

CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF CSR COMMUNICATION: AN EXPERIMENTAL INVESTIGATION

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2016002

Editor:

Dr. Isaac Cheah
School of Marketing

**MARKETING
INSIGHTS**
Working Paper Series
School of Marketing

ISSN 1448 – 9716

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Abstract

This research aims to find out the most effective Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) message approaches that will contribute to favourable consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company. Three message approaches: the use of narrative, invitational rhetoric and message ambiguity will be investigated. It is expected that consumer support for CSR and consumer scepticism will have moderating effects and consumer attribution of company motives will mediate the relationship between message approach and attitude toward the company. A series of laboratory experiments will be conducted with consumers as the participants. Quantitative data collected through the experiment will be analyzed and a research model will be tested. It is anticipated that the findings from this research will allow public relations and corporate communication practitioners to better identify effective CSR communication message approaches which lead to positive consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company.

Research Objectives

Communication is central to the practice of corporate social responsibility (Capriotti and Moreno 2007b). The aims of CSR communication are to foster a company's CSR image, stakeholder interactions (Maignan and Ferrell 2004), corporate reputation (Hooghiemstra 2000) and influence consumer attitudes toward them (Brown and Dacin 1997; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004). However, research has shown that CSR communication does not always bring about positive perceptions of the CSR initiatives. This is due to stakeholder scepticism and cynicism over CSR communication (Lindgreen and Swaen 2010; Mohr, Webb, and Harris 2001; Schlegelmilch and Pollach 2005) and their suspicions over the self-serving motives of companies in their CSR initiatives (Forehand and Grier 2003; Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, and Schwarz 2006). This research aims to find out the type of Corporate Social

Responsibility (CSR) message approaches that are effective in creating positive CSR communication. Drawing from studies in crisis management, dialogic communication and narrative theory, this research will conduct experiments to investigate three message approaches namely the narrative, invitational rhetoric and ambiguous message approaches in creating favourable CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company (Igartua 2010; Yang, Kang, and Johnson 2010; Dickinson-Delaporte, Beverland, and Lindgreen 2010; Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz 2009). This research will also look at whether there are different effects for positive and negative CSR information (Klein and Dawar 2004) and for companies with or without a perceived CSR track record (Vanhamme and Grobben 2009); whether consumer support for CSR will have a moderating effect; and if consumer attributions of company motive will mediate the main relationship (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006).

Research objectives:

1. To find out whether CSR message approaches such as narrative, invitational rhetoric and ambiguous message are more effective than informational messages in creating positive consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company.
2. To find out whether negative or positive CSR information will bring about different impacts on consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company.
3. To find out whether a CSR message which contains CSR history is more effective than the one without a CSR history in creating positive consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company.
4. To observe whether there will be an interaction effect between CSR message approaches and CSR information valence (positive vs. negative) or CSR history (apparent vs. not apparent) in contributing to consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company.
5. To determine whether consumers' support for CSR and consumer scepticism will have moderating effects on the relationship between CSR message approaches and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company; between CSR information valence and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company; and, between CSR history and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company.
6. To determine whether the relationship between CSR message approaches and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company will be mediated by consumer attribution of company CSR motives such as values-driven, strategic-driven, egoistic-driven or stakeholder-driven.

Background

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Communication

Corporate social responsibility concerns a company's voluntary efforts to comply with moral obligations and to be involved in socially responsible behaviour to bring about positive impacts to society in four main domains: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic (Carroll 1979; Salmones, Crespo, and Bosque 2005; Maignan 2001). In recent years, there has been a sharp rise in CSR initiatives and CSR reporting. Almost 80 percent of the world's largest 250 companies have issued CSR reports (KPMG 2013). Australian public and private sectors are actively involved in CSR reporting (Golob and Bartlett 2007). With the rise in awareness of socio-environmental issues, stakeholders such as consumers, employees, media and activists are more aggressive in demanding companies be socially responsible. Research in CSR has shown that consumers are willing to support companies that are involved in CSR initiatives (Luo and Bhattacharya 2006; Maignan and Ferrell 2004) and effective CSR communication can help increase consumer awareness of the company's CSR actions, contributing to positive attitudes and behaviour toward the company (Maignan and Ferrell 2004; Sen, Bhattacharya, and Korschun 2006).

However CSR communication has experienced what communication scholars call the "promotional dilemma" or "Catch-22" situation (Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen 2008), where on one hand stakeholders demand more information about a company's involvement in CSR, yet on the other hand stakeholders will come to distrust and despise companies with "self-promotional" motives for their CSR involvement (Coombs and Holladay 2012). Stakeholders are sceptical and cynical over CSR communication (Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz 2009; Lindgreen and Swaen 2010; Mohr, Webb, and Harris 2001; Schlegelmilch and Pollach 2005). They suspect the self-serving motives of companies in their CSR initiatives (Forehand and Grier 2003; Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, and Schwarz 2006). Different CSR communication message strategies and approaches can have different impacts on stakeholder perceptions of CSR resulting in varying levels of stakeholder support for CSR initiatives (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Du and Vieira Jr. 2012). For example, companies that use "Loud CSR" which involves intensive publicity and mass media to communicate CSR messages, may cause greater consumer suspicion of the motive of the company in their CSR communication compared to "Quiet CSR", which uses more "low key" and subtle ways such as web page

links to communicate CSR messages (Ligeti and Oravec 2009; Coombs and Holladay 2012). “Proactive” or “reactive” strategies (whether a company is involved in CSR before or after a crisis or stakeholder protest) also impact CSR communication perceptions (Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz 2009). Third-party endorsement can reinforce and complement CSR communication (Coombs and Holladay 2012). This research further investigates CSR communication approaches to determine whether message strategies such as narrative, invitational rhetoric and message ambiguity, which draw from studies in crisis management, dialogic communication, narrative theory and strategic ambiguity, will be effective in creating positive consumer perceptions of CSR messages (Yang, Kang, and Johnson 2010; Foss and Griffin 1995; Eisenberg 1984; Green and Brock 2000).

Narrative persuasion

A study of the CSR communication of six big oil companies in the United States showed that the use of storytelling and narratives in CSR communication positively engages stakeholders and leads them to perceive the company favourably (Du and Vieira Jr. 2012). Extended Elaboration Likelihood model (E-ELM) and Education-Entertainment model scholars have argued that narrative persuasion is able to lessen counterarguments compared to rhetorical persuasion techniques such as using editorials, political speeches, or advertisements (Igartua 2010). Research on fictional films and stories has demonstrated the power of narrative persuasion in changing audience beliefs and attitudes (Igartua and Barrios 2012). For example, positive depiction of tobacco in films will result in more favourable attitudes toward smoking and smokers (Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong 2002). The advantages of narrative persuasion over rhetorical persuasion are further evidenced in the research on the recruitment of cornea donors (Bae 2008), the promotion of health behaviour change (Hinyard and Kreuter 2006) and occupational health and safety communication (Ricketts et al. 2010).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposed that there are central and peripheral routes to attitude change. The central route emphasizes the consideration of issue-relevant arguments that lead to attitude change while the peripheral route relies on a positive or negative association with “cues” such as pain and attractiveness (Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman 1981). Narrative persuasion scholars have introduced the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM) as an extension of the conventional ELM model. Under E-ELM,

the issues involvement of the central route is replaced by the absorption into narrative and identification with characters in narratives. There is no longer a clear distinction between central and peripheral processing (Slater and Rouner 2002). E-ELM suggests that the reason narrative is an effective persuasion tool is because of the presence of *narrative transportation* and *identification with the characters* (Igartua and Barrios 2012). The model suggests that *narrative transportation* allows an audience to transport themselves from the world of reality into the world of story (Green and Brock 2000) and *identification with characters* allows the audience to adopt the feelings and opinions of the characters in the narrative or story (Cohen 2001, 2006; de Graaf et al. 2011). Story-based or drama-based television commercials were found to have advantages over argument-based messages in reducing counterarguments (Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989), thus making narrative a powerful method of persuasion. Audiences will not feel they are being “sold” an idea as it “slips under the radar” of cognitive processing (Moyer-Guse 2008; Brown, Childers, and Waszak 1990; Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong 2002). Yang, Kang, Johnson (2010) reported that presenting narratives can be effective in crisis communication. After reading crisis narratives, participants’ negative emotions against the company such as disappointment, frustration, anger and “madness” in a crisis were significantly reduced. However, narrative persuasion should not be seen as manipulation and scholars have shown that narrative persuasion is just a way to engage audiences through emotional appeal rather than rational appeal (Cho, Shen, and Wilson 2012). Both emotional appeal and rational appeal can be used to communicate the same information and no one appeal is always, under all circumstances, superior to the other (Ruiz and Sicilia 2004; Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989; Millar and Millar 1990). Whether a rational or emotional appeal can be ethical or manipulative actually depends more on whether the practitioners decide to communicate ethically or not (Edgett 2002; Barney and Jay Black 1994; Messina 2007), rather than the choice to communicate the message through rational or emotional appeal. Currently there is no in-depth research on the use of narrative in CSR communication. Therefore this research will address the research gap in studying the use of narrative persuasion in the context of CSR communication.

Invitational rhetoric

Dialogue can be referred to as a communication process which aims to fuse one’s interests with the other’s in building a long-term relationship (Taylor, Kent, and White 2001).

Dialogue plays an important role in companies' communication of their social responsibility initiatives to the public (Capriotti and Moreno 2007a). Participants who are involved in dialogue are less sceptical towards the initiator of the communication (Maon, Lindgreen, and Swaen 2009). Dialogue is seen as a viable vehicle for the implementation of CSR communication (Golob and Podnar 2011, 232). Scholars in crisis communication, and organizational blogs and communication, have shown positive results from dialogic communication tactics such as *human conversational voice*, *interactivity* and *invitational rhetoric* used on corporate CSR websites which embody the characteristics of dialogic communication (Kelleher 2009). *Human conversational voice* (where a company attempts to "humanize" blogging experience by introducing a conversational-style communication) and *interactivity* (where the company establishes a sense of connectedness, reciprocity and involvement with their stakeholders) when used in organizational blogs and based on dialogic principles promote openness and mutual understanding in communication and have proven to be effective in maintaining good relationships with stakeholders (Kelleher and Miller 2006; Kelleher 2009). *Invitational rhetoric* is seen as effective in countering negative perceptions in crisis communication. Therefore it is expected that such communication tactics can be successfully incorporated into CSR communication strategies (Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, and Schwarz 2006). Invitational rhetoric is defined as "an invitation to understanding and as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination" and represents a key antecedent of dialogical communication (Foss and Griffin 1995, 5). Studies in crisis management have shown that organizations' openness to dialogic communication creates a dialogic loop with the target audience and facilitates the exchange of ideas and opinions, leading to positive communication outcomes (Yang, Kang, and Johnson 2010; Kent and Taylor 1998). This research will further explore the potential of using invitational rhetoric in a CSR context, which is currently a research gap.

Strategic ambiguity

Equivocal or ambiguous communication theory was developed by Bavelas et al. (1990) based on Lewin's psychological force theory (Lewin 1935, 1938). The term "strategic ambiguity" refers to the practice where managers try to gain support for their ideas by employing ambiguous and imprecise rhetoric (Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney 2008). Generally, the corporate communication literature has advised clarity and specificity in communicating

corporate messages, however such advice ignores the fact that communicators often have multiple and conflicting goals when communicating with internal and external stakeholders (Eisenberg 1984). Strategic ambiguity promotes “unified diversity” where individual communicators in an organization are allowed to have individual differences and interpretations while working on achieving common agreed understandings (Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney 2008). Organizational communications are seen as not discursively monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonic, the combination of diversity and unity play up against each other, within a coherent entity, involving multiple dialogical practices that occur simultaneously and sequentially (Humphreys and Brown 2002; Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney 2008). The use of ambiguous messages is appropriate where a firm’s reputation is influenced by a network of stakeholders (Roloff 2008) and CSR communication deals with multiple stakeholder relationships (Sen, Bhattacharya, and Korschun 2006). Message ambiguity allows divergent interpretations by different stakeholders to co-exist (Paul and Strbiak 1997). Companies need to allow different stakeholders to identify with them and their goals (Palazzo and Basu 2007), hence message ambiguity may be suitable for CSR communication. Research has shown the use of ambiguous messages is appropriate at the early stage of crisis communication and where multiple stakeholders are involved (Kline, Simunich, and Weber 2008, 2009; Dickinson-Delaporte, Beverland, and Lindgreen 2010). This research will investigate whether message ambiguity can be introduced into CSR communication to create a positive impact on consumers, which is currently a research gap.

Narrative, invitational rhetoric and ambiguous message approaches vs. informational approach

Informational messages present objective and rational information which is processed cognitively by the readers or audiences (Yoo and MacInnis 2005). Narrative messages try to persuade the readers or audiences by appealing to them emotionally or affectively with the use of characters, dramatization and plots (Chang 2009). Unlike invitational rhetoric, informational messages also do not invite participants to take part in a dialogic process (Yang, Kang, and Johnson 2010) and have a very clear statement of facts, unlike ambiguous messages (Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney 2008). This research aims to investigate whether narrative, invitational rhetoric and message ambiguity are more effective than

informational approach in creating favourable consumer CSR beliefs and positive attitude towards the company.

CSR beliefs and attitude towards the company

CSR beliefs are consumers' overall assessment of a company's CSR initiatives (Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz 2009). Company CSR information will influence consumer CSR beliefs and general attitude toward a company when they are exposed to the company's CSR information (Sen, Bhattacharya, and Korschun 2006; Brown and Dacin 1997). Both CSR beliefs and attitude toward a company are able to affect consumer behaviour such as purchase, employment and investment intentions (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004; Pan and Zinkhan 2006). When companies communicate their CSR initiatives, they hope that their communication efforts can create favourable CSR beliefs and positive attitude toward the company (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2007, 2010; Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz 2009).

Research Hypotheses:

Based on the above research background, the following hypotheses have been derived:

H1a: CSR messages communicated via narrative approach will lead to more favourable consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company compared to CSR messages communicated via informational approach.

H1b: CSR messages communicated via invitational rhetoric will lead to more favourable consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company compared to CSR messages communicated via informational approach.

H1c: CSR messages communicated via ambiguous approach will lead to more favourable consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company compared to CSR messages communicated via informational approach.

Positive CSR information has a positive impact on evaluations of the company and purchase intent (Mohr and Webb 2005). The availability of information about the unethical behaviour of companies leads to negative attitudes toward the company (Folkes and Kamins 1999). Positive CSR information can create a halo effect and influence consumer attributions in a

product-harm crisis situation (Klein and Dawar 2004). Consumers are more sensitive to negative CSR information than to positive information when negative information is communicated and managers should recognize the danger of the company being perceived as socially irresponsible (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). Hence:

H2: Positive CSR information will lead to more positive consumer CSR beliefs and positive attitude toward the company compared to negative CSR information.

Vanhamme and Grobben (2009) found that CSR information in crisis communication is more effective for companies with a long CSR history than for those with a short CSR history. They reported that a long history of good actions can provide better leverage for the company to defend its legitimacy. Companies with only recent involvement in CSR initiatives, in contrast, will not be equipped with such goodwill. Therefore this research will try to find out if highlighting CSR history in the CSR message will bring about a positive perception.

H3: A CSR message that contains the company's CSR history will lead to more favourable consumer CSR beliefs and positive attitude toward the company compared to a CSR message without CSR history.

When a group of different independent variables interact on one another to create an impact on dependent variables, an interaction effect has taken place (Pallant 2011). As previous research in CSR communication has indicated that CSR information valence, whether negative or positive, has an impact on perceptions of CSR, it is hypothesized that there is an interaction effect between CSR message approaches and CSR information valence (positive vs. negative). Currently there is no in-depth research studying the effectiveness of narrative, invitational rhetoric and ambiguous message approaches for CSR communication in the context of positive versus negative CSR information.

H4: There will be an interaction effect between CSR message approaches and CSR information valence. Different CSR information valence, positive vs. negative, will lead to different consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company when different message approaches are used.

It is expected there will be an interaction effect between CSR message approaches and CSR history. Previous studies have found that a company's CSR track record or the history of a

company's involvement in CSR have an impact on consumer perceptions of CSR communication. However, these studies used only informational CSR messages (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006; Webb and Mohr 1998; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Vanhamme and Grobhen 2009). This research will further address the previous research gap by examining the interaction between different message approaches (narrative, invitational rhetoric, ambiguous and informational) and CSR history (apparent vs. not apparent).

H5: There will be an interaction effect between CSR message approaches and CSR history. Different CSR history presented in the message, apparent vs. not apparent, will lead to different consumer CSR belief and attitude toward the company when different message approaches are used.

When buying products or services, consumers may take into account ethical or unethical activities by businesses (Creyer and Ross 1997). CSR research has identified a group of consumers who are more concerned than others about whether a company is behaving ethically when making purchases, more likely to pay attention to companies' CSR activities and more likely to investigate their CSR behaviour. This group is variously referred to as "CSR activists" (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Dawkins 2004), "socially conscious consumers" (Webster 1975), "socially responsible consumers" (Roberts 1995) or "high CSR support consumers" (Maignan 2001; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Marin and Ruiz 2007). High CSR support customers take more serious account of CSR activities undertaken by companies (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Marin and Ruiz 2007). "CSR support" has been found to moderate the relationship between CSR information and customers' company evaluations and purchase intentions (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010). Consumers with high CSR support are expected to be more careful, and actively process CSR information, therefore they are more attracted to "facts", rather than the emotional appeal of narrative messages (Escalas 2007). They are likely to find ambiguous messages, which lack specific information, unappealing. Therefore they are more likely to probe further when presented with CSR information. Narrative message, invitational rhetoric and ambiguous message approaches therefore may not be welcomed by high CSR support consumers. Conversely, high CSR support customers are expected to pay more attention to CSR information valence and CSR history and will have more favourable attitudes toward the company if these elements are positive and apparent respectively in CSR messages.

H6a: Consumer support for CSR will moderate the relationship between CSR message approaches and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company; high CSR support consumers will have comparatively more favourable CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company when they are exposed to informational message approach rather than narrative, invitational rhetoric and ambiguous message approaches.

H6b: Consumer support for CSR will moderate the relationship between CSR information valence and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company; high CSR support consumers will have comparatively more favourable CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company when they are exposed to positive CSR message, and more negative CSR beliefs and attitudes when exposed to negative messages.

H6c: Consumer support for CSR will moderate the relationship between CSR history and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company; high CSR support consumers will have comparatively more favourable CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company when CSR history is apparent, and more negative CSR beliefs and attitudes when CSR history is not apparent.

In general, scepticism means a tendency of a person to doubt, to question or distrust a claim (Forehand and Grier 2003; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). It is seen as a cognitive response to various contexts and communication contents (Mohr, Eroglu, and Ellen 1998). For example, scepticism towards an advertisement implies a consumer's tendency to disbelieve advertising claims (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Consumers are more sceptical about the CSR activities of for-profit companies than non-governmental organizations, due to their perceptions of companies' motivations in CSR activities (Webb and Mohr 1998; Vanhamme and Grobben 2009). Consumers' increased scepticism towards the "true" motivations behind persuasive communication can inhibit its effectiveness (Vanhamme and Grobben 2009; Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Lafferty and Goldsmith 1999). Scepticism is also seen as a moderating variable influencing CSR messages (Pomering and Johnson 2009). Scepticism also moderates responses towards various advertising appeals (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Consumers with high scepticism are found to be less responsive to informational compared to emotional appeals (Obermiller, Spangenberg, and MacLachlan 2005). Therefore, this research will hypothesise that consumers with high scepticism will respond more positively to narrative, invitational rhetoric and ambiguous message approaches than an informational message approach. However, consumers with high scepticism will still respond

favourably to positive CSR messages and CSR messages with apparent CSR history. This research will further the understanding of consumer scepticism on different message approaches and appeals in the context of CSR which has not been previously researched.

H7a: Consumer scepticism will moderate the relationship between CSR message approaches and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company; consumers with high scepticism will have comparatively more favourable CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company when they are exposed to informational messages, and more negative CSR beliefs and attitudes when exposed to narrative, invitational rhetoric and ambiguous messages.

H7b: Consumer scepticism will moderate the relationship between CSR information valence and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company; consumers with high scepticism will have comparatively more favourable CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company when they are exposed to positive CSR message, and more negative CSR beliefs and attitudes when exposed to negative messages.

H7c: Consumer scepticism will moderate the relationship between CSR history and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company; consumers with high skepticism will have comparatively more favourable CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company when CSR history is apparent, and more negative CSR beliefs and attitudes when CSR history is not apparent.

Attribution theory and the persuasion knowledge model (PKM) posit that consumer attributions of company motives will influence their perceptions of CSR communication (Vanhamme and Grobbsen 2009; Friestad and Wright 1994; Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill 2006). It was found that “other-serving” companies are likely to attract positive evaluations from stakeholders compared with the “self-serving” type company (Forehand and Grier 2003; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004). However, other research found that customer attributions of the motives behind CSR communication are not a simple bi-polar judgment of either self-serving (egoistic) or other-serving (altruistic). Other types of attributions may also contribute to positive evaluations (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006; Fein 1996). Maignan and Ralston (2002) suggested the other attributions can be *values-driven*, *strategic-driven* and *stakeholder-driven*. Although, *strategic-driven* attributions are accepted as self-centered, they are not negative as it is widely accepted that to operate a successful business, the company does have attend to customers and profits (Whettan and Mackay 2002). However, if a company focuses primarily on satisfying stakeholders (in the sense of reactively responding to

pressures from them) rather than consistently on corporate values, consumers may evaluate their CSR efforts negatively (Swanson 1995).

Consumer attributions may mediate the relationship between the company's CSR initiatives and consumer purchase behaviour and perceptions of CSR communication. Consumers respond more positively to a company's CSR initiatives when they attribute the motives to be *values- and strategically-driven* rather than *stakeholder- and egoistically-driven* (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006; Groza, Pronschinske, and Walker 2011; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). So far CSR research has focused on informational messages and argued that consumers will normally attribute CSR messages to be either *values-driven*, *strategic-driven*, *stakeholder-driven* or *egoistic-driven*. This research will extend previous studies to include narrative, invitational rhetoric and ambiguous message approaches to see how they may affect customer attributions. It is expected that narrative, invitational rhetoric, ambiguous message approaches may lead to more values-driven and strategically-driven attributions, this is because narrative approach can lead to emotional appeal and identification with characters; invitational rhetoric approach provides more opportunities for customers to interact and have dialogue with the company; ambiguous approach allows customers to have more open interpretations of company's CSR intention and all these make it easier for consumers to identify with the company and acknowledge the company's contributions to CSR.

H8: Consumer attributions of company CSR motives such as values-driven, strategically-driven, egoistically-driven or stakeholder-driven mediate the relationship between CSR message approach and consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company. Narrative, invitational rhetoric, ambiguous message approaches will lead to comparatively more values-driven and strategically-driven attributions.

(The conceptual framework for this research is included in Appendix 1.)

Significance

This research seeks to advance knowledge and understanding of CSR communication, CSR message approaches and how they can positively impact on consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company. In terms of theoretical contribution, this research will further explore the implications of theories such as Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM), attribution theory and strategic ambiguity for CSR communication. In terms of

methodological contribution, this research will study the impact of CSR message approaches on consumer perceptions of CSR communication through laboratory experiments to further investigate the causal relationships. Previous research has concentrated more on CSR and its impact on company performance, but not extensively on different CSR message approaches such as narrative, invitational rhetoric and ambiguity and their impact on CSR communication. Previously, these message approaches have been studied in advertisement persuasion, crisis management and strategic management but not in a CSR context. Therefore this research will address these research gaps and advance understanding on the effective use of these message approaches in CSR communication. Findings from this research will benefit managers, public relations and corporate communication practitioners dealing with CSR communication.

There may be a concern about the ethical implications of this research which involves a variety of persuasion techniques. However, it is not the aim of this research to provide means of manipulation. Scholars have found that persuasion itself is not unethical and communication practitioners have the duty to observe good professional communication practices and function within an ethical communication framework (Barney and Jay Black 1994; Edgett 2002; Messina 2007). The decision to communicate through rational or emotional appeal does not change the “facts” and “evidence” relating to a product, service or CSR information, as it is actually a making a choice of which type of appeal – whether rational or emotional, and which type of message approach – whether informational or persuasive, will be more effective in communicating a piece of information to target audiences. Therefore, PR and communication practitioners commitment to ethical communication becomes more influential than the persuasion types (rational or emotional) in determining whether the communication is ethical or not (Yoo and MacInnis 2005; Millar and Millar 1990; Rozier-Rich and Santos 2012; Mattila 2002; Shaw and Elger 2013). The findings from this research will help communication and public relations practitioners to communicate more effectively the genuine and authentic CSR actions to consumers (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Du and Vieira Jr. 2012; Suprawan 2011).

Research Method

This is a quantitative research study in which data will be collected via series of laboratory experiments. Respondents will be exposed to different CSR messages and questionnaires will

be used to collect their responses for later analysis. An experiment involves an investigator carefully creating a situation which allows the observation of the respondents' reaction and behaviour towards a treatment exposure (Maylor and Blackmon 2005). In an experiment, the independent variable will be manipulated and the changes in the dependent variables due to that manipulation will be measured (Churchill and Iacobucci 2002). Therefore an experiment is capable of providing more convincing evidence of the relationships between variables by observing how independent variables have affected the dependent variables (Hair, Bush, and Ortinau 2003).

This is a posttest only with control group experiment and is considered a true experimental design (Hair, Bush, and Ortinau 2003; Churchill and Iacobucci 2002). Pretest is not required here as the study focuses on the responses of the respondents when they are exposed to the stimuli and to avoid contamination through pre-existing attitudes or a priori knowledge toward a company (Hair, Bush, and Ortinau 2003; Churchill and Iacobucci 2002; Groza, Pronschinske, and Walker 2011; Vanhamme and Grobben 2009). This research will be conducted in 3 separate studies. Study 1 is a 2 X 2 X 2 between-groups design involving CSR message approaches (narrative vs. informational), CSR information valence (positive vs. negative) and CSR history (apparent vs. not apparent). Study 2 is a 2 X 2 X 2 between-groups design involving CSR message approaches (invitational rhetoric vs. informational), CSR information valence (positive vs. negative) and CSR history (apparent vs. not apparent). Study 3 is a 2 X 2 X 2 between-groups design involving CSR message approaches (ambiguous vs. informational), CSR information valence (positive vs. negative) and CSR history (apparent vs. not apparent). The dependent variables for all three studies will be consumer CSR beliefs and attitude toward the company. Hair et al. (2010) suggested that the recommended minimum sample size should be 20 observations per cell group. However some comparable research has 60 per cell group (Zheng 2010; Braverman 2008; Murphy et al. 2013; Sen, Bhattacharya, and Korschun 2006; Rozier-Rich and Santos 2012; Mazzocco et al. 2010). Therefore an estimated total of 1440 consumer respondents will be needed for this research. Respondents will consist evenly of men and women, with a representative spectrum of diverse ethnicities, household status and ages (with minimum age of 18) (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006; Webb and Mohr 1998) and will be randomly assigned to the experimental and control conditions to reduce confounding effects (Groza, Pronschinske, and Walker 2011). Due to the sampling size, an online data collection or questionnaire administration service

company using consumer panels, such as Qualtrics or Snap Survey, will be used. It is expected that the service fees will be payable with the researcher's HDR consumable funds.

A pilot study which consists of manipulation checks on the reliability and validity of the scales and message stimuli will be conducted. The experimental stimuli which consist of different CSR message approaches (narrative, invitational rhetoric, ambiguous, informational) with different CSR information valence (negative vs. positive) and with a fabricated CSR history (apparent vs. not apparent) featuring a fictitious company will be forwarded to a panel of professional corporate communication and public relations practitioners and academic judges to obtain comments and feedback on suitability and adequacy of the stimuli and scales (Chang 2009; Perez and del Bosque 2011; Webb, Mohr, and Harris 2008). A different group of respondents from those participating in the actual experiment will then be selected. An estimated 288 respondents, which is 20 percent of the total 1440 for the actual experiment, will be used in this pilot study (Zheng 2010; Yang, Kang, and Johnson 2010). They will consist of Curtin University student volunteers. The students will be contacted via emails and will be rewarded with discount coupons or gift vouchers for their participation in the pilot study. The tutorial classrooms in Curtin University will be used to conduct the study in a number of small experimental sessions where respondents will be exposed to different sets of message stimuli. Their responses will be recorded in the form of questionnaires.

For narrative message, Green and Brock's (2000) scale and Igartua's (2010) scale will be used; for invitational rhetoric, Yang, Kang and Johnson's (2010) scale; for message ambiguity, Putnam and Sorenson's (1982) scale; and, for informational message, Yoo and MacInnis's (2005) scale. (For the actual scales please refer appendix 4a, 4b, 4c and 4d). For CSR beliefs, Salmons, Crespo and Bosque's (2005) scale; for the attitude toward the company, Ponzi, Fombrun and Gardberg's (2011) scale (appendix 2 and 3); for consumer support of CSR, Maignan's (2001) scale; for consumer scepticism, Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1998) scale and for consumer attribution of company motives, Skarmeas and Leonidou's (2013) scale (appendix 5, 6 and 7). After the pilot study, some revisions may be required for the message stimuli and different sets of scales may be needed. Further manipulation checks may be conducted. Once the validity and reliability of the scales and message stimuli have been established, the actual experiments will be undertaken. It is expected that the main statistical analysis for this research will be MANOVA as this research

attempts to find out how multiple independent variables affect more than one dependent variables (Pallant 2011).

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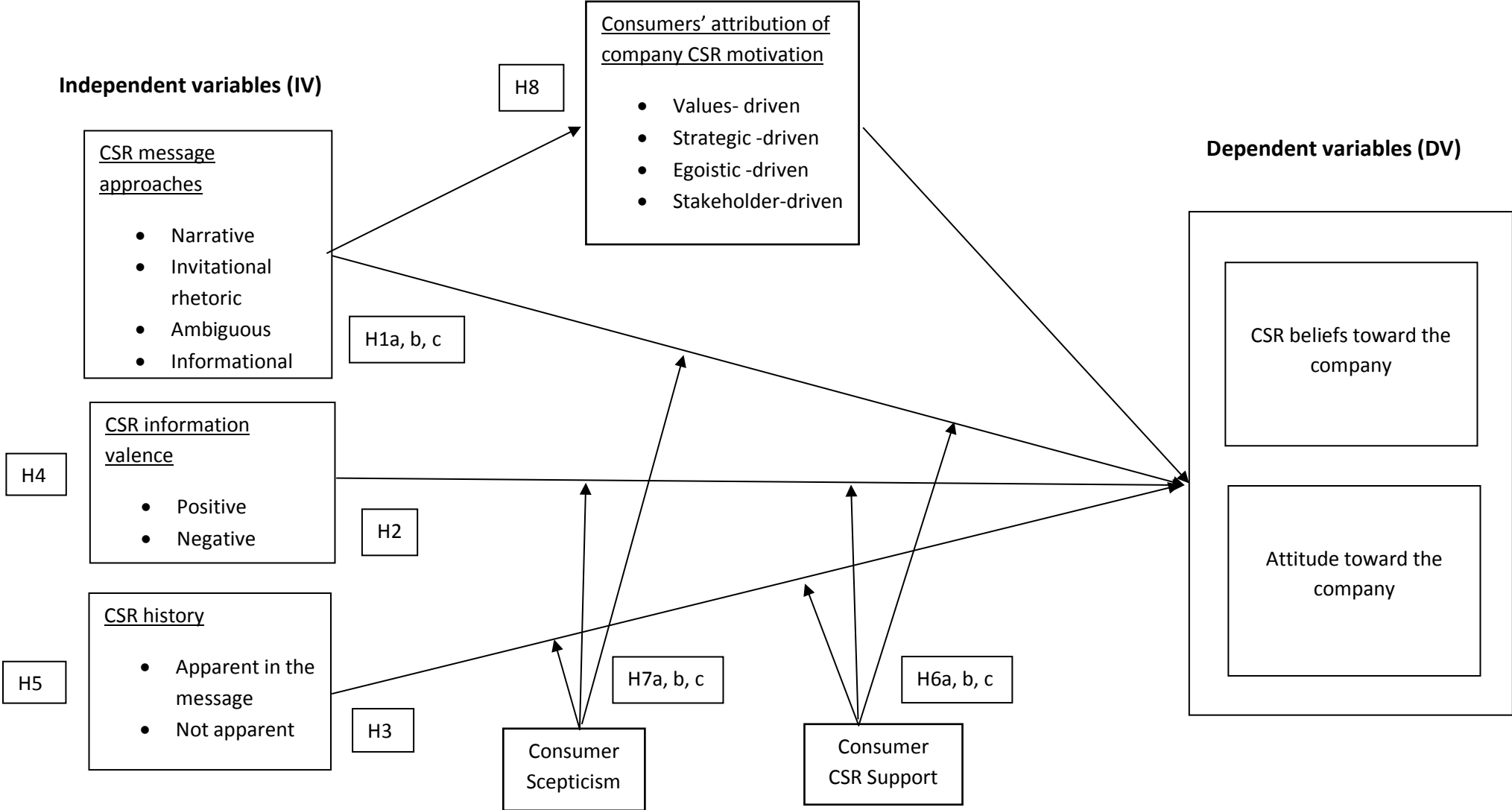
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Appendix 1: Conceptual framework



Appendix 2

Scale to measure CSR beliefs

7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)

I believe the company...

1. Tries to obtain maximum profit from its activity.
2. Tries to obtain maximum long-term success.
3. Always tries to improve its economic performance.
4. Always respects the norms defined in the law when carrying out its activities.
5. Is concerned to fulfil its obligations vis-a`-vis its shareholders, suppliers, distributors and other agents with whom it deals.
6. Behaves ethically/honestly with its customers.
7. Respecting ethical principles in its relationships has priority over achieving superior economic performance.
8. Is concerned to respect and protect natural environment.
9. Actively sponsors or finances social events (sport, music...).
10. Directs part of its budget to donations and social works favouring the disadvantaged.
11. Is concerned to improve general well-being of society.

Reference: Salmones, Crespo, and Bosque (2005)

Appendix 3

Scale to measure attitude toward company

7-point Likert scales, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree

1. [Company] is a company I have a good feeling about
2. [Company] is a company I trust
3. [Company] is a company that I admire and respect
4. [Company] has a good overall reputation

Reference: Ponzi, Fombrun, and Gardberg (2011)

Appendix 4a

Scale to measure narrative transportation

CSR message approaches (the stimuli) will be pre-tested on a separate pool of respondents. The reason that narrative message is found to be persuasive and able to change beliefs is because of the presence of narrative transportation. The following scale developed by Green and Brock (2000) for the test of narrative transportation will be used for the manipulation check for this research:

All items are measured using a 7-point scale ranging from “Not at all” to “Very much”. Higher scores represent greater degree of this message transportation.

1. While I was reading this message, I could easily picture the events in it taking place.
2. While I was reading this message, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind. (Reversely phrased statement)
3. I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in this message.
4. I was mentally involved in this message while reading it.
5. After finishing this message, I found it easy to put it out of my mind. (R)
6. I wanted to learn how this message ended.
7. This message affected me emotionally.
8. I found myself thinking of ways this message could have turned out differently.
9. I found my mind wandering while reading this message. (R)
10. The events in this message are relevant to my everyday life.
11. The events in this message have changed my life.

Appendix 4b

Scale to measure identification with the characters

A company acquires some form of personality or characteristic like human has been widely studied by marketing and branding scholars (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004; Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Fombrum and Shanley 1990). Aaker (1997) identified five dimensions for ‘brand personality’ such as sincerity, competence, sophistication, excitement and ruggedness. Companies that show empathy towards society can be seen as having a “nice” personality just like human and some companies, can be seen as “bully” or “greedy” (Davies et al. 2004). A narrative persuasion is powerful because it is able to make the readers or audiences empathise with the characters, see and experience things from their point of view (Igartua 2010). The following scale is used to test the identification with the characters in a narrative message.

5-point intensity scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much)

1. I thought I was like the characters (the company) or very similar to them.
2. I thought that I would like to be like or act like the characters (the company).

3. I identified with the characters (the company).
4. I felt “as if I were the characters (the company)”
5. I had the impression that I was really experiencing the story of the characters (the company)
6. I felt as if I “formed part of” the story.
7. I myself have experienced the emotional reactions of the characters (the company).
8. I understood the characters’ (the company’s) way of acting, thinking or feeling .
9. I tried to see things from the point of view of the characters (the company).
10. I tried to imagine the characters’ (the company’s) feelings, thoughts and reactions.
11. I understood the characters’ (the company’s) feelings or emotions.
12. I was worried about what was going to happen to the characters (the company).
13. I felt emotionally involved with the characters’ (the company’s) feelings.
14. I imagined how I would act if I found myself in the place of the protagonists (the company).

Source: Igartua (2010)

Appendix 4c

Scale for measuring invitational rhetoric message

The manipulation check for invitational rhetoric will make use of the scale develop by Yang, Kang, and Johnson (2010) which consists of 7-point Likert items ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (very much) with the following measurement items:

1. The company that releases this information seems to make an effort to respond to comments.
2. The company that releases this information seems to ignore others’ perspectives or opinions (reversed).
3. The company that releases this information seems arrogant (reversed).
4. The company that releases this information tends to be authoritative (reversed).
5. The company that releases this information seeks control over others (reversed).
6. The company that releases this information seems to be aware of the audience.
7. The company that release this information tries to teach others (reversed).

Appendix 4d

Scale for measuring ambiguous message

The manipulation check for message ambiguity will make use of the scale developed by Putnam and Sorenson (1982):

1. How many ways do you think this statement could be interpreted?

2. How complicated or complex is this message?
3. How easy is it for you to determine the specific meaning of this message?
4. How clear is this message?
5. How easy is it to determine an appropriate course of action or response to this message?
6. To what extent does this message indicate what action should be taken on this matter?

Appendix 4e

Scale for measuring informational message

7-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree

This message....

1. provides a lot of information
2. appeal to my rationality
3. appeals to my emotion (reverse)
4. creates a mood (reverse)

Reference: Yoo and MacInnis (2005)

Appendix 5

Scale for measuring consumer skepticism

5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree)

1. We can depend on getting the truth in most corporate communication.
2. Corporate communication's aim is to inform the consumer.
3. I believe corporate communication is informative.
4. Corporate communication is generally truthful.
5. Corporate communication is a reliable source of information about the quality and performance of products.
6. Corporate communication is truth well told.
7. In general, corporate communication presents a true picture of the product being advertised.
8. I feel I've been accurately informed after viewing most corporate communication.
9. Most corporate communication provides consumers with essential information.

N.B: The original scale has been adapted to the context of corporate communication in accordance to the experiment design of this research.

Reference: Obermiller and Spandenberg (1998)

Appendix 6

Scale for measuring consumers' CSR Support

On a seven-point scale, the respondents rate the following statements:

1. I would pay more to buy products from a socially responsible company.
2. I consider the ethical reputation of businesses when I shop.
3. I avoid buying products from companies that have engaged in immoral actions.
4. I would pay more to buy the products of a company that shows caring for the well-being of our society.
5. If the price and quality of two products are the same, I would buy from the firm that has a socially responsible reputation.

Reference: Maignan (2001)

Appendix 7

Scale to measure consumer attribution to company CSR motives

7-point Likert-type response format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7)

Egoistic-driven motives

The reasons the company involve in CSR is because it ...

1. is trying to capitalize on the growing social movement
2. is taking advantage of social causes
3. is trying to benefit from the increased awareness of social problems

Values-driven motives

The reasons the company involve in CSR is because it ...

1. has a long-term interest in the society
2. is trying to give back something to the society
3. has an ethical responsibility to help society
4. feels morally obligated to help society

Strategic-driven motives

The reasons the company involve in CSR is because it ...

1. wants to keep its existing customers
2. hopes to increase its profits
3. wants to get new customers
4. hopes to increase its competitiveness

Stakeholder-driven motives

The reasons the company involve in CSR is because it ...

1. feels its employees expect it
2. feels its customers expect it
3. feels its stockholders expect it

4. feels society in general expects it

Reference: Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013)