scientific communities. This work puts forward the idea that scholars must establish appropriate institutions that legitimate the conventions and standards based on which they aim to build a scientific community. For example, Whitley (1984) argued that academic fields are institutionalized by making available a substantial amount of related tenured positions, such as professorships for “strategy”, “entrepreneurship”, “digital transformation” (see also Stinchcombe (1994)). Relatedly, Biglan's (1973) study suggested that academic fields emerge around institutionalized “subject matters”, i.e., shared understandings of the features and characteristics of research subjects that guide how a university's departments are organized. More recently, Hambrick and Chen (2008) conceptualized academic fields as “admittance-seeking social movements” that build their own legitimacy by mobilizing support for their norms and conventions (see also Merton (1973); Nag et al. (2007)). Bird et al. (2002) pointed into a similar direction by illustrating how the field of family-business research has gained legitimacy in the academic landscape.

Although these works have generated useful descriptions and conceptualizations of academic fields and, in part, hint at “a substantial need for discourse” (Nag et al., 2007, p. 936) in the constitution of scientific communities (e.g., Bird et al. (2002); Gulati (2007)), they do not fully leverage and unpack the communicative aspects of producing

and recreating academic fields. Therefore, we know much less about the activities and practices through which academic fields are communicatively constituted (Vogel, 2012). The underrepresented role of communication in writings on scientific communities is unfortunate because it leaves us with an incomplete understanding of the emergence and evolution of academic fields.

In addition to such incompleteness, the need for foregrounding communication in the constitution of academic fields is further provoked by the “digital age”. Specifically, digitalization, i.e., the “process of applying digitizing techniques to broader social [...] contexts” (Tilson et al., 2010, p. 749)<sup>1</sup> has transformed not only the practices of long-established businesses such as news publishers (Rothmann and Koch, 2014) and funeral homes (Wenzel, 2015; Wenzel et al., 2017), but also the ways in which scholars produce and consume research output (Kitchin, 2014; LeBaron, 2017): Rather than writing manuscripts by hand and submitting them via mail, we use word processors and submit manuscripts online; rather than going to libraries to search for relevant literature, we use online databases that make most of our papers readily available; etc. Especially the latter aspect has rendered the importance of communication in the production and recreation of academic fields perhaps more salient than ever before (Roth, 2017; Roth et al., 2017; Turkle, 2016): If academic fields do not create visibility in communication through journal articles that are accessible, e.g., via online databases, they are not recognized as a scientific community (Marinetti, 2018). Such salience of communication as a key part of the constitution of academic fields in the “digital age”, we argue, provokes a digital transformation of our understanding of the organization of scientific communities that does justice to the important role of communication in this process.

## 2.2. Digital transformation: toward a CCO perspective on academic fields

To gain a better understanding of the communicative constitution of academic fields, we draw on the “communicative constitution of organizations” (CCO) perspective (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Schoeneborn et al., forthcoming). While the CCO perspective comprises several theoretical approaches (Blaschke and Schoeneborn, 2017; Brummans et al., 2014; Schoeneborn et al., 2014), proponents of this theoretical perspective generally highlight as “the field’s distinguishing principle” (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Shepherd and Challenger, 2013) that “organizations are invoked and maintained in and through *communicative practices*” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 286, emphasis added). Thus, the CCO perspective is inspired, in part, by two turns in social theory. First, CCO builds on the linguistic turn (van Dijk, 1997) in that it defines communication as “the ongoing, dynamic, interactive process of manipulating symbols toward the creation, maintenance, destruction, and/or transformation of meanings” (Ashcraft et al., 2009); in doing so, this perspective suggests that communication does not merely “reflect” and express but rather performatively produces and recreates social reality (Cooren et al., 2011). Second, CCO scholars—especially from the “Montreal School” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014)—draw from the practice turn (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001), which considers social life as being produced and recreated in and through practices as “a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki, 1996, p. 89). Thus, by focusing on “communicative practices” as the unit of analysis, the CCO perspective draws attention to communication as an irreducible aspect of social practices (Reckwitz, 2002) through which organizations are constituted. These two characteristics turn the CCO perspective into a

useful lens for examining the communicative constitution of academic fields: It highlights important role of communication for the production and recreation of organized social phenomena, such as academic fields, and renders the communicative practices through which they are produced and recreated accessible to investigation.

Although not explicitly designed as a “digital theoretical language”, the CCO perspective is based on two central tenets (Schoeneborn, 2013) that overlap to a great extent with the key characteristics of transformations produced by digitalization: generativity and convergence (Yoo et al., 2012). First, this theoretical perspective is *generative* in that it suggests that organizations are “ongoing and precarious accomplishments” (Cooren et al., 2011, p. 1150). More specifically, CCO scholars highlight that organizations constantly come into being through the use of language and cease to exist if communication breaks down (Schoeneborn and Scherer, 2012). Thus, this theoretical perspective subscribes to the idea that “[c]ommunication is not just a peripheral epiphenomenon of human actions but the primary mode of explaining social reality” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 302). Therefore, the CCO perspective considers communication as “the central [part of] social practice[s] through which organizations are] talked into existence” (Cooren et al., 2011, p.1154). In doing so, the CCO perspective challenges widely taken-for-granted dualisms, such as micro and macro, action and structure, and internal and external: From this perspective, organizations are a phenomenon of “communicative practice”—a unit of analysis that conflates such dualisms (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011).

Second, in light of the precarious character of organizations, the CCO perspective does justice to *convergence* in that it examines how organizations are, nevertheless, stabilized and perpetuated (Schoeneborn, 2013). Thus, CCO scholars explore the “meaning-making practices” (Cooren et al., 2011) through which organizations are communicatively accomplished over time. That is, from this perspective, the ways in which actors construct and shape the meaning of concepts are a matter of how they organize themselves in and through the enactment of communicative practices.

In keeping with these tenets, CCO-based works have primarily focused on the communicative constitution of fluid social collectives. For example, Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) showed how *Anonymous* is continuously produced and recreated through the communication of identity claims by diverse actors. Stohl and Stohl (2011) highlighted the special status of clandestine organizations such as *al Qaeda*, which build on both secrecy and transparency in their communicative constitution. Schoeneborn and Scherer (2012) extended these ideas by suggesting that organizations can be talked into existence not only by organizational members, but also by third parties such as the media. As they argued, this results in “extreme invisibility of [*al Qaeda*’s] governance structures and [...] extreme visibility of its terrorist activities” (p. 963). Others have also examined the communicative constitution of project-based organizations. For example, Schoeneborn (2013) showed how *PowerPoint* permeates professional communication in and of consulting organizations. In turn, Vázquez et al.’s (2016) study of three project-based organizations showed how the very attempts of creating order through sense-giving communication sows the seeds for disorder, thus constantly reproducing the need for further meaning-making communication.

Although these studies provide useful insights into the important role of communication for the production and recreation of organizations, they still focus on social collectives that can overtly be conceived as more or less formal “organizations”. Sillince (2010) and Schoeneborn et al. (forthcoming) suggested expanding the explanatory potential of the CCO perspective by including other social phenomena that are not overtly conceived as organizations. In fact, as Cooren et al. (2011) highlighted, the communicative constitution of organizations not only includes observed organizations but also “the people who attend and interpret/respond to such performance—*analysts included*” (p. 1152, emphasis added). Similarly, Taylor denoted that academic fields,

<sup>1</sup> Tilson (2010) distinguished this term from “digitizing”, to which they referred as “the process of converting analog signals into a digital form” (p. 749). Through this distinction, they aimed to clarify that digitizing relates to a technical process, whereas digitalization implies behavioral changes that come along with digitizing analog parts of human *lifeworlds*.



including CCO, are also fluid organizations that are talked into existence as precarious accomplishments (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). This involves discussing theoretical ideas at conferences, informal conversations with colleagues during lunch, and communicating their ideas through journal articles. Especially the latter is highly important in the “digital age”. As it has become ever more important for scholars to produce and consume journal articles, academic fields seem to be primarily produced and recreated through communication in journals: Today, not books (Kuhn, 1970) or deeper communicative interactions at workshops and conferences (Marinnetto, 2018), but journal articles (Kieser and Leiner, 2009) are the central currency of management research. That is, if academic fields do not find an intellectual home in journals that are accessible through online databases, they are not recognized as such (Hambrick and Chen, 2008). Yet, despite these insights, we know much less about the activities and practices through which academic fields are communicatively accomplished. Therefore, we explore the following research question: *How are academic fields communicatively constituted?*

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Case selection

Our study focuses on the academic field of CSR. This multi-disciplinary field reflects on the societal impacts and social obligations of businesses (Crane and Matten, 2007). In the meanwhile, this field “has become mainstream” (Crane et al., 2015). However, the meaning of CSR has been extremely contested and (re)negotiated throughout the past five decades of the field's existence (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Carroll, 1999; de Bakker et al., 2005; Garriga and Melé, 2004; Windsor, 2006). The literature on CSR has long been dominated by instrumental views on CSR as a mechanistic instrument that firms can “manage” to achieve societal and business goals (Carroll and Shabana, 2010; Porter and Kramer, 2006), and the political-normative view on CSR, which foregrounds the political power of corporations and the need of businesses to achieve legitimacy in society (Scherer et al., 2016; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007). More recent studies have begun to develop a “communication view” on CSR (Christensen and Cheney, 2011; Guthey and Morsing, 2014; Haack et al., 2012; Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013; Schoeneborn et al., forthcoming; Schultz et al., 2013), which takes the formative role of communication in constructing and shaping meanings of CSR more seriously and does justice to the “polyphony” of this process (Castelló et al., 2013; Trittin and Schoeneborn, 2017). Consequently, the academic field of CSR is in a “continuing state of emergence” (Lockett et al., 2006 p. 133), constantly producing and recreating itself (Hambrick and Chen, 2008) through extended communicative struggles about the concept (Crane and Matten, 2007). Therefore, the communicative constitution of the field of CSR—from the beginnings in the early 1970s to date—is a suitable “revealing” case that helps us explore our research question.

#### 3.2. Methodological approach

To explore our research question, we examined the academic debate on CSR through which scholars performatively create and reproduce meanings of societal obligations and impacts of businesses. While there are various approaches to discourse analysis (Balogun et al., 2014; Heracleous, 2006), we drew on GABEK, a software-supported method for the detailed analysis of texts. GABEK builds on the idea that the meaning of texts is based on linguistic gestalts (Hielscher and Will, 2014; Mueller et al., 2011; Zelger, 2000), which is an adaptation of Stumpf's (1939) perception gestalt. The theory of the perception gestalt assumes that people perceive reality in the form of combinations of elements, and not as single elements. Stumpf explained this approach by referring to the analysis of music: As he argued, we do not perceive music as independent tones but a combination of tones—what we make

sense of is a gestalt, such as a melody.

By employing GABEK, one applies the idea of linguistic gestalts to the analysis of texts (Zelger, 2008). As Zelger argued, in contrast to assumptions of word count analyses, actors do not make sense of single words but *combinations of words*. Thus, a linguistic gestalt is constitutive in that it gives meaning through the context in which words are used and linked within a text. In this regard, this methodological approach differs from bibliometric studies, as it focuses on the analysis of meaning-making communication rather than actor-centric networks. Specifically, GABEK aids scholars in the examination of constitutive combinations of hermeneutic units with an emphasis on the linguistic, meaning-making details of texts rather than communicative episodes between individuals. This turns GABEK into a useful methodology for analyzing scholarly communication to explore the communicative constitution of academic fields because this approach helps us reveal how scholarly communication about CSR changes over time.

Although GABEK provides powerful software tools for the analysis of texts, it is important to note that this method does not replace researchers' interpretations.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, unlike artificial intelligence, which is grounded in complex algorithms that determine supposedly “optimal” solutions (see Lindebaum et al., 2019), researchers have to set the rules and criteria based on which the software displays patterns, and they have to identify and interpret the patterns that the software displays. In the next sections, we explain how we did so.

#### 3.3. Data collection

Our empirical analysis focuses on communication about CSR in journal articles. We examined journal articles because they belong to a main, if not *the* most important genre of scholarly communication that is constitutive for academic fields (Kieser and Leiner, 2009; Marinnetto, 2018), and the ideas that they convey are frequently cited as a legitimating reference in related genres of communication (MacKenzie, 2006), including conferences, books, newspaper articles, etc. In this regard, journal articles essentially contribute to the communicative constitution of academic fields, including CSR.

We searched for journal articles in the *Web of Science* database. Specifically, we conducted a full-text search using the keywords “corporate social responsibility”. This search yielded 6065 entries. Given the processual character of the communicative constitution of organizations (Cooren et al., 2011), we aimed to select journal articles that played a dominant role in the communicative constitution of the academic field of CSR over an extended period of time. Consequently, we relied on the number of citations as the selection criterion because, as Vogel (2012) argued, it serves as a proxy for the communicative reproduction of theoretical ideas and concepts in an academic field. Accordingly, we chose the 20 most-cited studies of each decade from the 1970s to date, filtering the search results by citation count and publication date. We came to choose this number by exploring the technical limits of GABEK-based discourse analyses. Specifically, in light of the enormous computing power that is necessary to conduct detailed textual analyses supported by GABEK, we probed our empirical analysis with greater and smaller sample sizes and then chose the one that preserved the possibility to process the data with the software and, at the same time, provided us with a longitudinal overview of the main theoretical debates that constituted the academic field of CSR over time. Because we found only 17 journal articles on CSR that were published in the 1970s, we included no more than these journal articles from this decade in our analysis. Thus, in total, our database included 97 journal articles, which facilitated a detailed textual analysis of combinations between more than 675000 words (see Table 1).

Table 2 provides an overview of our dataset. This overview reflects

<sup>2</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

**Table 1**  
Summary of journal articles.

Characteristics	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Sum
Number of texts	17	20	20	20	20	97
Number of words	112483	87072	144170	160691	171060	675476
Number of citations	570	1641	3509	9557	2643	17920

the multidisciplinary character of the academic field of CSR (e.g., [Crane and Matten \(2007\)](#)): The gathered articles were published in journals of various fields and disciplines, such as accounting, economics, law, marketing, sociology, and strategy, among others. Furthermore, as summarized in [Table 1](#), both the number of words and the number of citations have increased over time. Of course, the number of citations of journal articles published in the 2010s is much lower because this decade is still ongoing. As displayed in [Table 1](#), we ran a detailed analysis of texts, in part, with combinations between more than 170000 words per decade—to our knowledge, the most extensive GABEK-based analysis to date.

### 3.4. Data analysis

To reveal the contextual and inter-subjective meaning of concepts in the journal articles, we followed four consecutive steps. In the first step, we loaded the journal articles into the software and divided them into text units (see [Fig. 1](#)). According to [Zelger and Oberprantacher](#), text units are “meaningful short sections, which form a [...] sense unit” ([Zelger and Oberprantacher, 2002](#)). These authors sensitized that text units do not have to follow formal sentence structures; instead, they suggested that text units are “meaningful, coherent thoughts, which represent a comprehensible unit containing at least three and at the most nine relevant lexical concepts” ([Zelger and Oberprantacher, 2002](#)). Especially the analysis of interviews requires scholars to build text units that capture meanings across formal punctuation. Yet, in our analysis, we worked with journal articles. Given that publishing in academic journals exhorts scholars to convey meaning in every single sentence ([Ragins, 2012](#)), we considered each sentence as a meaningful text unit and let the software divide the texts into text units based on this rule. We began by testing in a random sub-sample of 13 papers from our dataset whether this approach would yield meaningful text units. Specifically, we checked whether each text unit that the software generated was understandable without requiring additional information. As we concluded that this approach generates reliable results, we repeated this procedure for all remaining journal articles.

In the second step, we defined relevant keywords (see [Fig. 1](#)). Keywords describe the basic meaning of words within text units and identify “relevant lexical concepts [for an] object-linguistic coding” ([Zelger and Oberprantacher, 2002](#)). Through the definition of keywords, redundant words (e.g., “a”, “as”, “to”, etc.) are eliminated without losing the central meaning of the text. Thus, in contrast to word-count analyses, which pull selective words out of their context, keywords reflect the meanings of combinations of words within text units. To identify such keywords, we composed a list of all (675476) words used in the journal articles. Then, we independently marked words in this list that they interpreted as irreducible signifiers of meaning, i.e., words that would lead to an obfuscation of meaning in the text units if they were erased (e.g., “CSR”, “firm”, “competition”, “customer”, etc.). Our selections coincided in 86% of all words. Then, we resolved disagreements on the relevance of words through discussions. This procedure resulted in 5892 keywords for the entire dataset. In addition, this step includes “synonymization”, i.e., the process of assigning the same label to similar signifiers of meaning ([Zelger, 2000](#)). Thus, we went through the list of keywords to identify similar signifiers of meaning (e.g., “corporate social responsibility” and “CSR”). Whenever one of us identified such an overlap, we discussed to which extent

the keywords would be alike. In the case of agreement, we merged the keywords and assigned the same label to it (e.g., “CSR”). Yet, in ambiguous cases in which words could potentially contribute to the communicative constitution of different meanings in different constellations of words (e.g., “firm” and “business”), we kept the keywords separate. As a result of the synonymization process, we obtained 2778 keywords. We then imported the synonymized list of keywords into the software and auto-coded all text units; i.e., whenever a text unit contained a keyword or a synonym of it, the software assigned a code with this label to the text unit.

In the third step, we generated linguistic nets to visualize linguistic gestalts (see [Fig. 1](#)) ([Zelger, 2008](#)). Inspired by [Wittgenstein's \(1967\)](#) language games, linguistic nets show in which context keywords are used: A link between two keywords illustrates that these two words have been used in one text unit. To generate such linguistic nets, we relied on the visualization tools of *AutoMap* and *ORA-LITE*. Specifically, we used this software to create five linguistic nets, i.e., one for the journal articles of each decade (see also [Vogel \(2012\)](#)). *ORA-LITE* also visualizes the textual proximity of keywords; i.e., the more frequently keywords have been used together in text units, the shorter is the visualized link between these words. Given the large amount of keywords that we obtained in the previous analytical step, visualizing all links would have resulted in highly complex networks that cannot be interpreted. To handle this issue, [Zelger and Oberprantacher \(2002\)](#) suggested concentrating on links that appear several times in the dataset because these links reveal linguistic gestalts that re-appear throughout the texts and, thus, highlight central communicative patterns. Therefore, we created several versions of the linguistic nets with different cutoff values. Specifically, the linguistic nets excluded links and keywords with less than 20, 30, 40, and 50 co-appearances in text units, respectively. In our selection of an appropriate cutoff value, we balanced the competing goals of reflecting linguistic complexity and maintaining interpretability. As we compared the linguistic nets across different cutoff values, we both concluded that the linguistic nets with a cutoff value of 40 best fulfilled these criteria, given that the other versions were either over-complex or under-complex. Therefore, we used the linguistic nets with this cutoff value for further analysis. In addition, we controlled if our findings are reliable independent of how we set the period. Specifically, we generated a “moving average” with a length of ten years shifted by five years. The resulting linguistic nets (available upon request) highlighted that, although the “moving average” produces a more nuanced transition between different meanings of CSR within this academic field, our theoretical arguments were still visible in these figures. Therefore, we concluded that our focus on decades in the historical development of the academic field of CSR provides reliable empirical insights into the communicative constitution of academic fields.

Finally, in the fourth step, we used the linguistic nets to uncover patterns that would explain how the focal phenomenon would occur (see [Fig. 1](#)). In our case, such patterns would become manifest as communicative practices through which the meanings of CSR were produced and recreated in the journal articles and, thus, through which the academic field of CSR was constituted over time (see [Cooren et al. \(2011\)](#)). For this purpose, we aimed to gain a better understanding of the communicative patterns that each of the linguistic networks conveyed—a process that we came to describe as “within-net analysis” (see [Eisenhardt \(1989\)](#)). Similar to other approaches to discourse analysis ([Balogun et al., 2014](#)), we began by identifying dominant themes and topics in each decade. Specifically, in line with the theoretical idea of constructing meaning through the combination of words ([Zelger, 2000](#)), we scrutinized each linguistic net with regard to the linkages between keywords. To identify more prevalent topics and debates among those linkages, we relied on *ORA-LITE*'s word proximity function; i.e., shorter links between keywords indicated a more prominent role of this debate in the journal articles. For example, in the scholarly debates of the 1970s (see [Fig. 2](#)), the close linkages between CSR and

**Table 2**  
Overview of the dataset.

Author(s)	Year	Short title	Journal <sup>a</sup>	No. of citations
<i>1970–1979</i>				
Abbott & Monsen	1979	Measurement of corporate social responsibility	AMJ	167
Alexander & Buchholz	1978	Corporate social responsibility and stock market performance	AMJ	149
Bowman & Haire	1975	Strategic posture toward corporate social responsibility	CMR	98
Grunig	1979	New measure of public opinions on corporate social responsibility	AMJ	32
Holmes	1976	Executive perceptions of corporate social responsibility	BH	31
Engel	1979	Approach to corporate social responsibility	SLR	29
Ostlund	1977	Attitudes of managers toward corporate social responsibility	CMR	19
Gavin & Maynard	1975	Perceptions of corporate social responsibility	PP	13
Walters	1977	Corporate social responsibility and political ideology	CMR	11
Shanklin	1976	Corporate social responsibility	JBR	5
Carroll	1974	Corporate social responsibility	JBR	4
Carroll	1978	Setting operational goals for corporate social responsibility	LRP	3
Blumberg	1972	Selected materials on corporate social responsibility	BL	3
Blumberg et al.	1973	Constituencies of the corporation and the role of the institutional investor	BL	2
Richman	1973	New paths to corporate social responsibility	CMR	2
Lowes & Luffman	1977	Junior managers' attitudes towards corporate social responsibility	MD	1
Sommer et al.	1973	Corporate social responsibility panel	BL	1
<i>1980–1989</i>				
McGuire et al.	1988	Corporate social responsibility and firm financial performance	AMJ	540
Aupperle et al.	1985	An empirical examination of the relationship between corporate social responsibility and profitability	AMJ	415
Cochran & Wood	1984	Corporate social responsibility and financial performance	AMJ	259
Jones	1980	Corporate social responsibility revisited, redefined	CMR	99
Epstein	1987	The corporate social policy process	CMR	84
Drucker	1984	The new meaning of corporate social responsibility	CMR	73
Zahra & Latour	1987	Corporate social responsibility and organizational effectiveness	JBE	38
Teoh & Thong	1984	Another look at corporate social responsibility and reporting	AOS	31
Boal & Peery	1985	The cognitive structure of corporate social responsibility	JOM	30
Orpen	1987	The attitudes of United-States and South-African managers to corporate social responsibility	JBE	14
Sohn	1982	Prevailing rationales in the corporate social responsibility debate	JBE	11
Moser	1986	A framework for analyzing corporate social responsibility	JBE	9
Baker	1985	The international infant formula controversy	JBE	9
Manheim & Pratt	1986	Communicating corporate social responsibility	PRR	8
Frederick	1983	Corporate social responsibility in the Reagan Era and beyond	CMR	7
O'Neil	1986	Corporate social responsibility and business ethics	IJSE	4
Filios	1984	Corporate social responsibility and public accountability	JBE	4
Gill & Leinbach	1983	Corporate social responsibility in Hong Kong	CMR	3
Spitzer	1981	Should the government audit corporate social responsibility?	PRR	2
Corlett	1988	Schefflerian ethics and corporate social responsibility	JBE	1
<i>1990–1999</i>				
Brown & Dacin	1997	The company and the product	JM	718
Klassen & McLaughlin	1996	The impact of environmental management on performance	MS	621
Klassen & Whybark	1999	The impact of environmental technology on manufacturing performance	AMJ	372
Roberts	1992	Determinants of corporate social responsibility disclosure	AOS	304
Burke & Longsdon	1996	How corporate social responsibility pays off	LRP	209
Swanson	1995	Addressing a theoretical problem by reorienting the corporate social performance model	AMR	167
Pava & Krausz	1996	The association between corporate social responsibility and financial performance	JBE	137
Esrock & Leichty	1998	Corporate social responsibility and web pages	PRR	133
Carter & Carter	1998	Interorganizational determinants of environmental purchasing	DS	126
Murray & Vogel	1997	Using a hierarchy-of-effects approach to gauge the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility to generate goodwill toward the firm	JBR	96
Kanter	1999	The social sector as beta site for business innovation	HBR	92
Arlow	1991	Personal characteristics in college students' evaluations of business ethics and corporate social responsibility	JBE	86
Robertson	1993	Empiricism in business ethics	JBE	75
Herremans et al.	1993	An investigation of corporate social responsibility reputation and economic performance	AOS	72
Greenley & Foxall	1997	Multiple stakeholder orientation in UK companies and the implications for company performance	JBS	66
Ibrahim & Angelidis	1995	The corporate social responsiveness orientation of board members	JBE	50
Gatewood & Carroll	1991	Assessment of ethical performance of organizational members	AMR	49
Rosen et al.	1991	Social issues and socially responsible investment behavior	JCA	46
Luthar et al.	1997	Perception of what the ethical climate is and what it should be	JBE	45
Bluedorn et al.	1994	The interface and convergence of the strategic management and organizational environment domains	JOM	45
<i>2000–2009</i>				
Porter & Kramer	2006	Strategy and society	HBR	1044
McWilliams & Siegel	2001	Corporate social responsibility	AMR	971
Sen & Bhattacharya	2001	Consumer reactions to corporate social responsibility	JMR	728
Seuring & Mueller	2008	From a literature review to a conceptual framework for sustainable supply chain management	JCP	632
Matten & Moon	2008	A conceptual framework for a comparable understanding of corporate social responsibility	AMR	571
McWilliams & Siegel	2000	Corporate social responsibility and financial performance	SMJ	568
Campbell	2007	An institutional theory of corporate social responsibility	AMR	545
Garriga & Melé	2004	Corporate social responsibility theories	JBE	528
Aguilera et al.	2007	A multilevel theory of social change in organizations	AMR	452
McWilliams et al.	2006	Corporate social responsibility	JMS	433
Luo & Bhattacharya	2006	Corporate social responsibility, customer satisfaction, and market value	JM	388

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Author(s)	Year	Short title	Journal <sup>a</sup>	No. of citations
Scherer & Palazzo	2007	Toward a political conception of corporate social responsibility	AMR	359
Porter & Kramer	2002	The competitive advantage of corporate philanthropy	HBR	323
Lemos & Agrawal	2006	Environmental governance	ARER	309
Dahlsrud	2008	How corporate social responsibility is defined	CSREM	297
Rothaermel et al.	2007	University entrepreneurship	ICC	291
Maignan & Ralston	2002	Corporate social responsibility in Europe and the US	JIBS	288
Hitt et al.	2007	Multilevel research in management	AMJ	280
Mohr et al.	2001	The impact of corporate social responsibility on buying behavior	JCA	275
Lichtenstein et al.	2004	The effect of corporate social responsibility on customer donations to corporate-supported nonprofits	JM	275
<i>2010–date</i>				
Carroll & Shabana	2010	The business case for corporate social responsibility	IJMR	290
Sarkis et al.	2011	An organizational theoretic review of green supply chain management literature	IJPE	250
Scherer & Palazzo	2011	The new political role of business in a globalized world	JMS	216
Aguinis & Glavas	2012	What we know and don't know about corporate social responsibility	JOM	208
Surroca et al.	2010	Corporate responsibility and financial performance	SMJ	163
Du et al.	2010	Maximizing business returns to corporate social responsibility (CSR)	IJMR	150
Dhaliwal et al.	2011	Voluntary nonfinancial disclosure and the cost of equity capital	AR	140
Carter & Easton	2011	Sustainable supply chain management	IJPDLM	137
Luchs et al.	2010	Potential negative effects of ethicality on product performance	JM	109
van Dierendonck	2011	Servant leadership	JOM	101
Tate et al.	2010	Corporate social responsibility reports	JSCM	97
Seuring	2013	A review of modeling approaches for sustainable supply chain management	DSS	95
Peloza & Shang	2011	How can corporate social responsibility activities create value for stakeholders?	JAMS	93
Kuo et al.	2010	Integration of artificial neural network and MADA methods for green supplier selection	JCP	92
Barnea & Rubin	2010	Corporate social responsibility as a conflict between shareholders	JBE	87
King & Pearce	2010	The contentiousness of markets	ARS	86
Benabou & Tirole	2010	Individual and corporate social responsibility	EC	85
Sheth et al.	2011	A customer-centric approach to sustainability	JAMS	84
Reuter et al.	2010	Sustainable global supplier management	JSCM	82
Bear et al.	2010	The impact of board diversity and gender composition on corporate social responsibility and firm reputation	JBE	78

<sup>a</sup> The abbreviations refer to the following journals: Academy of Management Journal (AMJ), Academy of Management Review (AMR), Accounting, Organizations and Society (AOS), Accounting Review (AR), Annual Review of Environment and Resources (ARER), Annual Review of Sociology (ARS), Business Horizons (BH), Business Lawyer (BL), California Management Review (CMR), Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management (CSREM), Decision Sciences (DS), Decision Support Systems (DSS), *Economica* (EC), Harvard Business Review (HBR), Industrial and Corporate Change (ICC), International Journal of Management Reviews (IJMR), International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management (IJPDLM), International Journal of Production Economics (IJPE), International Journal of Social Economics (IJSE), Journal of Business Ethics (JBE), Journal of Business Research (JBR), Journal of Cleaner Production (JCP), Journal of Consumer Affairs (JCA), Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS), Journal of Management (JOM), Journal of Management Studies (JMS), Journal of Marketing (JM), Journal of Marketing Research (JMR), Journal of Supply Chain Management (JSCM), Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (JAMS), Long Range Planning (LRP), Management Science (MS), Management Decision (MD), Personnel Psychology (PP), Public Relations Review (PRR), Stanford Law Review (SLR), and Strategic Management Journal (SMJ).

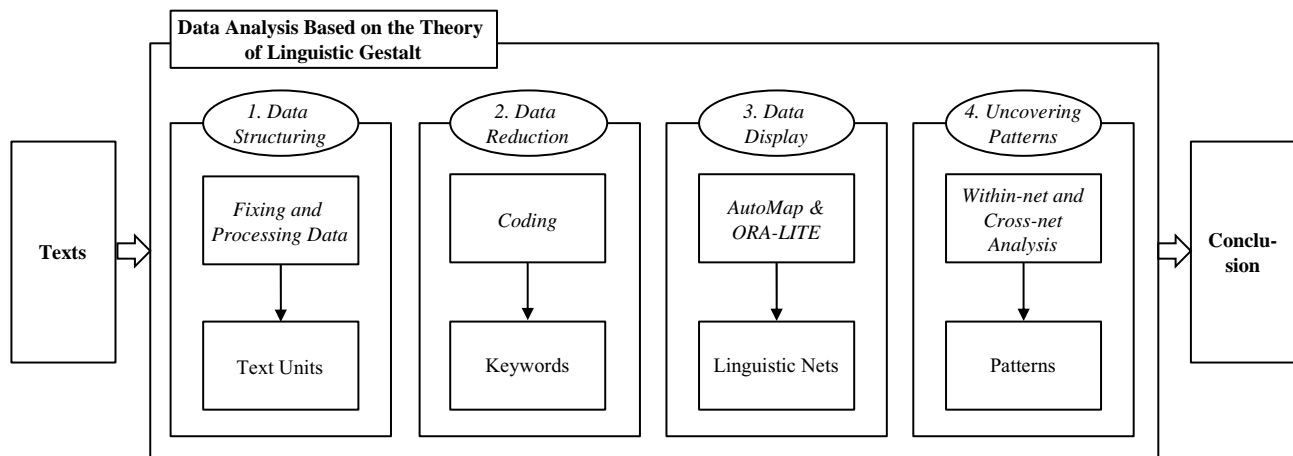


Fig. 1. The research framework of GABEK (Mueller et al., 2011, p. 131).

several actors who were assumed to “manage” the societal obligations and impacts of businesses helped us identify the emergence of an instrumental understanding of CSR. By repeating this procedure for all linguistic nets, we additionally identified a political-normative and an emerging communication-centered understanding of CSR. Given that a larger number of linkages with other words and, thus, its higher centrality in the linguistic net, indicates a stronger relevance of a keyword

in the analyzed communication (Zelger and Oberprantacher, 2002), we also gave consideration to the centrality of keywords in each linguistic net. This enabled us to observe the CSR-related scholarly debates that prevailed in each decade. For example, in the 1970s (see Fig. 2), the scholarly debate on CSR was largely focused on the management of firms—CSR itself played only a peripheral role. We subsumed such observations as the “first-order findings” of our study.



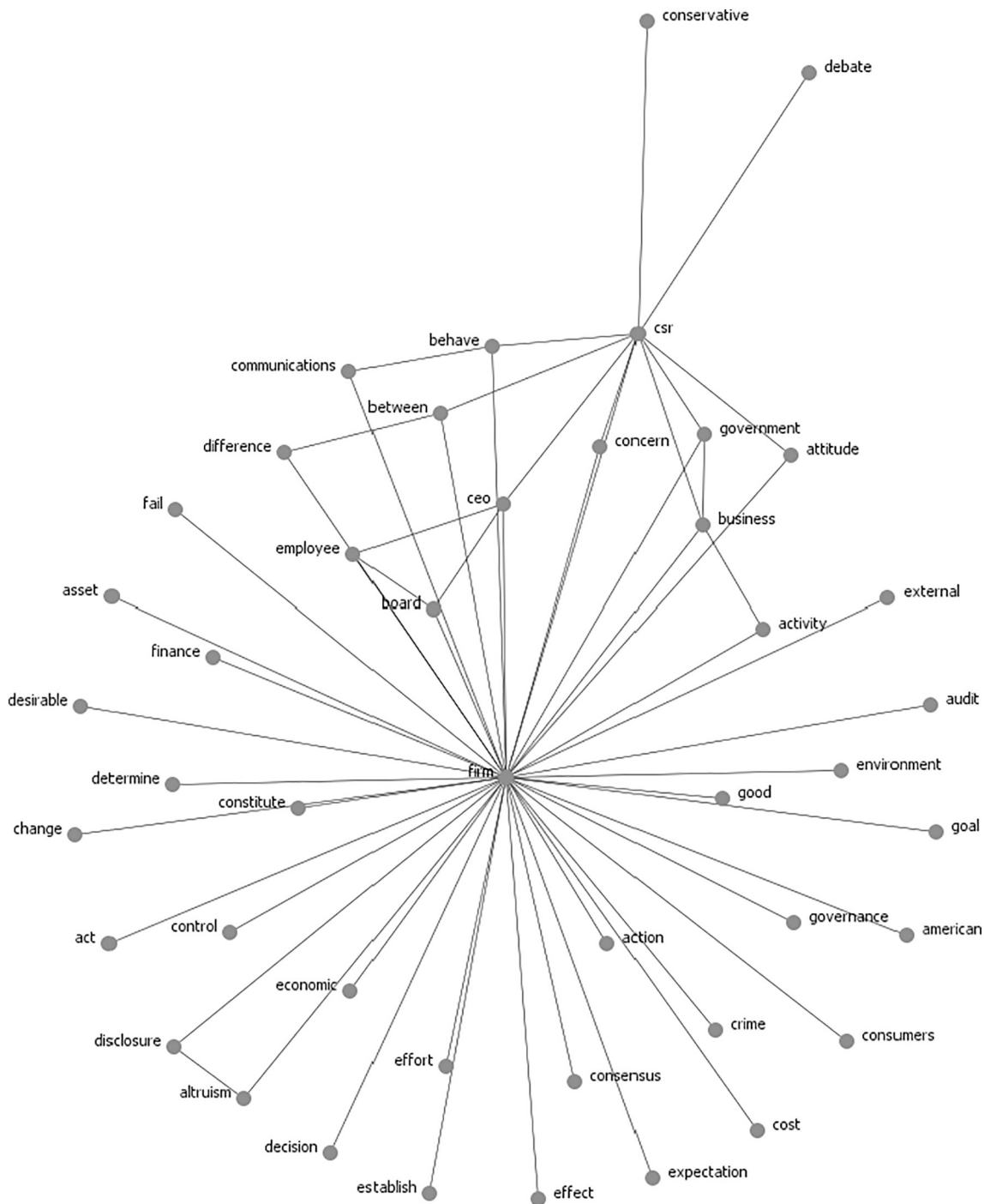
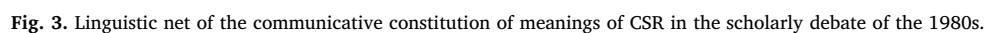


Fig. 2. Linguistic net of the communicative constitution of meanings of CSR in the scholarly debate of the 1970s.

Then, we extended our analysis of individual linguistic nets by giving consideration to communicative patterns across these images—a process that we came to describe as “cross-net analysis” (see Eisenhardt (1989)). Specifically, we began by observing how the centrality of the keyword “CSR” in the focal scholarly communication evolved over time. In doing so, we recognized a noticeable development of the scholarly debate on CSR across the analyzed decades: Whereas CSR started as a peripheral part of a broader scholarly debate on the management of firms (see Fig. 2), it gradually became an independent scholarly debate that makes only few communicative references to other academic debates (see Fig. 6). To gain a deeper understanding of this process, we put the themes and topics, which we identified in the previous analytical step, into a broader processual context; i.e., we

scrutinized which scholarly debates on CSR emerged, were intensified, or vanished over time. Based on this, we noticed that, starting from a peripheral position in the 1970s (see Fig. 2), scholars intensified emerging linkages between CSR and other parts of the scholarly debate on the management of firms in the 1980s (see Fig. 3) and, in part, in the 1990s (see Fig. 4). In doing so, they situated CSR as part of this broader scholarly debate. We refer to this communicative practice as “embedding”. Furthermore, in the 1990s (see Fig. 4) and partially in the 2000s (see Fig. 5), we noticed the emergence of a large number of CSR-related scholarly debates, which diversified the scholarly debate on CSR and, in doing so, contributed to the establishment of CSR as an independent academic field that consists of, and emerges through, its own controversial scholarly debates. We relate to this communicative practice

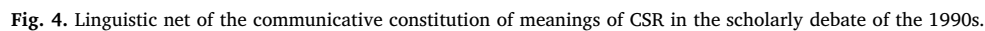




communicative practice was enacted led us to propose that the academic fields are communicatively accomplished through the sequential enactment of the explored communicative practices. We summarized these results as the “second-order findings” of our study.

#### 4.1. First-order findings: the communicative constitution of CSR in scholarly debates

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The linguistic net of the journal articles from the 1980s (see Fig. 3) highlights that scholars of this decade developed further concepts that linked CSR with ideas of the firm. Consequently, this debate became more nuanced compared to the 1970s. In the center of this debate, scholars argued how “CSR”, “ethics”, “business”, and “finance” might come together. Thus, they developed an instrumental understanding of CSR and debated to which extent socially responsible “activit[ies]” lead to beneficial “effect[s]”. Again, the papers promoted a U.S.-American perspective. In contrast to the debate of the 1970s, terms like “CEO”, “board”, and “employees” appeared in different and separate contexts.

In the 1990s, the debate on CSR became even more diversified around “CSR”, “ethics”, “business”, and “finance” (see Fig. 4). Thus, at that time, scholars intensified and deepened the instrumental understanding of CSR. Compared to the previous decade, scholars engaged even more in discussing methodological questions (“data”, “factor”, “analysis”, “empirical”, “evidence”), strengthened the role of employees and further reduced the role of CEOs in CSR-related issues (as the word proximities indicate), and highlighted even more the “difference[s]” to other “firm”-related debates (as the word proximity indicates). Furthermore, scholars linked CSR to many other (sub-)debates in management research, such as on capabilities (“ca” for corporate ability), “culture”, value “chains”, and gender (“female”). Moreover, they began to debate how firms can make sustainable changes in “favor” of the “environment” and handle “diversity”. Thus, in addition to the prevalent instrumental understanding of CSR, scholars also made (political)-normative conceptions of CSR more explicit. Overall, the linguistic net illustrates that the 1990s were a decade of conceptual complexification of scholarly communication on CSR. As a result, links between CSR and the management of firms became both tighter and more diverse, which indicated that scholars increasingly considered

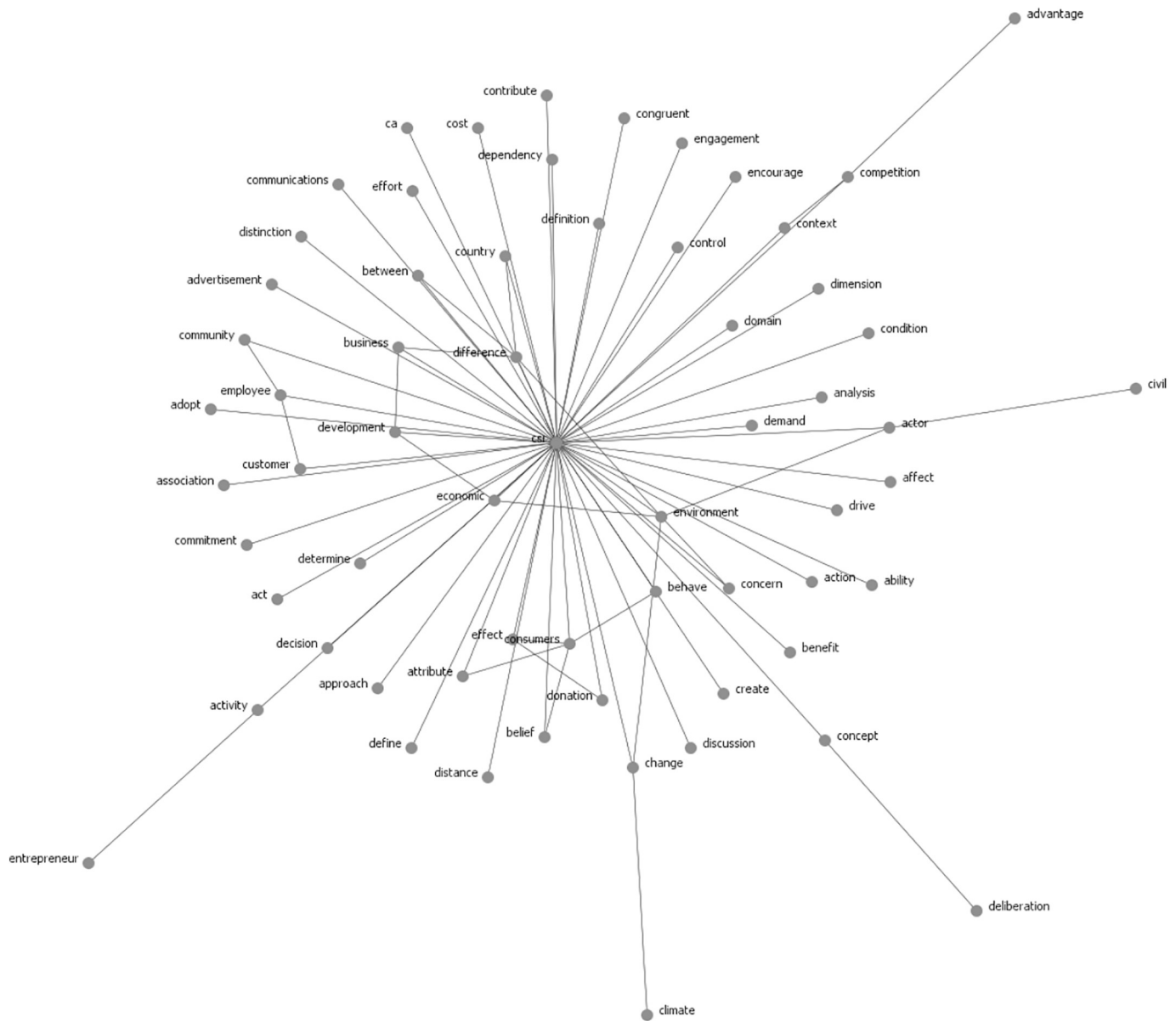


Fig. 5. Linguistic net of the communicative constitution of meanings of CSR in the scholarly debate of the 2000s.

CSR as an inherent part of management.

Fig. 5 highlights that the scholarly debate on CSR evolved even further in the 2000s. Whereas earlier debates focused on developing and intensifying linkages between CSR and broader debates on the management of firms, CSR now became an independent scholarly debate in which the societal obligations and impacts of businesses were put front and center. By discontinuing the establishment of connections with these broader debates, the scholarly debate in the 1990s began to (implicitly) assume that CSR is an essential part of the management of firms and, thus, needed no further debate. This development is also reflected in the emphasis on “difference[s]”, which shifted from adjacent scholarly debates to “countr[ies]” to gain a more nuanced understanding of CSR-related management practices and overcome the U.S.-American focus in the scholarly debate on CSR. In line with this stronger focus on CSR-focused debates in this decade, scholars intensified several sub-debates on CSR. For example, CSR-related debates on “consumers”, frictions between “environmental” issues (e.g., “climate” “change”) and the “economic” “development”, and “entrepreneur[ship]” became more prevalent. Another sub-debate tried to conceptualize the links between “community”, “customers”, and

“employees” and, in doing so, highlighted the political role of businesses in society. Thus, while discussions on how CSR can be transformed into “competiti[ve]” “advantages” still promoted the instrumental understanding of CSR, the political-normative understanding of CSR became more prevalent in this decade.

The ongoing scholarly debate on CSR in the 2010s continues the developments of the previous decade (see Fig. 6), i.e., contemporary scholarly debates on CSR remain focused on the term itself. In fact, the debate on diverging “definition[s]” of CSR has become prevalent, as the word proximity suggests. However, overall, scholarly debates on CSR have become much sleeker and more focused, as the reduced conceptual apparatus in the linguistic net compared to Fig. 5 indicates. For example, the CSR-related debate on entrepreneurship that emerged in the 2000s seems to have become less prevalent. Furthermore, the instrumental idea of transforming CSR into “competiti[ve]” “advantages” and debates on “country”-related differences have become peripheral. At the same time, scholars continue to discuss the role of “consumers” in CSR and have deepened methodological debates (e.g., “analysis”, “data”) by discussing empirical concepts such as Corporate Social Performance (“CSP”) and Corporate Financial Performance (“CFP”).

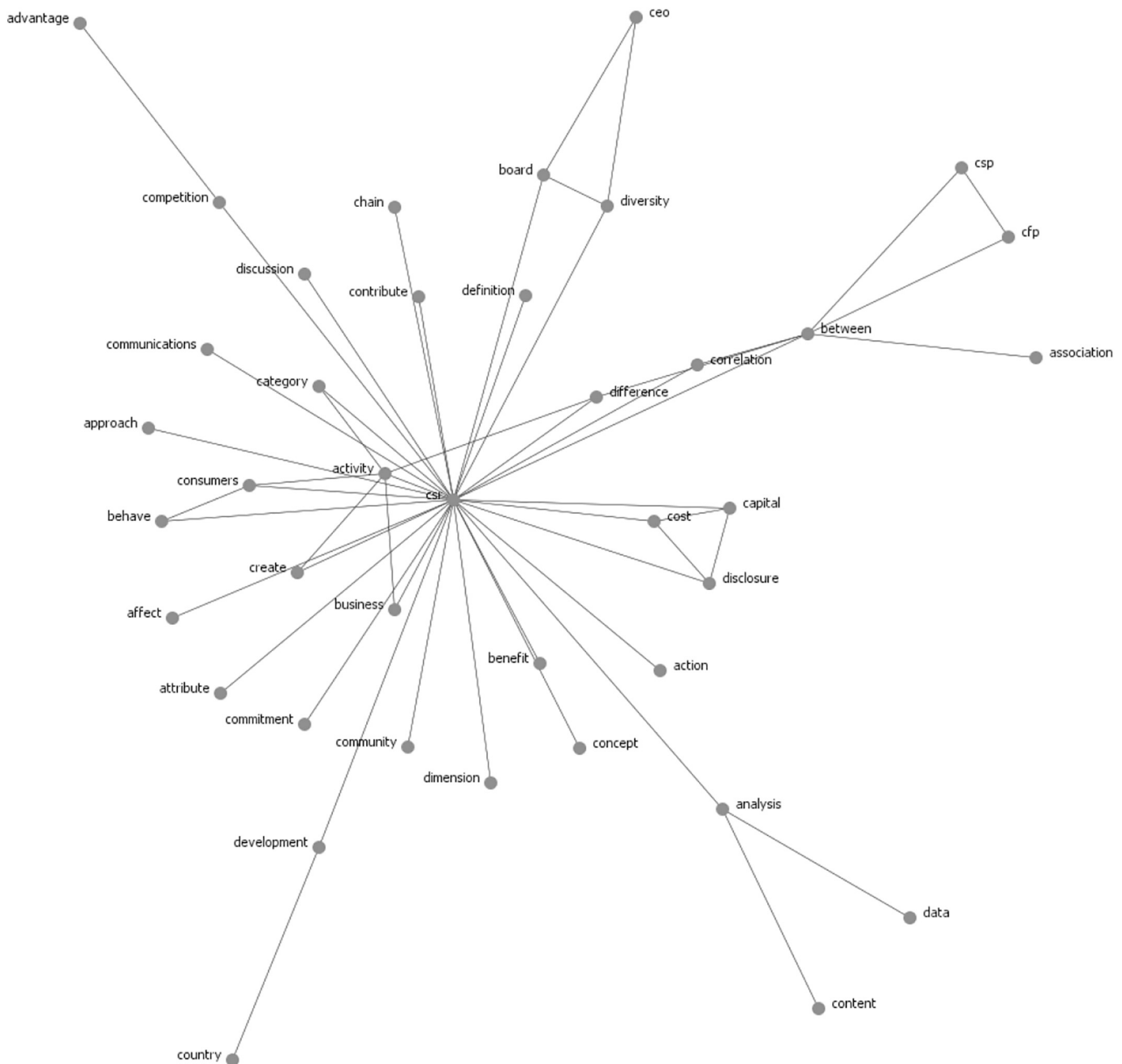


Fig. 6. Linguistic net of the communicative constitution of meanings of CSR in the scholarly debate of the 2010s.

Furthermore, in addition to a reinvigoration of earlier CSR-related debates, such as the importance of the value “chain” for successful CSR, the more focused scholarly debate on CSR also includes new debates, such as links with “diversity” in top management teams and, importantly, a stronger focus on the essential role of “communication” in CSR. Thus, Fig. 6 reflects recent trends toward a communication-centered understanding of CSR that takes the role of communication more seriously (as indicated by the direct link with “CSR”).

#### 4.2. Second-order findings: the communicative constitution of the academic field of CSR

The first-order findings emerged from what we called a “within-net analysis” of the prevalent concepts and themes in use in the scholarly debate on CSR in each decade. In turn, the second-order findings that we present in this section are based on a “cross-net analysis” of the

development of the scholarly debate on CSR, thus comparing and contrasting linguistic nets from each decade in order to identify patterns that describe how some concepts emerged, evolved, changed their relationships with other concepts, and vanished over time. As we leverage a CCO approach (Cooren et al., 2011) to the empirical examination of the scholarly debate on CSR, such patterns become manifest as “communicative practices”. More specifically, our empirical analysis highlights the sequential enactment of three communicative practices: embedding, diverging, and converging.

*Embedding* refers to the communicative practice of situating an emerging academic debate in an established scholarly debate and developing linkages with it. As became particularly evident in the scholarly debate on CSR of the 1970s, scholars did not constitute CSR as an independent field of research right from the beginning. Instead, they extensively built on the prevalent scholarly debate on the management of firms and drew connections with it. This is also reflected by the





Fig. 7. The communicative constitution of academic fields.

initial (and long-lasting) prevalence of the instrumental understanding of CSR, which was compatible with dominant perspectives in management research. Importantly, the scholarly debate on CSR began as a peripheral part of the broader debate on the management of firms that had very limited linkages with other debates. Yet, especially in the 1980s, scholars communicated about these linkages more intensively. By building these linkages, CSR became a more central part of the debate on the management of firms and, thus, became inscribed into this broader debate.

*Diverging* relates to the communicative practice of diversifying the scholarly debate and, in doing so, contributing to detaching this debate from the broader scholarly debate. Specifically, in the 1990s, the scholarly debate on CSR was still not communicatively accomplished as an independent academic field. However, scholars published works on a broad range of CSR-related topics. On the one hand, this communication about CSR intensified some of the linkages with the broader debate on the management of firms that scholars had established in previous decades; i.e., the tighter connections between “CSR”, “ethics”, “business”, and “finance” communicatively reinforced the instrumental understanding of CSR. On the other hand, scholars communicatively invoked alternative understandings of CSR in this decade, most importantly, the political-normative perspective on CSR, which scholars extended in the 2000s and through their communication about CSR. As the scholarly debate on CSR became more diversified, CSR increasingly became an academic field that consisted of, and emerged through, its own (partially competing) scholarly debates. Thus, in this process, scholars could increasingly contribute directly to scholarly debates on CSR and had to establish links with the broader debate on the management of firms to a lesser extent.

*Converging* refers to the communicative practice of contracting the emerged scholarly debate. Specifically, in the 2000s, scholars increasingly engaged in self-referential debates on CSR. By that, they invested less communicative efforts into linking CSR with broader debates. Instead, their communication focused more directly on constructing meanings of CSR by linking concepts with other CSR-related terms. This led to a simplification of the scholarly debate on CSR and, importantly, the communicative accomplishment of an independent academic field with proprietary debates. In the 2010s, scholars have been reducing the complexity of their debate on CSR even further. While the contemporary scholarly debate on CSR leaves some room for emerging perspectives, such as the communication view on CSR, it focuses much less on other debates such as the role of entrepreneurship, which have ephemerally emerged in previous decades. Therefore, our analysis suggests that, despite ongoing struggles with competing definitions as an important debate in the scholarly discourse on CSR, scholars have developed an increasingly dense language through which they communicatively invoke CSR as a distinctive academic field.

As our analysis suggests, the enactment of these communicative practices overlapped to a certain extent. For example, in the 1990s, scholars both continued to embed CSR in the debate on the management of firms by establishing linkages with other parts of this broader debate and diversified debates on CSR; in the 2000s, scholars both continued to enact the latter communicative practice and began to contract their debate on CSR. However, the overall development of the

scholarly debate on CSR from 1970s to date indicates a sequential communicative pattern: Scholars began by enacting the communicative practice of embedding (1970s, 1980s, 1990s), moved over to enacting the communicative practice of diverging (1990s, 2000s), and shifted toward enacting the communicative practice of converging (2000s, 2010s).

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we set out to explore how academic fields are communicatively constituted. For this purpose, we conducted a *GABEK*-based discourse analysis of the meaning-making communication about CSR in journal articles from 1970 to date. Our results suggest that scholars “talk” academic fields into existence in and through the enactment of three communicative practices: embedding, diverging, and converging. *Embedding* relates to situating an emerging scholarly debate as part of an established debate. *Diverging* involves diversifying the scholarly debate and, in doing so, contributing to the detachment of this debate from the broader scholarly debate. *Converging* refers to contracting the debate on CSR and, in doing so, contributing to establishing an independent academic field with proprietary debates. Our analysis indicates that it is through the sequential enactment of these practices that academic fields are communicatively accomplished. Fig. 7 synthesizes these findings in a framework.

Our findings offer two interrelated contributions to extant research: They (1) extend prior literature on the organization of scientific communities by beginning to develop a communication-centered understanding of academic fields, one that has implications for the digital transformation of social theory; and (2) expand the boundaries of the CCO perspective by exploring the communicative constitution of academic fields. We now discuss these contributions in more detail.

### 5.1. The digital transformation of social theory: toward a communication-centered understanding of scientific communities

Our study extends the literature on the organization of scientific communities. Most notably, our paper adds to a digitally-transformed understanding of this phenomenon. Whereas much of this literature has promoted actor-centric (e.g., Battilana et al. (2010); Courpasson et al. (2008)) or institutionalist (e.g., Biglan (1973); Hambrick and Chen (2008)) conceptualizations of scientific communities, our study draws on the CCO perspective to begin to develop a communication-centered understanding of academic fields. Specifically, by examining how academic fields are communicatively constituted, our study identifies patterns on the important but underresearched role of communication in producing and recreating scientific communities. In keeping with post-Kuhnian ideas on scientific communities (Vogel, 2012), our framework builds on CCO thinking (Cooren et al., 2011) in that it puts communication, rather than actors or institutions, front and center in the constitution of academic fields. However, it goes further in at least two ways.

First, our study explores specific communicative practices through which academic fields are constituted. One of these practices, “embedding”, illustrates how our findings extend our understanding of extant descriptions of the constitution scientific communities. Specifically, Gulati’s (2007) actor-centric conception of academic fields as “tribes” highlighted war-like hostility against and the negligence of other academic fields as central mechanisms for the (re)production of scientific communities. In turn, our study puts communication front and center and, in doing so, highlights building connections, rather than emphasizing disconnections, as the first critical stage for building a scientific community. Thus, a communication-centered understanding of scientific communities opens up the view for more “peaceful” ways of constituting of academic fields, ones that do not necessarily involve

direct communicative confrontation with competing scientific communities from the very beginning. In this sense, “embedding” might be considered as a protecting mechanism<sup>3</sup> through which scholars avoid such confrontations in order to shield their ideas before they are evaluated by competing scientific communities as being incompatible with their predominant paradigms.

Second, our study reconstructs the processual dynamics through which academic fields emerge and evolve, illustrating how academic fields are constituted in and through the sequential enactment of these communicative practices. In doing so, our study takes more seriously the digital transformation of knowledge production, which renders the important role of communication in the development and perpetuation of social theory (e.g., Roth (2017); Roth et al. (2017)) more salient. We do so not only by surfacing patterns on the communicative aspects of the production and recreation of academic fields, but also by drawing on, explaining, and illustrating the use of a GABEK-based discourse analysis (Zelger, 2000; Zelger, 2008), a software-supported method that aids researchers in the observation and examination of the formative role of communication in the organization of social phenomena, such as academic fields. More specifically, our use of GABEK extends previous descriptions of this type of discourse analysis (e.g., Mueller et al. (2011); Zelger (2008); Zelger and Oberprantacher (2002)) by transparently acknowledging the interpretive steps involved in GABEK-based discourse analyses and specifying these steps as “within-net” and “cross-net analyses”. This extension, we believe, provides useful guidance for future GABEK-based discourse analyses.

As our analysis of the communicative constitution of the academic field of CSR indicates, a communication-centered and, thus, digitally transformed understanding of scientific communities has interesting implications for the way(s) in which we conceive of academic fields. In particular, our findings partially contradict with prior literature reviews and bibliometric studies on CSR. These studies and reviews have predominantly proclaimed the fragmented and heterogeneous character of this field and the concepts and definitions that it discusses (e.g., Aguinis and Glavas (2012); Carroll (1999); de Bakker et al. (2005)), thus suggesting that the academic field of CSR has not built a consensus on a widely-shared paradigm and, therefore, not reached a state of “normal science” (Kuhn, 1970) yet. In fact, our findings reflect that struggles over definitions have become a dominant debate in the academic field of CSR. However, our longitudinal analysis of scholarly communication on CSR also suggests that this debate is just *one part* of the overall academic debate on CSR, which, when considered in its totality, has recently converged around a reduced conceptual apparatus; according to Kuhn, such ways of communicating are a derivative of building on a shared paradigm and, thus, one important indicator of “normal science” (Kuhn, 1970). This dynamic implies that, although the communicative struggles over definitions that we see in many academic fields (e.g., Giudici and Reinmoeller (2012); Massa et al. (2017); Nag et al. (2007)) might intend to achieve more conceptual differentiation and nuance, they—perhaps unintentionally—contribute to communicative closure by constantly “agreeing to disagree” and, thus, engaging in self-referential debates that reproduce the ever-same concepts and themes and are increasingly disconnected from other academic fields. This also indicates that “normal science” itself can, at least in part, be a communicative accomplishment: While external observations through literature reviews and bibliographic studies may lead to the conclusion that an academic field, such as CSR, may not have reached a consensus on a unifying paradigm yet, a scientific community may nevertheless establish such unity in communication, e.g., through repeated claims that such a consensus is reached (e.g., see Crane et al. (2015)) or, as this study indicates, by agreeing more or less openly on a condensed conceptual apparatus that eases communication within a scientific community and, therefore, accomplishes “the peculiar efficiency of the

normal research activity and [shapes] the direction in which it proceeds at any given time” (Kuhn, 1970) even in the absence of a paradigm. Thus, our study illustrates how a communication-centered analysis of academic fields can generate somewhat unorthodox results and provide a more nuanced understanding of how scientific communities evolve.

These observations have implications for the “digital transformation of social theory” more generally. While scholars have demonstrated interests in exploring the digital transformation of managerial and organizational phenomena (e.g., Rothmann and Koch (2014); Wenzel et al. (2017)) and, themselves, increasingly rely on digital technologies in knowledge production (Kitchin, 2014; LeBaron, 2017), social theory has remained largely unaffected by these developments. Specifically, as Roth (2017) suggested, social theorists have yet to explore “digital theoretical languages” that may nurture the digital transformation of social theory.

In turn, our study indicates that practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001) might constitute a prototype of such a “digital theoretical language”. Specifically, in our study on the communicative constitution of academic fields, we drew on the CCO perspective, which builds in part on the practice turn in social theory; in doing so, our findings suggest a sequential pattern of enacting three (communicative) practices through which academic fields are constituted. This indicates that social practices may be coded, decoded, and recoded in and through their performance, resulting in a continuous morphing from one social practice into another. In this sense, practice theory offers to incorporate the two main features of digital transformation, generativity and convergence (Yoo et al., 2012), into the repertoire of social theory: a convergence toward prevalent, institutionalized social practices on one side and the generative transformation of these practices through their enactment on the other side.

Thus, our study adds to the digital transformation of social theory by uncovering practice theory as a potential programming language for this process. Future research might, thus, build on these ideas to deepen our understanding of the specific coding, decoding, and recoding mechanisms in place, which will help scholars conduct a practice-based digital transformation of social theory.

## 5.2. The communicative constitution of academic fields

Our findings also extend to the emerging CCO perspective. Specifically, our study responds to calls to expand the boundaries of the CCO perspective beyond focusing mainly on social phenomena that can be overtly conceived as organizations (e.g., Schoeneborn et al. (forthcoming); Sillince (2010)) by exploring how *academic fields* are communicatively accomplished. Of course, the academic field of CSR differs from fluid organizations such as hacker collectives, terrorist organizations, and project-based organizations, which prior studies have explored from a CCO perspective (e.g., Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015); Schoeneborn and Scherer (2012); Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013)), in many ways. However, our analysis suggests that academic fields are also somewhat fluid communicative accomplishments that are constantly (re)organized and talked into existence through the sequential enactment of communicative practices. Thus, our findings illustrate that the CCO perspective is an insightful theoretical approach to the examination of social phenomena that are not overtly conceived as organizations. Yet, our study goes further in that it contributes to bringing the assumption of the performativity of communication (e.g., Ashcraft et al. (2009); Cooren et al. (2011)) to another level. In particular, our study indicates how meanings of theoretical concepts are performatively constructed in and through the communicative constitution of an academic field—i.e., not by observed actors but observers. More specifically, our study illustrates how theoretical concepts emerge, evolve, and vanish in and through enacting the very communicative practices through which academic fields are organized. Thus, our study suggests that a communication-centered examination of academic fields offers reflexive potentials: It draws attention to the

<sup>3</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

formative role of scholarly communication, provides access to the underlying communicative dynamics of this process, and—with a critical stance (e.g., Fairclough (2003); Wenzel et al., forthcoming)—helps scholars reveal problematic aspects of these dynamics. For example, our study surfaces how the communicative constitution of the academic field of CSR contributed to creating and reproducing an instrumental understanding of CSR, which is grounded in the allegedly “neoliberal” ideology of elites (Vaara and Fay (2012), see also Roth et al. (forthcoming)). Thus, our study suggests that, while the creation of compatibilities with the broader debate on the management of firms in communication contributed to the emergence of the academic field of CSR, it essentially nurtured the reproduction of a contestable ideology for a long time. In this regard, a CCO perspective on academic fields that we put forward in this paper adds to a more reflexive approach to the examination of social phenomena that takes the formative role of communication more seriously.

Our results also specify and elaborate Cooren et al.'s (2011) and Taylor's (Schoeneborn et al. (2014)) passing remarks on the communicative constitution of academic fields. Specifically, our study illustrates how academic fields are communicatively accomplished. By reconstructing and unfolding this process as the sequential enactment of “embedding”, “diverging”, and “converging”, our study explores specific communicative practices through which academic fields come into being. In doing so, our study provides a more nuanced understanding of the communicative constitution of academic fields. Although our empirical analysis focuses on scholarly communication on CSR, we argue that our results can also be transferred to other areas of research and, thus, provide broader insights into the emergence and development of academic fields even beyond CSR. For example, proponents of the CCO perspective also embedded ideas from communication studies in the field organization research by communicatively situating this perspective as part of the broader scholarly debate on organizations and organizing (e.g., Ashcraft et al. (2009); Cooren et al. (2011)) and diversified linkages with parts of this broader debate—which we called “diverging” (e.g., Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015); Vásquez et al. (2016)); recently, scholars have begun to enact “converging” by pursuing an increasingly introverted debate on different approaches to CCO (e.g., Blaschke and Schoeneborn (2017); Schoeneborn et al. (2014)), which contributes to establishing the CCO perspective as an independent academic field. The sequential enactment of embedding, diverging, and converging is also observable in the scholarly debate on dynamic capabilities (see Giudici and Reinmoeller (2012)) and the field of strategy research more generally (see Hambrick and Chen (2008)). To empirically validate the transferability of our findings, we encourage future research to explore the communicative constitution of other fields of research. Such inquiries would be especially interesting if they focused on academic fields that, in contrast to CSR, have not become established despite initial communicative buzz or have ceased to exist. For this, real-time observations—e.g., of the emerging scholarly debate on startup accelerators (Wenzel and Koch, 2018a)—instead of retrospective analyses would be particularly insightful.

### 5.3. Directions for future research

In this paper, we began to develop a communication-centered understanding of scientific communities, one that add insights to the digital transformation of social theory. By that, we aimed to provide (communicative) contributions to the literature on scientific communities and CCO. However, we also acknowledge the limitations of our study, which constitute interesting starting points for future research.

First, like most discursive studies (Balogun et al., 2014), we could not include the entire scholarly debate on CSR in our analysis. By focusing on the 97 most cited journal articles from 1970 to date, we analyzed those papers with CSR-related ideas that have become most prevalent in scholarly communication. Yet, in doing so, we did not include many other works that have also generated interesting ideas on

CSR. Although the above-mentioned comparisons with other academic fields reinforce our confidence in the presented results, we presume that an extension of the dataset might have resulted in more ambivalent findings. This also relates to our analytical focus on journal articles: Although journal articles are the main genre of scholarly communication (Kieser and Leiner, 2009) and belong to those documents that contribute to the communicative constitution of organizations by materializing and perpetuating communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Vásquez et al., 2016), we believe that scholars have also provided important communicative contributions to the debate on CSR by publishing books and book chapters, presenting papers at conferences, engaging in informal conversations at academic meetings, giving formal speeches on CSR, etc. Although such communicative contributions are strongly inspired by ideas published in journal articles and might generate a smaller impact on the constitution of academic fields in the digital age, they may shape debates on CSR in different and no less important ways. Therefore, in addition to analyzing an even more extended dataset, we encourage future research to explore the intertextuality (Fairclough, 2003) through which ideas on CSR that are published in journal articles inspire and support other parts of scholarly communication and vice versa.

Second, our findings reflect longitudinal patterns that offer insights into *how* academic fields are “talked” into existence. However, in order to turn these findings into a more full-scale theory, one also needs to account for *why* these patterns occur (e.g., McMullin (1978)). Our data did not provide us with access to the underlying drivers of the observed patterns. Relatedly, GABEK-based discourse analyses are particularly useful for exploring “how” questions, but are less powerful for examining “why” questions (e.g., Zelger (2000)). Therefore, future research may take the next steps toward a more full-scale theory of the focal phenomenon by drawing on complementary methodological approaches, such as case study research (Yin, 2014) or other types to qualitative research (see Wenzel and Koch, 2018b; Wenzel et al., 2016), and gathering complementary data, such as interviews (e.g., Nag et al. (2007)), which enable scholars to capture and analyze why the patterns emerge in the way we observed in this study.

Finally, although our study provides a longitudinal analysis of the communicative constitution of academic field of CSR over an extended period of time, it is necessarily limited by its time frame, given that scholarly debates on CSR are ongoing. The future of the academic field of CSR might go into different directions. As our first-order analysis suggests, contemporary works establish linkages with the broader scholarly debate on diversity management (Trittin and Schoeneborn, 2017), which indicates the beginning of reenacting the communicative practice of “embedding” and, potentially, the reinitiation of the described process. Future studies may follow up on our study in order to develop theory on the ongoing communicative reproduction, or demise, of academic fields.

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