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SANG Yeal LEE

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ARTICLE



## Framing corporate social responsibility for a controversial product

Sang Yeal Lee <sup>a</sup>, Ji Young Lee<sup>b</sup> and Yong-Suk Cho<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Reed College of Media, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA; <sup>b</sup>Faculty Research Affiliate, Public Interest Communication Research Lab, Reed College of Media, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA; <sup>c</sup>Faculty of Media and Advertising Communication, Hansei University, South Korea

### ABSTRACT

Firms operating casino businesses such as casino hotels often face scrutiny with heightened suspicion regarding the intent of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative. This study examined how persuasive intent and the CSR issue influenced consumers' processing of a CSR initiative for a casino hotel. The results of an experiment showed that participants reacted favorably to a CSR initiative, but such positive reactions disappeared when persuasive intent was explicit in the CSR message. This study further explored the underlying mechanism by testing a moderated mediation model in which issue importance in a CSR initiative acted as a moderator.

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### KEYWORDS

Casino; hospitality marketing; controversial product; corporate social responsibility (CSR); issue importance; persuasive intent; persuasion knowledge; moderated mediation; persuasion resistance

### Introduction

Firms in many parts of the world have incorporated corporate social responsibility (CSR) into their business plans for practical and philosophical reasons. The hospitality industry is no exception to this growing global trend. While many hospitality firms, such as hotel chains, boast about their global CSR initiatives on their websites and in reports, research suggests that these CSR initiatives are not strategically planned and managed in the hospitality industry (e.g. Grosbois, 2012; Holcomb, Upchurch, & Okumus, 2007). Further, although researchers in recent years have paid more attention to the overall effects of CSR on the hospitality business, there has been little empirical data to address communication effects of CSR initiatives by hospitality firms. To make the situation more difficult, the hospitality industry includes one business sector that complicates the understanding of the role of CSR initiatives – the casino business. Many hotels and hotel chains operate casinos, which are considered a controversial product with negative public perceptions.

The casino business is an important part of the hospitality industry in many countries. In 2015, the global casino industry revenue was more than US\$ 182 billion, of which a significant portion came from hotels with casino operations (Statista, 2016). Although the casino business contributes to local and state economies by increasing tourism, creating jobs, and

paying taxes to local and state economies, it is still considered a stigmatized industry. In many countries casinos are perceived as a typical example of a controversial product and are subject to chronic negative perceptions (Liu, Wong, Rongwei, & Tseng, 2013; Oh, Bae, & Kim, 2016; Yani-de-Soriano, Javed, & Yousafzai, 2012). Controversial products are defined as “products, services, or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offense, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented” (Wilson & West, 1981, p. 93). Examples of controversial products are gambling products, opioid painkillers, or tobacco products.

Pre-existing negative perceptions regarding controversial products can certainly be a factor inhibiting effective communication. To alleviate negative perceptions among the consumers, casino industries in the United States (US) and other countries have utilized CSR as a strategic option to promote positive functions and to establish the legitimacy of casinos within society (Porter & Kramer, 2006). However, firms with casino-related businesses face challenges in initiating CSR actions. Consumers often first elicit harmful effects rather than constructive functions when they are exposed to marketing communication messages for the firms with casino-related businesses (Lindorff, Jonson, & McGuire, 2012). With the negative percep-

tions in mind, CSR actions for these firms can face additional scrutiny, and the benevolent intent of CSR actions can be perceived as manipulative. Such scrutiny makes CSR communication more difficult and leaves the outcome of communication uncertain for firms operating casinos. Indeed, studies have shown that CSR actions by casino-related firms are often susceptible to a reputational backlash and the motives of such actions tend to be viewed as manipulative (Reast, Maon, Lindgreen, & Vanhamme, 2013).

Studies on the effects of CSR suggest that CSR initiatives by casino firms can boost employee morale (Vong & Wong, 2013), lessen negative perceptions about casinos (Lindorff et al., 2012; Porter & Kramer, 2006), and positively influence customer brand preference (Liu et al., 2013). Although many studies in recent years investigated CSR in the hospitality industry, CSR research to understand how consumers perceive CSR messages by casino-related firms has been sparse and some fundamental questions remain unanswered. To fill this gap, the current study provides theory-based empirical explanations regarding the conditions under which a CSR action by a casino hotel can lead to positive or negative communication effects. Specifically, this study aims to contribute to the literature in two ways. First, it adds empirical evidence on the efficacy of CSR communication by examining how consumers attribute persuasive intent behind a CSR action by a casino hotel, and how the CSR issue influences their attitudes and perceptions. Second, this study examines the underlying mechanism of CSR message processing by testing a moderated mediation model in which perceived manipulateness mediates the relationship between persuasive intent by issue importance interaction and the attitudinal outcome variables. The moderated mediation model sheds light on our understanding of consumers' CSR information processing by emphasizing the importance of perceived manipulateness evoked by a CSR message.

## Theoretical background and hypothesis development

### *Casino as a controversial product and persuasive intent in CSR*

Marketers use various tactics to achieve their persuasive goals. Over time, however, consumers acquire persuasion knowledge about marketers' tactics in various persuasion situations. The persuasion knowledge model (PKM) (Friestad & Wright, 1994) posits that consumers use their persuasion knowledge to recognize, analyze, interpret, and evaluate persuasion attempts from

marketers. While persuasion knowledge is primarily used to interpret and cope with marketers' persuasion attempts, such knowledge may not work favorably in the context of marketers' communication efforts. For example, when consumers see a CSR message from a casino hotel, they might infer an intent to manipulate, such that the CSR action is viewed as a way to cover up or justify the negative aspects of the firm's business. Thus, if not carefully planned, a CSR message can lead to unexpected outcomes for firms operating casinos, which are often attributed to financial or psychological harm to consumers.

In marketing communication for controversial products, one important issue to consider is negative bias or negativity effects. Negative bias is a general bias or tendency to give greater weight to negative items or information even when both positive and negative items are featured and evaluated (Das, Guha, Biswas, & Krishnan, 2016; Lee, 2016; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Research showed that negative information is more salient and attention-grabbing, and perceived as more useful and diagnostic than positive information (Ahluwalia, 2002; Lee, 2016). Negativity bias has been well demonstrated in person perception research (e.g. Fiske, 1980) as well as in consumer behavior research (e.g. Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Lee, 2016). Thus, negativity bias is likely to impede efforts to improve the positive image of a firm. Eberle and colleagues (2013), for example, showed that the detrimental effects of negative user evaluations on corporate CSR reputation are much higher than the favorable impacts of positive evaluation. Liu and colleagues (2010) also found that negativity bias evoked by negative corporate information offset participants' existing positive CSR image. Thus, for controversial products, negativity bias stemming from the negative perception of the product can be a triggering factor for consumers to activate their persuasion knowledge relating to CSR information, and thereby decrease the effectiveness of marketing communication.

Being aware of persuasive intent can further complicate the persuasion process for controversial products. In a sense, marketing communication is communication with persuasive intent. While consumers may not always be aware of the persuasive intent embedded in a message, there are situations in which they are more likely to be aware of the marketer's persuasive intent. For example, when consumers are exposed to a CSR message by a casino hotel, the word "casino" can be a salient cue with which they can look for persuasive intent in the message instead of focusing on the CSR action itself. Research showed that when people are aware of

persuasive intent in a message, it reduces communication effectiveness (Hsieh, Hsieh, & Tang, 2012; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962; Muller & Scherr, 2017). This is because people tend to embrace their existing beliefs when they realize someone is trying to persuade them on an issue on which they have already formed their beliefs. Thus, the persuasion message can be more thoroughly analyzed and evaluated (Kachersky, 2011; Sotiriadis & Zyl, 2013; Van Dam & Jonge, 2014). Such vigilance against persuasive intent can lead consumers to be more cautious about accepting the content of the message, and any cues that may signal persuasive intent may likely be interpreted as the manipulative intent of the marketer (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Lee, 2016). While persuasion resistance in marketing communication is not new, it can be even stronger when consumers already have negative perceptions of the product. As a result, the positive content of the CSR action, for example benefits of a public research grant, is likely to be discounted, and more weight will be placed on the potential negative aspects of the product, for example social and financial harm of casinos.

Although CSR is often tied into positive corporate reputation, the relationship between CSR and corporate reputation can be complex. Attribution research suggests that consumers go through an attribution process to interpret and evaluate marketers' CSR messages. For example, Ellen, Web, and Mohr (2006) showed that consumers tend to identify and attribute different types of CSR motives, for example egoistic or consumer-driven. The results of their study are consistent with PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which suggests that consumers actively utilize their persuasion knowledge in processing marketing communication messages. For example, if the CSR action is attributed to benefiting the company, such an action is not likely to be interpreted and evaluated positively. This is especially the case for firms

operating controversial businesses such as casinos. A study by Oh and colleagues (2016) showed that even advertising CSR for controversial product marketers can backfire. Thus, the authors argue the duality of advertising for controversial products such as casinos, which suggests that while there is evidence that the CSR-related advertising can improve a controversial product firm's image, the advertising message should be carefully framed to avoid a backlash.

On the other hand, if the CSR action is considered to have consumer-driven or altruistic goals, it is likely to be positively interpreted and evaluated. In particular, the persuasive intent of the marketer can play an even more important role for consumers to perceive the nature of the CSR action for a casino hotel. If persuasive intent is explicitly exposed, the CSR action is likely to be attributed to egoistic goals of the casino hotel, and the persuasive intent can be interpreted as manipulative (Ellen et al., 2006; Lee, 2016; Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2009). Further, once persuasive intent is detected, consumers are likely to activate persuasion knowledge (Kachersky, 2011). As such, the focus of information processing will not be on the CSR content but on the casino hotel's intent, which will lead to the increased perception of manipulateness of the message. In contrast, if consumers are not explicitly aware of the persuasive intent of the casino hotel, they are less likely to activate persuasion knowledge and the focus of information processing will be on the CSR action itself. Accordingly, consumers are less likely to perceive the CSR message as manipulative, which will lead to favorable evaluations of the CSR action for the company. Such favorable evaluations of the CSR action will also lower the perception of controversy surrounding the product. Hence, the following hypotheses (Hs) are proposed (an overview of all predictions is provided in Figure 1):

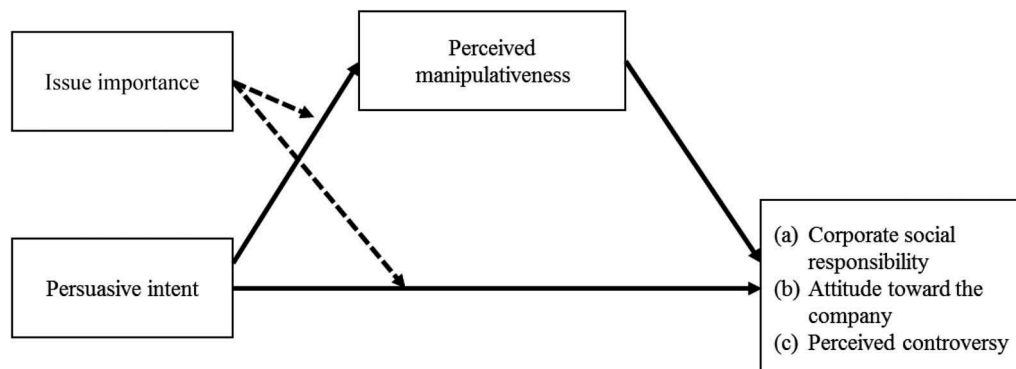


Figure 1. Hypothesized moderated mediation model between constructs.

H1: Implicit persuasive intent (versus explicit) in the casino hotel's CSR message will lead to (a) less perceived manipulateness; (b) higher perceived CSR; (c) a less negative attitude toward the company; and (d) less perceived product controversy.

### *The mediating role of perceived manipulateness of the message*

Evaluations of the CSR action can be influenced by whether people perceive manipulateness in the CSR action. The explicit display of persuasive intent in the message can activate persuasion knowledge, which will in turn increase the likelihood of negative attribution about the CSR action. While attributional processes at times evoke heightened suspicion about the motive of a CSR action (Gosselt, Rompay, & Haske, 2017; Vlachos et al., 2009), it is notable that negative attribution of the CSR action is more likely to occur due to negative bias in the controversial product industries (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Oh et al., 2016; Yani-de-Soriano et al., 2012). Such negative attribution is more likely to lead consumers to perceive manipulateness in the CSR message, and as a result, the CSR action is not likely to be evaluated favorably (Skarmas & Leonidou, 2013). To the extent that the CSR message is perceived as manipulative, the perceived product controversy surrounding the product is likely to increase. In contrast, when consumers are not aware of persuasive intent in the CSR message, they are less likely to perceive the CSR message as manipulative. Further, when consumers are not aware of persuasive intent, they will focus more on the content of the CSR action. Such message-focused information processing will lead to positive evaluations of the CSR action, which will result in positive attitudinal outcomes. In summary, we expect that perceived manipulateness will mediate the relationship between persuasive intent and the outcome variables when persuasive intent is explicit. This is because consumers are less likely to perceive manipulateness when they are not aware of persuasive intent in the CSR message. That is, the link between persuasive intent and manipulateness of the CSR message will be strong when consumers are explicitly aware of persuasive intent. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Perceived manipulateness of the CSR message mediates the relationship between persuasive intent and (a) perceived CSR; (b) attitude toward the company; and (c) perceived product controversy, such that the mediated relationship is valid only when persuasive intent is explicit.

### *Issue importance and perceived manipulateness*

Issue importance is critical in information processing because it affects how people choose and process certain information while ignoring other information. Issue importance can be defined as an individual's perceived concern, caring, or significance regarding an issue, and generally pertains to issues with social significance (Sarup, 1981). Most consumers have little motivation to carefully attend to all the information or issues they are exposed to every day through the media. Amid the information flood, they must be selective in choosing the information to which they are exposed. Issues that are perceived to be important are likely to be selected but also processed in a more elaborate manner. Perceived issue importance also encourages people to engage in more effortful processing of issue-relevant information (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984a; Yoon & Tinkham, 2013). Thus, if a casino hotel carries out a CSR action by donating a public research grant to find a cure for cancer, people are likely to be more cognitively involved in the content of the message than the source of the message, for example a casino hotel, because a cure for cancer is an important issue for the public. On the other hand, when an issue is considered less important, people are less likely to engage in effortful information processing. Further, they are more likely to utilize heuristic cues, such as the identity of the source or other non-content cues, in their message processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984b). For example, if a casino hotel donates to public research to find a solution for a less important issue such as beach erosion, people will pay more attention to heuristic cues such as source characteristics, for example casino operation. Accordingly, the negative perception of the source will persist and the CSR action will not be positively evaluated.

Importantly, persuasive intent in the message can moderate the outcome of issue-relevant information processing. Specifically, in processing the CSR message, issue importance can offset the potentially negative effects of explicit persuasive intent. In other words, even though people detect persuasive intent, if the issue is important, the focus of the information processing can still be the issue rather than the intent of the marketer. For example, if a casino hotel makes a research grant donation for children's cancer research, it is more likely that people will pay more attention to the issue than the source of the research grant or intent of the donor. Such information processing can result in positive evaluations of the CSR action. On the other hand, when the issue is considered less important, explicit persuasive intent can exacerbate the persuasion situation. For example, if a casino hotel donates to beach erosion research, which is considered a less important issue, explicit



persuasive intent can trigger the activation of persuasion knowledge, and the motive of the donation can be suspected, for example why would a casino hotel make a donation to beach erosion research? As a result, the intent-focused information processing will lead to more negative evaluations of the CSR action and the source of the action.

We expect that the mediating effects of perceived manipulateness between persuasive intent and the outcome variables will be dependent on issue importance. Consumers who are explicitly aware of the persuasive intent of the firm will perceive higher manipulateness (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) of the CSR action, and such an effect will be more apparent when the research issue is considered less important. Specifically, when the issue is considered less important, consumers' information processing is likely to focus on the peripheral information such as source characteristics (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, 1979) instead of on the content of the information (i.e. research donation). As a result, the issue with low importance will make the manipulateness of the message more salient, leading to negative outcomes. In contrast, when the issue is considered to be important, consumers are more motivated to process the content of the CSR action in a more elaborate manner (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984a). Such content-focused information processing will lower the perception of manipulateness of the message, which will lead to positive evaluations of the CSR action. To the extent that the CSR action is perceived to be positive and not manipulative, consumers are less likely to view the product as controversial. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: The indirect effects of persuasive intent of the company on (a) corporate social responsibility; (b) attitude toward the company; and (c) perceived product controversy through the perceived manipulateness vary as a function of CSR issue importance, such that the mediated relationship is valid when the CSR issue importance is low. That is, when the CSR issue is not important, the explicit persuasive intent of the company leads to higher perceived manipulateness, which in turn lowers perceived CSR and attitude toward the company, and increases perceived product controversy.

## Method

### Study design and participants

The study employed a 2 × 2 full factorial design with persuasive intent of the company (implicit versus

implicit) and issue importance (low versus high) in a research grant donation as manipulated independent variables. One hundred and twenty-six participants with English as the primary language were recruited through Amazon's mTurk platform. The majority of participants was from the US. Participants' age ranged from 20 to 66 years old with a mean age of 38.6. More than half of the participants (53.2%) had a 4-year college education or higher, and 69.1% of the participants had casino gambling experience at least once. Participants received a nominal incentive fee for participation (see Table 1 for detailed study participant characteristics).

### Pretest

The study involved a research grant donation by a casino hotel firm to a public research institute. A pretest was conducted to identify research topics to be used in the study. Forty-eight participants who did not participate in the main experiment evaluated the issue importance among 19 different research topics. Participants were asked to rate the level of importance for each research topic on a 7-point scale (e.g. "In your opinion, how important is this issue as a public research topic?"). As a result, children's leukemia was selected as the high importance research topic ( $M = 6.08$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ), and beach erosion was selected as the low importance topic ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) to be used in the research donation scenarios.

### Manipulation of independent variables and procedure

The study employed two independent variables. Issue importance in the research grant donation was manipulated by using the two research topics from the pretest: children's leukemia (high research importance) and beach erosion (low research importance). Persuasive

Table 1. Study participant characteristics.

Age	M = 38.6 (SD = 12.7), Range: 20–66,
Gender	71 females (56.3%), 54 males (42.8%), 1 participant declined to answer.
Education	67 participants (53.2%): 4-year college education or higher 48 participants (38.1%): junior college or some college education 11 participants (8.7%): high school or high-school equivalent education
Ethnicity	White (100), Black (10), Hispanic (9), other (7)
Casino experience	87 participants (69.1%): played at casino at least once 37 participants (29.4%): no casino experience 2 participants (1.5%): declined to answer
Nationality	US (119 participants), Canada (3), Mexico (1), Ireland (1), Brazil (1), Portugal (1)

intent of the company was manipulated by a paragraph at the end of each research grant scenario. In the explicit persuasive intent condition, the scenario stated that the research institute will identify the donor of the research grant, that is to say, the name of the casino hotel, when the results of the research are released to the public. The implicit persuasive intent condition, on the other hand, did not include this information.

Upon access to the study website, participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions and read the directions about the study, which was ostensibly being conducted by a research company to understand the public's opinion about a casino hotel company's proposed research grant. The directions further stated that a casino hotel company was considering a US\$ 1 million donation for public research, but the company wanted to hear how the public might perceive the research grant donation (see Appendix 1 for sample stimulus).

After reading the directions, participants read a scenario in the form of a publicity release by the donor company based on their experimental condition. Participants in the persuasive intent condition read the scenario with the donor identification (explicit persuasive intent) or without the donor identification (implicit persuasive intent). Participants in the issue importance condition read a donation publicity article for leukemia research (high importance) or beach erosion research (low importance). After reading the publicity article and forming their opinion, participants filled out the questionnaire designed to measure their opinion and attitudes toward the donation.

### Measures

Four dependent measures were used in this study to assess the effects of the independent variables (see Appendix 2 for dependent measures). *Perceived CSR* was measured by a 3-item, 7-point scale (Brown & Dacin, 1997), for example, "This company believes in philanthropy" ( $\alpha = .92$ ). *Attitude toward the company* was measured by a 3-item, 7-point scale (Kahle & Homer, 1985), anchored by bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, and unsatisfactory/satisfactory ( $\alpha = .98$ ). *Perceived product controversy* was measured by a 5-item 7-point scale, anchored by controversial/not controversial, offensive/not offensive, ethical/not ethical, pro-social/anti-social, and acceptable/not acceptable ( $\alpha = .96$ ). *Perceived manipulateness intent* was measured by a 6-item, 7-point scale (Campbell, 1995), for example, "The company tries to manipulate people in ways that I don't like" ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

## Results

### Manipulation checks

For the persuasive intent manipulation check, participants were asked to rate how much they felt there was manipulateness in the CSR message on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all manipulative" (1) to "very manipulative" (7). Data analysis indicated that participants in the explicit persuasive intent condition ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) reported higher persuasive intent scores than those who were in the implicit persuasive intent condition ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ),  $F(1, 124) = 12.04$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ . For the issue importance manipulation check, participants were asked to indicate how important the research issue is as a public research topic, with response options ranging from "not at all important" (1) to "very important" (7). Data analyses also showed that leukemia ( $M = 6.43$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) was perceived to be more important than beach erosion ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ),  $F(1, 124) = 24.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .17$ , as a public research topic. Thus, the manipulations were deemed successful for the two independent variables.

### Main effects

In order to test H1, that the implicit persuasive intent (versus explicit) would result in (a) less perceived manipulateness; (b) higher corporate social responsibility; (c) a more negative attitude toward the company; and (d) more perceived product controversy, a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) was conducted. The results showed a significant main effect of the persuasive intent on perceived manipulateness,  $F(1,122) = 7.38$ ,  $p = .008$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ , CSR,  $F(1,122) = 5.19$ ,  $p = .024$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ , and attitude toward the company,  $F(1,122) = 8.40$ ,  $p = .004$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ . Specifically, participants who read the scenario with the explicit persuasive intent were more likely than those who read the same scenario without the donor identification (implicit persuasive intent) to perceive the scenario as manipulative, and less likely to have higher CSR and a favorable attitude toward the company (Means and standard errors for each variable are listed in Table 2). With regard to perceived product controversy, a marginally significant main effect of the persuasive intent types was found,  $F(1,122) = 3.51$ ,  $p = .063$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Participants in the explicit persuasive intent condition were more likely than those in the implicit persuasive intent condition to indicate higher perceived product controversy. Thus, H1a, H1b, and H1c were supported, while H1d was marginally supported.



**Table 2.** Means and standard errors for dependent variables.

	Condition	Perceived manipulateness		Corporate social responsibility		Attitude toward the company		Perceived product controversy	
		M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE
Persuasive intent	Implicit	2.76	0.18	5.28	0.18	5.45	0.20	3.03	0.22
	Explicit	3.47	0.19	4.69	0.19	4.61	0.21	3.61	0.23
Issue importance	Important	2.76	0.20	5.37	0.20	5.53	0.22	3.18	0.24
	Unimportant	3.45	0.17	4.60	0.17	4.54	0.19	3.46	0.20

SE: standard error.

### Mediation effect and moderated mediation effect

H2 predicted that perceived manipulateness would mediate the relationships between the persuasive intent types and (a) CSR; (b) attitude toward the company; and (c) perceived product controversy. To investigate the indirect effects, Model 4 in the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) was employed with 10,000 bootstraps resamples. All analyses included the persuasive intent types (implicit versus explicit persuasive intent) as the independent variable and the perceived manipulateness as the mediator. CSR, attitude toward the company, and perceived product controversy were independently entered as the dependent variables for each analysis. The results of direct and indirect effects (reported in Table 3) showed that the 95% bootstrap confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effects did not include zero, indicating that the persuasive intent types indirectly influenced (a) CSR (95% CI = [-1.1902, -.3294]); (b) attitude toward the company (95% CI = [-1.3887, -.3768]); and (c) perceived product controversy (95% CI = [.2300, .9554]) through perceived manipulateness (Table 4). In other words, the explicit

persuasive intent of the company (versus implicit intent) was likely to increase the perceived manipulateness, which, in turn, resulted in lower perceived CSR, negative attitudes toward the company, and higher perceived product controversy. H2a, H2b, and H2c, therefore, were supported.

Model 8 in the PROCESS macro was used with 10,000 bootstrap resamples to test H3, which predicted whether the indirect effects of persuasive intent of the company on (a) CSR; (b) attitude toward the company; and (c) perceived product controversy through the perceived manipulateness is dependent on issue importance. Specifically, all analyses included the persuasive intent types (implicit versus explicit persuasive intent) as the independent variable, issue importance (low versus high) as the moderator, and the perceived manipulateness as the mediator. As the dependent variables, CSR, attitude toward the company, and perceived product controversy were independently entered for each analysis.

The analyses showed that the indices of moderated mediation were significant, index = .82, SE = .42, 95%

**Table 3.** Results of direct and indirect effect analysis.

Direct effects	Effect	SE	95% CI
Persuasive intent → Corporate social responsibility	.14	.14	.3119, .2588
Persuasive intent → Attitude toward the company	-.30	.17	-.6340, .0297
Persuasive intent → Perceived product controversy	.22	.27	-.3100, .7489
Indirect effects	Effect	BootSE	Boot 95% CI
Persuasive intent → Perceived manipulateness → Corporate social responsibility	<b>-.75</b>	<b>.22</b>	<b>-1.1902, -.3294</b>
Persuasive intent → Perceived manipulateness → Attitude toward the company	<b>-.86</b>	<b>.26</b>	<b>-1.3887, -.3768</b>
Persuasive intent → Perceived manipulateness → Perceived product controversy	<b>.54</b>	<b>.18</b>	<b>.2300, .9554</b>

Statistically significant values are presented in bold. Bootstrap resampling = 10,000.  
SE: standard error; CI: confidence interval.

**Table 4.** Results of conditional indirect effect analysis.

Dependent variable	Conditional indirect effects		Effect	Boot SE	95% Boot CI
	Mediator	Moderator			
Corporate social responsibility	Perceived manipulateness	Issue Importance (low)	<b>-.9541</b>	<b>.2914</b>	<b>[-1.5330, -.3916]</b>
Corporate social responsibility	Perceived manipulateness	Issue Importance (high)	-.2027	.2374	[-.6748, .2591]
Attitude toward the company	Perceived manipulateness	Issue Importance (low)	<b>-1.0447</b>	<b>.3208</b>	<b>[-1.6674, -.4116]</b>
Attitude toward the company	Perceived manipulateness	Issue Importance (high)	-.2219	.2621	[-.7368, .2867]
Perceived product controversy	Perceived manipulateness	Issue Importance (low)	<b>.6713</b>	<b>.2457</b>	<b> [.2594, 1.2447]</b>
Perceived product controversy	Perceived manipulateness	Issue Importance (high)	.1426	.1720	[-.1706, .5160]

Statistically significant values are presented in bold. Bootstrap resampling = 10,000.  
SE: standard error; CI: confidence interval.

CI = [.0164, 1.4947] for CSR; index = .75,  $SE = .38$ , 95% CI = [.0123, 1.6339] for attitude toward the company; and index = -.5287,  $SE = .29$ , 95% CI = [-1.2068, -.0381] for perceived product controversy, which indicated that the indirect effects of the persuasive intent of the company (implicit versus explicit) on (a) CSR; (b) attitude toward the company; and (c) perceived product controversy through the perceived manipulateness were dependent on issue importance with regard to whether the topic used in the research donation scenarios was considered important or not. Additionally, probing of the conditional indirect effects showed that the indirect effect on (a) CSR; (b) attitude toward the company; and (c) perceived product controversy through the perceived manipulateness was significant only when issue importance was low. Specifically, when the issue used in the research donation scenarios was considered not important (i.e. beach erosion in this study), explicit persuasive intent of the company led to higher perceived manipulateness, which in turn lowered their perceived CSR and their attitude toward the company, and increased their perceived product controversy. H3a, H3b, and H3c were supported by the data.

## Conclusion

Consumers go through the attribution process to evaluate different types of CSR actions (Coombs, 2007; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006). This study makes several contributions to the hospitality CSR literature. First, it provides empirical evidence on how consumers process CSR messages by a hotel firm that operates casino businesses in varying conditions. Despite the importance of CSR in the casino-related industry, empirical studies on the effectiveness of CSR messages from a corporate communication perspective have been sparse. Second, the study examined two variables relevant to CSR actions for firms operating casino business. As the results of this study show, the effects of CSR actions for a casino hotel can be selective. Explicit (versus implicit) persuasive intent in the CSR message by a casino hotel lowered the effectiveness of the message. Issue importance in the CSR action also influenced participants' evaluations of the CSR action by affecting participants' perceived manipulateness of the CSR action. Third, the results of the study showed that perceived manipulateness of CSR action mediated the relationship between persuasive intent by issue importance interactions and the outcome variables. Consistent with previous research (Campbell, 1995; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013; Vlachos et al., 2009), the moderated mediation model tested and confirmed in this study indicates the significance

of perceived manipulateness in understanding the effectiveness of CSR action for casino hotels.

## Theoretical implications

Persuasive intent in CSR message has rarely been explored in hospitality marketing research and most CSR studies in the hospitality literature have been concerned with the positive effects of CSR. Firms operating casino businesses, however, may need to pay attention to a possible backlash because of the negative perception associated with casino gambling. Consumers' attribution process with regard to casino-related firms' CSR initiatives can differ from those of other non-controversial marketers. The current study gives us an understanding of consumers' attributions pertaining to CSR actions for controversial products such as casino hotels. This study provides several implications. First, consistent with research in persuasion resistance (Muller & Scherr, 2017; Sotiriadis & Zyl, 2013), the results of this study showed that explicit persuasive intent decreased the effectiveness of the CSR message. However, when persuasive intent was implicit or when participants were not aware of persuasive intent in the message, the CSR message led to positive effects. The main effects for persuasive intent were significant for all dependent variables, except for perceived controversy of the product. This may suggest that the controversy surrounding the product, namely the casino, may indeed be chronic and not easily dissipate after one exposure to a CSR message.

Second, the findings of this study showed that perceived manipulateness mediated the relationship between persuasive intent and the outcome variables, such that when persuasive intent of the company was explicit, participants elicited higher perceived manipulateness, which influenced their attitude toward the casino hotel and lowered the ratings of perceived CSR for the casino hotel. The level of controversy surrounding the casino hotel was also higher when participants perceived the CSR message as manipulative. As PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) suggests, when persuasive intent is salient, people tend to activate persuasive knowledge, which can lead to additional scrutiny and heightened persuasion awareness with regard to the CSR message. The results of such scrutiny are likely to be less favorable evaluations of the persuasive message (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Muller & Scherr, 2017; Sotiriadis & Zyl, 2013). Overall, these results show that whether or not consumers perceive manipulateness in the message can significantly influence the way they positively or negatively evaluate the CSR action for a casino hotel. Third, the findings of the conditional

indirect effect of persuasive intent on the outcome variables through manipulateness at a specific level of issue importance showed that such an indirect effect varies as a function of issue importance. Specifically, the results showed that the indirect effect only occurred when issue importance was low, such that the explicit persuasive intent was likely to increase perceived manipulateness, which, in turn, led to lower effectiveness of the CSR message. These results are theoretically meaningful because the findings suggest a critical role of perceived product manipulateness in consumers' processing of a CSR message for casino hotels. Specifically, the moderated mediation model in this study demonstrated that the indirect effect of the persuasive intent of the company on the outcome variables through the level of perceived manipulateness depends on the issue importance of the CSR action. In other words, the roles of persuasive intent and issue importance for a CSR action by a casino hotel firm became more apparent when perceived manipulateness was included in the data analyses.

### *Managerial implications*

The results of the study provide managerial implications pertaining to hospitality firms operating casino businesses. While CSR can bring direct and indirect benefits, the level of scrutiny of CSR actions by consumers can be much higher for casino hotels (Reast et al., 2012). Consumers are likely to process CSR messages of a casino hotel in a different manner compared with other products with no perceived manipulateness. The findings of the study show that explicit persuasive intent would result in undesirable outcomes. Firms allocate resources to public causes because doing so is not only socially responsible but also benefits the firm. However, explicitly exposing persuasive intent of a CSR action on the part of the casino hotel can jeopardize achieving strategic goals. Consumer research (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988) showed that a CSR action perceived as a marketing activity can be understood as exploitation of the cause by firms operating casino businesses. For example, as this study showed, any cues in the message that are viewed as promoting the company, such as including the donation recipient's obligations, can be perceived as egoistic and exploitative. Therefore, associating CSR actions with marketing activities should be avoided to communicate the genuine intent of the firm (Oh et al., 2016). Accordingly, the CSR message may need to entirely focus on the benefits of the donation to the recipients or the public, and the messages that may signal that the donor can also benefit from the CSR action should be discouraged in CSR communication for

casino hotels. As Donia and colleagues (2016) noted, managers should understand that a CSR action must convey the perception that the firm is a genuine giver rather than a taker to achieve the objectives of the CSR initiative.

Casino firms must also be careful in selecting the content of CSR. The CSR initiatives by casino firms must be perceived as valuable and meaningful in the eyes of consumers. While CSR initiatives involving worthy social causes can improve the image of the firm, casino hotels need to selectively choose the topic of a CSR initiative. Managerial decisions on less important issues are likely to lead to unfavorable outcomes (Donia et al., 2016). It is important for managers to understand that, for casino hotels, consumers may notice casino (controversial product) first rather than hotel (not controversial). As this study showed, CSR actions in the context of substantive issues such as children's cancer research are more likely to be viewed as genuine and altruistic while those relating to less significant issues such as beach erosion research are less likely to contribute to achieving the firm's CSR objectives. Another important point to consider for managers is the CSR fit. While a CSR fit is an important factor affecting the effectiveness of a CSR action in non-controversial sectors, casino-related firms must be careful in examining the fit. For example, a CSR action designed to help gambling addicts is likely to backfire because consumers can link such an action with self-serving or egoistic motives (Yoon et al., 2006).

### *Limitations and future research*

This study has some limitations. First, this study used a "casino hotel" instead of a "casino firm." Thus, the results may pertain to those hotels that operate casino businesses. With this in mind, caution should be exercised in interpreting the results in other controversial product areas. Controversial products and services span many different categories with different characteristics. For example, consumers' reactions to a pharmaceutical company that markets opioid drugs could be different from those to casino hotels. Third, the participants of this study were mostly consumers from the US. Given that the perceptions of casinos can be different depending upon the culture, the results may be limited to the US market. Additionally, the number of samples used in the study was relatively small and mainly from the US. Given the nature of the product used in this study (casino hotels), future studies may benefit by including increased samples from other countries.

Future research can also benefit by examining other variables regarding hospitality situations. For example,

cultural differences can influence the activation of persuasion knowledge and information processing. A significant body of research shows that people in East Asian cultures process information more holistically than those in Western cultures (e.g. Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999). For example, Ramasamy and Yeung (2009) also found that Chinese consumers show a higher level of support of CSR than consumers in Western cultures do. A different way of thinking and a different level of support for CSR may lead to different information processing of CSR actions. With a holistic view, persuasive intent of a donor may be processed differently by Chinese people. Considering that some hospitality firms operate across national boundaries, cultural differences in information processing can result in different communication effectiveness when global CSR initiatives are implemented. Second, the role of a hotel brand or reputation may be an interesting variable to explore. For example, CSR actions by a Hilton Casino and Hotel can be perceived differently from those by an unknown casino hotel. Third, the fit between casinos and CSR actions can be an important issue in understanding how consumers positively or negatively attribute casino-related firms' CSR initiatives. The importance of fit between a company and a CSR initiative has been demonstrated by many studies and it can be even more important for casino firms, which face much higher scrutiny in marketing communication from the general public (Reast et al., 2012). Finally, future research can explore the generalizability of our findings pertaining to CSR issue importance. For casino hotels with a known prior CSR reputation, issue importance may not be a significant factor because consumers know that the firm has been active in CSR initiatives.

CSR has been motivated mainly by economic and legal purposes, and truly altruistic CSR activities may be outside of the for-profit corporate boundaries (Lantos, 2001). While CSR can be a strategic imperative for many companies to build corporate reputations, casino hotels must be aware that consumers may go through different attribution processes in the case of CSR messages from casino-related firms. As the results of the current study indicate, casino hotels need to carefully consider their CSR strategies to benefit from their CSR actions.

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### ORCID

Sang Yeal Lee  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6552-214X>

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Sample stimulus used in the study

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

#### SPRINGFIELD CASINO & HOTELS TO AWARD \$1M RESEARCH DONATION

**MIAMI – (Updated February 11, 2017)** Today, Springfield Casino & Hotels announced the recipient of its 2017 Research Grant. The company will make a \$1M research grant donation to the Clark Center for [Children's Leukemia Research/Beach Erosion Research]. The Corporate Giving Review Board of the Springfield Casino & Hotels selected the Clark Center as the recipient of the \$1M research grant because of its reputation and their public research focus.

"We understand the importance of giving back and continuing to foster our commitment to corporate social responsibility," said David P. Berg, Chairperson of the Review Board. "In particular, we are interested in supporting research projects the results of which will benefit the public in general," Berg added.

The research grant will allow the Clark Center to install a new pilot research program designed to [find the cure for children's leukemia cancer/understand the potential environment impact of beach erosion].

"We are grateful for the generous donation," said Dr. Joseph Swain, Director of the Clark Center. "The research to be funded by this donation will accelerate scientific discovery that will further advance [the innovative therapies for children's leukemia cancers/our knowledge of the environmental impact of beach erosion]. This generous research grant will certainly accelerate our research programs," Dr. Swain added.

*As a part of the grant agreement, the Clark Center for [Children's Leukemia Research/Beach Erosion Research] will identify Springfield Casino & Hotels as the research grant donor when the research results are released to the media and in academic journals.*

####

*About Springfield Casino & Hotels:*

Springfield Casino & Hotels is one of the largest casino and hotel holding companies in the US. Springfield Casino & Hotels is a publicly traded company with \$2.5 billion in sales in the 2015 fiscal year.

Media Inquiries Only Contact:

Jennifer Rosen, Senior Manager, Donor Relations

Clark Center for Beach Erosion Research

503-446-7155, Jennifer.rosen@ccrf.org

(1) The phrases in parenthesis are the issue importance manipulation (high versus low).

(2) The explicit persuasive intent condition included the italicized paragraph while the implicit persuasive intent condition did not include this paragraph.

## Appendix 2

Dependent variable measurement items (all items were measured on a 7-point scale)

**Perceived manipulativeness** ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

How would you evaluate the intent of the donor company?

- The way this company tries to persuade people seems acceptable to me.
- The company tried to manipulate the public in ways that I don't like.
- I was annoyed by this donation because the company seemed to be trying to inappropriately manage or control the consumer audience.
- I didn't mind this donation; the company tried to be persuasive without being excessively manipulative.
- This donation was fair in what was said and shown.
- I think that this donation is unfair.

### Perceived corporate social responsibility ( $\alpha = .92$ )

How would you evaluate the company's corporate social responsibility?

- This company believes in philanthropy.
- This company is a good corporate citizen.
- This company donates money to worthy causes.

**Attitude toward the company** ( $\alpha = .98$ )

Please provide your impression of the donor company.

- good/bad
- favorable/unfavorable
- satisfactory/unsatisfactory

**Perceived product controversy** ( $\alpha = .96$ )

How controversial do you find the nature of the product or service of the donor company?

- controversial/not controversial,
- offensive/not offensive,
- unethical/ethical,
- anti-social/pro-social,
- not acceptable/acceptable