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Anthropomorphizing brands: The role of attributed brand traits in interactive CSR communication and consumer online endorsements

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Abstract

Consumers tend to relate to brands in similar ways as they relate to individuals and groups. However, relatively little is known about the attribution of human traits to brands in online contexts. The current research focused on the role of attributed brand traits in interactive corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication and positive electronic word-of-mouth intentions. Results of an online survey (N = 174) revealed that higher levels of perceived interactivity were associated with stronger attributions of morality, sociability, and competence traits to brands. Yet only attributed brand morality was associated with consumers' willingness to endorse the brand and its CSR message on social networking sites. These findings underline the importance of brands' openness to dialogue regarding the promotion of CSR activities. Furthermore, these findings suggest that consumers are most likely to feel that brands can represent their identity when brand morality is considered to be high.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The promotion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives traditionally tended to occur through one-way communication—in which consumers are recipients of information and are not directly listened to. However, the rise of social networking sites (SNS) has enabled companies to engage in two-way communication with their consumers, which allows both parties to explore whether corporate activities are mutually beneficial (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Suárez-Rico, Gómez-Villegas, & Garciá-Benau, 2018). The interactive affordances of SNS can invite consumers to engage in a dialogue with brands, thereby increasing brands' perceived interactivity (i.e., "the extent to which users perceive their experience as a simulation of interpersonal interaction and sense they are in the presence of a social other"; Thorson & Rodgers, 2006, p. 36). Corporate social performance ratings are influenced by the ability of companies to meet—or exceed—consumer norms (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Nason, Bacq, & Gras, 2018), and consumers are more actively involved in contributing to social marketing content due to the rise of SNS

(Heinonen, 2011). The inclusion of consumers in CSR communication could therefore promote greater endorsement of the CSR initiative (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). CSR communication on SNS might help shift the focus away from the instrumental aspects of CSR by instead emphasizing the humanistic and relational aspects (Kent & Taylor, 2016).

The current research addresses how interactive CSR communication can affect attributed brand traits and whether these traits in turn can promote consumers' electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intentions to endorse the brand on SNS. Relationships with brands are formed in ways that are relatively comparable with how people connect to other individuals and groups (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). These consumer-brand relationships can be established through the process of anthropomorphism (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Maehle, Otnes, & Supphellen, 2011), which refers to the tendency to attribute humanlike characteristics to nonhuman entities (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Brands tend to be considered as mindful and intentional agents that are responsible for their actions (Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2013) and are therefore likely to be the targets of moral judgments (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). Indeed, consumers

assess the intentions and ability of brands in order to guide their brand loyalty and purchase intentions (Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012; Malone & Fiske, 2013). As such, perceived brand traits can play an important role in consumers' behaviors.

Research has demonstrated the effects of perceived interactivity levels of SNS brand messages on a range of outcomes, such as more positive brand attitudes (Van Noort, Voorveld, & Van Reijmersdal, 2012; Yang & Shen, 2018). Yet relatively little is known about the underlying processes explaining these effects. Furthermore, few studies have addressed eWOM intentions regarding CSR communication. The current research focuses on the mediating role of brand traits in the relation between perceived interactivity of a CSR message and eWOM intentions. As such, the contributions are threefold. First, we examine whether interactive CSR communication can influence attributed humanlike brand traits. CSR can function as a signal to consumers that a company is behaving as a "good citizen" (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), which might promote the attribution of humanlike traits to brands. Second, we address which brand traits drive consumers' online endorsement decisions. Although consumers consider eWOM as a valuable source of information to determine a company's trustworthiness (Bulut & Karabulut, 2018; Ziegele & Weber, 2015), consumers also tend to be reluctant to engage in eWOM due to the associated social risks (Eisingerich, Chun, Liu, Jia, & Bell, 2015). It is therefore important to learn which perceived brand traits are regarded as essential for consumers to endorse a brand and its CSR message on SNS. Third, the few studies that have examined attributed humanlike brand traits mainly focused on warmth and competence perceptions (Bernritter, Verlegh, & Smit, 2016; Malone & Fiske, 2013). However, research has revealed that warmth perceptions actually comprised two empirically distinct components that play a different role in impression formation (Landy, Piazza, & Goodwin, 2016; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007): Morality—which refers to perceived rightness, and sociability—which refers to the perceived willingness and ability to connect.

Perceived interactivity and attributed brand traits

People construct an impression of others' traits in order to determine whether they are willing to engage in an interpersonal interaction and to estimate which potential benefits and costs they can expect from such an interaction (Asch, 1946). Formed impressions of others are based on their morality, sociability, and competence levels (Ellemers, 2018; Landy et al., 2016). Whereas morality traits (e.g., honesty, trustworthiness) provide an indication of others' beneficial or harmful intentions toward oneself, sociability traits (e.g., likeability, friendliness) reflect the extent to which others are capable of building and maintaining connections. Competence traits (e.g., intelligence, skillfulness) can provide an indication of whether others are capable of achieving their intended goals through their own efforts.

We propose that interactivity perceptions can positively influence the attribution of moral, sociable, and competent brand traits. First, we suggest that attributed brand morality is likely to be higher when communication is perceived as interactive. The promotion of CSR

initiatives through SNS requires companies to be transparent about their activities (Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010), as consumers have more opportunities to question and challenge companies when the provided CSR information is considered to be unreliable (Lyon & Montgomery, 2013). Omitting key information by presenting CSR performances in a desirable manner can reduce the perceived trustworthiness of a company (Devin, 2016). Indeed, it has been argued that greenwashing (i.e., "selective disclosure of positive information about a company's environmental or social performance, while withholding negative information on these dimensions," Lyon & Maxwell, 2011, p. 5) is less likely to occur on SNS than in traditional media, as it is easier for consumers to detect greenwashing and punish the brand as a result (Lyon & Montgomery, 2013). We therefore argue that consumers might attribute moral traits to a brand that is willing to expose itself through SNS interaction. Using dishonest information in interactive contexts can bring substantial costs to a company. As such, consumers might reason that it is unlikely that a company will choose to disclose CSR information in an interactive context when there are aspects of the CSR performance that cannot be revealed. Thus, consumers might imply that brands that promote their CSR interactively—thereby allowing SNS users to criticize their actions—can be considered to be trustworthy.

Second, we expect that a higher level of perceived interactivity is likely to promote stronger perceptions of brand sociability. Rather than focusing on managing and persuading audiences, the opportunity to create a dialogue with consumers on SNS emphasizes the construction and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2016). Dialogic communication requires involved parties to show a genuine interest in each other, which can lead to a feeling of empowerment among stakeholders (DeBussy, Ewing, & Pitt, 2003; Men, Tsai, Chen, & Ji, 2018). Consequently, we predict that consumers will consider a brand that shows openness to interaction about CSR to be more sociable. Facilitating interaction with consumers on SNS allows companies to reveal their sociability traits by increasing their accessibility and social presence, which can positively affect the experienced intimacy of the consumer-brand relationship.

Third, we predict that perceived interactivity will positively influence perceived corporate competence. Engaging in a dialogue can increase a company's accountability and enables stakeholders to make stricter demands regarding the authenticity of the information that a company shares (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Consequently, we argue that it becomes more difficult for a company that performs poorly on CSR to hide its shortcomings. In line with this reasoning, research has shown that companies with strong environmental records are more willing to communicate about their environmental performance through SNS than companies with weak environmental records (Lee, Oh, & Kim, 2013). Thus, communicating about CSR accomplishments in interactive contexts is likely to result in a backlash when companies have experienced multiple CSR failures. It is therefore possible that consumers expect brands to only promote their CSR activities in interactive contexts when brands are sufficiently competent to withstand scrutiny of their CSR performance.

As such, the following is hypothesized:

H1. Higher perceived interactivity of CSR communication on SNS is associated with higher levels of attributed brand morality, sociability, and competence.

Attributed brand traits and eWOM intentions

Various predictors of the willingness to talk positively about brands have thus far been examined in previous studies (Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018). For example, eWOM intentions have been associated with the extent to which a product is perceived to be of high quality and the extent to which consumers are satisfied with a product (Wien & Olsen, 2012). Furthermore, indicators of the connection of the consumer to a brand—such as identification—have consistently been demonstrated to promote both WOM and eWOM (Eberle, Berens, & Li, 2013; Hung & Lu, 2018; Sicilia, Delgado-Ballester, & Palazon, 2016). Nevertheless, little is known about the factors that might drive consumers' connection to a brand on SNS. The current research addresses this issue by examining the humanlike traits that consumers attribute to brands, and how these traits can influence consumers' willingness to endorse a brand on SNS.

Attributed brand traits are likely to impact consumer behaviors. The extent to which the brand can function as a signal of one's identity influences consumers' brand endorsement (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011). People prefer brand attributes that enable them to express their desired identity (Kuksov, Shachar, & Wang, 2013). Brands can also provide a signal about the social groups to which consumers belong (Berger & Heath, 2007). Consumers experience a stronger connection to a brand when the brand image is congruent with the image of one's in-group than when it is congruent with the image of an out-group (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Preferring products that signal belongingness to a social group is particularly likely to occur in contexts where others will try to infer the consumer's identity, such as an SNS context (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Berger & Heath, 2007). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that people endorse brands on Facebook to represent their self-concept (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Brands that provide SNS users a better opportunity to represent their identity are more likely to have positive eWOM (Lovett, Peres, & Shachar, 2013).

As brands can symbolize group membership—which in turn impacts brand endorsements (Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2005)—it is important to reflect on which traits determine whether people want to belong to a group. Research has consistently shown that morality is considered to be more important than sociability or competence in impression formation processes of individuals and groups. For example, only morality affects group identification and pride in group membership (Leach et al., 2007). Furthermore, morality is seen as more fundamental to identity and as more desirable than sociability or competence (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). Moral traits inform people about others' intentions—and thereby whether interactions present a threat to their well-being (Willis & Todorov, 2006). As such, the willingness to interact with others is primarily driven by morality information (Brambilla, Sacchi, Pagliaro, & Ellemers, 2013). In performance-related contexts—where competence is likely to be salient—people nevertheless prefer to work with moral but incompetent team members rather than competent but immoral team members (Van Prooijen & Ellemers, 2015).

Consequently, we expect that perceived brand morality will have a stronger influence on consumers' eWOM intentions than perceived brand sociability or competence. As morality is deemed key in identity evaluations, it is likely that consumers will feel a stronger connection to brands that are perceived to be moral, which can thereby promote brand endorsement on SNS as a way to signal their identity. The following is predicted:

H2. Higher levels of attributed brand morality are associated with stronger eWOM intentions on SNS regarding (a) the CSR message and (b) the brand than attributed brand sociability or competence.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants and procedure

A convenience sampling method was used to collect data from 174 participants (112 females, 62 males). In general, it is recommended to have 10 cases per parameter when conducting confirmatory factor analyses (Bentler & Chou, 1987). Our tested models included 16 measured items, which would require a sample of 160 participants. Thus, a sample size of 174 should be sufficient to adequately test our hypotheses. Participants' ages ranged between 19 and 84 years ($M = 31.20$, $SD = 14.14$). Participation was on a voluntary basis. Participants were invited to take part in an online survey, in which they were asked to read a (fictitious) CSR message on the Facebook page of an existing travel company. After presenting the CSR message, participants rated the perceived interactivity of the brand. Measures of the perceived brand traits, and eWOM intentions were then assessed. Finally, participants were debriefed about the fictitious CSR message and thanked for their time.

2.2 | Materials

2.2.1 | Corporate social responsibility message

To generate a wider range of attributions of perceived interactivity, participants were exposed to differently framed fictitious CSR messages. Previous research has indicated that using a conversational human voice in brand messages increases the perceived interactivity in comparison with a more formal, corporate voice (Park & Cameron, 2014). As such, four messages were developed in which tone of voice varied. The most personal (human voice) message was delivered by a project manager, who first introduced herself, used her own profile picture, and spoke in a first-person voice. The most impersonal message (corporate voice) was delivered by the organization in a third-person voice, using the logo as a profile picture. In two other messages, the tone of voice was somewhat more neutral, as components of both a personal and an impersonal tone of voice were integrated. Each participant reads one of the four CSR messages.

Despite these different messages, this study specifically aimed to address perceived rather than objective interactivity. Research has consistently shown that perceived interactivity is more influential than objective interactivity and that interactivity reflects a dynamic process that is difficult to assess (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006; Yang & Shen, 2018).[1]

Each message focused on the environmental sustainability activities of an existing travel company that specializes in luxurious all-inclusive holidays. This setting was selected for various reasons. First, consumers tend to rely on eWOM in order to guide their travel-related decisions (Murphy, Mascardo, & Benckendorff, 2007), and eWOM therefore plays a significant role in the travel industry. Second, it is common for consumers to use SNS to engage in eWOM by sharing their travel experiences (Hanai, Yashiro, & Konno, 2018; Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011; Ring, Tkaczynski, & Dolnicar, 2016). This might be partially explained by the involvement that consumers are likely to experience with the service that travel companies provide. Involvement is considered to be an important condition for consumers to engage in WOM (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998). Third, luxurious products and services tend to be associated with status, which can promote a stronger connection to a brand (Brashear-Alejandro, Kang, & Groza, 2016; Romero, 2018) and which can help consumers to obtain self-enhancement goals. The latter factors are both associated with higher WOM and eWOM intentions (De Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker, & Costabile, 2012; Eberle et al., 2013). Finally, environmental sustainability has been shown to be one of the most valued CSR domains by consumers (Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, Murphy, & Gruber, 2014; Schons, Scheidler, & Bartels, 2017) and might therefore be more likely to facilitate eWOM than CSR domains that are less valued. Additionally, sustainability is a key issue in the travel industry (Torres-Delgado & Palomeque, 2012).

The message described that the built-up surfaces only cover 11% of the total site surface and how the organization aimed to protect the local vegetation and prevent erosion during the construction of the resorts and the accompanying gardens. Furthermore, an example was given, where the organization took action to avoid smothering of the coral reef by removing sand during the renovation of a resort. To ensure that the message was realistic, the described CSR activities were based on CSR information that the company promotes on its website, and the lay out of the message was largely similar to the Facebook lay out of the company.

2.2.2 | Perceived interactivity

Perceived interactivity was measured using four items (adapted from Kelleher, 2009): "This company is open to dialogue," "this company

invites people to conversation," "this company approaches me in a personal manner," and "this company provides the opportunity to contact her directly," $\alpha = .78$. Items were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

2.2.3 | Brand traits

A total of nine traits were used as indicators of the three social perception dimensions (Leach et al., 2007). Participants were asked to indicate how they estimated the morality, sociability, and competence traits of the company on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very low, 7 = very high). Morality was assessed with the traits "honest," "sincere," and "trustworthy," $\alpha = .93$. The traits "likeable," "warm," and "friendly" assessed sociability, $\alpha = .91$. Finally, competence was assessed with the traits "intelligent," "skilled," and "competent", $\alpha = .92$.

First-order confirmatory factor analyses were conducted using AMOS 23.0 to test whether the three attributions were perceived as three distinct constructs. The following fit statistics were used: chi-square estimate with degrees of freedom (χ^2/df), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA), and the root mean square residual (RMR). The criteria for acceptance of χ^2/df vary across researchers, ranging from less than two (Ullman, 2001) to less than five (Bollen, 1989; Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). Hu and Bentler (1999) further recommend using a cutoff value over 0.90 or 0.95 for CFI and TLI and a value less than 0.08 for the RMSEA and RMR.

It was first investigated whether the uncorrelated three-dimensional model with morality, sociability, and competence as separate constructs fitted the data. However, results indicated that this uncorrelated model did not fit, $\chi^2/df = 10.12$; CFI = .83; TLI = .77; RMSEA = .23; and RMR = .43. The correlated three-dimensional model did provide a good fit with the data, $\chi^2/df = 2.05$; CFI = .98; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .08; and RMR = .03. Thus, morality, sociability, and competence attributions cannot be considered as independent constructs. When people perceive traits in one domain to be positive, they are also more likely to ascribe somewhat more positive attributions to traits in other domains. Similar "spill-over effects" have been found in previous research (Van Prooijen, Ellemers, Van der Lee, & Scheepers, 2018).

As previous research has tended to approach morality and sociability as a single "warmth" dimension, a correlated two-dimensional model was also investigated, in which morality and sociability were introduced as one construct and competence was introduced as the second construct. The correlated two-dimensional model did not fit the data, $\chi^2/df = 11.76$; CFI = .80; TLI = .73; RMSEA = .25; and RMR = .11, which is in line with research demonstrating that people perceived morality and sociability as two distinct constructs (Goodwin et al., 2014; Landy et al., 2016; Leach et al., 2007). Finally, a one-dimensional model was examined, which also did not provide a fit with the data, $\chi^2/df = 14.89$; CFI = .74; TLI = .65; RMSEA = .28; and RMR = .10. Thus, the correlated three-dimensional model proved to provide the best solution. These findings are in line with previous research, which has also shown that morality, sociability, and competence represent theoretically and

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[1]Although this study focused on perceived interactivity, the effects of the differently framed messages were also explored. An analysis of variance revealed that perceived interactivity was higher when messages contained more personal tone of voice elements, $F_{(3, 170)} = 12.70$, $p < .001$. However, in line with previous research (Eberle et al., 2013), using the different messages (rather than perceived interactivity) in the tested models did not yield significant findings on the dependent variables. This further underlines the importance of perceived interactivity (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006; Yang & Shen, 2018).

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables ($N = 174$)

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
eWOM brand	2.70	1.30	—					
eWOM message	2.24	1.15	.70**	—				
Morality	4.52	1.09	.37**	.31**	—			
Competence	4.80	1.09	.36**	.25**	.72**	—		
Sociability	4.71	1.06	.32**	.27**	.57**	.64**	—	
Perceived interactivity	4.01	1.11	.28**	.28**	.36**	.28**	.55**	—

Note. 7-Points Likert scales were used.

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

empirically distinct components that are nevertheless related (Stellar & Willer, 2018; Van Prooijen et al., 2018).

2.2.4 | Electronic word-of-mouth intentions

Two measures were used to assess participants' eWOM intentions (adapted from Eisingerich et al., 2015). Three items were used to assess eWOM intentions to share the CSR message: "I would 'like' this message on Facebook"; "I would post a positive reaction to this message"; and "I would share this message on Facebook with my friends," $\alpha = .83$. eWOM intentions to endorse the company were also assessed with three items: "I would say positive things about this company on Facebook"; "I would recommend this company to my friends on Facebook"; and "I would follow the Facebook page of this company," $\alpha = .88$.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the study variables. Overall, participants evaluated morality, sociability, and competence levels of the company positively. In general, participants appeared to be reluctant to use eWOM about the message or about the company, which is in line with findings from Eisingerich et al. (2015).

3.2 | Perceived interactivity and perceived brand traits

Two models were tested for the dependent variable eWOM intentions regarding the CSR message: a model in which morality, sociability, and competence were correlated and a model in which these traits were not correlated. Only the model in which with morality, sociability, and competence were correlated fitted the data well, $\chi^2/df = 1.50$; CFI = .98; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .05; and RMR = .06. Similarly, when testing eWOM intentions regarding the brand, the model in which morality, sociability, and competence were correlated provided a good fit with the data, $\chi^2/df = 1.49$; CFI = .98; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .05; and RMR = .05. In line

with Hypothesis 1, results showed that higher levels of perceived interactivity were associated with higher attributions of morality, $\beta = .42$, $p < .01$; sociability, $\beta = .64$; $p < .01$; and competence, $\beta = .33$, $p < .01$.

3.3 | Electronic word-of-mouth message

Whereas attributed morality promoted eWOM intentions regarding the CSR message, $\beta = .29$, $p < .05$, eWOM message intentions were not influenced by attributed sociability, $\beta = .14$, $p = .26$, or attributed competence, $\beta = -.04$, $p = .80$. This confirmed Hypothesis 2a, which stated that attributed morality is associated with a higher willingness to endorse a CSR message on SNS than attributed sociability or competence. To test whether morality mediated the relation between perceived interactivity and eWOM intentions regarding the CSR message, a mediation analysis was conducted using bootstrapping in AMOS 23.0 (2,000 iterations, bias corrected; Hayes, 2009). The indirect effect, $\beta = .09$, $p < .05$, and the direct effect, $\beta = .28$, $p < .01$, were both significant. However, the direct effect lowered after including the mediator, $\beta = .20$, $p < .05$, suggesting partial mediation (see Figure 1). Thus, the relation between perceived interactivity and eWOM intentions regarding the CSR message was partially explained by morality.

3.4 | Electronic word-of-mouth brand

In line with Hypothesis 2b, in which it was predicted that morality is associated with a higher willingness to endorse a brand on SNS than sociability or competence, results showed that morality had a positive effect on eWOM intentions regarding the brand, $\beta = .26$, $p < .05$. In contrast, no effects on eWOM intentions regarding the brand were found of sociability, $\beta = .14$, $p = .23$, or competence, $\beta = .07$, $p = .62$. It was then tested whether morality mediated the relation between perceived interactivity and endorsement of the brand on SNS, again using bootstrapping in AMOS 23.0 (2,000 iterations, bias corrected; Hayes, 2009). The analyses showed a significant indirect effect, $\beta = .13$, $p < .01$ and a significant direct effect, $\beta = .33$, $p < .01$. The inclusion of the mediator reduced the direct effect, $\beta = .20$, $p < .05$, suggesting a
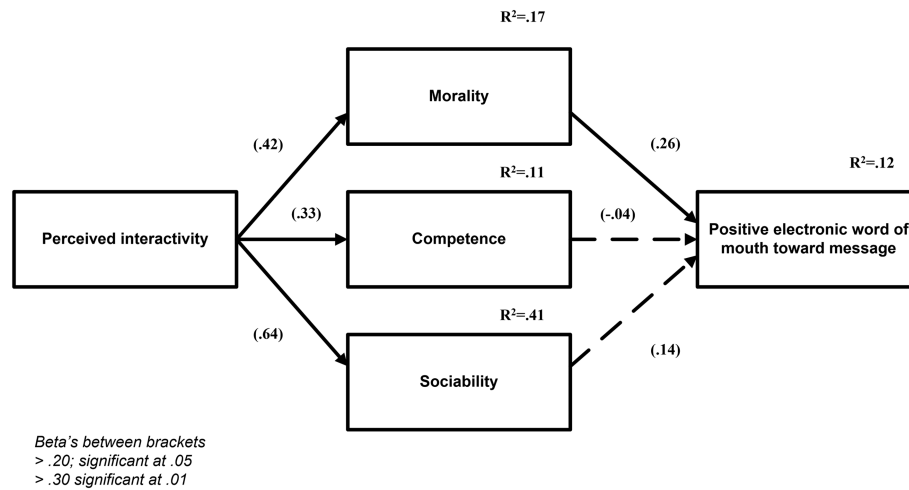
FIGURE 1 Determinants of positive electronic word-of-mouth toward the message
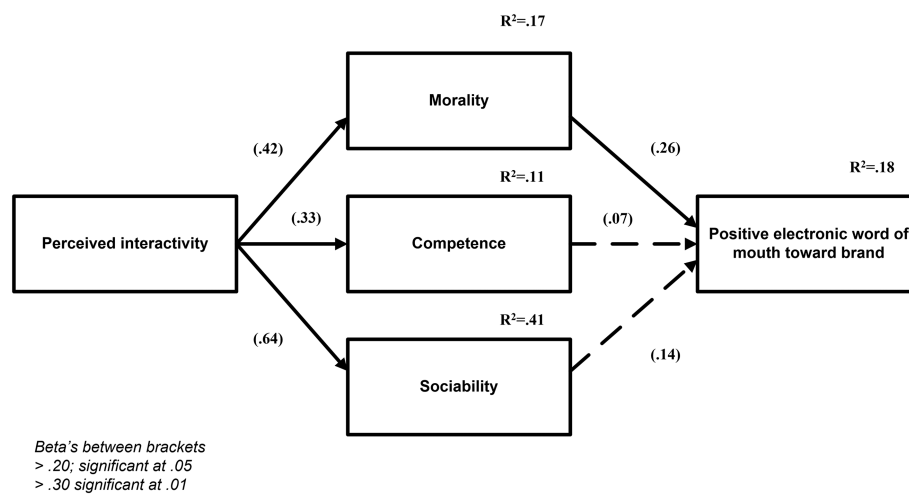

FIGURE 2 Determinants of positive electronic word-of-mouth toward the brand

partial mediation of morality between perceived interactivity and eWOM intentions regarding the brand (see Figure 2).[2]

4 | DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to examine whether perceived interactivity of a CSR message could lead to the attribution of moral, sociable, and competent brand traits and which brand traits in turn promote greater willingness among consumers to endorse the brand and its

[2]Because there were more females than males in the study, we tested whether including gender in the analyses improved the models or had an influence on the dependent variables eWOM message and eWOM brand. Furthermore, due to the focus on an existing travel company in the CSR message, we also assessed whether including the perceived corporate reputation would alter the findings. Reputation was measured using a 4-item scale (Hsu, 2012; Petrick, 2002), α = .95. Example items were: "This company has a good reputation" and "This company is well respected" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Additional AMOS analyses showed that the inclusion of gender and reputation did not improve the models. Moreover, eWOM message was not predicted by gender, β = −.09, p = .23, or reputation, β = −.10, p = .25. Similarly, eWOM brand was not related to gender, β = −.03, p = .65, or reputation, β = .01, p = .91.

CSR message on SNS. Results showed that higher levels of perceived interactivity were linked to the attribution of moral, sociable, and competent traits to brands. Thus, by demonstrating an openness to engage in a dialogue about CSR initiatives with consumers, companies can benefit from more positive attributions on all three dimensions of impression formation processes.

Whereas it could be argued that the positive impact of perceived interactivity on attributed brand traits indicates a potential halo effect; the results of the current research also showed that only attributed morality is associated with positive eWOM intentions regarding the CSR message and the brand. This finding suggests that a halo effect cannot explain our results and that consumers prefer to signal moral aspects of their identity by endorsing brands with moral traits on SNS. Previous research has also demonstrated that people consider morality to be more important to identity than sociability or competence (Goodwin et al., 2014) and prefer morality over sociability or competence when determining whether they want to interact with others (Brambilla et al., 2013; Leach et al., 2007; Van Prooijen

& Ellemers, 2015). In addition, as engaging in eWOM can pose social risks (Eisingerich et al., 2015), it is likely that consumers might feel that such social risks are lower when the endorsed brand is considered to be trustworthy.

4.1 | Theoretical implications

Previous research on perceived interactivity in brand messages has mostly focused on outcomes—such as eWOM—rather than the underlying processes that drive these effects. Additionally, whereas consumer eWOM of products and services has received empirical attention, few studies have addressed eWOM regarding CSR communication. This study brings novel insights on both issues. First, the current findings indicate that interactive CSR communication can lead consumers to connect to brands in ways that are comparable with how they connect to humans. Although previous research has proposed that online CSR communication might help to strengthen relations with stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 2016), this study provides empirical support to this notion by showing that brands' openness to two-way CSR communication can promote the attribution of positive human traits to brands.

Second, this research demonstrates the benefits of interactive CSR communication for consumers' positive eWOM intentions. Moreover, findings showed that perceptions of honesty and trustworthiness are essential in promoting consumers' online endorsements, whereas perceived friendliness or skillfulness does not influence eWOM intentions. This study thereby extends previous work on attributed brand traits (e.g., Bernritter et al., 2016; Malone & Fiske, 2013), in which morality and sociability were treated as part of a single warmth dimension. However, in line with research on individual and group impression formation processes (Goodwin et al., 2014; Leach et al., 2007), we showed that consumers consider morality and sociability as related, but distinct dimensions. Importantly, morality—rather than sociability or competence—was of key importance in consumers' eWOM intentions regarding CSR communication, thereby showing that morality and sociability traits play a different role in brand evaluation. This suggests that consumers specifically care about the intentions of brands and are only willing to endorse a brand to signal their identity on SNS when these intentions are considered to be sincere. Thus, these findings contribute to the literature by showing that morality attributions help explain the relation between perceived interactivity and eWOM.

4.2 | Practical implications

Despite the opportunities for dialogue on SNS, brands nevertheless often rely on an informational strategy to promote their CSR activities (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Stakeholders tend to have little influence on decision-making processes regarding CSR, which are often strategic and mainly take place internally (Trapp, 2014). Paradoxically, the SNS features that promote stakeholder engagement also provide reasons for brands to be reluctant to use SNS in their communication strategies, as stakeholders might openly question the legitimacy of the brand

(Etter, 2013). However, the current findings indicate that CSR initiatives might be received more positively when brands opt for CSR promotion in an interactive SNS context and can even generate eWOM. It is possible that the willingness to discuss CSR—thereby accepting the associated risks—can function as a signal to consumers that brands are not just advertising their CSR activities but are sincerely dedicated to bring about societal changes and are sufficiently confident about their CSR investments to endure potential critical responses.

4.3 | Limitations and future directions

A limitation of this research is that the explained variance of the models was relatively low. Additionally, results showed that morality did not fully mediate the relation between perceived interactivity and participants' endorsements. Both findings might be explained by the notion that eWOM intentions are driven by a range of factors (see for example Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018). Thus, it would be merited to test the relative impact of perceived interactivity and attributed human traits in comparison with other variables in future research.

In relation to this, the current research focused on a luxurious travel company that invested in environmental sustainability initiatives. Despite the prevalence of travel-related eWOM on SNS (Hanai et al., 2018; Lo et al., 2011; Ring et al., 2016) and despite the interest that consumers have in environmental sustainability (Öberseder et al., 2014; Schons et al., 2017), it is possible that this specific service or CSR initiative does not appeal to all consumers. Moreover, the messages represented an existing brand. As such, consumers' prior attitudes toward the brand might have affected the findings. For example, the high-end holidays that are offered by this brand might be perceived as unattractive or unaffordable by some consumers, which can reduce their involvement in the service and their willingness to endorse the brand or the CSR initiative (Sundaram et al., 1998). Consequently, it is possible that focusing on a different brand, a different product or service, and a different CSR initiative might generate different outcomes. It is therefore important that the current research is replicated in a different context. To avoid possible previous brand associations, the current research could also be replicated with a fictitious brand.

Finally, this research only assessed consumers' positive eWOM intentions. However, consumers also use negative eWOM to warn others about the problems that they experienced (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Although it is likely that brand morality is also a key predictor of negative eWOM intentions—given the value that is attached to information about others' beneficial or harmful intentions (Brambilla et al., 2013)—more research is nevertheless needed to examine this issue.

In conclusion, the current research provides insights in the factors that drive consumers' brand endorsement on SNS. Despite the challenges that a brand might face when using SNS to create a dialogue about its CSR activities, the current findings nevertheless show that consumers' impressions of the brand are likely to improve if CSR advertising is perceived to be interactive. Moreover, attributed

brand morality can increase due to openness to dialogue, which in turn motivates consumers to share positive CSR and brand information with others online, thereby benefitting the brand.

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