Speed and symmetry: Developing effective organisational responses to social media criticism of CSR

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how organisations can respond effectively to negative user-generated content (NUGC) about their corporate social responsibility (CSR) on social media. Specifically, it investigates the role of speed and symmetry of response in mitigating the impact of NUGC on perceptions of the company's CSR and legitimacy. It was motivated by the fact that, despite the increasing importance of social media as a CSR communication channel, most companies appear unwilling or unable to respond effectively to NUGC, compromising the efficacy of their CSR communication on social media. Using a between-groups experimental design (n = 660), the study finds that: i) NUGC about a company's CSR post negatively impacts stakeholder perceptions of organisations' CSR and legitimacy; ii) NUGC's impact can be partially mitigated by company responses that are either fast *or* highly symmetrical; iii) NUGC's impact is only fully mitigated when company responses are fast *and* highly symmetrical. The findings establish speed and symmetry, in combination, as necessary conditions for effectively responding to NUGC about company CSR posts on social media. The authors recommend, to maximise the effectiveness of social media communication of CSR, managers should establish processes to identify, read, and respond to NUGC rapidly *and* with a high degree of symmetry.

1. Introduction

To foster and reinforce perceptions of legitimacy amongst customers and other key stakeholders, organisations have increasingly engaged in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities that positively impact society and the environment (Pride & Ferrell, 2006). This brings potential benefits to the organisation in the form of positive beliefs, perceptions, and behaviours amongst stakeholders (Chung et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018). However, the benefits of CSR initiatives can only be realised if people know, and think positively, about them. Communicating CSR effectively is therefore just as important as engaging in it (Bortree, 2014; Melewar et al., 2017).

For this reason, social media has emerged as a potentially powerful CSR communication tool as it facilitates continuous two-way dialogue with stakeholders (Hayes & Carr, 2021; Troise & Camilleri, 2021). However, the open nature of this dialogue within social media can give rise to significant challenges for organisations. Specifically, Yang et al. (2019) found that negative user-generated content (hereafter NUGC) on such platforms is a significant concern for managers as, with limited

control over what users post, NUGC can severely damage their brand. Similarly, Siti-Nabiha et al. (2021) found that managers in small and medium-sized organisations perceived customers' negative comments on social media to be a serious risk to their company's reputation. Such concern is perhaps understandable given research that suggests social media communication can have severe and detrimental impacts on outcomes such as consumer trust and behaviour, including purchase intent (Rehman et al., 2020). Specifically, communicating CSR via social media might reasonably be considered to carry an increased likelihood of open and widely-read criticism of the nature, motivations and consequences of the company's activities (Jha & Verma, 2022; Song & Wen, 2020). This criticism can have damaging effects on corporate image, reputation, and perceived legitimacy (Du et al., 2010; Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010; Rim & Song, 2016; Stohl et al., 2017). However, the company's willingness to engage in open and potentially risky communication via social media is precisely what underpins the heightened credibility, authenticity, and trust this can engender. The opportunity to listen and respond to those who post critical comments in response to CSR communication allows for organisations to engage in

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(and shape) the public debate, and to mitigate the negative impact of these comments (Hayes & Carr, 2021). Thus, we contend that the act of communicating CSR via social media messages that are open to criticism is a potentially effective means of enhancing perceived legitimacy and perceptions of CSR activity *if* the company is able and willing to respond effectively to such criticism.

Against this background, we address the question of how organisations might respond effectively to NUGC about their CSR activity and communication on social media. Drawing on literature from the related fields of 'webcare' (the management of online reviews; Kerkhof & Dijkmans, 2019), complaint handling and corporate communications, we identify and examine two key factors – the *speed* and *symmetry* of a company response – that might, independently and in combination, mitigate the detrimental impact of NUGC about a company's social media posts on perceptions of its CSR activity and overall legitimacy. This, to our knowledge, constitutes the first direct response to Eberle et al.'s (2013, p.742) longstanding call for research, "to investigate the effects of corporate responses to stakeholder comments, either implying an intention to change […] as a result of the comments (symmetrical) or merely defending the company's existing policies (asymmetrical)". The continuing need for research in this area was more recently echoed by Peeroo et al. (2018), who argue that it is crucial for organisations to understand the effects of using social media as a CSR communication tool and the implications that symmetric and asymmetric communication have on corporate legitimacy. Furthermore, Dunn and Harness (2019, p. 908) reiterate that the continued absence of such understanding remains an important gap in the literature, and thus "future research that examines when and how to respond to UGC about CSR would be valuable".

To address this knowledge gap, we use an experimental approach to first investigate the impact of NUGC about companies' CSR posts on perceptions of the CSR activity itself and the legitimacy of the organisation. We then examine the independent and combined effects of organisational responses that are both fast (versus slow) and high (versus low) in symmetry. As a result, the paper makes three empirical contributions in demonstrating that: i) exposure to NUGC about a company's CSR post detrimentally impacts perceptions of CSR activity and organisational legitimacy; ii) exposure to a company response to the NUGC that is either a fast *or* highly symmetrical partially mitigates these negative impacts; and iii) exposure to a company response to the NUGC that is both fast *and* highly symmetrical fully mitigates these negative impacts. As such, the primary theoretical contribution of this work to establish speed and symmetry of response as necessary conditions to fully mitigate the negative effects of NUGC about a company's CSR post and thus to maximise the positive impact of CSR communication on social media. The clear implication of this is that, when their CSR-related social media posts are subject to NUGC, organisations must respond quickly *and* in a way that communicates a willingness to listen and change to maximise the effectiveness of their CSR communication on social media.

The paper begins by outlining the theoretical foundations for this study, prior to the development of hypotheses during a critical review of the extant literature. The authors then explain the experimental method by which these hypotheses were tested, before presenting and discussing the results.

2. Theoretical foundation

Being perceived as 'legitimate' is arguably essential for an organisation's long-term existence and prosperity (Dawkins, 2005). Defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p.574), the concept of legitimacy acknowledges a 'social contract' between the company and society (Perks et al., 2013). Where consumers perceive an organisation to be legitimate, they are more likely to develop positive

evaluations (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975), trust (Suchman, 1995) and purchase intentions (Lee et al., 2018) towards it. Perceived legitimacy fosters credibility (Chung et al., 2016), ensures sustained stakeholder support, helps to secure long-term prosperity (Du & Vieira, 2012), and serves as a "goodwill buffer" during times of adversity (Suchman, 1995). By contrast, organisations that are not perceived as entirely legitimate risk being perceived negatively by stakeholders (Colleoni, 2013).

CSR communication is widely considered to be an effective means by which companies might enhance consumer perceptions of their CSR activity (Crane & Glozer, 2016; Stanaland et al., 2011), and thus the perceived legitimacy of the organisation (Du & Vieira, 2012). Perceptions of CSR are important as they determine the extent to which stakeholders will reward the organisation for engaging in CSR initiatives (Harrison & Huang, 2020). They also significantly impact purchase intentions (Mohr & Webb, 2005), attitudes towards the organisation (Lee et al., 2014), the perceived reputation of the company, consumer trust, and loyalty (Stanaland et al., 2011). Dang et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of engendering positive CSR perceptions in an online context, as they shape consumers' propensity to spread positive word-of-mouth, brand identification and purchase intent.

The effects of communicating CSR via traditional promotional tools (such as TV, print and online advertising) are well documented, with studies identifying the positive influence of this on consumer perceptions, and thus corporate image, reputation and credibility (Lee, 2016; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; Uzunoğlu et al., 2017). Similar effects have been demonstrated for CSR communication at the point of sale and/or consumption, including packaging, in-store advertising and consumer-employee interactions (Edinger-Schons et al., 2019; Lee, 2016). Considerably less attention has been given to the effects and effectiveness of CSR communication via social media; a corporate practice that has grown rapidly, in terms of volume and importance, during recent years (Lee et al., 2018).

Social media is a potentially powerful tool by which organisations can legitimise their presence within society and create positive stakeholder perceptions of their CSR (Manetti & Bellucci, 2016). Compared to traditional channels, these platforms can deliver relatively high levels of visibility (Jeong et al., 2013), enhance credibility and trust (Akehurst, 2009; Flanagin & Metzger, 2013; Sparks & Bradley, 2017), and increase the persuasive power of the communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This is because social media provides opportunities for dialogue between organisations and their stakeholders, and thus for high levels of engagement (Seele & Lock, 2015; Uzunoğlu et al., 2017). When organisations communicate via social media they open themselves to criticism, which can in itself create an impression of sincerity (Van Halderen et al., 2011). Haigh et al. (2013) argue that CSR communication via company Facebook pages bolsters consumers' positive perceptions of CSR initiatives, because such platforms enable 'virtual CSR dialogues', signalling that the company is open, transparent and committed to its CSR causes (Korschun & Du, 2013). This suggests that, for CSR social media communication to be effective, organisations must be prepared to not only make initial disclosures about their activities but also engage appropriately with social media responses; even, and perhaps especially, when these comments are negative.

However, scholars have long argued that few organisations use a dialogic approach in communicating CSR and engagement with online consumer criticism is somewhat rare (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009). This observation is still apparent in recent literature, where Kent and Li (2020) contend that interaction with stakeholders on social media does not extend beyond likes, retweets, and asymmetrical exchanges, observing that, "organizational 'interaction' on media such as Facebook and Twitter are quite limited [where] social media are seen as one-way messaging tools […] that serve no relational purpose" (Kent & Li, 2020, p.3). Similarly, Okazaki et al. (2020) found that social media platforms tend to be used in a unidirectional way and organisations frequently fail to engage in dialogue with users about their CSR.

It would seem, therefore, that little has changed in the decade since

Dekay (2012) observed a reluctance by organisations to engage with NUGC on social media; noting that 48% of the companies studied deleted NUGC on Facebook without responding, and only 4% responded to more than three-quarters of negative comments. Indeed, Pahlevan Sharif and Mura (2019, p.159) appear to encourage this approach in recommending that organisations remove NUGC, or at least organise user-generated content (UGC) "through a structure that privileges the positive messages over the negative ones". Similarly, since Dellarocas (2006) introduced the prospect of managers manipulating UGC to positively affect stakeholder opinion, Gössling et al. (2019) more recently observed that manipulation of NUGC, rather than engagement with it, has become increasingly widespread. Such manipulation strategies include organisations adding fake reviews, soliciting positive UGC, or placing NUGC on competitors' web sites (Gössling et al., 2018). Not only does this raise ethical concerns (Gössling et al., 2019), it is likely to harm the credibility and potential of social media as a corporate communication tool and jeopardize organisations' long-term relationships with customers (Carl, 2006). At the very least, companies might fail to capitalise on the opportunity to demonstrate transparency and enhance legitimacy. At worst, such actions could undermine any previous conceptions that the company was open to receiving criticism or engaging in dialogue on social media and is therefore credible and trustworthy.

Thus, if we accept the need for companies to respond to NUGC about their CSR posts on social media, the question arises as to how they can most effectively do this. Whilst very little work has previously sought to address this question in the specific context of social media and CSR, useful insights can be derived from the wider communications literature. Specifically, previous work in the fields of 'webcare', complaint management, and corporate communications has highlighted the importance of the speed, content and tone of company responses to online criticism and complaints. The following section provides a review of this literature as a basis for hypothesis development.

3. Hypotheses development

Previous research has considered the effects of negative user-generated online content and various aspects of company responses to this, including the speed of the response and the nature of the message content. A critical review of the extant literature in each of these areas is provided in the subsections below as a foundation for hypothesis development and testing in the current study.

3.1. Negative user-generated content

In the social media environment, negative user-generated content (NUGC) about an organisation reaches a wider audience, is more readily believed, and has more persistent effects than positive user-generated comments (Hornik et al., 2015). This reflects a broader negativity bias (Wu, 2013), whereby consumers generally weight negative reviews more heavily than positive reviews (Filieri et al., 2019; Le & Ha, 2021). As a result, NUGC is generally considered do more harm to organisations than positive user-generated comments do good (Li et al., 2018). More specifically, there is evidence to suggest that exposure to NUGC on social media about the company and its actions negatively impacts attitudes towards the company (Weitzl et al., 2018), purchase intention (Christodoulides et al., 2012; Lee, 2009), and sales (Corstjens & Umblijs, 2012). Kim et al. (2016) demonstrate the relationship between these various negative outcomes in showing that, after reading NUGC about a particular incident involving the company, audiences are likely to attribute responsibility for this to the organisation, generate negative attitudes towards the organisation and subsequently reduce their spending with it.

Against this background, and specifically consistent with evidence that NUGC on social media results in negative attitudes to the company and its actions (e.g. Kim et al., 2016; Weitzl et al., 2018), it would seem

reasonable to assume that exposure to NUGC about a company's CSR post will negatively impact perceptions of the CSR activity itself and the organisation's legitimacy. However, to establish this as a platform on which to investigate how subsequent managerial responses might effectively mitigate such outcomes, it is first necessary to empirically demonstrate these specific effects of exposure to NUGC within the current study. As such, we hypothesise that:

H1. In the absence of a company response, negative user-generated content (NUGC) about a company's CSR social media post will negatively impact a) perceptions of CSR and b) perceived legitimacy

3.2. Management response to negative user-generated content

The current study seeks to extend the body of work into managerial responses to UGC. It does so by adopting a novel and specific focus on how managers might most effectively respond to NUGC about their CSR communication on social media, and thus mitigate the impact of this on stakeholder perceptions of CSR and organisational legitimacy. As illustrated in Table 1, our study emerges from a broad canon of work that has thus far focussed primarily on how companies might respond to online reviews (e.g. Casado-Díaz et al., 2020; Le & Ha, 2021) and handle specific complaints (e.g. Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Johnen & Schnittka, 2019), predominantly within the hospitality industry. For example, in their analysis of how hospitality providers currently respond to NUGC, Sparks and Bradley (2017) developed a 'Triple A' typology for the content of management responses. They identified that, to varying degrees, management responses *acknowledge* the dissatisfying event, *account* for its occurrence with an explanation, and reference *action* taken.

Within this 'webcare' literature, however, there has yet been very little specific focus on how companies might most effectively respond to NUGC about their CSR communication on social media. Indeed, the only study to have thus far adopted such a focus appears to be that of Rim and Song (2016), who considered the question of how companies might more effectively persuade stakeholders of their altruistic motives for engaging in CSR media by being more transparent about the benefits of this to the company. We seek to build on this initial work by extending beyond a persuasion paradigm to consider the broader question of whether CSR social media communication that demonstrates genuine symmetry (i.e. a company's willingness to listen to stakeholder concerns and affect change where necessary) might most effectively mitigate the impact of NUGC on perceptions of CSR activity and, importantly, the perceived legitimacy of the organisation. We also consider the independent and interactive effects of response speed on these outcomes. The theoretical foundation and justification for examining these factors emerges from a recent review of the extant literature by Kerkhof and Dijkmans (2019), in which the authors propose that the effectiveness of organisational responses to negative online reviews may be influenced by their *speed* (e.g. Istanbulluoglu, 2017) and *content/tone* (e.g. Dens et al., 2015; Dijkmans et al., 2015; Li et al., 2018). We expand on this in the sub-sections below, in which we critically consider the literature and derive hypotheses in each of these areas.

3.3. Speed of response

Speed of response to NUGC (Sparks et al., 2016) is perceived by consumers as one of the most easily controllable factors (Istanbulluoglu, 2017) and is therefore judged more harshly (Kelley et al., 1993). The literature suggests that consumers might make a variety of inferences from the perceived speed with which the company responds to online criticism. A prompt response may signal the company's willingness to accept responsibility for any failure highlighted in the NUGC and its resolution (Min et al., 2015). Similarly, a perceived delay in response might indicate limited concern for the customer or an attempt to shift responsibility for a problem to the customer (Tax et al., 1998). This can cause negative emotional states, dissatisfaction in the complainant

Table 1

Literature review on management response to negative UGC.

Study	Context (Source of UGC)	Theory	Focal variables (IVs)	Effects examined (DVs)	Data source	Main conclusion
Le and Ha (2021)	E-commerce (Online negative reviews)	Category diagnosticity theory; literature on managerial responses to negative reviews	Managerial response rate, managerial response relevance; Review diagnosticity, review impression	Attitude toward product, Attitude toward seller, Purchase intention	Experiment	Managerial responses (i.e., response rate, response relevance) have positive effects on potential consumers' attitudes and behaviour, and moderate the detrimental impacts of negative reviews.
Casado-Díaz et al. (2020)	Hospitality industry (Online negative reviews)	Negative word-of-mouth literature	Defensive, accommodative, and no response	Attitude towards hotel, Booking intention	Experiment	No response is worse than either defensive or accommodative responses.
Xu et al. (2020)	Travel industry (Online reviews)	Literature on online reviews, source credibility, management of online reviews, and review manipulation	Review volume ratio, review valence ratio (Moderator: management response)	Number of bookings	Field study from two travel websites	Managerial responses on TripAdvisor are associated with fewer bookings. Number of management responses significantly moderates the effect of review valence and volume on bookings.
Johnen and Schnittka (2019)	Consumer complaints (Social networking sites)	Literature on managerial responses	Accommodative response vs defensive response	Perceived benefits, purchase intention	Laboratory experiment and field data	A defensive response is superior to an accommodative response in hedonic contexts, but inferior in utilitarian ones.
Weitzl et al. (2018)	Consumer complaints (Social networking sites)	Attribution theory and service failure literature	Defensive, accommodative, and no response	Failure attributions, negative word-of-mouth intentions, and post-webcare satisfaction	Survey and quasi experiment	Accommodative responses lead to the smallest unfavourable attributions, followed by defensive, then no responses. Responses' ability to mitigate unfavourable failure attributions is determined by prior failure experiences.
Wang and Chaudhry (2018)	Hospitality industry (Online reviews)	Literature on managerial responses, electronic-word-of-mouth, and customer satisfaction management	Responding vs not responding (Moderator: response tailoring)	Subsequent reviews'/ opinion	Field data from four travel websites	Responses to negative reviews significantly and positively influenced subsequent opinion. Tailoring of response amplified such effect.
Li et al. (2018)	Hospitality industry (Online negative reviews)	Literature on managerial responses	Defensive vs accommodative response (Moderator: Ordinary negative review vs product failure review)	Hotel sales revenue, purchase intention of prospective customers (Mediator: Attribution of negative review towards brand)	Field study and experiment	Accommodative responses to product failure reviews and defensive responses to ordinary negative reviews effectively increased sales and consumer purchase intentions.
Li et al. (2017)	Hospitality industry (Online negative reviews)	Signalling theory	Frequency, speed, and length of response	Volume of reviews, votes for review helpfulness, valence of reviews, popularity ranking	Field study using panel data from TripAdvisor	Speed and frequency of response significantly increase travellers' engagement signified through more reviews, more votes for helpfulness, higher popularity ranking, and higher average valence.
Ghosh (2017)	Hospitality industry (Online negative reviews)	Literature on word-or-mouth, webcare, online reviews, and consumer forgiveness	Strength and speed of response (Moderator: review helpfulness)	Consumer forgiveness	Experiment	Strength and speed of response positively effect consumer forgiveness, subsequently effecting consumer loyalty.
Istanbulluoglu (2017)	Consumer complaints (Social networking sites)	Complaint handling literature	Speed of response	Satisfaction with complaint handling	Survey	A faster initial response and faster conclusive response result in higher satisfaction with complaint handling.
Xie et al. (2017)	Hospitality industry (Online reviews)	Literature on source credibility, management response, and word-of-mouth	Job position of response providers, response speed, response length, topic repetition, response volume (Moderators: review ratings and volume)	Hotel financial performance indicators: revenue, average daily rate, and occupancy	Big-data analytics approach	Quick responses enhanced future financial performance. Responses that repeat topics in the review and those provided by hotel executives lower future financial performance. Review volume and rating moderated the effects of management responses.
Sparks et al. (2016)	Hospitality industry	Consumer inferences theory	Presence vs absence of response to NUGC; speed,	Customer inferences of a hotel's caring about	Experiment	The presence (vs absence) of a response, using a human (vs

Table 1 (*continued*)

Study	Context (Source of UGC)	Theory	Focal variables (IVs)	Effects examined (DVs)	Data source	Main conclusion
	(Online negative reviews)		source, voice, and action frame of response	customers and trustworthiness		professional) voice, or fast (vs moderate or slow) response produces more positive customer inference of caring and trustworthiness.
Rim and Song (2016)	CSR (Social networking sites)	Persuasion theory, message sidedness, transparency	Valance of UGC (positive vs negative), sidedness of company response (societal benefits vs societal & company benefits)	Altruistic motives, perceived negativity of UGC, attitude towards the company	Experiment	Company responses that are transparent about benefits of CSR to the company most effectively persuade stakeholders of altruistic motives of the company, and thus enhance attitudes towards it when UGC is negative.
Min et al. (2015)	Hospitality industry (Online negative reviews)	Interactional justice theory, active listening theory, procedural justice theory	Speed of response, paraphrasing statement in response, empathy statement in response	Satisfaction with response	Experiment	Responses that include an empathy statement and paraphrasing the complaint improved satisfaction with response. Speed of response did not influence satisfaction.
Current study	CSR (NUGC on social networking sites)	Legitimacy theory	Speed and symmetry of response	Perceived legitimacy, perceptions of CSR	Experiment	High degrees of symmetry and speed of responses, in combination, are necessary to mitigate the detrimental effects of NUGC on perceptions of legitimacy and CSR.

(Blodgett et al., 1997) and can even lead to aggression towards the organisation (Azemi et al., 2020). Such inferences align with broader findings that suggest speedy responses to external criticism positively impact an organisation's reputation during crisis management situations (Ryschka et al., 2016) and the financial performance of hotels (Xie et al., 2017).

In the complaint management literature, however, empirical evidence for the impact of response speed is somewhat mixed. Whilst most studies here show a positive relationship between a timely management response and consumer forgiveness (Ghosh, 2017), brand trust (Sparks et al., 2016), satisfaction (Istanbulluoglu, 2017), service recovery (Davidow, 2003), and reduction in negative emotions such as frustration and aggression (Azemi et al., 2020), some report no such relationship. For example, Min et al. (2015) find no significant effect of speed of response on customer satisfaction or customer rating of the company's response, while Einwiller and Steilen (2015) conclude that response time on Facebook and Twitter does not necessarily influence satisfaction. However, consistent with the current weight of evidence in this body of work, it seems reasonable to hypothesise that:

H2. Responses that are perceived to be 'fast' (versus 'slow') will more effectively mitigate the negative impact of NUGC about a company's CSR social media post on a) perceptions of the CSR activity and b) perceived legitimacy.

3.4. Message content

In addition to speed of response, Kerkhof and Dijkmans (2019) highlight the potential importance of message content in developing effective organisational responses to negative online reviews. In this respect, research has so far tended to focus on the relative effects and effectiveness of *accommodative* versus *defensive* responses to the negative online review; i.e. those which encompass some form of apology, compensation, and/or promise of corrective action versus those that tend towards denying responsibility for the negative event, challenging the accuser, or shifting the blame to others (Lee & Cranage, 2014). For example, Lee and Song (2010) propose that accommodative strategies have a greater positive impact on consumer evaluations of the company than defensive responses or no action at all. This is supported by findings that suggest apologising (vs denying responsibility) leads to greater

credibility and more positive attitudes towards the company's response (Kerkhof et al., 2011; Lee, 2005). However, this may depend on the focus of the negative review. Li et al. (2018), for example, found that whilst accommodative responses more effectively enhanced purchase intent and sales when the negative review related to product failure, defensive responses produced better outcomes when the review concerned other issues.

3.4.1. Symmetry of the message

In the corporate communication literature, including that which is related to CSR (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), notions of accommodation and defensiveness are encapsulated in the concept of *symmetry* (Grunig, 1984; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Here, communication is seen to be symmetrical when the company indicates a willingness to engage in dialogue with stakeholders and, if necessary, initiate internal changes to ensure its actions are of mutual benefit to both parties (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Huang, 2004). Highly symmetrical communication is thus characterised by listening to, understanding and valuing stakeholder feedback (Lim & Greenwood, 2017). In contrast, asymmetrical communication maintains a sender-oriented approach, where the company does not indicate a willingness to genuinely listen to and understand stakeholder concerns, or to effect internal changes as a result of interactions with its publics (Grunig & White, 1992; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

This concept is particularly important for the current study, as the degree of symmetry in corporate communication can impact perceptions of consumer trust (Kollat & Farache, 2017) and, ultimately, legitimacy. However, in the corporate communication and CSR literature, research into this phenomenon has so far focussed on organisations' initial controlled CSR messages. As Table 1 illustrates, whilst studies have begun to examine what makes an effective response to negative online reviews and complaints, none have yet considered the effects of symmetry in such responses. Hence, to our knowledge, the calls for research from Eberle et al. (2013) and Peeroo et al. (2018), to examine the effects of symmetry in managerial responses to UGC on corporate legitimacy, have remained unanswered.

To some extent, the absence of work comparing the effects of symmetrical and asymmetrical corporate responses to social media criticism of CSR may be understandable in the sense that purely asymmetrical

communication of CSR (i.e. that which indicates an unwillingness to change or enter into any form of dialogue with the consumer; Li et al., 2018) is unlikely to enhance perceptions of legitimacy and trust amongst stakeholders (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010), or to assuage the discontent expressed in NUGC on social media (Lee & Song, 2010). By contrast, symmetrical management responses are likely to imply a genuine attempt by the organisation to align its CSR practice with its CSR communication and should therefore increase social approval (Lee et al., 2018) and perceived legitimacy of the organisation (Suchman, 1995).

However, just as organisations rarely adopt entirely asymmetrical approaches to CSR communication, so too do they often avoid making responses with extremely high levels of symmetry (Etter, 2014; Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010). For example, in proposing three online CSR communication strategies (ranging from highly asymmetrical *broadcasting*, through *reacting*, to highly symmetrical *engagement*), Etter (2014, p.323) found that: "in practice, [highly] symmetrical communication [has] hardly been embraced for CSR communication online". Of the 30 organisations studied, only four used the *engagement* strategy when communicating CSR online. In a more recent study, Gomez (2018) found that *engagement* strategies are still rarely adopted; an analysis of 50 Fortune companies' Facebook and Twitter profiles identified that social media was not used to promote interactivity and feedback about CSR. Abitbol et al. (2019) provide further support for this in their observations that, whilst organisations post on Facebook about their CSR credentials, their communications lack interactive language and two-way messaging, dissuading stakeholders to engage on such sites. Organisations' reluctance to engage in highly symmetrical communication regarding CSR issues may reflect a general cautiousness about engaging with stakeholders in open online dialogue about CSR (Okazaki et al., 2020), perhaps due to fear of criticism (Kent & Li, 2020; Moreno & Capriotti, 2009). It might also reflect a prudent approach in light of proposals in the literature that, whilst highly symmetrical responses are likely to be "useful for gaining trust" (Kollat & Farache, 2017, p.511), there are instances in which they do not necessarily result in positive outcomes – for example, where consumers feel the organisation is 'over-engaging' with them (see Green, 2018) – and thus there is a need for continued research in this area (Kollat & Farache, 2017).

Against this backdrop, Laskin (2012) suggests that symmetry in communication is more usefully conceptualised as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy, and that the important question is not whether to adopt a symmetrical or asymmetrical approach, but rather what degree of symmetry is most appropriate in a given context. Laskin (2012, p.57) critiques Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model of communication for being an "unrealistic utopia", which is "often unattainable" for organisations, and proposes that most organisational communication falls "somewhere in between the opposing poles" of extreme symmetry and asymmetry (Laskin, 2012, p.360). This view is echoed by Etter (2014), who suggests that organisations are most likely to oscillate between strategies of relative symmetry and asymmetry in their CSR communication online.

Hence, in responding to calls for research into the effects of symmetry in CSR communication (Eberle et al., 2013; Peeroo et al., 2018), it is appropriate in the current study to consider the effects of management responses to NUGC about their CSR in terms of the degree of symmetry they exhibit, rather than whether they are entirely symmetrical or asymmetrical in nature. In this respect, whilst it is important to acknowledge the possibility that highly symmetrical communication may not always produce positive outcomes, the weight of evidence reviewed in this section indicates the perceived legitimacy of the organisation and its CSR activity is more likely to be enhanced, rather than diminished, by communication that has a relatively high (versus relatively low) degree of symmetry. As such, we hypothesise that:

H3. Responses that are relatively high (versus relatively low) in symmetry will more effectively mitigate the negative impact of NUGC about a company's CSR social media post on a) perceptions of CSR and b)

perceived legitimacy.

Finally, it is of course important to recognise that both speed and symmetry of the message content are inherent qualities of any managerial response, and thus the most practically relevant outcome of interest is arguably the combined effect of these two variables on perceptions of the company's CSR activity and legitimacy. Given that their independent effects are likely to be positive (see above), it is reasonable to assume that responses exhibiting both characteristics will most effectively mitigate the detrimental impact of NUGC about the company's CSR post. Thus, we hypothesise that:

H4. Responses that are both fast and relatively high in symmetry will most effectively mitigate the negative impact of NUGC about a company's CSR social media post on a) perceptions of CSR and b) perceived legitimacy.

In the remainder of the paper we explain the method by which we tested these hypotheses, before presenting and discussing the results.

4. Method

We utilised a 2 (company response: high symmetry vs low symmetry) x 2 (speed: fast vs slow) between-subjects experimental design, with two control groups, to test the mitigating impact of different company responses to NUGC about their social media posts. The first control group featured the original CSR post only. The second featured the original CSR post and associated NUGC. Table 2 summarises the groups.

4.1. Participants

We recruited 660 participants via a large UK consumer panel, using quota sampling to ensure the sample was broadly representative of the UK adult population in terms of age, sex, education, and income, and included only those who were active users of the internet. We assigned participants randomly and equally to the six groups (n = 110 per group), with each group exhibiting a similar socio-demographic profile. A summary of the sample profile and group similarity checks is provided in Appendix A.

4.2. Stimuli

We selected the food retail industry as a relevant and realistic context for this study. Recent years have seen some organisations within the food retail industry act in ways that could damage perceptions of legitimacy and CSR activity. For example, research suggests that supermarkets have irresponsibly managed their supply chains (Czinkota et al., 2014), contributed to obesity through their marketing practices and focus on selling high-calorie products (Lee et al., 2013), used environmentally damaging packaging (Peake, 2020), and taken insufficient care over the provenance of their products (Cole et al., 2019). Hence food retailers are likely to face obstacles to perceived legitimacy.

We constructed the stimuli in three parts: i) an initial CSR-focussed

Table 2
Control and treatment conditions.

Control conditions		Treatment conditions			
No Company Response Conditions		Company Response Conditions			
Initial company CSR post only	Initial company CSR post + NUGC			Speed of company response to NUGC	
				Fast	Slow
Group 1 (n = 110)	Group 2 (n = 110)	Symmetry of company response to NUGC	High	Group 3 (n = 110)	Group 4 (n = 110)
			Low	Group 5 (n = 110)	Group 6 (n = 110)

social media post from three different fictitious supermarkets (hereafter, 'CSR post'), ii) a negative user-generated comment in response to each company post, (hereafter, 'NUGC') and iii) a response to the NUGC from the company (hereafter, 'company response'). Three CSR posts – one from each of three fictitious supermarkets (FoodCo, ShopCo and SuperCo) – mimic the social media content created by real supermarkets (see Appendix B for an example). This prevented interference from existing associations or attitudes regarding existing brands (Eberle et al., 2013), ensuring results were not an artefact of responses to one particular issue or brand. Participants completed check questions within the study to ensure they were not familiar with the fictional brands. For each supermarket, less than 10% of the sample claimed to be familiar with the brand and less than 6% believed they had purchased from the brands.

The CSR posts focussed on the organisations' efforts to reduce food waste, encourage healthy living, and minimise plastic waste, respectively. Each presented a CSR initiative that the company was implementing, a description of what this involved, and a related picture. To maximise realism, we constructed content that was informed by, and adapted from, existing UK supermarkets' public social media pages. We hired professional graphic design and social media companies to develop company logos and simulated social media pages containing a CSR post. To increase external validity, we constructed NUGC by adapting real-world social media comments that had been made in response to supermarkets' CSR posts on public social media pages.

Finally, a company response consistent with each treatment condition accompanied each NUGC. These responses were all relatively short (approximately 50 words), in line with Li et al.'s (2017, p.50) recommendation that, on social media, "lengthy response should be avoided" as too much information is likely to induce cognitive overload, resulting in consumers ignoring or discounting the response. Furthermore, Sheng et al. (2021) observe that shorter responses are more effective, as social media sites often show only the first three lines of a management response, unless users opt to 'read more'.

4.3. Manipulation of the independent variables

We varied the speed and nature of the company responses to create stimuli that clearly and distinctively reflected each treatment condition (see Table 2). We also developed company responses on the basis of Eberle et al.'s (2013, p.733) key distinction between those that are high in symmetry and those that are not; i.e. "whether the company actually uses the comments it receives to change its policies (symmetric) or only to monitor stakeholder sentiments (asymmetric)". In addition, we designed each type of company response to reflect a number of defining characteristics outlined by Morsing and Schultz (2006); whereby we set responses that communicated an openness to stakeholder engagement, involvement and co-creation in future CSR activity (symmetrical) against those that reassured stakeholders that the company is ethical/socially responsible but clearly indicated that, while stakeholders are welcome to respond to corporate actions, these actions will ultimately be decided by management (asymmetrical).

In the highly symmetrical response scenarios, therefore, the organisation stated they valued customer feedback, suggested they were open to change based on the user's comments, and agreed to take action, where possible, to implement changes. These 'high symmetry' responses included phrases such as "we really value customer feedback" and "your comments will be discussed internally, with the suggestion that the scheme is changed along these lines." In the 'low symmetry' response scenarios, the organisation showed appreciation for the stakeholder response, assured them of the positive impact of the CSR activity, and expressed a commitment to continuing with it. These 'low symmetry' responses included comments such as: "whilst we appreciate that more can always be done, we are committed to rolling out the new product range in store". Sparks and Bradley (2017) found that most management responses they studied acknowledged the NUGC by thanking the user for their comment. We replicated this in all responses, beginning each with

a comment such as "thank you for your feedback".

In each condition, we manipulated only the independent variables, controlling for extraneous variables that could also impact participant responses, as identified in prior literature (e.g. style, personalisation, length and use of pronouns). Furthermore, none of the company posts or NUGC had any 'likes' or 'shares', as this can influence how people perceive the posts and thus might have constituted an alternative explanation for changes in the dependent variables (Lee et al., 2018).

To manipulate speed of company response, we told participants that the supermarket had responded within either three to six hours (in the 'fast response' condition) or after one week (in the 'slow response' condition). This is consistent with Istanbulluoglu (2017), who suggests that, in a social media context, consumers perceive a suitably quick response to complaints as one that is made within three to six hours. The slower condition was based on theoretical evidence from Sparks et al. (2016), who identified that consumers perceive responses received after one week as being relatively slow.

4.4. Pretesting for validity

We pretested the stimuli for clarity, appropriateness and validity amongst a sample of 300 participants (n = 100 per supermarket brand), recruited via a large UK consumer panel. These participants did not participate in the main study. The pretest enabled us to select the most appropriate stimuli out of a total of 18 user-generated comments, each paired with a high symmetry and low symmetry company response. See Appendix C for pretest results.

4.5. Procedure

At the beginning of the online research instrument (optimised for completion via laptop, phone and tablet), we advised participants they would see an excerpt from the social media pages of three different supermarkets and would then be asked to complete a series of questions. After providing informed consent, participants completed questions about their social media usage. They then read the stimulus material, relating to each of the three supermarkets (items) in turn, and completed the dependent variable measures after each item. Each participant encountered the items in random order. Finally, participants completed the manipulation check, validity check and demographic questions. Participants across all conditions did not significantly differ with respect to the time spent completing the survey. We built a number of data integrity checks into the survey in the form of 'attention filters', requiring respondents to provide a specific response to an unrelated question, and included only those that successfully completed these checks in the sample.

4.6. Measurement and analysis

We measured CSR perceptions using a 7-point Likert scale (anchored by 'strongly disagree' and 'strongly agree'), adapted from Stanaland et al. (2011) and De Roeck and Delobbe (2012). We measured perceived legitimacy using a five-item scale based on Chung et al. (2016) and Lee et al. (2018). Composite reliability values ranged between 0.786 and 0.949, above the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006; Pallant, 2013). Finally, we measured social media usage using 7-point Likert scales adopted from Eberle et al. (2013) and Barcelos et al. (2018). We then used general linear modelling techniques, principally one-way ANOVA, to test the hypotheses.

4.7. Manipulation checks

Consistent with Sparks et al. (2016), we checked the manipulation of *speed of response* using a 9-point Likert scale (anchored by 'extremely slow' to 'extremely fast') with a single item: 'Which of the following best describes the time that was taken by the supermarkets to respond to the

user-generated comments?'. The results of single-sample t-tests indicated that the mean ratings of 'fast' conditions were significantly higher than the midpoint of 5 ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.40$; t (219) = 8.03, $p = .000$). Means for the 'slow' conditions were significantly below the midpoint of 5 ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.81$; t (219) = −7.68, $p = .000$), demonstrating an effective manipulation of the perceived speed of company response. We then tested the difference between the two treatment conditions (fast vs slow) using an independent samples t-test. Here the fast response time ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.40$) was perceived as significantly faster than the slow response ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.81$; t (438) = 11.00, $p = .000$).

To check the manipulation of the 'high symmetry' and 'low symmetry' company responses, we adopted a 5-item scale from Sparks et al. (2016). It included items such as 'the supermarket is open to change' and 'the supermarket values comments from its customers'. We then tested the difference between the two treatment conditions (high symmetry vs low symmetry) using an independent samples t-test. All the high symmetry responses ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.02$) were perceived as significantly higher than low symmetry responses ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.14$; t (438) = 5.35, $p = .000$), indicating an effective manipulation of perceived symmetry in the message.

Following Rim and Song (2016), we measured the *perceived negativity* of the NUGC via a scale from 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive), with a single-item: 'Overall, how positive or negative were the user-generated comments in your opinion?'. The results of single-sample t-tests indicated that the mean score for the NUGC in the stimulus material were all perceived as significantly less than the mid-point of 4 (see Table 3).

5. Results

5.1. Validity checks

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted realism checks for the CSR posts, NUGC and company responses. For this, we adopted scales from Sparks and Browning (2011) and Sparks et al. (2016), using a 7-point Likert scale. Single sample t-tests confirmed the perceived external validity of the stimuli (see Table 4).

5.2. Results

To test the hypotheses, we compared the means of both dependent variables (perceptions of CSR and perceived legitimacy) across all six groups in Table 2 (see section 4.0) using a one-way ANOVA, with a series of planned comparisons between specific groups. The means plots for each dependent variable are provided in Fig. 1a and b. The descriptive statistics and planned comparisons results are presented in Tables 5a – 6b (below).

We found significant between-group differences for CSR perceptions (F(5, 654) = 8.82, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$) and perceived legitimacy (F(5, 654) = 8.55, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$), with a moderate effect size apparent in both cases (Cohen, 1988; Pallant, 2013).

The results of planned comparisons, via Bonferroni-corrected t-tests, are reported in Table 5a and 5b for CSR perceptions and Tables 6a and 6b for perceived legitimacy, with respect to each hypothesis.

As shown in Table 5b and 6b, perceptions of CSR and perceived legitimacy were significantly higher in Group 1 (company post only) compared to Group 2 (company post + NUGC). These results demonstrate the impact of NUGC in response to the original company post, providing support for H1a and H1b.

Table 3
NUGC manipulation check.

NUGC creator	M	SD	Df	T	p
'Helen'	2.60	1.38	549	−23.79	.000
'James'	2.32	1.33	549	−29.56	.000
'Jenna'	2.76	1.42	549	−20.57	.000

Table 4
Validity check results.

Construct	M	SD	Df	T	p
CSR post	5.30	.91	659	36.61	.000
NUGC	5.28	.85	549	35.16	.000
Company response (high symmetry)	5.41	82	219	25.61	.000
Company response (low symmetry)	5.33	.81	219	24.44	.000

We observed large differences in perceptions of CSR and perceived legitimacy between Group 1 (company post only) and Group 6 (slow + low symmetry responses to NUGC). Furthermore, we found no significant differences between Group 2 (Company CSR post + NUGC) and Group 6 (slow + low symmetry responses to NUGC) for either of the dependent variables. This indicates that slow company responses with a low degree of symmetry are ineffective in mitigating the impact of NUGC towards a company's CSR post.

We did not see significant differences in the means for perceptions of CSR or perceived legitimacy between Group 2 (Company CSR post + NUGC) and either Group 4 (slow + high symmetry responses to NUGC) or Group 5 (fast + low symmetry responses to NUGC). For both dependent variables, perceptions of CSR remained significantly higher in Group 1 (company post only) than in Group 4 (slow + high symmetry responses to NUGC) and Group 5 (fast + low symmetry responses to NUGC). Taken together, these results suggest that neither speed nor (high) symmetry of response alone was sufficient to mitigate the impact of NUGC in response to a company CSR post on perceptions of either CSR or company legitimacy; and thus they fail to provide support for H2a, H2b, H3a and H3b.

To further test the mitigating effect of fast company responses in isolation, we collapsed Groups 3 and 5 to create a 'fast response' condition (n = 220), in which exposure to low and high symmetry responses was counterbalanced, and compared the dependent variable means to those in Group 2 (company post + NUGC). A Welch two-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups for CSR perceptions (t(2) = 4.50, $p = .012$) and perceived legitimacy (t(2) = 4.58, $p = .011$). Post-hoc comparisons using the Dunnett test revealed there was no significant difference between the control Group 2 (M = 4.56, SD = 1.90) and the 'slow response' treatment group for either CSR perceptions (M = 4.69, SD = 0.939, MD = 0.124, $p = .432$) or perceived legitimacy (M = 4.71, SD = 0.943, MD = 0.048, $p = .860$). By contrast, the 'fast response' treatment group exhibited significantly higher means than the control Group 2 (company post + NUGC) for CSR perceptions (M = 4.90, SD = 1.00, MD = 0.336, $p = .008$) and perceived legitimacy (M = 4.94, SD = 0.968, MD = 0.284, $p = .021$), though the effect size was small in both cases ($\eta^2 = 0.02$).

We then created a 'high symmetry response' condition, collapsing Groups 3 and 5, such that exposure to fast/slow company responses was counterbalanced, and compared the dependent variable means to those in Group 2 (company post + NUGC). Again, a Welch two-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups for CSR perceptions (t(2) = 4.72, $p = .010$) and perceived legitimacy (t(2) = 4.78, $p = .009$). The Dunnett test indicated there were no significant differences between the control Group 2 and the 'low symmetry' treatment group for either CSR perceptions (M = 4.68, SD = 0.949, MD = 0.121, $p = .451$) or perceived legitimacy (M = 4.70, SD = 0.906, MD = 0.042, $p = .888$). By contrast, the 'high symmetry' treatment group exhibited significantly higher means than the control Group 2 (company post + NUGC) for CSR perceptions (M = 4.90, SD = 0.994, MD = 0.339, $p = .007$) and perceived legitimacy (M = 4.95, SD = 1.00, MD = 0.290, $p = .018$). Once again, however, the effect size was small in both cases ($\eta^2 = 0.02$). Overall, these results indicate that speed and symmetry in isolation may provide some buffer to the negative effects of UGC, albeit to a relatively small degree, providing partial support for H2a, H2b, H3a and H3b.

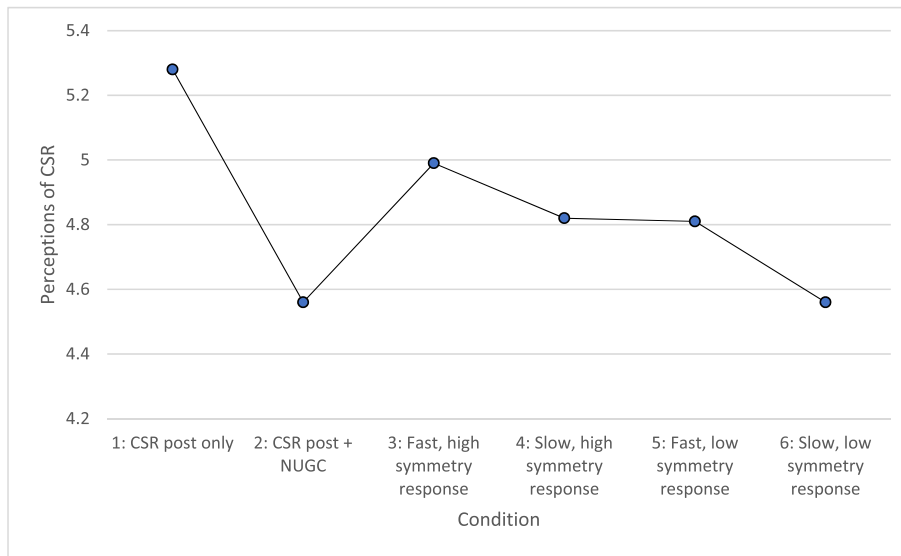Finally, with reference to Table 5b and 6b, perceptions of CSR and

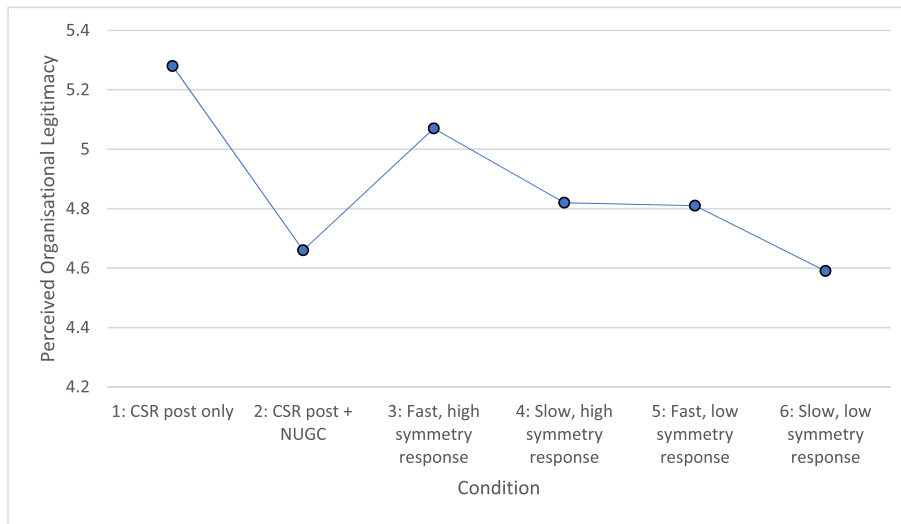**Figure 1a.** Comparison of mean scores for 'Perceptions of CSR'.

Figure 1b. Comparison of mean scores for 'Perceived Legitimacy'.

Table 5a
CSR perceptions: Descriptives.

Condition	N	M	SD	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Group 1: Company post only	110	5.28	.806	5.13	5.43
Group 2: Company post + NUGC	110	4.56	1.09	4.36	4.77
Group 3: Fast, high symmetry	110	4.99	.962	4.81	5.17
Group 4: Slow, high symmetry	110	4.82	1.02	4.62	5.01
Group 5: Fast, low symmetry	110	4.81	1.04	4.61	5.01
Group 6: Slow, low symmetry	110	4.56	.832	4.40	4.71

perceived legitimacy were significantly higher in Group 3 (fast + high symmetry responses to NUGC) than in Group 2 (company CSR post + NUGC). Furthermore, there were no significant differences in either

dependent variable between Group 1 (company post only) and Group 3 (fast + high symmetry responses to NUGC). By contrast, the means for both dependent variables were significantly lower in Group 6 (slow + low symmetry responses) compared to those in Group 1 (company post only), and no different to those in Group 2 (company CSR post + NUGC). Taken together, these results indicate that the impact of NUGC about a company CSR post on perceptions of CSR and legitimacy is fully mitigated only when the company response is fast *and* highly symmetrical. H4a and H4b are thus supported.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine how organisations can most effectively respond to user-generated criticism of their CSR communication on social media, ensuring the positive perceptual effects of this original communication are not lost. To this end, we first demonstrated the detrimental effects of NUGC about a company's CSR communication on perceptions of the CSR activity itself and the organisation's legitimacy. This supports and extends prior evidence of the damaging impacts of NUGC in the extant literature (e.g. Haigh & Wigley,

Table 5b
CSR perceptions: Planned comparisons.

Hypothesis	Groups compared		Comparison result		
			Mean difference	P	Result
H1a	Group 1	Group 2	-.718	.000***	Supported
H2a and H3a	Group 1	Group 6	-.723	.000***	Partially supported
	Group 2	Group 6	.005	1.00	
	Group 2	Group 4	.254	.780	
	Group 2	Group 5	.246	.883	
	Group 1	Group 4	-.464	.006**	
	Group 1	Group 5	-.471	.005**	
H4a	Group 2	Group 3	.425	.017*	Supported
	Group 1	Group 3	-.293	.374	

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 6a
Perceived legitimacy: Descriptives.

Condition	N	M	SD	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Group 1: Company post only	110	5.28	.806	5.13	5.43
Group 2: Company post + NUGC	110	4.66	.981	4.47	4.84
Group 3: Fast, high symmetry	110	5.07	.929	4.90	5.25
Group 4: Slow, high symmetry	110	4.82	1.06	4.62	5.02
Group 5: Fast, low symmetry	110	4.81	.993	4.63	5.00
Group 6: Slow, low symmetry	110	4.59	.799	4.44	4.74

Table 6b
Perceived legitimacy: Planned comparisons.

Hypothesis	Groups compared		Comparison result		
			Mean difference	P	Result
H1b	Group 1	Group 2	-.621	.000***	Supported
H2b and H3b	Group 1	Group 6	-.690	.000***	Partially supported
	Group 2	Group 6	.068	1.00	
	Group 2	Group 4	.164	1.00	
	Group 2	Group 5	.153	1.00	
	Group 1	Group 4	-.457	.005**	
	Group 1	Group 5	-.468	.003**	
H4b	Group 2	Group 3	.415	.015*	Supported
	Group 1	Group 3	-.206	1.00	

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

2015). We then tested the independent and additive effects of two central characteristics of a company's response to this NUGC; the speed with which it is made, and the degree of symmetry in the message. Our results indicate that fast responses (regardless of symmetry) and highly symmetrical responses (regardless of speed) might each partially buffer the damaging impact of NUGC on audience perceptions of the company's CSR and overall legitimacy to a small extent. However, the primary empirical contribution of this study lies in identifying that this impact is only fully mitigated when responses are both quick and highly symmetrical. Thus, we establish speed and symmetry of response as necessary conditions to fully mitigate the negative effects of NUGC about a company's CSR post, and thus to maximise the effectiveness of CSR communication on social media. This is an important addition to a body of work that has so far demonstrated the potentially damaging effects of NUGC on attitude towards brands (Lee et al., 2008), corporate reputation (Eberle et al., 2013), purchase decisions and behaviour (Kim et al., 2016), and sales (Corstjens & Umblijs, 2012).

The current study informs the theoretical debate about symmetry and, in particular, that which concerns the impact of highly symmetrical responses. Kollat and Farache (2017), for example, question the effectiveness of symmetric communication strategies, suggesting that they do not always positively influence evaluations of the organisation's trustworthiness. Consistent with Kollat and Farache (2017), we also find that, in isolation, highly symmetrical responses have only a small effect on consumer perceptions of organisational legitimacy and CSR. However, we advance this debate by identifying that high symmetry responses are considerably more effective when they are combined with other factors; namely, speed of response. We therefore highlight the need to extend the academic debate about symmetry in a more integrated and holistic way, considering this in the context of other, simultaneously occurring, characteristics of the communication.

A similar argument might be made with respect to speed of response. Prior research into the effectiveness of fast responses has largely centred on complaint handling, particularly in the hospitality industry, where findings are somewhat equivocal. Whilst most studies indicate that quicker responses result in higher customer satisfaction with organisations' complaint handling (Istanbulluoglu, 2017), more effective service recovery (Davidow, 2003), greater levels of consumer forgiveness (Ghosh, 2017), and brand trust (Sparks et al., 2016), others suggest such effects are not consistently apparent (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Min et al., 2015). In the social media context, and with respect to CSR communication in particular, the results of the current study offer a means by which to explain these apparent inconsistencies. Put simply, whilst speed of response is a necessary condition for mitigating the impact of NUGC about a company's CSR communication on social media, it may not, on its own, constitute a sufficient condition.

From a theoretical perspective, therefore, the current findings lead us to propose that the absence of speed in managerial responses may be seen as a boundary condition for the effectiveness of high symmetry responses, and vice versa. Thus, we contend that any conceptualisation of effective responses to NUGC must adopt an integrated, holistic perspective. Such a perspective offers a potential resolution to ongoing debates in the literature as to whether speed and symmetry, in and of themselves, are effective components of company responses to NUGC on social media. Furthermore, the current findings also indicate that whilst models of management response that focus on 'what' is being said (e.g. 'Triple A' Typology; Sparks & Bradley, 2017) remain important and useful, it is necessary to consider the effects of 'when' and 'how' this is being said. The current study highlights the importance of speed and symmetry of response as key components of any theoretical model of effective corporate responses to online criticism. For example, speed of response would seem to constitute an overarching condition across Sparks and Bradley's (2017) 'Triple A' Typology, whilst symmetry of response constitutes an important factor when considering how to effectively *acknowledge* the source of dissatisfaction, *account* for it by way of explanation, and reference *action* that has been, or will be, taken.

6.1. Practical implications

The current study has important implications for managers and communications professionals. Essentially, the findings provide new and specific insights into how best to engage with NUGC about CSR posts on social media and thus how to maximise the effectiveness of CSR communication through this channel. Against the backdrop of previous literature (Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Sparks et al., 2016), it would be understandable if practitioners were to conclude that responding quickly is of primary importance and thus focus on speed of response over the careful consideration of message content. Alternatively, practitioners may take the seemingly reasonable view that what is said, and how it is said, is more important than how quickly a response is made, and therefore take time to construct a message with an appropriate degree of symmetry. In the current study, however, we demonstrate that neither approach will necessarily mitigate the negative effects of NUGC about a CSR post on social media. To fully recover the situation, responses must be characterised by speed *and* a high degree of symmetry.

Practitioners might therefore find it useful to develop templates of responses, to rapidly facilitate the construction of responses that sufficiently convey a willingness to listen and make reasonable changes in line with user suggestions. Moreover, it is important that systems and processes are established that allow for NUGC on social media to be identified, read, and responded to as quickly as possible. By putting such fail safes in place, companies are likely to be better equipped to maximise the potential value, and minimise the considerable risks, of communicating their CSR activity within social media.

Given the corporate context of this first principles demonstration of the effects of speed and symmetry of organisational responses on social media, the direct implications of the data are most relevant to managers in corporate entities. However, our findings are also likely to be of relevance to an array of organisations, such as governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charities, that use social media as a primary tool to communicate their socially responsible activities. Indeed, the overarching implication from this study is that, for any organisation aiming to most effectively communicate their socially responsible actions, and thus enhance their perceived legitimacy, responses to NUGC that are characterised by speed and a high degree of symmetry are essential and effective.

6.2. Limitations and future research

As with all research of this nature, it is important to acknowledge some necessary limitations and their implications for further research. In order to isolate and rigorously test the phenomenon in question (i.e. the specific impact of speed and symmetry of response on audience perceptions of the CSR activity and company legitimacy), it was necessary to control for the extraneous effects of prior knowledge, experience and attitudes with respect to the originators of these responses. For this reason, we adopted fictional organisations as stimuli for this study. Whilst these were pretested for realism, the enhancements to internal validity they provide necessarily come at the cost of a degree of external validity. It is thus proposed that, where possible, further research might seek to extend this first-principles study by way of field experimentation with existing organisations and audiences.

In terms of scope, the aims of this study were to test the proposition that symmetry and speed of response to NUGC on social media will exert an impact on audience perceptions of CSR activity and organisational legitimacy. Further research might usefully seek to extend this work by exploring potential explanations for the effects observed. For example, given the required brevity of social media communication (Sheng et al., 2021), the opportunity to employ nuanced, detailed, and persuasive explanations of the company's position in just a few sentences is necessarily limited. As such, it is possible that low symmetry responses, which primarily seek to acknowledge the stakeholder's response, assure them of the efficacy/ethics of the company's decisions/actions, and

assert the company's commitment to these (in line with Morsing & Schultz, 2006), could run the risk of being interpreted as somewhat curt or dismissive in the social media environment. This may provide some explanation as to why low symmetry responses were relatively ineffective in the current study and constitutes a potentially interesting avenue for further research.

Similarly, the specific linguistic construction of the company's response might also serve as a useful route for future research that seeks to ascertain how the effectiveness of both low and high symmetry responses might be maximised. For example, in the current study we adopted conciliatory language (e.g. the word "unfortunately") in some of the low symmetry responses with the aim of 'softening' the message that the company appreciated the stakeholders right to respond but felt unable or unwilling to make changes as requested in the NUGC. We selected these messages (from a group of 18 possible stimuli) because they were seen to be most realistic and particularly typical of those encountered on social media by pretest respondents (see Appendix C). However, the question of whether such language is always interpreted as conciliatory, or whether and when it gives rise to other reactions (e.g. irritation), might constitute an interesting and valuable direction for future research.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that participants in this study were shown one (different) negative user-generated comment in response to each of the three company CSR posts they saw. In the complex social media environment, however, social media users are likely to be exposed to a series of user-generated comments, often of mixed valence, on a single post. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the interactive and order effects of multiple user-generated posts, future research of this nature would constitute a useful extension to this work. Specifically, these studies might consider how organisations should respond when there is a large volume of positive and negative comments, and how the effectiveness of company responses is impacted when negative comments are preceded by either positive or more negative UGC. Furthermore, exploring how managerial responses to one user comment might change the nature of subsequent UGC would be a particularly interesting focus for future research.

6.3. Conclusion

This study was motivated by the need to better understand how companies can most effectively respond to NUGC about their CSR activity and communication on social media. Such understanding is necessary if managers are to minimise the impact of NUGC on perceptions of the company and its actions, and thus maximise the effectiveness of their CSR communication in this increasingly important channel. Specially, the experimentation reported here sought to fill a long-standing knowledge gap regarding the effects of two key characteristics of company responses to NUGC about CSR communication on social media: i) the speed with which the company response is made, and ii) the degree of symmetry in the message (see Dunn & Harness, 2019; Eberle et al., 2013; Peeroo et al., 2018). The results demonstrate that NUGC has a detrimental effect on perceptions of the company's legitimacy and the CSR activity it has communicated, and that this can be partially mitigated by company responses that are either quick or constructed with a high degree of symmetry. However, the key finding is that the detrimental impact of NUGC on stakeholder perceptions is only fully mitigated when company responses are both quick *and* highly symmetrical. The primary theoretical contribution of this study is thus to establish both speed and symmetry of response, in combination, as necessary conditions for company responses that fully mitigate the detrimental effects of NUGC on social media. The practical implication of this for managers and communication professionals is clear: to be wholly effective, responses to NUGC about the company's CSR on social media must be made quickly *and* with a high degree of symmetry.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Katherine Dunn: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Anthony Grimes:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A

Participants' profile

We report the distribution of the participants by gender, age, educational background and income in Table 7. Participants were randomly allocated to each condition. Profiles were run for each condition to check for equivalence across the group demographics. This confirmed the groups were comparable in terms of demographic characteristics and social media usage. The vast majority (91%) of participants use social media and have a profile on one or more social networking sites (86%).

Table 7
Sample characteristics

	Sample percentage
Gender	
Male	50
Female	50
Age	
18–24	6.1
25 - 34	18.3
35 - 44	17.7
45 - 54	17.3
55 - 64	22.7
65+	17.9
Education	
Some high school	3.3
O Level/GCSE	27.0
A Level	30.0
Undergraduate degree	26.7
Post graduate degree	9.7
Other	3.3
Income	
£19,999 or less	37.9
£20,000 - £39,999	39.7
£40,000 - £59,999	12.4
£60,000 - £79,999	2.9
£80,000 - £99,999	1.8
£100,000 or more	.5
Prefer not to say	4.8
Sample size (n)	660

ANOVA tests were run to ensure that the groups did not differ significantly in terms of their demographics. The tests shows no significant differences in gender ($F(5, 654) = 0.239$, $p = .036$), age ($F(5, 654) = 1.83$, $p = .104$), education ($F(5, 654) = 0.273$, $p = .93$), income ($F(5, 654) = 1.26$, $p = .28$) or weekly supermarket spend ($F(5, 654) = 0.740$, $p = .59$) across the groups.
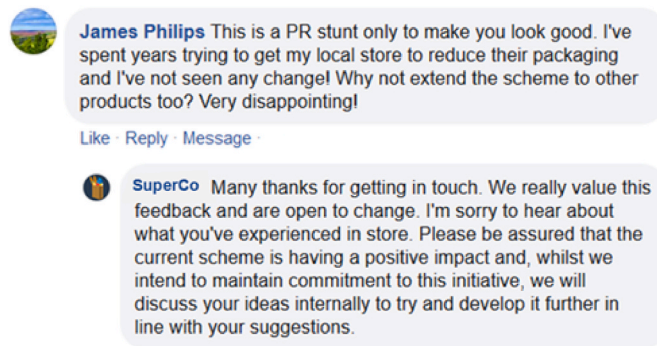
The means of the social media usage ($F(5, 654) = 0.731$, $p = .60$) and social media intensity variables ($F(5, 654) = 1.19$, $p = .31$) were also not significantly different across the groups.
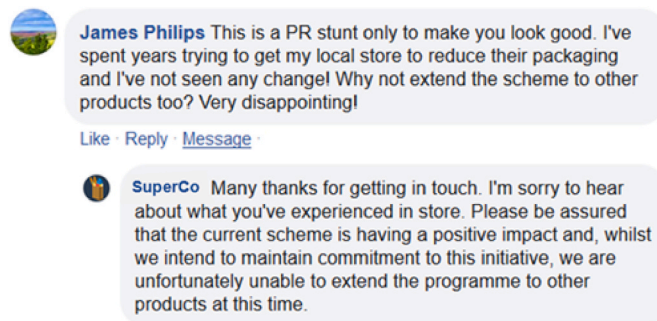
Appendix B

SuperCo - original company post.

SuperCo - NUGC and high symmetry company response.

SuperCo - NUGC and low symmetry company response.

Appendix C

Pretest

Participants were randomly and equally assigned to each of the three supermarket brands and asked to respond to the manipulation check items, as detailed below. This ensured the manipulations worked as intended, participants understood the CSR and NUGC, and respondents believed the posts to be realistic.

To test the external validity of the company posts, a single-sample *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the mid-point of the 7-point scale and the mean score, when the realism of the company post was considered. All the original company posts were considered externally valid (see Table 8).

Table 8
External validity checks: company post

Supermarket	M	SD	df	T	p
ShopCo	4.69	1.20	70	4.84	.000
SuperCo	4.93	1.23	87	7.08	.000
FoodCo	4.77	1.27	79	5.43	.000

For each supermarket, one piece of NUGC (from a range of 18 possible comments) was chosen in response to the original company post, on the basis that it exhibited high levels of external validity and perceived negativity. As above, to test external validity a single-sample *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the mid-point of the 7-point scale and the mean score. Perceived negativity was measured using the single item 'how positive or negative was the comment in your opinion?'. A single-sample *t*-test was conducted and responses were considered most negative when significantly lower than the mean of 4 (see Table 9).

Table 9
External validity and perceived negativity of NUGC

Supermarket	NUGC selected	Construct tested	M	SD	df	t	P
ShopCo	'Helen'	Perceived negativity	3.41	1.69	70	−2.96	.004
		External validity	4.99	1.14	70	7.34	.000
SuperCo	'James'	Perceived negativity	3.02	1.75	43	−3.71	.001
		External validity	5.21	1.15	70	8.96	.000
FoodCo	'Jenna'	Perceived negativity	3.59	1.81	79	−2.04	.045
		External validity	5.15	1.19	79	8.65	.000

To select the most appropriate company responses, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to ensure the high symmetry and low symmetry company responses were considered statistically significantly different to one another. For each supermarket brand, an appropriate and significant difference was observed between the perceived degrees of symmetry in each response (see Table 10).

Table 10
Company response independent samples *t*-test results

Supermarket	Treatment condition	M	SD	Df	t	p
ShopCo	High symmetry	5.30	.959	69	2.60	.011
	Low symmetry	4.62	1.25			
SuperCo	High symmetry	5.07	1.22	86	2.70	.008
	Low symmetry	4.33	1.36			
FoodCo	High symmetry	5.09	1.23	78	2.98	.004
	Low symmetry	4.25	1.29			

To check the realism and external validity of the company responses selected, a two-item scale was adopted. Using a 7-point Likert scale ('strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'), participants were asked to state the extent to which they agreed with the statements 'I could imagine seeing a company response like this on companies' social media sites' and 'I think the company response is similar to those that appear online'. The statistically significant results of single-sample *t*-tests indicated that the company responses chosen were externally valid (see Table 11).

Table 11
Company response external validity results

Brand (Response)	M	SD	df	T	p
ShopCo (High symmetry)	4.76	1.38	41	3.57	.001
ShopCo (Low symmetry)	5.10	1.07	28	5.54	.000
SuperCo (High symmetry)	5.44	1.06	43	9.00	.000
SuperCo (Low symmetry)	4.95	1.17	43	5.43	.000
FoodCo (High symmetry)	5.62	1.05	41	10.03	.000
FoodCo (Low symmetry)	4.78	1.13	37	4.25	.000

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