

Effects of message appeal and service type in CSR communication strategies*

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Abstract

Studies highlight the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for companies' stakeholders. Consumers, however, are often unaware of such initiatives. Understanding how to effectively communicate socially responsible initiatives is an important challenge for both researchers and managers, who invest considerable resources in CSR initiatives. This study examines consumers' responses to two types of CSR initiatives (environment-related and employee-based) using two types of message appeals (emotional and rational) across two service types (hedonic and utilitarian). Consumers' responses provide data on their awareness of CSR initiatives, attitude toward the company, perceived firm uniqueness, emotional response, and attributions of company motives to engage in CSR activities. Rational appeals more effectively communicate environment-related CSR initiatives, whereas emotional appeals more effectively communicate employee-based CSR initiatives. Effects on consumers' attributions of company motives to engage in CSR are significant in both service types. Finally, rational message appeals affect consumers' CSR awareness and emotional responses, but only in utilitarian service.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility; hedonic and utilitarian services; message appeal; website communication

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is important in today's socially conscious market environment (Korschun et al., 2014). In marketing, CSR is the "management of stakeholder concern for responsible and irresponsible acts related to environmental, ethical and social phenomena in a way that creates corporate benefit" (Vaaland et al., 2008, p. 931). Studies show the importance of CSR for companies' stakeholders (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Campbell, 2007). Consumers, in contrast, display a lack of awareness of socially responsible initiatives (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Öberseder et al., 2013; Sen et al., 2006). Understanding how to effectively communicate CSR initiatives is important to raise consumer awareness of CSR initiatives and develop brand equity (Beckmann, 2007; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Hur et al., 2014).

Despite its importance, CSR receives scant attention in the literature (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). Researchers are now calling for greater consumer and employee awareness of CSR initiatives (Korschun et al., 2014). This study therefore investigates the joint effect of CSR initiative type (environment-related or employee-based) and message appeal type (rational or emotional) on consumers' reactions to CSR initiatives across two service types (hedonic and utilitarian). This study contributes to the literature by analyzing how CSR communication strategies enhance CSR consumers' reactions to CSR initiatives. The study analyzes not only CSR awareness, but also CSR brand equity. The empirical research employs a 2 (type of CSR-service based initiative) x 2 (emotional/rational message appeal) x 2 (hedonic/utilitarian service) experimental design. Company websites act as stimuli platforms to communicate CSR initiatives. The choice of company websites as the CSR communication channel reflects their key role as an advertising and marketing channel (Argyriou et al., 2006; Bartl et al., 2013).

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

2.1. *Service-based CSR initiatives*

Although companies engage in a wide range of CSR initiatives (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), this study focuses on two types: employee-based initiatives and environment-related initiatives. Both are relevant for services marketing (Zeithaml et al., 2013), and in this research they therefore receive the name service-based CSR initiatives.

Employee-based CSR initiatives include employee support (e.g., concern for safety and job security) and diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and disabilities). Environment-related initiatives refer to activities such as recycling, use of environmentally friendly products, hazardous-waste management, and pollution control (Grimmer & Bingham, 2013). Both types of CSR initiatives (i.e., employee-based and environment-related) can positively affect brand image (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

2.2. *Emotional and rational appeals in CSR communication*

The advertising literature shows that message appeal design (i.e., emotional versus rational) is a primary strategic consideration (Singh & Dalal, 1999; Stafford, 2005). Rational advertising assumes that consumers make rational decisions. Rational advertising's goal is thereby to change consumers' beliefs about a brand using arguments or reason (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999). Rational appeals present facts straightforwardly and objectively (Stafford & Day, 1995). In contrast, emotional appeals target the emotional or experiential facet of consumption. Such appeals seek to make the consumer feel good about the product, by creating a likeable or friendly brand (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999).

Evidence as to the effectiveness of emotional and rational appeals is conflicting (Page et al., 1990). Using their elaboration likelihood model (ELM), Petty and Cacioppo (1984) find that rational appeals are effective when elaboration (i.e., the amount a person thinks about a message) is high, whereas emotional appeals are effective when elaboration is low. Um (2008) shows that elaboration is higher when the argument is relevant to the individual (i.e., high involvement), and lower when the argument is irrelevant. Persuasion literature implies that when CSR communication focuses on employee-based CSR initiatives, consumer interest is lower than when CSR communication focuses on environmental issues (Grimmer & Bingham, 2013). Consumers are likely to pay more attention to CSR initiatives that directly affect them (i.e., environmental initiatives) than to those that aim to improve employees' well-being. For example, Singh et al. (2008) demonstrate that in both the UK and Spain, consumers have greater concern for companies' environmental behaviors than for companies' ethical behaviors, which include employee-based CSR initiatives. Thus, the effectiveness of rational arguments is higher for environmental issues (high involvement processing), whereas emotional appeals are more effective for employee-related CSR initiatives (low involvement processing).

2.3. *Hedonic versus utilitarian services*

Studies demonstrate that the effectiveness of marketing strategies for a particular service depends on service type (i.e., hedonic or utilitarian) (Hill et al., 2004; Stafford & Day, 1995). Hedonic consumption reflects multi-sensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of consumer experience, whereas utilitarian consumption focuses on functional consequences (Jiang & Wang, 2006). Hedonic services provide consumers with hedonic values such as excitement and playfulness (e.g., restaurants and vacation resorts). Utilitarian services, in contrast, provide consumers with functional utilities or solve practical problems (e.g., car repairs and banking).

Research suggests that message appeal type must match product type for maximum effectiveness. In other words, a rational appeal is more effective for utilitarian products, whereas an emotional appeal is more effective for experiential products (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). Support for this matching principle is inconclusive, however (Mortimer, 2008). Consumer behavior research shows that reliance on affective or cognitive information may vary by product type. Kempf (1999) argues that consumers evaluate utilitarian products using cognitive criteria,

whereas consumers evaluate hedonic products on the basis of affective reactions. Consequently, the appeal type's suitability (i.e., rational appeal for utilitarian services and emotional appeal for hedonic services) might explain how service-based CSR initiatives affect consumers.

2.4. *Consumer reactions to CSR communication strategies*

Research shows that service companies enhance brand equity by increasing their commitment to CSR (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Torres et al., 2012). Keller (1993) defines brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand. Brand awareness is the first step toward building brand equity (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). Perceived uniqueness of the brand, brand attitude, and an emotional connection with the target audience are additional requirements for brand equity (Berry, 2000). Studies also show that CSR attributions of the motives underlying a company's CSR initiatives affect consumers' brand perceptions (Du et al., 2010).

CSR awareness. Research demonstrates that CSR awareness induces positive attitudes and behavioral intentions (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Effective CSR communication makes consumers aware of such initiatives; otherwise, they will purchase a similar product that does not have such attributes. Thus, marketing communications are important in raising CSR awareness among individuals who want to purchase products with CSR attributes (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001).

Brand attitude and perceived uniqueness. To create brand equity, companies must ensure their brand has some strong, favorable, and unique brand associations (Keller, 1993). CSR studies suggest that social responsibility is "a distinct brand personality dimension" (Madrigal & Bousch, 2008, p. 538). A brand personality dimension is "an enduring, differentiating characteristic that describes a brand's actions with respect to its obligation to the society at large, and the individuals living in that society" (p. 540).

Emotional responses. Berry (2000) reports that brands reflecting consumers' core values induce emotional bonding. An individual's emotions reflect his or her appraisals of something relevant to his or her well-being (Bagozzi et al., 1999). CSR research indicates that consumers are more likely to form an emotional attachment with brands that provide opportunities to do good (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Consequently, service brands that communicate socially responsible initiatives induce positive emotional responses and convey positive brand image.

CSR attributions refer to "causal reasoning consumers engage in when trying to understand a company's CSR activities" (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, p. 14). Attribution theory posits that consumers attempt to understand company motives behind marketing communications (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Thus, when a company communicates its CSR actions, consumers are likely to ponder the message and perceive the company's motive to be either self-serving (e.g., to increase profits and sales) or social (e.g., to support employees) (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Therefore, companies must ensure that consumers attribute CSR initiatives to motives reflecting genuine concern for society's welfare rather than profitability

(Bigné et al., 2012). This study tests the following research hypotheses.

H1: When a service-based CSR initiative focuses on environmental issues, a rational appeal generates a higher level of CSR awareness (H1a), service brand attitude (H1b), perceived uniqueness (H1c), emotional responses (H1d), and CSR attributions with social motives (H1e) than an emotional appeal generates.

H2: When a service-based CSR initiative focuses on employees, an emotional appeal generates a higher level of CSR awareness (H2a), service brand attitude (H2b), perceived uniqueness (H2c), emotional responses (H2d), and CSR attributions with social motives (H2e) than a rational appeal generates.

3. Research method

The research tests hypotheses using a 2 (type of CSR-service based initiative) x 2 (emotional/rational message appeal) x 2 (hedonic/utilitarian service) between-subjects design (Table 1).

Table 1 here.

The sample comprised 181 faculty and administrative employees at a large state university in the USA. Such experiments commonly use university staff as participants (Gau et al., 2012). Random assignment placed subjects in one of eight experimental conditions. The sample comprised 63.1% women. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 76 years (13% younger than 30, 29% between 31 and 40, 26% between 41 and 50, 23% between 51 and 60, 4% older than 61).

Participants became aware of service-based CSR initiatives by evaluating website content (Appendix 1). Websites in the experiment contained stimuli from real websites portraying employee-based and environment-related CSR initiatives in two service contexts: restaurants (hedonic) and banks (utilitarian). Drawing on Strahilevitz and Myers' (1998) procedure, the experiment included a manipulation check to test for perceived difference between utilitarian (functional/non-functional; necessary/unnecessary; and practical/impractical) and hedonic (delightful/not delightful and enjoyable/unenjoyable) services. Emotional websites generated positive emotions and created warm feelings, thereby conveying subjective, evaluative properties. Rational websites were more direct and presented facts straightforwardly. Rational websites were objective and induced cognitive elaboration. A manipulation check building on Liu and Stout's (1987) three items of emotional/rational appeals (logical/emotional; objective/subjective; and factual/nonfactual) tested the effectiveness of these appeals. Measurement of all items took place on a seven-point scale.

To avoid potential confounding effects, all experimental website content used the same image (i.e., a color picture from a real-life website), in both emotional and rational conditions. Using a fictitious service company name (XYZ) controlled for preexisting knowledge and attitudes. Specifically, the subjects read the following description: "Imagine that there is a new company in town and you would like to use its services. This company, XYZ, is known for

great service and consumer care. Before contacting the company, you visit the company's website" (showing the rational/emotional website version).

Measures from the literature provided the basis for dependent measures. Asking consumers their perceived level of awareness of the company's CSR initiatives (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*) captured CSR awareness (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). A three-item semantic differentiation scale from Berry (2000) (bad/good; not favorable/favorable; and negative/positive) measured attitude toward the company. A four-item, Likert-type scale (Keller, 1993) measured perceived uniqueness (1 = *distinct from other brands of restaurants/banks*; 2 = *very different from other restaurants/banks*; 3 = *really stands out from other restaurants/banks*; and 4 = *unique from other restaurants/banks*). Two items (to what extent the website makes consumers feel happy/pleasant: 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very strongly*) measured emotional responses to the website (Mattila, 2000). A three-item semantic differentiation scale (profit-motivated/socially-motivated; self-interested/community-interested; and company-focused/consumer-focused) measured CSR attribution (Becker et al., 2006).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) analyzed the psychometric properties of these scales (Table 2). Scales yielded acceptable psychometric properties: factor loadings greater than 0.5, composite reliability greater than 0.7, and average variance extracted greater than 0.5 and greater than the squared correlation with any other construct (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2 here.

4. Results

4.1. Manipulation checks

As per expectations, consumers perceive rational stimuli to be more factual than emotional stimuli ($F = 12.27, p < 0.01$). Similarly, consumers perceive emotional stimuli to be more emotional ($F = 12.41, p < 0.01$), more subjective ($F = 19.76, p < 0.01$), and less factual ($F = 6.74, p < 0.05$) than rational stimuli. Finally, consumers perceive the utilitarian service (bank) to be more necessary ($F = 18.72, p < 0.01$) than the hedonic service. Conversely, consumers perceive the hedonic service (restaurant) to be more delightful ($F = 17.77, p < 0.01$) and enjoyable ($F = 25.11, p < 0.01$) than the utilitarian service.

4.2. Service-based CSR initiative, message appeals, and type of service

This study tests the research hypotheses using multivariate ANOVA (Table 3).

Table 3 here.

For CSR awareness, multivariate ANOVA detects a significant interaction in utilitarian services ($F = 6.22, p < 0.05$) (Figure 1): rational appeals outperform emotional appeals in environment-related CSR initiatives, whereas emotional appeals outperform rational appeals in employee-based CSR initiatives. Results reveal no significant interaction effect in hedonic services. These results partially support hypotheses 1a and 2a.

Figure 1 here.

For company attitudes and perceived uniqueness, ANOVA detects no interaction effects in hedonic or utilitarian services. This finding leads to rejecting hypotheses 1b, 1c, 2b, and 2c. For emotional responses, results reveal a significant interaction in utilitarian services ($F = 3.07$, $p < 0.10$) (Figure 2): rational appeals outperform emotional appeals in environment-related initiatives, whereas emotional appeals outperform rational appeals in employee-based CSR initiatives. Results reveal no significant interaction effects in hedonic services. Thus, results partially support hypotheses 1d and 2d.

Figure 2 here.

For perceived CSR attribution, results show a significant interaction effect in utilitarian services ($F = 7.62$, $p < 0.01$) (Figure 3) and hedonic services ($F = 3.53$, $p < 0.10$) (Figure 4): rational appeals outperform emotional appeals in environment-related initiatives, whereas emotional appeals outperform rational appeals in employee-based CSR initiatives. Thus, in both service types, when companies communicate environment-related CSR initiatives using rational appeals and employee-based initiatives using emotional appeals, consumers attribute company motivation to social motives. Thus, results support hypotheses 1e and 2e.

Figure 3 here.

Figure 4 here.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Findings indicate that consumers' reactions to CSR depend on three factors: type of CSR stimuli (environment-related or employee-based), message appeal (rational or emotional), and type of service (hedonic or utilitarian). Rational appeals are more effective with environmental CSR initiatives, whereas emotional appeals are more effective with employee-based initiatives. This finding is consistent with findings in the literature, which show that communication appeal must match individuals' attitudes and processing styles (Dube et al., 1996).

When CSR attribution is an outcome variable, effects of message appeal matching are observable in both service contexts (hedonic and utilitarian). For brand equity, results show only an effect of rational appeals on environment-related CSR initiatives. Only if the rational message appeal refers to a utilitarian service does the appeal affect consumers' CSR awareness and emotional responses. Findings are consistent with those in the advertising literature, namely that consumers process information about utilitarian products by focusing on the message argument (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

Findings have important implications for service companies that invest heavily in CSR. First, these companies must seek to match message type and appeal. Matching message type and appeal positively affects consumers' attributions of companies' CSR motives. Second, benefits of matching are even greater in utilitarian services than in hedonic services because benefits extend to CSR awareness and emotions. Previous research shows that a lack of consumer awareness is limiting companies' abilities to evaluate CSR as a strategic investment

(Du et al., 2010; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). Findings show that consumers' CSR awareness depends on the type of service, message appeal, and CSR initiative.

These findings raise important questions to address in future research. This study focuses on two types of CSR initiatives, but future research should examine message appeals' relative effectiveness for other CSR initiatives such as charitable donations and employee volunteering programs. In addition, because different consumers perceive CSR initiatives differently, future research should address how consumer commitment to the CSR initiative affects relationships between message appeal type, CSR type, service type, and consumer evaluations. This study considers only two service types. Therefore, future research should examine the robustness of these findings in other service segments using different empirical methods (e.g., fsQCA). Although studying employees is relevant, a larger sample containing non-employees would help generalize findings. Future research should use real-life stimuli to account for pre-existing brand attitudes. Examining behavioral consequences of CSR initiatives would also be beneficial. Research should explore linkages between message appeal, CSR content, and consumer engagement. Finally, scholars call for a cross-cultural investigation of consumer reactions to CSR (Beckmann et al., 2006).

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Table 1. Between-subjects factor sample sizes

Service type	Appeal	Stimulus	<i>N</i>
Hedonic (restaurant)	Rational	Environment	28
		Employee	27
	Emotional	Environment	24
		Employee	21
Utilitarian (bank)	Rational	Environment	17
		Employee	20
	Emotional	Environment	21
		Employee	23

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis results ($n = 181$)

Factor	Mean	SD	Indicator	Loading	Robust value	t	LA	CA	CR	AVE
Awareness	4.79	1.31	AWA0	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Attitude	4.48	1.39	ATS1	0.85 ^a	12.59		0.91	0.93	0.94	0.83
	4.52	1.43	ATS2	0.95 ^a	12.27					
	4.57	1.39	ATS3	0.93 ^a	16.02					
Uniqueness	4.24	1.59	UNIQ1	0.85 ^a	15.22		0.86	0.92	0.92	0.72
	4.02	1.66	UNIQ2	0.85 ^a	15.07					
	3.97	1.55	UNIQ3	0.86 ^a	12.28					
	3.95	1.65	UNIQ4	0.88 ^a	16.52					
Emotion	3.95	1.85	EMO1	0.87 ^a	17.87		0.93	0.91	0.92	0.86
	3.95	1.67	EMO2	0.98 ^a	21.68					
Attribution	4.23	1.69	ATR1	0.94 ^a	18.10		0.76	0.79	0.81	0.60
	3.83	1.53	ATR2	0.58 ^a	6.58					
	4.31	1.55	ATR3	0.76 ^a	11.27					

Model fit: $S-B^2 (d.f. = 56) = 75.42 (p = 0.04)$; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04; CI 90% [0.008–0.068]

Note: LA = Loadings average; CA = Cronbach's alpha; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted

^a $p < 0.01$; ^b $p < 0.05$

Table 3. Multivariate ANOVA results

	Hedonic service: restaurant ($n = 100$)			Utilitarian service: bank ($n = 81$)		
	Appeal	Stimulus	Interaction	Appeal	Stimulus	Interaction
	(A)	(S)	(AxS)	(A)	(S)	(AxS)
Awareness	0.16 (0.69)	0.01 (0.95)	1.57 (0.21)	0.87 (0.35)	1.60 (0.21)	6.22 ^b (0.02)
Attitude	0.35 (0.56)	0.11 (0.74)	0.84 (0.36)	2.19 (0.14)	1.14 (0.29)	0.50 (0.48)
Uniqueness	0.42 (0.52)	0.29 (0.59)	0.43 (0.51)	0.01 (0.95)	10.2 ^a (0.00)	1.94 (0.17)
Emotion	0.21 (0.65)	2.26 (0.14)	2.46 (0.12)	0.15 (0.70)	3.72 ^c (0.05)	3.07 ^c (0.08)
Attribution	0.07 (0.80)	5.51 ^b (0.02)	3.53 ^c (0.06)	1.95 (0.17)	0.11 (0.75)	7.62 ^a (0.00)

Note: F -value ($d.f. = 1$), p -values in parentheses. Appeal (rational vs. emotional), Stimulus (environment vs. employee-based).

^a $p < 0.01$, ^b $p < 0.05$, ^c $p < 0.10$

Figure 1. Effect of CSR stimuli and message appeal on consumer CSR awareness for utilitarian services (banks)

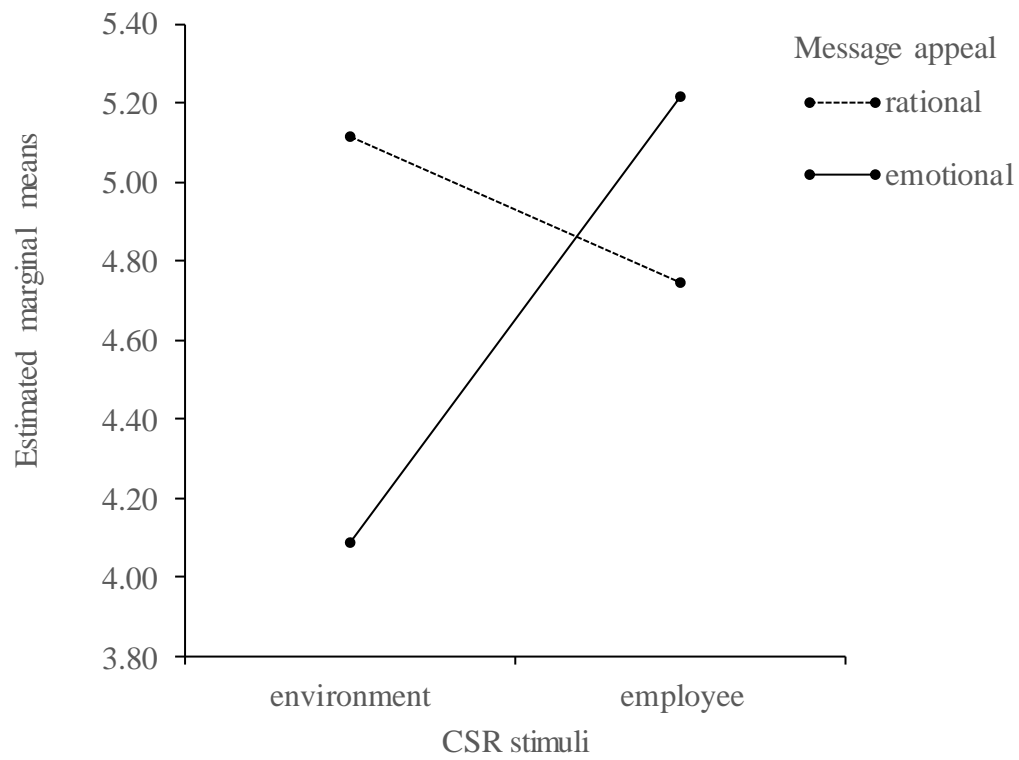


Figure 2. Effect of CSR stimuli and message appeal on consumer emotional responses for utilitarian services (banks)

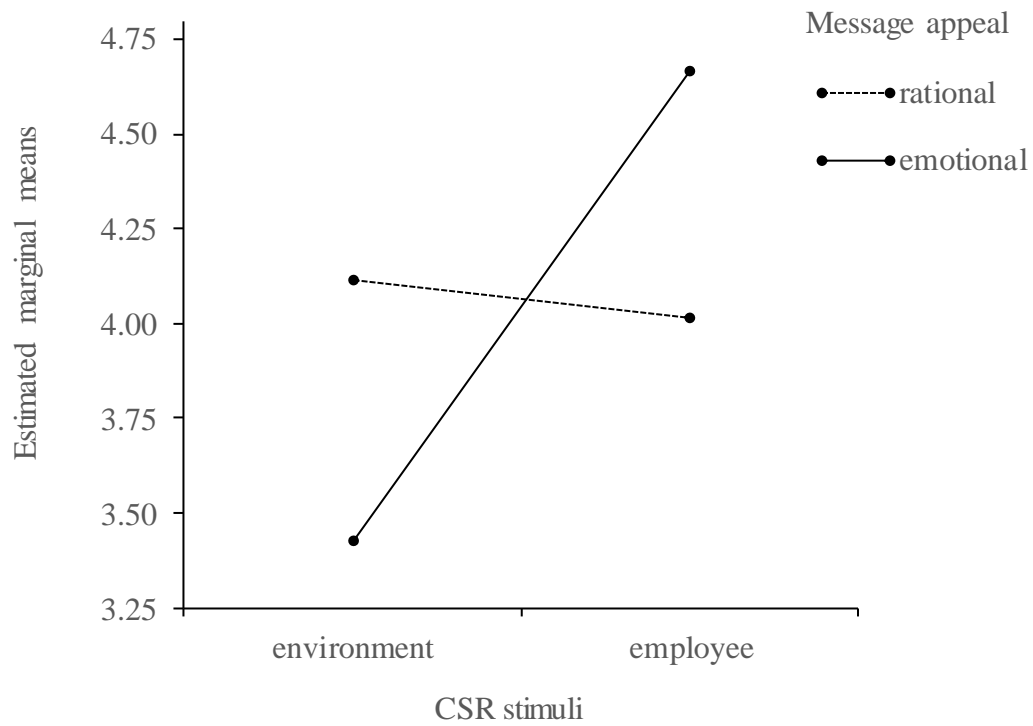


Figure 3. Effect of CSR stimuli and message appeal on consumer CSR attribution responses for utilitarian services (banks)

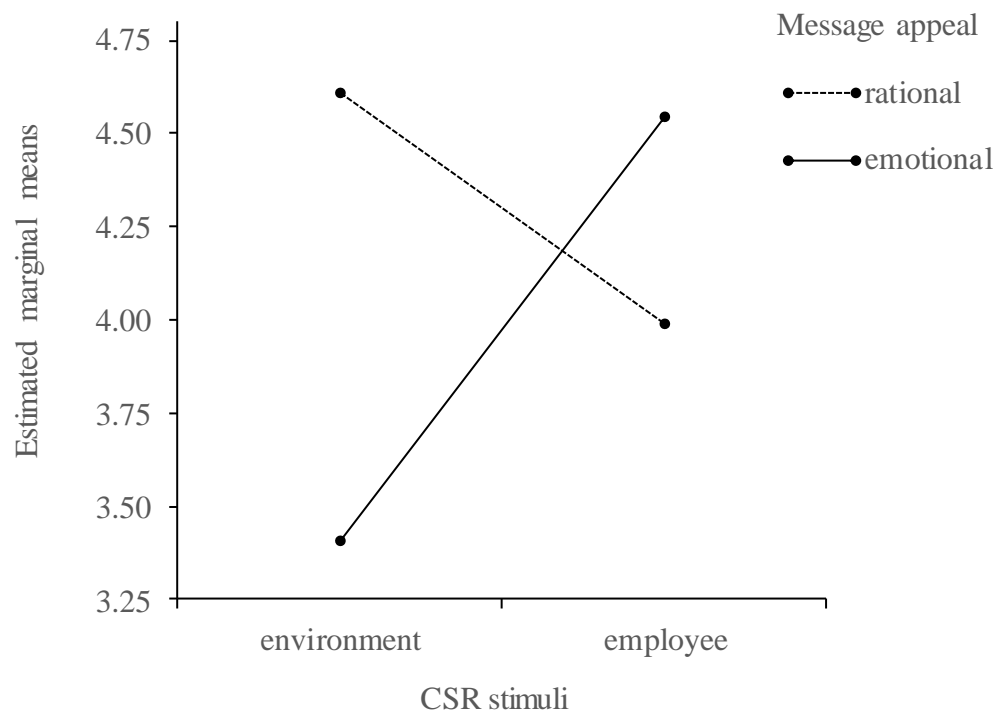
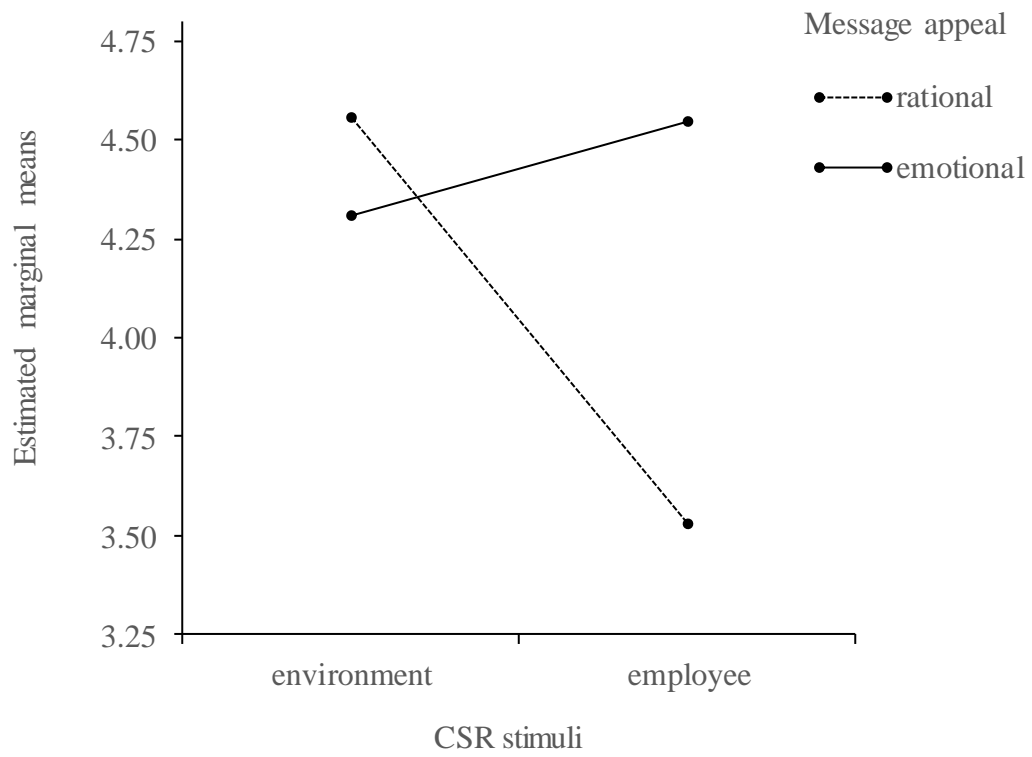


Figure 4. Effect of CSR stimuli and message appeal on consumer CSR attribution responses for hedonic services (restaurants)



Appendix 1. Website stimuli evaluated by participants in the experiment

Website A (employee, rational)



XYZ Consulting - Windows Internet Explorer
http://www.xyz.com/

XYZ Employees

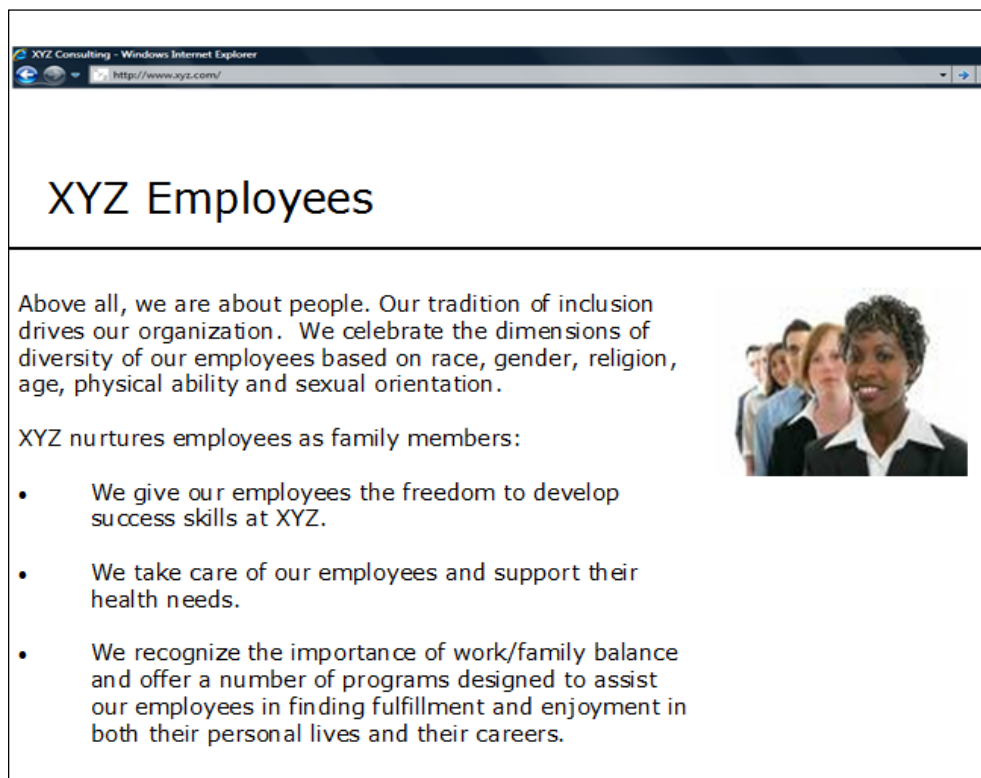
Employees are an investment in our company. At XYZ, we promote diversity policies –based on race, gender, religion, age, physical ability and sexual orientation- in the global market place.



XYZ invests in benefits to employees, including:

- Investment in employees' careers is a top priority at XYZ.
- Health insurance: medical coverage with just a \$100 deductible and a dental plan and eye care.
- Vacation benefits: We offer 10 days of paid vacations after the first year of employment.


Website B (employee, emotional)



XYZ Consulting - Windows Internet Explorer
http://www.xyz.com/

XYZ Employees

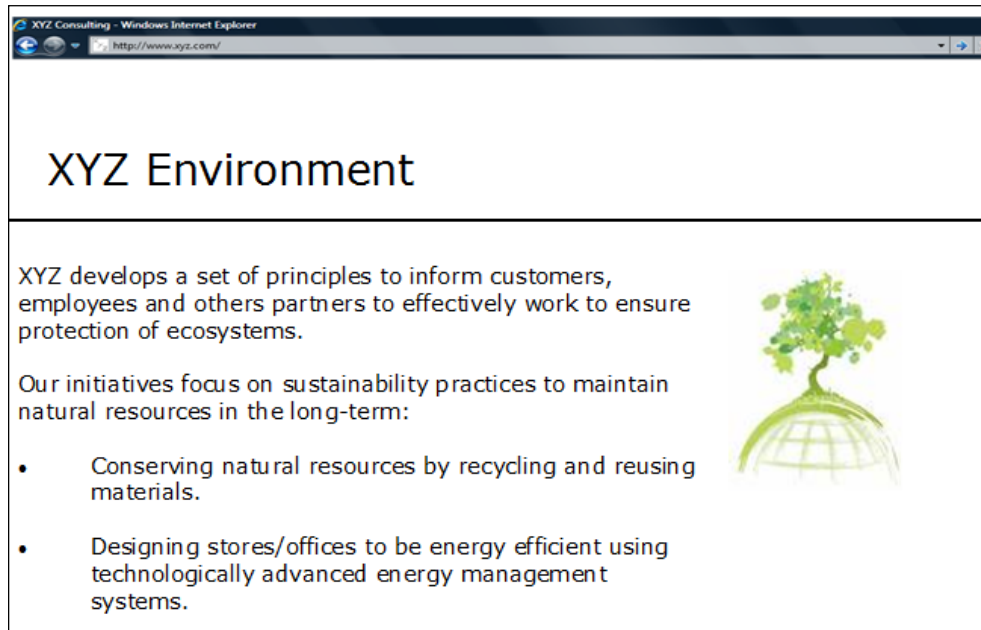
Above all, we are about people. Our tradition of inclusion drives our organization. We celebrate the dimensions of diversity of our employees based on race, gender, religion, age, physical ability and sexual orientation.



XYZ nurtures employees as family members:

- We give our employees the freedom to develop success skills at XYZ.
- We take care of our employees and support their health needs.
- We recognize the importance of work/family balance and offer a number of programs designed to assist our employees in finding fulfillment and enjoyment in both their personal lives and their careers.

Website C (environment, rational)




XYZ Consulting - Windows Internet Explorer
http://www.xyz.com/

XYZ Environment

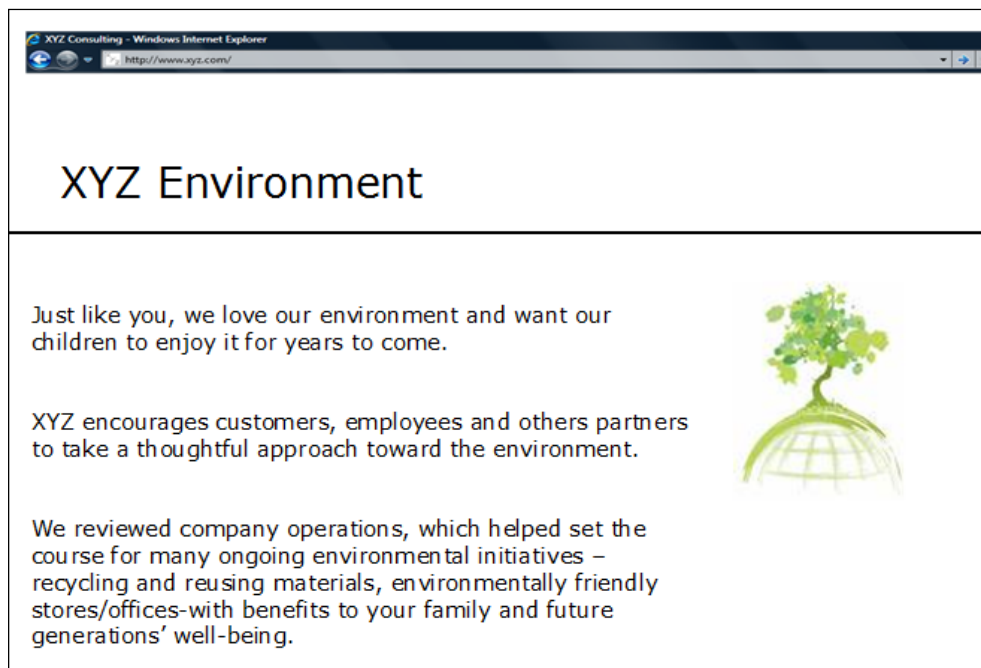
XYZ develops a set of principles to inform customers, employees and others partners to effectively work to ensure protection of ecosystems.

Our initiatives focus on sustainability practices to maintain natural resources in the long-term:

- Conserving natural resources by recycling and reusing materials.
- Designing stores/offices to be energy efficient using technologically advanced energy management systems.



Website D (environment, emotional)



XYZ Consulting - Windows Internet Explorer
http://www.xyz.com/

XYZ Environment

Just like you, we love our environment and want our children to enjoy it for years to come.

XYZ encourages customers, employees and others partners to take a thoughtful approach toward the environment.

We reviewed company operations, which helped set the course for many ongoing environmental initiatives – recycling and reusing materials, environmentally friendly stores/offices-with benefits to your family and future generations' well-being.

