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Towards a typology of strategic corporate social responsibility through camouflage and courtship analogies

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Abstract

This paper develops a theory of strategic corporate social responsibility responses, by drawing on the analogy of biological species-level adaptations of camouflage and courtship found in the natural world. In so doing, we focus on the substantive response and associated strategic motivation to engage in different types of CSR within a mainstreaming environment; and the mechanisms by which it occurs in differing scenarios, framed through a biological interpretative lens. We presents eight strategic approaches to CSR, each defined by a camouflage or courtship approach. Each strategy is considered through the lens of their biological comparators and published case vignettes of CSR strategies within firms. The paper concludes by discussing a future research agenda building on the theoretical framework presented.

KEYWORDS
adaptations, camouflage, corporate social responsibility

1 | INTRODUCTION

Increasingly it is *assumed* that the largest, most visible or high polluting firms are active participants in corporate social responsibility activities (CSR; Bondy et al., 2012). This mainstreaming of CSR coincides with an increasingly complex and fragmented environment for firms, as demands of CSR are set both collectively and specifically through stakeholder pressure, expectations and attribution (Agle et al., 1999; Godfrey et al., 2009). Pressure to assume CSR into everyday practice can result in both isomorphic conformity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) creating a collective rather than an individual strategic response (e.g., by joining self-regulating industry frameworks, Nikolaevna & Bicho, 2011), or emphasise differing priorities that are firm specific, necessitating the adoption of different CSR strategies tailored to their own individual context and need. It is this tension, between the wider institutional expectations on the firm and their response to specific stakeholder demands—particularly as firms will experience both to differing degrees simultaneously—that we explore in this paper. Moreover, whilst the extant literature has examined the business

imperative for CSR (for reviews, see Carroll and Shabana (2010); Kong et al. (2020)), the strategic rationale for *specific* CSR strategies and the adoption of CSR practices therein, remains conceptually embryonic. To address this gap, we develop a theory of strategic responses to CSR using the biological framing of camouflage and courtship.

In the natural world plants and animals have evolved to distract, hide, attract, or communicate to other species through a variety of species-level behaviours and biological adaptations. As a cluster of activities these are either camouflage (ways to hide, defend, deflect) or courtship (ways to attract or communicate). Typically in the biological sciences these are discussed as a continuum, and so we do so here in terms of CSR. A biological framing using 'nature's functioning as interpretative lenses to theorize about human organizations and organizational networks' (Winn & Pogutz, 2013, p. 3) has been utilised previously in the study of management phenomena. From Paul Hawken's work on the ecology of commerce and the Natural Step, to the seminal paper by Hannan and Freeman (1977) on organisations and population ecology, and Amburgey and Rao's (1996) review of the theoretical and empirical development of the organisational ecology

field. More recent work includes the potential contributions of neuroscience (McDonald, 2018), punctuated equilibrium in strategy discourse (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994), sustainability discourse in the media (Holt & Barkemeyer, 2012), ecosystems and the circular economy (Zucchella & Previtali, 2019) and nature-based metaphors in the exploration of marketing (Mitchell & Saren, 2008).

As with all academic enquiry, there are criticisms of the application of biological framing to the study of organisations within the literature (see, e.g., Nafal et al., 2018; Young, 1988). Some argue that the individual agency of organisations stands in direct contrast to the relative inertia of environmental determinism within species (Boone & van Witteloostuijn, 1995). Others state that in the natural kingdom, different species respond based on predetermined genetic, cellular or behavioural patterns, whereas organisational actors are responding based on rational choice. However, we would argue that managers make strategic decisions that whilst informed by rationality, are also influenced by the social and cultural contexts of the firm, industry (Saguta & Takahashi, 2015) and physical location (Ortiz de Mandojana et al., 2016); as well as instinct or 'gut' (Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004). The latter is particularly the case when the environment is fast moving. Thus whilst organisations in the anthropogenic environment do have individual agency, when we view their choices over time and across a range of firms or their 'ecosystem', what starts to emerge are 'bounded' choices or patterns that are similar to the selection of a 'programmed' choice by those in natural systems; shaped by culture, rationality but also individual and collective instinct. This suggests that exploring the common ecosystem properties that nature and organisations both possess, has much to offer in the study of strategic CSR at an organisational level. Thus drawing on a biological analogy with a camouflage/courtship framing has much to offer in advancing strategic CSR theory development.

In addition, Nafal et al. (2018) through a meta-review of papers on the biological framing management, find no organising framework, and very limited empirical testing of conceptual frameworks proposed therein. So, in this paper we are also *not* looking at the gap between the symbolic and the substantive in CSR (Walker & Wan, 2012), CSR as 'greenwashing' (Ferron-Vilchez et al., 2020), or the so-called CSR 'trash talk' (Bansal & Clelland, 2004). Instead we focus on the substantive responsive choice and associated strategic motivation to engage in different types of CSR within a mainstreaming environment, and the mechanisms by which it occurs in differing scenarios framed through a biological interpretative lens.

We therefore present an organising framework (Nafal et al., 2018) that captures the strategic intent of what firms do, rather than what they *ought*, whilst acknowledging that firms will at any one time be engaged in a range of strategic decisions, and so each will require specific consideration. In so doing, we ask if the intent is to engage in a defensive, that is to say where the firm is being *pushed* into a CSR strategy or action; or attractive, that is to say that the firm is attempting to *pull* attention onto its strategy, be that new, or for other purposes? Is this decision taken specifically individualised to the firm, or related to a group/multiple identity? Who (which stakeholder) is this CSR activity responding to? Is their CSR activity aimed at a specific group of stakeholders or responding to a crisis? We thus propose

that the *primary* strategic CSR choice arises as a result of a push/defence or pull/attraction strategy. We categorise these types on two theoretical dimensions: first whether the firm is responding to specific stakeholder concerns or broader institutionalised pressures and norms; and second related to the decision by a firm to respond at an individual or group level. We add nuance to this decision by then delving into the sub-categories of this typology with our eight strategic positions as illustrated in Figure 1. In this next section we expand on our reasoning behind each of these archetypes.

2 | COURTSHIP AND CAMOUFLAGE

Camouflage in nature can take a number of forms depending on the surrounding physical environment, the density and diversity of habitats, and the predators facing a particular species (Stevens & Merilaita, 2011). To achieve camouflage, the scientific literature suggests animals must either,

1. Move to the correct habitat at the right time of the season displaying the appropriate fixed camouflage patterns.
2. Alter posture or behaviour.
3. Live with a fixed pattern that represents a compromise between the requirements of several habitats.
4. Use adaptive colour-based camouflage for rapidly shifting external environments (Hanlon et al., 2011).

From the same biological root, courtship can also see animals taking a strategic approach to attract attention or a mate through

1. Displays and behaviours, using colour or behaviour as a form of communication
2. and/or signalling a specific audience for a particular reason (Svensson et al., 2010).

Camouflage and courtship seen in the natural world therefore offer insight into the ecosystems surrounding firms and their individualised strategic or group level responses. We thus see parallels in the way firms strategically seek to attract 'mates' (partners, customers etc.) or defend against 'predators' (other firms, pressure groups, critics, etc.). When exploring a firm's CSR activities however, their strategies are not mutually exclusive, with some firms seen adopting more than one approach, perhaps concurrently for different stakeholders or issues, or at different times in their business lifecycle or in differing institutional environments. For the purposes of this paper however we position these strategies as either primarily a camouflage (push/defensive) or courtship (pull/attraction) strategy and draw on the literature from the biological sciences to do so in developing their definitions and nomenclature. Our typology of strategic approaches thus includes four camouflage approaches; shadowing, dazzle, background matching, motion matching, and four courtship strategies; self-decoration, signalling, associative identities, distractive mimicry. We reflect on these in an iterative manner, considering how

FIGURE 1 Summary of CSR typology

		FOCUS OF RESPONSE	SPECIFIC STAKEHOLDER CONCERNS	INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL PRESSURES AND NORMS
LEVEL OF RESPONSE	INDIVIDUAL		*Dazzle* **Signal**	*Shadowing* **Self-Decoration**
	GROUP		*Motion Matching* **Distractive Mimicry**	*Background Matching* **Associative Identities**

Camouflage   **Courtship**

each biological phenomenon may relate to CSR practice and antecedent theories within the CSR literature.

2.1 | Camouflage approaches

In our first cluster of strategies we consider camouflage within strategic CSR as a mechanism by which a firm hides, deflects or obscures attention away from negative aspects of performance or potential negative impacts. It is a strategy whereby attention is pushed *from* something, as opposed to the courtship approach of pulling attention *onto* something. Specifically we present four distinct camouflage strategies;

- Shadowing: an individual firm uses its position within the supply chain or its public profile as an anticipatory defensive strategy to deflect or push attention away from potential CSR failures.
- Dazzle: a named firm adopts a flagship CSR strategy, often pushed by specific stakeholder pressure or a specific issue; but this action does not change the overall CSR approach within the individual firm.
- Background Matching: a firm adopts the CSR standard as dictated by its industrial sector or sub-sector. It does not pursue an individual CSR approach and thus accepts the push of the wider institutional environment.
- Motion Matching: a firm responds individually to key changes in institutional CSR expectations, pushed by key stakeholder demands.

We expand and explore each below, with illustrative examples, beginning with shadowing.

2.1.1 | Shadowing

Shadowing, shading and countershading (Stevens & Merilaita, 2011) are all types of camouflage effects in nature that play with difference in light and dark, and location of the animal at depth or to the surface of their environment, for example, water. Extending this analogy, a firm is located within its operating environment or 'pool'. These 'pools' have complex mixtures of stakeholders and varied cultural/

political dimensions that determine acceptable corporate behaviour (Crilly et al., 2016). The degree of shadowing undertaken is determined by the firm's over-arching approach to CSR. Perhaps they take a 'doing good' or a 'do no harm' approach as a form of reputational insurance (Kim, 2014; Minor & Morgan, 2011). The more 'light' (i.e., visibility) that there is on an individual firm in the 'pool', determined by relative size, position, and end user, the more they need to manage stakeholder perceptions of their CSR activity, and thus are more likely to adopt a 'doing good' stance. They may however be able to 'counter-shade' pushing negative aspects of firm performance, activity or corporate social irresponsibility (CSI) onto less visible third-party suppliers. Moreover, firms further down the 'pool'/supply chain, can use the shadow cast by the larger primary supplier to deflect and push away direct attention of stakeholders.

Perhaps the most illustrative example is the contrast between the reaction to BP and Halliburton during the Deep-Water Horizon disaster as this shows how 'depth' within an industry 'pool' can be so critical to CSR response. Prior to this disaster BP had a well published '*doing good*' CSR strategy (Balmer et al., 2011) to counteract their position as one of the leading oil producers in the world. Post the Deep Water Horizon incident, BP as the firm with the higher profile, became the primary target for those seeking redress. Yet Halliburton were the supplier of the failed machinery that caused the explosion and subsequent oil spill. However, as a third-tier supplier it would seem that they were able to use the shadow cast by BP in the 'pool' of oil producers to avoid direct criticism and reputational harm.

Similarly and more recently, in 2013 Rana Plaza complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh 2013, which housed a range of garment manufacturers, experienced a structural collapsed causing significant loss of life. This disaster was brought about by a lack of basic health and safety being observed in the building. The blame was immediately pushed onto the 28 first tier international retailers who sourced the garments being manufactured in the building, rather than the garment manufacturers themselves. Focus was on the lack of regard by these first-tier suppliers for the manufacturing conditions, rather than on the second and third tier suppliers occupying the building, that led those at the 'top' of the 'pool' being viewed as irresponsible (Comyns & Franklin-Johnson, 2018). This incident once again turned the spotlight on the poor working conditions tolerated by both garment retailers and consumers in the developed world. The arising

Accord on Health and Safety in Bangladeshi factories (Comyns & Franklin-Johnson, 2018) with a commitment to change their practices and to audit their supply chains to ensure that working conditions were safe, was subsequently signed by nearly 200 international garment retailers. To date, very little, if any critique has been directed at the garment manufacturers themselves.

Thus shadow strategies are used most effectively by those who swim in deeper waters, lower down the supply chain, or supply firms with higher profiles. Deep in the pool a firm can avoid the complexities of high CSR expectations. This is risky however, as while the company that faces the end consumer may be exposed for failures in its supply chain (like BP above), firms deeper in the pool may still ultimately feel the repercussions of this strategic choice.

2.1.2 | Dazzle

In the animal kingdom *motion dazzle* is a form of obscure camouflage where markings on the animal or object make estimating speed and trajectory difficult to interpret by the receiver and so are used as an anti-predator defence (Stevens et al., 2011). Dazzle camouflage has also been used in military applications to make ships and airplanes difficult to track; thus pushing away or diverting enemy fire (Behrer, 1987).

In our CSR typology, dazzle strategies are undertaken response to being caught in some form of corporate indiscretion or in response to an overt threat targeted at an individual firm by salient stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 1997). As such the firm is pushed into a CSR strategy that it might not otherwise have adopted. A move to an individual dazzle strategy from a collective group approach may be due to an unexpected crisis event. A good example is the attack on the chocolate industry by Greenpeace (Brant, 2018) and the exposure of specific firms therein.

In March 2010 Greenpeace launched a report and video exposing the link between chocolate, palm oil, illegal deforestation and the killing of orangutans in Malaysia (Greenpeace, 2010). This video explicitly used an image of a Nestle Kit Kat as their centre piece; with a bloody orangutan finger in place of the famous Kit Kat chocolate 'finger'. The publicity from the YouTube video which received more than a million views, promoted in part by Nestle's attempts to have it removed, and various activist events at shareholder meetings, led Nestlé to hire a consulting firm to audit its suppliers for illegal activity.(Wolf, 2014). In response, Nestle joined the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, removed the palm-oil supplier Sinar Mas criticised in the report from their supply chain, partnered with the Forest Trust and committed to sustainable sourced palm oil by 2015.

Thus firms engaged in dazzle as part of their immediate defensive response to a 'crisis' event (Kotchen & Moon, 2012) will emphasise to salient stakeholders their positive CSR changes and thus seek forgiveness. Also, the damage caused by a CSI incident may vary depending on the firm's prior reputational insurance (Godfrey et al., 2009; Minor & Morgan, 2011) and how willing salient stakeholders are to forgive these indiscretions (Crilly et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 1997). The likelihood of forgiveness will in turn relate to attribution theory

(where an observed behaviour is determined as deliberate and attributable to an internal or external cause) and the firm's historical record in a specific community (Martinko, 2004). A firm responding with a dazzle strategy to a crisis event that was an out of character mistake, rather than a systemic moral failure of an organisation, may thus be able to weather a negative publicity storm by a rapid dazzle response. Similarly, dispositional legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) is also ascribed to those firms who are perceived by stakeholders to have 'good' character, and thus are more likely to be forgiven for negative incidences (Crilly et al., 2016). We may see firms develop such dispositional legitimacy through their courtship efforts (via signalling or high-profile self-decoration activities; see later in this paper) that build a positive image. However, firms known for irresponsibility will have less latitude (and less dispositional legitimacy) and are thus more likely to be 'punished' for CSI than rewarded for CSR (Lange & Washburn, 2012).

Thus, Dazzle will work for those firms with a positive or neutral CSR reputation. Adopting the suggestions of a key stakeholder, and/or being pushed into responding swiftly to exposure of CSR failure(s), can be an effective strategy when attempting to manage a CSR crisis. However for those in the 'sinful' industries or with a significant negative CSR legacy and thus less dispositional legitimacy, a Dazzle strategy will be less effective, and so more likely to be met with scepticism from key stakeholders. Such firms will need to use a courtship CSR strategy such as *distractive mimicry* (discussed below).

2.1.3 | Background matching

Crypsis or background matching occurs in nature when an animal prevents detection by adapting or matching their physical appearance to their environment. This can be done through colour, lightness and/or pattern. When we apply this idea of *background matching* we look to firms adopting CSR camouflage strategies that are externally driven by the sector in which a firm is located or shaped by their broader institutional environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Where a dominant CSR logic exists, this will push isomorphic conformity into the strategic approach taken by firms within a particular institutional space. As a result, specific codes of practice or industry norms emerge as a way of managing perceptions by others of a firm. In such circumstances, firms will use CSR activity to blend in and harmonise. They receive a push from stakeholders at a group or collective level rather than one on one; examples might include the accreditation to an environmental management standard (Wahba, 2010), such as ISO14001. It might also include joining special interest groups around key topics such as climate change, sustainable sourcing and/or modern slavery.

Implicit or incremental CSR (Matten & Moon, 2008) suggests that the adoption of CSR strategy is not a conscious strategic decision; rather it is a reaction to, or a reflection of, a firm's institutional environment. Thus, we argue that implicit CSR is a form of background matching whereby the codified rules and norms within a firms' immediate environment shape their CSR activities, or a form of mirrored co-operative behaviours (after Axelrod, 1984). This leads to conformity or mimicry of one another's strategic CSR approach (DiMaggio &

Powell, 1983; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999), rather than seeking to use it for competitive advantage (Vilanova et al., 2009). Hosoda and Suzuki (2015), for example, explore the increasing use of management control systems across large Japanese firms to respond to these isomorphic pressures. Similarly, more than 200 global companies have also joined the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. For leading global firms' exclusion from such networks might suggest to external audiences that they are lagging behind their peers in terms of their social and environmental responsibilities. Joining social interest groups and baseline standards are unlikely to be used for competitive advantage, and more likely used to illustrate conformity with peers and a sector.

Industry-based studies also show the extent to which background matching can pump isomorphism into a firm's individual approach to CSR. O'Connor and Gronewald (2012), for example, concluded from a study of 21 Fortune 500 oil and gas firms that standardised reporting practices and formats made some sections of each firm's CSR communication indistinguishable from one another. This created what they termed 'homogenised CSR' (O'Connor & Gronewald, 2012, p. 229) used more for defence than for distinction.

Thus a background matching strategy will be adopted where the industrial context sets out clear expectations or push factors with regards individual firms CSR behaviours and actions. This limits the risk of being targeted by individual stakeholders (unless a firm diverges from these) on the individual firm's CSR record. If those expectations change, then each firm has an incentive to work collectively to respond to those changes, as per the response to the electrification of motor vehicles illustrated above.

2.1.4 | Motion matching

In the animal kingdom motion camouflage involves obscuring movement to decrease the likelihood of being detected; 'tricking' a receiver into seeing no movement. Here objects in motion move at the same speed or angle so both appear stationary to each other and thus push attention away. In adopting this analogy, we see a type of CSR camouflage approach driven by changes in the external environment related specifically to their primary stakeholder concerns, rather than general non-specific pressure, or to an overall shift in 'background' such as the change in the content of a specific standard.

Perhaps the best example of motion matching is the switch to electric cars by all of the major motor manufacturers. Previously viewed as a niche market (Tesla), or something where firms could demonstrate technical prowess rather than practicality; the prevailing institutional environment has signalled strongly that petrol and diesel cars will be phased or legislated out of existence by 2050. As a result, all major motor manufacturers are now investing heavily in repurposing their plants for electric car manufacture. Moreover, rather than using this as an opportunity for green first mover advantage (Przychodzen et al., 2020), this fundamental shift for the industry has led to strategic alliances, for example, Renault, Nissan and Mitsubishi, as they adjust to this fundamental shift in stakeholder demand and consumer expectation (Riley, 2019). No manufacturer can be left behind, and so all must

adjust and work towards this new baseline CSR demand of the regulator. As we see here, firms choose to coalesce in formalised groups; gaining the benefits of the collective, but sacrificing the potential competitive advantage that could come from a more individual approach.

Signing up to new iterations of the global reporting index (GRI) such as the 2019 Tax Standards and the 2020 waste Standards might also be considered an example of a motion matching strategy. Each iteration of the GRI has an incremental shift in sustainability reporting expectations so firms that are accredited to GRI (with 93% of the words largest 250 firms now part of the GRI initiative, GRI, 2016), must *motion match* to keep pace with the other firms in this club. Though recent studies have cast doubt on the impact of the CSR outcomes arising from the GRI, it remains a baseline for its signatories and thus a way to ensure that a firm meets minimum CSR expectations (Talbot & Barbat, 2020) 'keeping up' is the only requirement.

Motion matching does not need to come from an incremental industry standard or through legislative changes; the recent behaviour of UK supermarkets in the wake of rising consumer awareness of food waste being a good example. Coinciding with the austerity measures put in place by the UK government after the 2008 financial crisis, many in the UK experienced food poverty. In response, Tesco, one of the UK's leading supermarkets a adopted a 'signalling' strategy (see below), and engaged in a direct partnership with The Trussell Trust, one of the leading UK charities running foodbanks, to donate all edible food not sold to their banks. As awareness of food waste grew, Tesco's nearest rivals joined them in making donations either to The Trussell Trust of Fareshare; another charity that redistributes usable, unsold food. Thus we saw this sub-group engage in a motion-matching approach, mirroring each other's behaviour. Since 2008, new entrant discount retailers such as the German firms Aldi and Lidl have gained a significant share of the UK supermarket. They too have recognised the need to 'keep up' and have been 'pushed' into adopted schemes that are similar to their most established rivals; starting partnerships with local food banks, and donating meals to specific charities at Christmas (see Hird, 2019). This approach of course does not deal with the cause of the food waste—it only provides a solution to waste once it has arisen. This would require a more direct or disruptive CSR strategy led by a front runner as with the signalling example earlier, or if in response to highly negative targeted pressure might be the resultant dazzle strategy.

This distinction between background and motion matching is a subtle but important one. Both are group strategies. Background ones are general approaches to non-specific pressures, prompted by the general environment without a specific direct imperative. Motion matching strategies are a group response that moves to a 'new' normal related to specific stakeholder concerns. There is the possibility that such motion becomes institutionalised and thus reverts to a background matching strategy in the future.

Thus, firms will adopt a motion matching strategy as external pressure from salient stakeholders to improve industry-wide CSR activity increases, or the norms of expected CSR activity change significantly for the whole industry. Thus firms within that industry will tend to adopt similar approaches, such as the food bank example above—rather than seek individual solutions. A firm will therefore adopt a motion

matching strategy where expectations in the external environment push a specific group level change. In cases such as the supermarkets and foodbanks, or electric cars above, if a similar approach is adopted by all firms in the sector or sub-sector, these changes are likely to become the standard, and thus revert to background matching.

All of the camouflage strategies above obscure the real extent, or lack of, CSR activity within a firm (Shadowing), or are responsive to the demands of key stakeholders. The 'push' aspect of these strategies also indicates that they are predominantly reactive. Stakeholders might target an individual firm (Dazzle), or an industry (Motion Matching), or the CSR expectations of an industry may be institutionalised by that industry (Background Matching), making it easier for individual firms to know how to engage. Camouflage strategies are thus mechanism(s) by which firms hide, deflect or obscure attention away from negative aspects of performance or potential negative impacts. They can also be a way to engage with the minimum CSR expectation, or facilitate an overt policy of not seeking competitive advantage through CSR. These are distinct from the courtship approach, which seeks to pulling attention *onto* something. We explore these below.

2.2 | Courtship approaches

In the four courtship strategies we see a strategy linked to attraction often 'pulling' attention onto the firm, or to specific aspects of the firm's activities over less attractive aspects of their operations or performance. Like camouflage above we present four distinct strategic approaches.

- Self-decoration: a firm will engage in a specific CSR action, usually prompted by an opportunity in the external environment, but this action will not alter the overall CSR approach taken by the firm. A firm will seek to pull attention towards this individual activity for short-term gain.
- Signalling: a firm in seeking out CSR alliances and partnerships, will overtly champion its relevant competences, performance and values hoping to pull others into its agenda.
- Associative Identities: a deliberate attempt to refocus attention by acquiring a firm that has higher CSR credentials than itself. It is hoped that by pulling this firm into its orbit, that the overall level of CSR activity and positive perception by outsiders will increase.
- Distractive Mimicry: adopted by firms in so-called 'sinful industries' to pull attention away from the inherent badness of their core business. Such CSR activity will not be related to that core business.

We explore each in turn, with illustrative examples, below.

2.2.1 | Self-decoration

As part of their courtship ritual, some animals decorate themselves with items from their local environment, or present shiny objects to signal attraction to a mate (Fiegl, 2013); the decorator crab being the

most obvious example (Hultgren & Stachowicz, 2011). With respect to firms, we suggest that self-decoration is used for courtship; adorning the corporate 'shell' to appeal to a salient stakeholder group (Kolk & Perego, 2014; Mitchell et al., 1997), rather than to camouflage CSR activity. This can be characterised by 'punctuated generosity' (after Tilcsik & Marquis, 2013) and/or 'vanity' projects (after Cushen & Thompson, 2012). Self-decoration strategies might also be used to generate symbolic CSR (Perez-Batres et al., 2012), critiqued by some as 'greenwashing' (Walker & Wan, 2012).

Self-decoration is an individualised response, internally constructed, shaped by some aspect of the local environment (which varies depending on the size and geographical spread of the organisation), and more likely (though not always) to be ad hoc, taking advantage of an opportunity in that operating environment and contextualised to local needs. Self-decoration strategies are also unlikely to be transformative, as they will involve items or actions being placed on the 'shell' of the organisation, without fundamentally changing the underlying structure, culture and management of the firm. Thus they will likely pull attention towards a specific action, without altering core CSR activity; though this initial gateway may result in more fundamental CSR activities later. Such self-decoration initiatives might distinguish organisations from their competitors, and can be unrelated to the primary business; decoupling CSR strategy from overall firm strategy, presenting a shiny object (Fiegl, 2013) to court the attention of specific stakeholder groups.

A good example is the Xerox community involvement programme. Here their focus is on a 'glocal' approach funding employees in their local communities to make a difference on projects of their choosing. In 2019 they supported 25,000 h of volunteer time (Xerox, 2020) with their Global Volunteer Policy. This granted every Xerox employee one workday of paid time off to volunteer at a non-profit of their choice. In addition their grassroots Community Involvement Program (XCIP) which began in 1974, saw Xerox invest $374,365 in XCIP with employees leading more than 186 projects worldwide in 2019. Conversely, at the Bank of America they took a more short-term approach, inviting female golfers to their sponsored tournaments against the backdrop of the exclusion of female players at the Masters in Augusta. This did nothing to impact their approach to female progression within its own organisation (Lougee & Wallace, 2008) or their management structure with respect to gender (see also Brown et al., 2012), but it did raise their profile via a key issue.

Thus, self-decoration is a de-coupled emergent CSR activity that will not result in a substantive change to a firm's existing CSR strategy. It takes place when the external CSR environment presents opportunities for self-adornment to communicate positive attributes to the wider institutional environment, and thus pull attention onto a specific CSR action or activity without fundamentally changing its core CSR strategy.

2.2.2 | Signalling

In nature, the use of colour, behaviour or smell by animals can signal their willingness to mate, is used to provoke engagements to secure

dominance, or to warn off predators (Stuart-Fox & Moussalli, 2011). We define this type of CSR strategy as courtship of potential partners for strategic alliances (Das & Teng, 1998) or actively signalling to salient stakeholders a firm's competencies, performance and/or values (Connelly et al., 2011). Thus the firm overtly attempts to pull external entities towards its CSR activity.

Xu et al. (2018) explore the use of CSR activities to signal positive firm performance in China as a mechanism to facilitate international expansion to gain competitive advantage. Thus, with respect to CSR, firms must choose which positive aspects to communicate about the firm to important stakeholder groups, without attracting predators and thus opening the firm up to wider scrutiny.

Unlike self-decoration, activities undertaken by firms engaged in signalling, will be related to their core business. We often see social enterprises and B Corporations engaging in such signalling activities. A good example is the significant investment by outdoor clothing company Patagonia in CSR, including their Footprint Chronicles and active programmes to improve worker conditions. Their recent 2018 'Blue Heart of Europe' campaign also signalled their commitment to preserving rivers in Eastern Europe, and positions them in an activist role and reinforced their brand image linked to wilderness and adventure (Rogers, 2018), thus pulling pertinent customers towards it by stressing their proactive response to the issues that are of particular concerns to the outdoor enthusiast. This is their individualised response aimed at a specific salient stakeholder, as per the mapping in Figure 1.

Firms can also use signalling to communicate an individual specific CSR competence (Barney, 2001), for competitive advantage (Vilanova et al., 2009). An example of this is the development of the Prius vehicle and associated hybrid technologies by Toyota. In addition, to signalling the positive environmental credentials of this firm, it also providing a halo effect over the rest of their products even when hybrid technologies had not been used in these other products (Sexton & Sexton, 2014). Thus, signalling CSR will be undertaken by firms where there is value in a pre-emptive approach to communicating some aspect of a firm's responsibility to their most salient stakeholders.

2.2.3 | Associative identities

In nature, *masquerade* camouflage effects are used to prevent recognition by predators; with animals often resembling an uninteresting or inanimate object. In *aggressive mimicry* a harmful predator can appear less dangerous by resembling other species; the most transformative shift in identity being that of the caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly. We combine these in our CSR theory into what we call the courtship strategy of *associative identities* whereby attention is pulled towards an alternative identity.

An acquisition of CSR competence (Barney, 2001) might allow the presentation of multiple, associated identities to pull attention in a specific direction and court specific audiences. This strategy may also facilitate the extrapolation of CSR competence; ideally, leading to metamorphic

transformation whereby the positive CSR attributes are not only extrapolated but also fully embedded in the whole (new) extended organisation. This argument was made to counter criticism of the purchase of Body Shop by L'Oreal in 2006 and Ben & Jerry's by Unilever in 2000. In both instances these firms were acquired by a larger conglomerate not known for specific environmental competencies. They were acquired as wholly owned subsidiaries that maintained their brand and a 'separate' identity; indeed many customers were potentially unaware they were no longer independent. Both the Body Shop were also values-based family firms who had made conscious decisions to use CSR as the basis of their competitive advantage (Vilanova et al., 2009). By acquiring these firms, L'Oréal and Unilever assumed this CSR competence. While there may be associated synergistic benefits arising from these acquisitions, it also allowed the larger firms to show multiple faces, to court different audiences as and when required (Devinney, 2009). As a result, this strategic approach looks attractive, but do associative identity strategies work?

Mirvis (2008) has explored the notion of whether CSR competencies can be bought by a third party, by considering the acquisition of the socially responsible chocolate company, Green & Blacks, by Cadbury. Now owned by Mondelez International who purchased Cadburys in 2017, they quietly recently launched their first chocolate product without a fair-trade or organic certification; instead they 'accredit' to Mondelez's in-house standard, indicating that the Green & Blacks ethos is now being downplayed (BBC, 2018). The former owner of Green & Blacks had seen synergies with Cadbury's as a firm that had been built on Quaker values, but had been behind the curve on Fair Trade, but following the sale to sale to Mondelez, felt that its ethos would be lost, (Milmo, 2011). It seems he has been proved right. Similarly, L'Oreal, predominantly a brand specialist, could not realise the potential synergies or transfer of competences that it might have expected from its acquisition of The Body Shop. Instead, The Body Shop went into decline (Hope, 2017). As a result, it sold the company to Brazilian firm Natura in 2018. Natura's ethos and approach is more attuned to that of The Body Shop's original mission of using natural ingredients and rejecting animal testing and so the synergistic benefits are likely easier to realise. Perhaps conversely, a recent interview with Ben & Jerry's CEO Jostein Solheim suggests the values-based approach of Ben & Jerry's has been maintained even whilst part of Unilever (Knowledge@Wharton, 2016). What is less clear is whether there has been any reciprocal impact upon Unilever. As these products mainstreamed into supermarkets in the UK and elsewhere, there is little explicit marketing of their social and environmental credentials to the supermarket customer; rather they efforts are focused on them as a luxury food item. These examples indicate that associative identity strategies might show promise, with the more ethical pulling the less ethical up, but that the reality is likely to be more difficult to achieve and may not deliver the benefits to the parent company had hoped.

2.2.4 | Distractive mimicry

In nature *disruptive colouration* consists of markings that create false edges obscuring recognition of an animal's true shape (Barbosa

et al., 2008). *Distractive markings* are also associated with this type of camouflage. Such markings draw or distract the attention of the receiver elsewhere. One of the earliest forms of camouflage identified by naturalist Henry Bates, a contemporary of Darwin, was protection through *Batesian Mimicry* where an animal, that is typically benign or harmless, looks like another species that is dangerous or toxic. Here we thus combine these three natural world phenomena—disruptive coloration, distractive markings and Batesian mimicry—to form *distractive mimicry*.

This is undertaken by those in 'sinful' industries as a proactive CSR strategy of courtship activities, pulling attention towards a secondary identity. This identity is diversified from the core business of the firm and is one that focusses attention elsewhere to a less harmful or value-adding part of the business portfolio. This CSR activity pulls attention away from, or offsets, the inherent 'nastiness' of their enterprise such as selling tobacco or uranium mining; softening the edges of such industries.

While not hiding the inherent nature of their core business, these positive 'contributions' by these firms might offset some criticism. It may be used by a firm to court salient stakeholders to buffer and/or moderate potential critique; it may also distract negative attention away from them to others in their peer group. This CSR strategy thus is distinct from self-decoration in that it is more prescriptive than ad hoc adornments. It also differs from signalling in that it is primarily a form of reverse Batesian mimicry (a 'harmful' business looking more benign) and relying on the offsetting value of their other more positive CSR attributes pulling attention onto these more positive activities to compensate for their sinful core business.

A good example might be the recent adoption of carbon offsetting by budget airlines such as the UK-based Easyjet. The budget airline revolution in the early 2000s made air travel accessible to millions. However, the consequences vis-à-vis carbon emissions and climate change have been significant, with the pace of emissions vastly exceeding predictions (Tabuchi, 2019). To mitigate this Easyjet and other low cost/budget airlines, have adopted carbon off-setting programmes, where passengers can offset the carbon from their flight investing in tree planting schemes. Yet, following recent studies by the EU, they have decided that from 2021, carbon offsetting will not count towards emissions reduction targets (EU, 2017). This is because it does not work. A tree takes up to 15 years to reach peak carbon absorption capacity, and only 1% of customers actually take it up (EU, 2017). Friends of the Earth have referred to this practice as a 'dangerous distraction'—yet it gives airlines a way to say that they are seeking to mitigate their environmental impact, even if that mitigation is limited at best.

Though many will remain suspicious about the motives for such CSR initiatives (Palazzo & Richter, 2005) sinful industries do not have the scope to fundamentally change their core business. Thus, any CSR or philanthropic activity they engage in will always be viewed as an 'add on'. Thus, while distractive mimicry may indeed generate pragmatic legitimacy through the communication of the positive benefits that they are generating for various influential primary stakeholders,

as sinful industries they will always be open to attack vis-à-vis their CSR practice and core business from a range of stakeholders.

These four courtship strategies are linked to attraction, 'pulling' attention onto the firm, or to specific positive aspects of the firm's activities. Just as in nature, Self-decoration uses shiny objects to deflect or obscure the true nature of a firms CSR approach with a single act (re female golfers at a tournament sponsored by a bank with no explicit policy on gender equality). Signalling works by inflating the parts of a firm's CSR performance that it thinks will be attractive, whilst distractive mimicry uses specific non-core CSR activities to 'soften' the impact of the core business. Perhaps the most difficult of the four, is associative identities. Many firms have attempted to 'buy' CSR by courting a more 'ethical firm', but few have found ways to make it a success. Rather than positively impacting the CSR of the acquirer, it seems that the CSR of the acquiree is compromised. We explore the implication of these four approaches, the camouflage strategies, and a potential future research agenda, below.

3 | CONCLUSION

We have utilised the biological framing of camouflage (as a defensive/push) and courtship (attraction/pull strategy), to explore CSR strategic decision making. The arising typology of strategic CSR responses are summarised in Table 1.

In describing the specific CSR strategies emerging across these dimensions we are informed by the characteristics of different individual camouflage and courtship types seen in nature, and illustrate these using our case examples. In developing this organising framework (Nafal et al., 2018) of strategic CSR activities in firms, we offer both a theoretical contribution to the strategic CSR literature and a contribution to CSR practice. Our theoretical contribution is modelled in Figure 1 as presented earlier.

This contribution moves beyond the extant framing of strategic CSR to unpack what CSR is in practice when used with deliberation and strategic intent. Our theory adds a predictive element to current understandings of strategic CSR to elaborate on the expected CSR strategic moves we would expect to see in large/visible corporations in the developed world. We do believe that our theory also has resonance with firms who exist in institutional environments that are less developed but this is an area that should be tested further when considering extended boundary conditions.

An additional contribution is also demonstrated by the application of concepts found in nature and supports the assertion that biological framing within management theory still does have a place. In our theory using the analogies of courtship and camouflage give a much-needed lens to the complex path that firms need to negotiate in a mainstreamed CSR environment. It allows us to bring structure and understanding to what might appear to be disparate choices by firms in similar circumstances. It also allows us to capture the myriad of influences on CSR strategic decision making, specifically cultural and social context, instinct, as well as rational choice.

TABLE 1 Comparative dimensions of a theory of camouflage and courtship strategic CSR

	Type	Definition	Individual/group approach	Stakeholder salience
Push/Camouflage	Shadowing	A camouflage effect where a firm is located within its operating environment or 'pool'	An individualised strategy of a firm to position themselves within a larger group	Responding to a broad cross section of stakeholders defining general perceptions of good corporate behaviour
	Dazzle	A dazzle motion camouflage strategy linked to adaptive camouflage as a defensive mechanism	A individualised distinctive movement to defend against a specific threat	Responding to targeted threats or responding to a specific salient stakeholder or group thereof
	Background matching	Crypsis camouflage matching industry or institutional background	A collective approach matching others through codes and/or practices	Responding to a broad cross section of stakeholders defining general perceptions of good corporate behaviour
	Motion matching	Camouflage/defensive approach where speed and direction of movement is obscured—running to stand still	Tit-for-Tat moves with the group—mirroring specific moves made by the collective group or sub-group	Responding to targeted threats or responding to a specific salient stakeholder or group thereof
Pull/Courtship	Self-decoration	A form of courtship attracting attention through decoration on corporate shell	Individualised to firm and local environment	Attracting to a broad cross section of stakeholders defining general perceptions of good corporate behaviour
	Signal	A proactive courtship strategy that signals aspects of a firm's CSR competencies, performance and values	An individualised response specific to the firm	Activity designed to attract a specific salient stakeholder or group thereof
	Associative identities	A courtship approach seeking to gain positive benefits by acquiring a new identity as a part of the organisation	Considered as a 'group' approach whereby a new distinct identity is added to the 'collective'	Attracting to a broad cross section of stakeholders defining general perceptions of good corporate behaviour
	Distractive mimicry	A courtship approach in sinful or controversial industries pulling attention away to a more benign part of the portfolio or activities rather than their 'sinful' core business	A distinctive secondary identity unrelated to, or more benign than, the core business of the firm	Activity designed to attract a specific salient stakeholder or group thereof

Thus, in presenting our typology of firm CSR strategies, we now call on other researchers to explore how firms negotiate these strategic choices. How do managers negotiate this myriad of influences on CSR decision making? What drives a firm to be a motion matcher or self-decorate? Why do firms decide to acquire an associative identity? How do firms using two or more strategic responses simultaneously manage this approach? How do firms using different strategic responses interact and compete?

Our contributions may also facilitate an alternative way to explore the difference between symbolic and substantive CSR (see, e.g., Schons & Steinmar, 2016) to allow the exploration of those that substantively change the CSR approach within a firm, that is, signalling, and those which do not, that is, 'self-decoration'. The extent to which the typology is applicable to firms from developing nations could also be explored. We therefore hope future researchers will explore these questions further, as well as test the boundary conditions of our theory and mapping of CSR strategy types in other contexts.

Finally, in presenting this typology, we are also asserting that by examining what CSR strategy *is*, rather than what is 'should be', we find that firms have between a push (camouflage) or pull (courtship), tensions that drive CSR strategy and so most firms will be engaged in a range of strategic responses at any one time. For example, motion matchers may be targeted by a specific salient stakeholder and so may need to adopt a dazzle strategy (or other) in response. Self-decoration opportunities are more likely to emerge from the prevailing operating environment, and thus can present opportunities for specific firms who had previously been content to shadow or motion match. Thus an exploration of the simultaneous use of our proposed strategies within the longitudinal history of a firm's CSR activity would also be a fruitful avenue for future research to build on this theoretical contribution. We finally also call on other researchers to visit other biological comparators to shed light on other areas of complexity and ambiguity within firm behaviour and management practice.

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