

The relationship between the framing of a company's CSR notice and consumers' perceptions of the company

Master Thesis

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Abstract

Purpose: The importance of a thoughtfully developed corporate social responsibility strategy has been demonstrated well over the last decade, both in academic literature as well as in practical cases. Companies are increasingly expected to behave responsibly, and CSR has been shown to significantly influence corporate outcome variables such as consumers' impression of the brand, perceived credible CSR behaviours, as well as overall authenticity. However, there is a paradox between the rising demand for CSR and the scrutinization of CSR activities. If the CSR activity or the communication thereof is deemed not acceptable by target groups and stakeholders, the organization will have to face detrimental outcomes. The purpose of this research is to provide further insights into the aspects of CSR communication that provide beneficial outcomes, as well as close a surprising research gap by including a human interest frame into CSR communication. This study aims to explore how three aspects of CSR communication (centrality, level of impact, and human interest) might influence consumers' impression of the brand, their purchase intention, consumer perceived corporate social responsibility, as well as perceived authenticity.

Method: The study featured a 3x2 factorial between-subjects design. The experiment was conducted by means of an online survey. A total of 240 participants with ages ranging from 20 to 77 completed the study conscientiously. The collected data was analyzed by conducting reliability analyses, repeated measures analyses of variance for three dependent variables, and analyses of variance for each dependent variable to explore main and interaction effects of the independent variables.

Results: The present experiment showed some surprising results. The independent variable of impact was found to have no significant effect on any of the dependent variables, demonstrating a shift from previous literature. Further, while there were some expected effects of centrality on the outcomes variables, the human interest frame showed by far the strongest results. This showed that the human interest frame is severely overlooked in CSR communication. The results regarding human interest are the most interesting, as there seems to be a strong possibility of emotional dimensions positively influencing perceived authenticity and impressions of the brand as a whole and as a socially responsible entity.

Conclusion: The explorative approach within this paper provides a useful stepping stone for further consideration regarding how to optimize CSR communication. While being in line with previous literature insofar that centrality of the CSR initiative is one of the crucial and defining points affecting perceived authenticity, the study further highlights the great potential of the human interest frame in CSR communication. The positive effects of human interest on authenticity and CPCR even surpassed the effects of centrality, demonstrating thought-provoking implications for both the theoretical knowledge, as well as practical implementation of CSR communication.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, CSR communication, CSR perceptions, authenticity

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1. Introduction

In today's world, global warming and environmental protection programmes are important buzzwords shaping social awareness. Issues such as climate change, poverty, and labour laws are concerning people globally (Elving, 2013). According to those rising issues, Vogler and Eisenegger (2021) describe that citizen and consumers alike are increasingly expecting companies to realize their impact on society and the environment alike and to justify their social and environmental actions. Jiang, Cheng, Park and Zhu (2022) elaborate further that organizations are expected to go display philanthropic and ethical accountability that goes beyond their immediate business actions. Schmeltz (2012) describes this phenomenon as "a new sense of morality [...] where companies are expected to share responsibility [...]" (p.29). Growing stakeholder pressure emerged, which requires companies to provide social programs in an effort to alleviate social and environmental concerns (Husted & Allen, 2007; Jiang et al., 2022; Sontaite-Petkeviciene, 2015; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Maktoufi, O'Connor, & Shumate, 2020). In order to fulfil consumers' expectations, as well as required government relations, businesses incorporate a broad spectrum of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities in their business strategy.

Hence, CSR is an increasingly significant factor affecting corporate reputation, value creation – which influences the company's standing in the competitive market – as well as customer perception, trust, and loyalty (Poolthong & Mandhachitara, 2009; Chaudary, Zahid, Shahid, Khan, & Azar, 2016; Husted & Allen, 2007; Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021; Lunenberg, Gosselt, & de Jong, 2016; Elving, 2013; Sontaite-Petkeviciene, 2015). Further, Maktoufi et al. (2020) explain that companies engaging in and communicating their CSR activities have an enhanced social and moral legitimacy. Naturally, consumers take a company's CSR practices into consideration when forming corporate evaluations, which automatically affects their purchase decisions. Moreover, corporate social responsibility initiatives are widely acknowledged as an imperative for companies, with the possibility for greater competitive advantage and positive economic outcomes (Sontaite-Petkeviciene, 2015). Therefore, the inclusion of CSR initiatives into core business ventures opens up valuable strategic opportunities. Nonetheless, the implementation of successful CSR and CSR communication is both complex and challenging for companies (Schmeltz, 2012). Villagra, Cardabe and Ruiz San Roman (2016) elaborate that CSR communication can generate scepticism and criticism. Scepticism lays the ground for consumers to interpret corporate activities as greenwashing efforts, which could lead to detrimental effects on corporate reputation (Potepkin & Firsanove, 2017; Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021). Thus, it is no surprise that there is a growing field of literature regarding CSR communication.

Previous literature has examined how CSR communication and CSR activities can influence factors such as consumers' impression of a brand, consumers' purchase intention, and their perceived authenticity (Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021, Poolthing & Mandhachitara, 2009; Hur, Moon, & Kim, 2020). Regarding the formation of optimal CSR communication strategies, one of the most prominent aspect is CSR fit, as well as the relation between CSR communication, authenticity, and scepticism.

There are countless articles regarding the matter, with the number continuously rising especially after the COVID-19 crisis. Additional aspects include centrality and the level of impact of a CSR initiative. Both factors have been described in recent literature (e.g., Liu & Jung, 2020; Barnett et al., 2020), demonstrating their crucial effects on perceived authenticity and credibility. With rising awareness of the demand for CSR, consumers evaluate them more critically. CSR activities must demonstrate a certain level of credibility in the company's motivations, as well as generate sufficient societal good to be considered as anything other than profit generating.

When talking about any kind of communication, one must always be aware of the inherent feature of framing. Every piece of communication will have at least some frames and when utilized correctly, they can have great effects. However, the aspect of a human interest frame – the inclusion of an emotional dimension to news by including and/or highlighting individuals – is surprisingly absent from CSR communication research. Based on previous experiments and studies dealing with CSR and authenticity and corporate reputation, however, allow for some expectations of the human interest frame into CSR communication, such as impression of the brand, purchase interest, perceptions of CSR and authenticity.

Therefore, there are two main research questions that this study aims to answer. It is questioned whether the inclusion of a human interest frame will have any, if not even positive, effects on the previously mentioned consumer perceptions such as impression, authenticity, and CSR involvement. Further, by taking the general interest into CSR communication a step further, two established, important aspects of CSR communication – centrality and impact – will be used in combination with each other, as well as with the third variable human interest, to investigate any potential interaction effects to further boost corporate outcomes.

Existing literature could be enriched by a closer inspection on how to communicate CSR activities more successfully for a company to be perceived as 'socially responsible' or 'ethical'. A closer inspection of possible factors influencing consumers' perceptions of credible CSR through corporate publications could be valuable for strategic communication and reputation management. Specifically, the exploration of human interest could have tremendous impact on the theoretical sphere, by opening up another branch of CSR communication and closing an existing gap between general communication and journalism literature and CSR literature.

Furthermore, any insights gained from this study will also have practical implications. With every new piece of information regarding the outcomes of CSR communications, the frame of reference for companies to engage with the subject of CSR and CSR with corporate reputation management will change. Again, due to the inclusion of the human interest frame, it might be that companies need to critically reevaluate their previous manner of tackling CSR communication through on-site involvement to boost their credibility.

With the research question in mind the remainder of the paper is structured as followed: chapter two provides an overview of previous literature through an established theoretical framework.

Then, in chapter three, the methodology is discussed with the results being presented in chapter four. Finally, the last chapter summarizes the findings of this study, discusses their implications, as well as provides a concluding remark.

2. Theoretical Framework

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an imperative practice for organizations. CSR has been an academic topic of interest for some time. Practices have been studied extensively in literature with the predominant findings being that such initiatives can have benefits for organizations as well as society at large. In the following CSR and relevant studies regarding CSR communication will be elaborated on. Afterwards, potent aspects affecting consumers' perceptions regarding corporate CSR efforts will be conceptualized prior to defining the research design of this study.

2.1 Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and CSR communication

Corporate social responsibility has been defined by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development as “the commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life” (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2008, p. 285). Within the context of corporate sustainability, companies are expected to engage in activities that demonstrate the inclusion of environmental and social concerns in fundamental business operations. Hence, the interest in and demands of CSR activities are growing (Yoo & Lee, 2018). By definition, corporate social responsibility activities can be sorted into three general dimensions: economic, environmental and social (Lim & Greenwood, 2017).

CSR activities have become part of companies' public relations strategy to, for example, enhance their reputation or attract consumers' attention to gain a market advantage (Yoo & Lee, 2018). Previous literature has established that positive effects of CSR activities include a positive effect on corporate reputation (Lunenbergh, Gosselt, de Jong, 2016); improved image through favourable impressions consumers have toward the brand/company, increased purchase intention and an enhanced buffer against corporate crises (Liu & Jung, 2021); enhanced consumer satisfaction (Yoo & Lee, 2018; Jiang et al., 2022); consumer loyalty and consumer trust (Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021; Elving, 2013; Fatma & Khan, 2022); advantages in the competitive market (Kress-Ludwig, Funcke, Böhm, & Ruppert-Winkel, 2019); as well as positive word of mouth (Fatma & Khan, 2022).

However, CSR initiatives and CSR communication is not without risks. Lock and Schulz-Knappe (2018) explain this phenomenon as the CSR paradox, whereas CSR communication does not result in perceived trustworthiness and credibility, but rather raises scepticism. In line with this, Weder, König and Voci (2019) further place importance on carefully designed CSR communication by stating that the CSR strategy itself is not as challenging for organizations as the correct communication strategy. While CSR communication is a crucial tool for creating positive corporate

outcomes, the effectiveness of CSR communication depends on stakeholders' perceptions (Weder, König, & Voci, 2019). Fatma and Khan (2022) explain this line of thought due to consumers demonstrating a tendency to evaluate companies based on how they perceive CSR activities, rather than purely based on information of the CSR activity. Therefore, emphasis needs to be placed on how CSR information needs to be communicated to enable favourable perceptions (Brunton, Eweje, & Taskin, 2017).

In summary, the involvement in CSR activities and CSR communication is not an easy feat for companies to undertake. CSR strategies must be well thought out to ensure that the company will benefit from favourable outcomes. To do this, companies should focus on how consumers perceive their activities and communications, as perceptions are the main drivers of value formation. If CSR communication is done right, the company can benefit from favourable consumer outcomes of CSR. The most notable ones that will be mentioned during the remainder of the study are consumers' impression of a brand/company, consumers' purchase intention, the perceived authenticity of a CSR strategy, as well as consumers perceived corporate social responsibility of a company, as the formation of perceptions and the subsequent outcomes cannot take place without knowledge of the CSR activity.

With the focus on effective CSR communication to facilitate positive corporate outcomes, it is necessary to identify common aspects of communication that affect consumers' perceptions. Here, the specific factors of CSR communication are crucial, as their impact on consumer outcomes is being measured in academic literature. In the following, those aspects are being explored to investigate whether they can be used to further improve on CSR communication understanding.

2.2 Centrality of CSR initiatives

The utilization of corporate social responsibility strategies is becoming increasingly important for companies, as they are being confronted about their impact regarding economic, environmental and social issues (Lin et al., 2021). Further, CSR activities are valuable for the further development of a society. However, research has shown that corporations engaging in CSR are not rewarded just for engaging in CSR activities (Afzali & Kim, 2021; Fatma & Khan, 2020). Instead, the credibility of companies undertaking CSR initiatives and communicating those is frequently questioned. Hence, corporations that are perceived as not being sincerely involved in CSR motives may suffer from negative outcomes.

According to Liu and Jung (2021), consumers want for companies to engage in genuine CSR activities that contribute to society rather than for their own gains. Therefore, CSR performance and corporate outcomes of CSR initiatives strongly depend on consumers' perceptions regarding a company's motivation to engage in CSR. CSR initiatives have a positive impact when a company's motivation is perceived as sincere and credible (Yoo & Lee, 2018; de Jong & van der Meer, 2017), whereas perceived non-sincere motivation can harm the organization's reputation (Afzali & Kim, 2021).

This inherent tension can be mitigated by centrality of corporate social responsibility activities. Sontaite-Petkeviciene (2015) describes centrality as whether the CSR activity is aligned with the organizations' core activities. This type of fit has also been identified by Yuan, Bao and Verbeke (2011), who called this type of fit 'internal consistency'. On the broadest level, a generalized statement can be made that consumers tend to prefer congruence and high consistency, as those reduce consumers' scepticism (Maktoufi et al., 2020; Sontaite-Petkeviciene, 2015; Elving, 2013; Villagra, Cardabe, & Ruiz San Roman, 2016). Low consistency, on the other hand, has been demonstrated to negatively affect consumers' attitudes and intentions, regardless of the organization's motives (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006).

The term centrality demonstrates that a company is undertaking actions that are consistent with their values and beliefs, demonstrating their seriousness of their CSR activities (Lee et al., 2018). Furthermore, the aspect of centrality relates to perceived CSR motives. Perceived CSR motives can be defined as consumers' perceptions of an organization's motivation fueling their CSR activities. Hence, the aspect of centrality provides information on whether the topic of the CSR initiative is congruent with the company's core business, and whether it is practiced not only externally but also internally (Hur et al., 2014).

If it can be evaluated that the CSR activity is based on the company's core values and philosophy, the CSR communication is being perceived more positively, influencing consumers' attitudes toward a brand (Villagra, Cardabe, & Ruiz San Roman, 2016; Elving, 2013). As such, it can be argued that the aspect of centrality can be attributed to the concept of congruence; a high fit between the knowledge of and associations with a company and the CSR domain, allowing for an easier integration of the CSR communication to the existing cognitive structures of the consumer (Sontaite-Petkeviciene, 2015; Villagra, Cardabe, & Ruiz San Roman, 2016). On the other hand, when consumers perceive an incongruence between their expectations and reality, they tend to evaluate the company and its motives and actions more critically.

The study by Villagra, Cardabe and Ruiz San Roman (2016) indicates that centrality enhances both perceived credibility and effectiveness of CSR communication. Furthermore, Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) found that centrality demonstrates that a company has genuine interest in improving societal good and benefitting its local community, which directly enhances consumers' perception of the brand. Thus, high centrality is hypothesized to increase consumers' perceptions of the company by attributing higher authenticity to CSR motives and the company's involvement with socially ethical initiatives in general, which positively affects corporate outcome variables. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Centrality of an organization's CSR initiative has a positive effect on:

- a) consumers' impression of the brand
- b) consumers' purchase intention
- c) consumer perceived corporate social responsibility

d) consumers' perceived authenticity of the initiative

2.3 Impact of CSR initiatives

Organizations can initiate a wide variety of CSR activities that would lead to diverse benefits for society. Regarding the communication of those activities, Jiang et al. (2020) have identified several key dimensions of effective CSR communication. Apart from corporate motives, meaning why the company chose to support a social/environmental cause (i.e., relating to centrality), impact is a crucial factor. Due to the industrial processes of the corporate sector that damage the environment and drive social issues, any CSR activity must be effective and generate sufficient societal good (Barnett, Henriques, & Husted, 2020). Gaither, Austin and Schulz (2018) even argue that social impact is one of the fundamentals that influence a company's value proposition.

In some case studies it has been found that CSR initiatives are not always effective in producing the intended societal good (Devenin & Bianchi, 2018). The introduction of CSR activities that do not bring forth the necessary environmental or societal good is detrimental to the credibility of further CSR communication, as it can validate consumers' inherent skepticism towards corporate social responsibility (Devenin & Bianchi, 2018; Maktoufi et al., 2020). Hence companies should develop effective CSR initiatives that provide the societal good promised instead of superficially benefit the company. This effectiveness is referred to by impact (Liu & Jung, 2021). Therefore, in this paper impact refers to the outcomes or results a company has accomplished or will accomplish with its CSR efforts (Jiang et al., 2020; Liu & Jung, 2021).

In order to study whether CSR initiatives are effective, several factors need to be addressed. Such factors include whether CSR initiatives are being performed consistently over time, or whether these initiatives have made a substantial contribution to solving a social problem (Fatma & Khan, 2020). A second aspect includes social impact specificity. Based on persuasion knowledge theory, consumers evaluate an organization's actions according to whether they are making any meaningful and real differences in society based on the knowledge they have about the CSR initiative and the relative size of the company (Fatma & Khan, 2020). Thus, the bigger and more profitable the company it is, the greater the expectations regarding this company's CSR initiative and impact on societal issues. If a company successfully makes a difference in society with their CSR initiatives by planning them for long-term commitment, consumers perceive these initiatives to be more authentic (Jiang et al., 2020; Liu & Jung, 2021).

Regarding the influence CSR impact can have in communication strategies, corporations are encouraged to carefully consider the output of their CSR initiatives – their societal impact and how their initiatives affect the targeted audience (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). The willful emphasis on a company's CSR commitment and their social impact has proved to be an effective communication strategy. Prior research on CSR communication suggested that impact serves as a cue with which consumers evaluate a company and its CSR motives (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen,

2010). Further, CSR impact has also been found to increase perceived CSR authenticity, as greater CSR impact has been positively related to perceived altruistic motivation and consumers' attributions regarding the company (Liu & Jung, 2012; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). On the other hand, when initiatives are viewed as ineffective, it can contribute to perceived inauthenticity. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Greater impact of an organization's CSR initiative has a positive effect on:

- a) consumers' impression of the brand
- b) consumers' purchase intention
- c) consumer perceived corporate social responsibility
- d) consumers' perceived authenticity of the initiative

2.4 Human interest

In line with stakeholders' demand of organizations to engage in CSR, media attention to CSR initiatives has also increased in recent decades (Lee & Riffe, 2017). The news media are one of the most important stakeholders for organizations, as it is the news media that enable consumer awareness regarding an organization's motives and activities and, thus, build corporate reputation (Zhang & Swanson, 2006; Lee, 2016; Lee & Riffe, 2017). Additionally, as stated by Fatma and Khan (2020), consumers assess an organization's motives for CSR based on their awareness, meaning that consumer awareness of CSR activities is crucial for positive corporate reputation formation; thus, CSR activities must be publicly communicated (Lee, 2016). News media are particularly important in attitude formation due to their large reach. Therefore, the news media is still a crucial source in forming CSR perceptions, even in today's era of social media (Lee, 2016; Lee & Riffe, 2017; Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021).

When it comes to publishing news, the aspect of framing has to be taken into consideration. Nielsen and Thomsen (2007) have laid the groundwork of analyzing and comparing CSR documents from several organizations, explaining that companies decidedly vary in their rhetorical strategies. Specifically, two types of discourse were mentioned: public discourse and business discourse on corporate social responsibility (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2007). When looking at the shifting social demands and the increasing focus on the harmful effects of corporate expansion, companies need to build and nurture relationships with their social surroundings. Therefore, the focus on public discourse becomes increasingly important to manage business reputations.

In this context, the human interest frame gained interest. According to Cho and Gower (2006), a human interest frame establishes an emotional angle to the matter at hand, which automatically affects readers' unconscious attribute formation. Due to the introduction of an individual's picture or personal stories, such frames can either humanize or dramatize a story (Beaudoin, 2007). Further, Devlin and Sheehan (2018) mention that when a specific individual has been made to be the central character, this can lead to greater identification with a corporate social

responsibility cause, which receives increased positive engagement from consumers. In their study, human interest activities mobilized more support than, for example, public activities such as donating did, demonstrating stakeholders to be more appreciative and well-meaning toward CSR activities with direct emotional impacts (Devlin & Sheehan, 2018). These findings are in line with the study from Kress-Ludwig et al. (2019), which further emphasizes that CSR initiatives that do not target a specified and tangible group of people, were evaluated as less relevant. Thus, personal concerns are a core factor deciding positive evaluation of CSR activities (Kress-Ludwig et al., 2019).

While the added emotional angle of human-interest frames in CSR communication is decidedly interesting, previous literature exploring the effects of the human interest framing mainly focus on corporate crisis reputation. Studies such as the one by Nijkrake, Gosselt and Gutteling (2015) explore how the addition of human interest often becomes apparent in relation to tragedies or crises. Within this context, human interest is often used as a way of aiming to bring attention to a negative event, or to boost a company's reputation by associating their activities following a crisis to the human frame (Nijkrake et al., 2015). Additionally, Yeomans and Topic (2015) argued that brands mainly use emotional communication on social media, as a way to appeal to accessible target audiences. However, there is little evidence exploring the positive effects of human interest frames when it comes to CSR, even though corporate social responsibility activities are directly related to improving the good of society in general.

Further research into the utilization of human frames in CSR communication by specifying individual people as recipients to enhance the evaluation of the CSR activity are rare. By including the aspect of human interest to the previous two aspects, a contribution to existing literature can be made by exploring the potential positive effects that included humanity can have on organizational value formation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: The inclusion of human interest within an organization's CSR communication has a positive effect on:

- a) consumers' impression of the brand
- b) consumers' purchase intention
- c) consumer perceived corporate social responsibility
- d) consumers' perceived authenticity of the initiative

2.5 Conceptual model

This study proposes that the three highlighted aspects of CSR communication can have a positive influence on consumers' perception of the brand and the CSR activity itself. It is proposed that when consumers are exposed to CSR communication that demonstrates differing levels of the factors centrality, impact and human interest, there will be measurable effects on the dependent variables

impression of the brand, purchase intention, CPCSAR, and authenticity. Furthermore, as the three independent variables in this paper build a rare combination, specifically due to the inclusion of human interest, there will be an explorative approach to interaction effects between the three variables when simultaneously present in CSR communication. The proposed research model is presented in Figure 1.

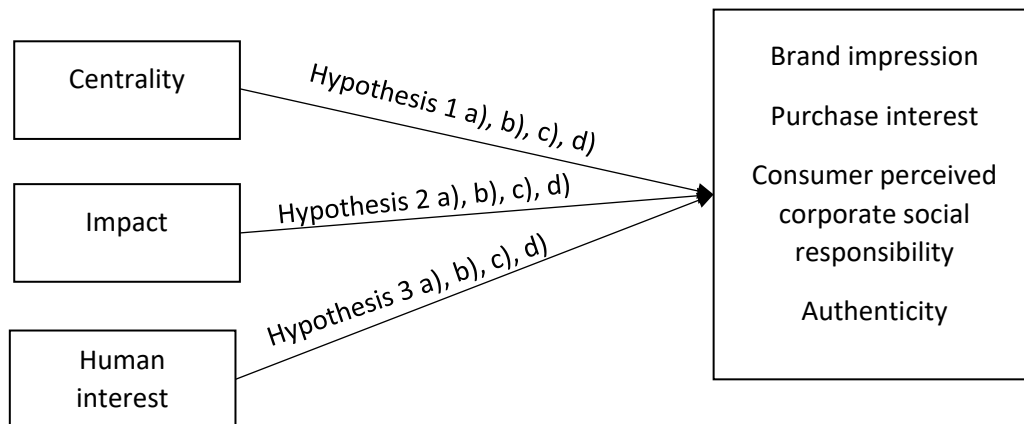


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

To test the research model an experiment with a 3x2 factorial between-subjects design was implemented. The three independent variables, centrality of the CSR initiative, impact of the CSR initiative, and human interest frame, had two levels each (high centrality – low centrality, high impact – low impact, human interest frame – no human interest frame), which resulted in eight conditions total. The influence of the manipulated independent variables has been tested on the following dependent variables: perceived authenticity of the CSR activity, consumer perceived corporate social responsibility, purchase intention, and consumers' impression of the company. While the experiment measures between-subjects differences related to the different conditions, the within-subject differences are also of interest, as repeated measures of the dependent variables – apart from perceived authenticity of the CSR activity – included in the design.

After the study had been awarded ethical approval from the BMS Ethical Review Committee of the University of Twente, the experiment was conducted as a quantitative online questionnaire in Qualtrics.

3.2 Research context

For the purpose of the experiment a fictitious scenario involving an organization initiating a new sustainability activity has been created. The hospitality sector has been chosen as a topic of interest based on the crucial issue of food waste, which is detrimental to environmental sustainability, as well as an increasingly occurring social challenge. According to the statistics of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), roughly one-third of food produced for human consumptions is lost or wasted globally, which equates to approximately 1.3 billion metric tons per year (Newsome & van Eeden, 2017; Huang, Liu, & Hsu, 2020). Such a large amount of food waste provokes severe environmental and social burdens (Huang, Liu, & Hsu, 2020). Therefore, for this study, a fictional hotel chain has been developed, with the CSR activity being a sustainability program to simultaneously cut down on food waste and donating surplus food to local communities.

3.3 Manipulations

While creating the manipulations, there was a focus on credibility, meaning that participants should evaluate the materials to be realistic statements published by a company. To facilitate this, the website www.csrwire.com has been consulted. CSRwire is a digital media platform compiling real-time news and press releases focusing on corporate social responsibility. Existing press materials were used as inspiration regarding the CSR activity and manipulated by the researcher to be conducive to the experiment. All research materials were created using a web-based graphic design software. The corpus of manipulations included eight different messages for the experimental conditions, based on the possible combinations of the independent variables and their levels.

The same base structure of the message has been used among all conditions. After the introduction and description of the CSR activity, the message includes three paragraphs, with each paragraph pertaining to one of the independent variables. Hence, the aspects of centrality, impact, and human interest were included in this order. To ensure that no other changes influenced participants' perceptions, only small differences were made in each paragraph depending on the levels of the independent variables.

Within this study, each independent variable had two levels: presence versus absence. The difference between these two levels can be explained by comparing the text variations. For the first variable, centrality, the 'presence' condition emphasizes the company's intrinsic motivation to act sustainably. The company explicitly relates to its core philosophy and describes that, in addition to the public CSR initiative, they constantly aim to improve their internal processes to become more sustainable as well. In opposition to that the text written for the 'absence' level connects the company's initiative to the emergence of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, insinuating that the company is 'jumping on the bandwagon' of sustainability activities, rather than doing it out of passion for the environment or social community.

Regarding the independent variable of impact, the manipulations differ twofold. First, a difference in the level of impact is established by stating two different numbers. The text mentions an average of ‘one in six meals being wasted in hospitality’, introducing a baseline for comparison. Here, the manipulations either significantly decrease this by introducing a higher number (e.g., one in twenty meals), or state a minor improvement on this number. Further, the texts aim to emphasize the manipulations due to explicit statements such as “[...] *we can make a big difference*”, as opposed to “[...] *our new program only makes a small contribution*”.

Last, to introduce the two levels of human interest, the statement within the ‘presence’ level highlights a specific individual as the recipient of the CSR activity, by including a name, a picture, and a personal quote from the person as part of the message. This was done to introduce an emotional bond to the person and their story. In the other condition, the text does not mention any individuals, rather, the message paints the picture of a faceless crowd benefitting from the CSR activity. To better demonstrate the differences between manipulations, Table 1 shows a direct comparison between the two variations of each paragraph.

Table 1. *Comparison between the manipulations.*

Manipulated variable	Presence of the variable	Absence of the variable
Centrality	At PALMTRI RESORTS, we are constantly aiming to improve our internal processes to become more sustainable. We have made it part of our core philosophy to care for both the environment and local communities, which is an attitude embodied by everybody within the company. We are proud that with our new program, we can act out our passion to bring a positive impact to people while caring for the environment, as well as simultaneously play our part toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.	Inspired by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, several industries and countries have started to initiate sustainability programs. At PALMTRI RESORTS, we are proud to join the movement toward sustainability by aiming to improve our internal processed to reduce wasteful behaviours.
Impact	With our new program, we can make a big difference. On average, one in six meals in hospitality is being wasted. We aim to reduce the amount to only one in twenty meals. Additionally, we can directly reduce the detrimental effect wasteful behaviours have on our environment, as food waste produces methane – a potent greenhouse gas. We are making significant progress toward becoming more sustainable; both socially and environmentally.	While our new program may only make a small contribution, we are happy for every step. On average, one in six meals in hospitality is being wasted. We aim to reduce the amount to one in eight meals. Additionally, we can partly reduce the detrimental effect wasteful behaviours have on our environment, as food waste produces methane – a potent greenhouse gas. We are making progress toward becoming more sustainable; both socially and environmentally.
Human interest	Due to on-site assistance, we were confronted with the reality of food insecurity and how many individuals are affected by it. There, we got to know the story of Michael*, who, after several unfortunate strokes of fate, arrived at the foodbank. “I hadn’t eaten in two days. Never been hungrier in my life,” Michael told us while waiting to be given a food parcel. We were happy to provide Michael with a hot, healthy meal.	Due to on-site assistance, we were confronted with the reality of food insecurity and how many are affected by it. There, we got to see that our program helps people. We were happy to provide everyone present with a hot, healthy meal.

The complete corpus of research materials can be found in *Appendix I*.

3.4 Manipulation check

To test whether the manipulations of the three independent variables – centrality, impact, and human interest – were perceived as intended, the survey included several questions to act as manipulation checks, whereas respondents were asked to give their answer on a 5-point Likert scale (see *Appendix II*). Using a reliability analysis, it was first checked whether the items used for the manipulation check could be transformed into reliable scales for further analysis. Based on this analysis, two scales could be computed: the items used to check for the centrality manipulation resulted in a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha=.78$, and the items meant to determine the human interest manipulation demonstrated a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha=.87$. The items that were implemented for the manipulation of the independent variable

impact could not produce a satisfactory reliability score ($\alpha=.65$). Hence, for the manipulation check, ANOVA analyses were conducted using constructs for centrality and human interest, whereas the two items for great impact and low impact were tested separately.

The analysis of variance to assess the effects of the centrality manipulation showed that participants in the presence of centrality condition scored significantly higher than those in the absence of centrality condition, $F(1, 238) = 31.91, p < .001$. Similarly, the analysis of variance conducted to check the effects of the human interest manipulation showed that participants in the presence of human interest condition scored significantly higher than those in the absence of human interest condition, $F(1, 238) = 101.04, p < .001$. The comparison of means and standard deviations of the experimental conditions can be found in Table 2 below.

While the manipulation checks for centrality and human interest were successful, the comparison of means between the presence of impact and absence of impact conditions shows that there is no noticeable difference between the two conditions, indicating that participants were not able to successfully identify the category of the independent variable impact they were assigned to.

Table 2. *Comparison of means between the experimental conditions.*

Condition	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	SD
Presence of centrality	114	3.56	.70
Absence of centrality	126	2.83	1.08
High impact	121	3.83	.97
Low impact	119	3.29	1.22
Presence of human interest	120	3.62	1.01
Absence of human interest	120	2.33	.99

3.5 Instrument

All items of the questionnaire were measured by a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from completely disagree to completely agree. The instrument served to measure several dependent variables, including impression of the brand, purchase interest, consumer perceived corporate social responsibility (CPCSR), and perceived authenticity. The items compiling the sub-scales have been adapted from existing scales to fit within the research context.

The items compiling the sub-scales have been adapted from existing scales to fit within the research context. For the dependent variable impression of the company, items were adapted from the scale used in Sengupta and Johar (2002) (e.g., “*I expect the service of PALMTRI resorts to be oh high quality*” and “*My opinion of PALMTRI RESORTS is very favourable*”).

Regarding purchase interest, four items been adapted from the scale used in Rodgers (2003). The scale consisted of both standard and reverse coded items such as “*I would likely consider PALMTRI RESORTS for a vacation*” and “*I am not interested in booking a vacation at PALMTRI RESORTS*”.

The third dependent variable, consumer perceived corporate social responsibility, was measured with a scale including six items, which have been taken from existing studies from Kim, Kim, Taylor and Lee (2015) and Perez and Rodriguez del Dosque (2013) and adapted to the context of the current study. This scale also consisted of a mixture of standard and reverse coded questions, for example “*I expect PALMTRI RESORTS to engage in sustainability programs*”.

Finally, the five items making up the scale for perceived authenticity was adapted from Kim and Lee (2019). Here, items such as “*I believe that PALMTRI RESORTS’ social responsibilities activities are genuine*” and “*I believe that PALMTRI RESORTS does not genuinely care about its environmental impact*” have been used.

In addition to the items meant to measure the dependent variables, two additional scales were introduced to the instrument: a section measuring involvement with resorts and another section measuring involvement with food waste and sustainability. These measures have been added to introduce another dimension to explain any potential results, such as, for example, negative scores when people just happen to not be interested into hotel brands. The scale for the vacation involvement has been adapted from Duman, Erkaya and Topaloglu (2020), while the items for involvement with food waste and sustainability was adapted from Amicarelli, Tricase, Spada and Bux (2021).

The complete instrument can be found in *Appendix II*.

3.5.1 Scale construction

Before constructing the measurement scales, a factor analysis has been conducted as the first step to clarify whether there was statistical distinction between the dependent variables. The factor analysis was conducted for both the dependent variables that were measured before the manipulation was introduced and for the dependent variables after the manipulation had been introduced. The complete Table 3 shows that there were seven components, meaning that the dependent measures could be statistically distinguished from one another. To then ensure the internal consistency of these measures, reliability analyses were performed computing Cronbach’s alpha. Again, this was done for both sets of repeating dependent variables, as well as for the singular measure perceived authenticity. An alpha of $>.70$ has been adapted for acceptable reliability.

The table below summarizes the results of the reliability analyses for each construct. The three repeated measures – impression of the brand, purchase interest, and CPCR – have each been analyzed twice. All constructs have demonstrated internal consistency.

Table 3. *Groupings of the factor analyses.*

Items	Component						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Pre_Impression1	.102	-.022	.517	-.033	.061	.208	.567
Pre_Impression2	.517	.194	.490	.191	-.001	-.101	.394
Pre_Impression3	.222	.070	.791	.122	.027	-.069	.169
Pre_Impression4	.195	.046	.773	.084	.054	.044	.102
Pre_PI1	.859	.159	.140	.133	.002	-.076	.136
Pre_PI2	.893	.139	.174	.131	.081	.010	.024
Pre_PI3	.826	.007	.256	.151	.100	.136	-.047
Pre_PI4	.413	-.059	-.030	.071	.541	.172	.182
Pre_CPCSR1	.086	.118	-.018	.463	-.002	.688	.106
Pre_CPCSR2	.155	.161	.097	.725	.086	.351	.070
Pre_CPCSR3	.186	.214	.066	.838	.070	.091	-.022
Pre_CPCSR4	.171	.191	-.005	.811	-.021	-.021	.022
Pre_CPCSR5	.145	.028	.123	.402	.514	-.171	-.316
Pre_CPCSR6	.086	.035	.006	.547	.543	-.031	-.128
Post_Impression1	.207	.244	.492	-.154	.074	.479	.110
Post_Impression2	.479	.467	.432	.117	.037	.074	.120
Post_Impression3	.245	.331	.675	-.012	.060	.157	-.145
Post_Impression4	.231	.228	.697	-.036	.075	.156	-.251
Post_PI1	.839	.278	.170	.097	.090	.039	.050
Post_PI2	.867	.240	.159	.124	.096	.106	-.050
Post_PI3	.812	.144	.233	.072	.101	.199	-.125
Post_PI4	.309	.000	.062	.001	.652	.178	.153
Post_CPCSR1	.081	.395	.207	.069	.032	.718	-.017
Post_CPCSR2	.199	.667	.198	.140	-.005	.309	-.011
Post_CPCSR3	.186	.619	.254	.151	.028	.272	-.212
Post_CPCSR4	.106	.624	.194	.197	-.077	.202	-.106
Post_CPCSR5	-.143	.282	.119	.018	.677	-.084	-.121
Post_CPCSR6	.029	.414	.054	-.010	.695	.000	.016
Authenticity1	.187	.805	.124	.115	.140	.042	.018
Authenticity2	.204	.769	.021	.099	.114	.058	.035
Authenticity3	.141	.763	.172	.099	.151	.042	-.065
Authenticity4	.021	.636	-.011	-.055	.451	-.042	.329
Authenticity5	.006	.660	-.095	.158	.434	-.013	.263

Table 4. *Cronbach's alpha for the measured dependent variables.*

Scale	Items	Cronbach's α prior to manipulation	Cronbach's α after manipulation
Impression of the brand	4	.79	.81
Purchase interest	4	.82	.82
CPCSR	6	.79	.75
Authenticity	5	/	.87

3.6 Procedure

The experiment took place online and was divided into two parts. In the beginning, participants were asked to carefully read the survey instructions that explained the purpose of the study. Here, preliminary deception was used to ensure that indicated attitudes had not been primed due to knowledge of the true aim of the study. Thus, participants were told that the survey was being used to conduct market research to collect input regarding the rebranding strategy of a resort chain. In this first step, the survey software randomly assigned participants to one of the eight conditions without their knowledge. After having read the instructions and given their informed consent, participants were asked to answer some questions regarding their involvement with resorts/vacationing interest, to submerge them into the topic matter of the fictional resort chain.

Then, the first part of the actual experiment commenced. Respondents were told to carefully look at two images and to share their initial perceptions and attitudes regarding the material. The first slide showed a brand board, which had been created for the purpose of this study for participants to tangibly picture the created hotel chain brand (see *Appendix I*). A second slide presented short, written information regarding the brand, including details such as hotel locations and the company's core philosophy (see *Appendix I*). After having formed preliminary impressions, participants were asked to answer a first set of questions, aimed to measure the dependent variables impression of the brand, purchase intention, and consumer perceived corporate social responsibility.

Next, participants were introduced to the second part of the experiment. Respondents were told that they were about to see an article published by the company, describing their new CSR venture. Depending on the condition the participants were randomly assigned to, they were shown one out of the eight different messages. After having carefully read the notice, participants were asked to answer questions relating to whether they could correctly identify the manipulation they were assigned to. Then, respondents were asked to answer the same set of questions as during the first part, measuring impression of the brand, purchase intention and consumer perceived corporate social responsibility once again to test whether the CSR communication had an effect on participants' perceptions. In addition to the repeated measures, respondents were also asked to answer a set of questions aimed at measuring perceived authenticity of the company's CSR activity.

In the last step, some questions regarding the demographics of the participants were being asked. Moreover, some questions aimed at determining participants' involvement with sustainable behaviours were asked. At last, the debrief explicitly stated the use of deception in the beginning and clarified the true aim of the study – to determine whether different aspects of CSR communication affect potential consumers' perceptions of the company as authentic and socially responsible. Here, it was communicated that, although anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed, participants are free to withdraw their participation if they did not agree with the use of deception. Nonetheless, no responses were withdrawn.

3.7 Participants

The experiment was conducted in Germany. Therefore, the main participation criteria was proficiency in the German language. Further, to control for potential cultural difference, the survey mainly addressed German citizens. Apart from that, no additional criteria were formulated. Since social and environmental challenges affect the general public, the study aimed to collect data from a wide variety of participants.

Respondents were recruited through several methods. First, personal networks were utilized to distribute the survey link to several groups of people. Each contacted individual was additionally asked to further spread the survey link, resulting in snowball sampling for further multipliers. Moreover, social media was used two-ways. First, the survey link was distributed through social media to reach a wider net of participants for multiplication. Second, social media groups specifically designed to publish and distribute academic surveys were frequented to recruit respondents. Through these sampling methods, the survey was mainly shown to students and young adults.

As to not skew the age demographic, participants were recruited in a third way. Making use of the personal workplace environment, the survey link was internally spread among workers of a large building society and financial chain in Germany. This method resulted in responses from an older generation, evening out the population pool of participants.

After the survey had been closed, the collected responses had to be reviewed and insufficient data was deleted. The criteria used to decide whether to delete a response include time taken to complete the survey (i.e., to ensure that only responses that were taken in one session with a realistic time frame were analyzed), integrity, and plausibility of the responses. A total of 78 responses were deleted from the data set. Altogether, 240 responses were recorded. Participants were evenly distributed among the eight experimental conditions. Regarding age distribution, the youngest participant was 20 years old, while the recorded response with the highest age was 77 years. The mean age was 33.7 with a standard deviation of 13.57. Comparatively, 60.4 percent of responses were given by participants between the ages of 20 to 30, whereas the remaining 39.6 percent stem from participants between the ages of 31 to 77. In terms of gender, 95 participants were male (39.6) and 140 participants (58.3%) were female. The remaining 5 participants either did not want to disclose their gender or did not identify with the binary system. As for education, most participants indicated having some kind of academic degree (130 participants, 54.2%). There were no distinctions made between bachelor's, master's or doctorate degrees. The second most common level of education was a high school diploma for admission to university (i.e., German Abitur) with 72 indications (30%), with a completed apprenticeship coming in third with 28 indicated responses (11.7%).

When comparing the composition of the eight experimental groups, it can be seen that there is approximately even distribution among groups, meaning that the conditions are comparable.

Table 5. *Comparison of demographics by experimental group.*

Experimental group	N	Age	SD	Number of male participants	Number of female participants	Number of participants with a high school diploma or completed apprenticeship	Number of participants with an academic degree
1	28	32.7	13.63	8	19	11	17
2	24	31.4	13.09	8	16	9	15
3	33	35.2	15.54	13	20	21	12
4	29	40.6	16.72	13	16	13	16
5	30	35.7	12.94	13	16	12	18
6	36	30.2	10.69	15	20	17	19
7	33	32.3	13.08	15	16	20	13
8	27	31.7	10.42	10	17	7	20
Total	240	33.7	13.57				

4. Results

4.1 Main within-subject effects

A one-way repeated measured analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the null hypothesis that there is no change in the three dependent variables impression of the brand, purchase intention, and CPCSR when measured before and after being subjected to the manipulated CSR communication. The results of the ANOVA indicated a significant within-subjects effect of the CSR communication, Wilks' Lambda = .48, $F(3, 237) = 84.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .516$. Thus, there is significant evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

Table 6. *Differences within the repeated measures.*

Measure	Prior to the manipulation		After the manipulation	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Impression of the brand	4.10	.55	3.97	.59
Purchase intention	3.55	.92	3.51	.93
CPCSR	2.97	.68	3.59	.62

Follow up comparisons of the means scores of the dependent variables indicate that there are distinct differences after participants have read the CSR messages. Regarding participants' impression of the brand, it is of importance to note that the scores decreased after the manipulation. On average, respondents' impression of the brand was slightly lower after they had read the CSR message. Nonetheless, when comparing the mean scores of the dependent variable CPCSR, the scores are significantly higher after the manipulation. While there was no noticeable difference of the

manipulation on purchase intention, the negative effect on impression of the brand and the significant positive effect on CPCSAR are interesting for further analysis.

4.2 Main effects of the independent variables

A two-way analysis of variance was conducted on the influence of three independent variables (centrality, impact, human interest) on participants' impression of the company. Each independent variable included two levels (high centrality – low centrality, high impact – low impact, human interest – no human interest).

4.2.1 Impression of the brand

The ANOVA analysis analyzing the effect of the three independent variables on the fixed factor impression of the brand demonstrated that there is only a statistical significance main effect of human interest on impression of the brand, indicating that there is a significant difference between the human impact (M = 4.07, SD = .58) and no human impact (M = 3.88, SD = .58) conditions. There were no further significant main effects of the independent variables, as well as no significant interaction effects. Thus, there is statistical evidence to support H3a), whereas H1a) and H2a) have to be rejected, based on the non-significant results.

Table 7. ANOVA results using impression of the brand as dependent variable.

Predictor	Sum of Squares	df	F	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	3727.31	1	10908.44	<.001
Centrality	.50	1	1.45	.229
Impact	.07	1	.21	.651
Human interest	2.04	1	5.96	.015*
Centrality*impact	.23	1	.69	.408
Centrality*human interest	.01	1	.02	.888
Impact*human interest	.12	1	.34	.559
Centrality*impact*human interest	.05	1	.15	.699
Error	79.27	232		

Note. * indicates statistical significance at the <.05 level.

4.2.2 Purchase intention

Similarly, a two-way analysis of variance on the influence of the independent variables on purchase intention was conducted. Only the main effect of centrality demonstrated statistical significance, indicating that there is a statistical significance between high centrality (M = 3.64, SD = .87) and low centrality (M = 3.39, SD = .97). Similarly to the results on impression of the brand, there were no further significant main effects, as well as no significant interaction effects. There is statistical evidence supporting H1b). However, hypotheses H2b) and H3b) have to be rejected.

Table 8. ANOVA results using purchase intention as dependent variable.

Predictor	Sum of Squares	Df	F	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	2913.26	1	3371.39	<.001
Centrality	3.68	1	4.26	0.40*
Impact	.84	1	.97	.326
Human interest	.38	1	.44	.509
Centrality*impact	1.41	1	1.63	.202
Centrality*human interest	.15	1	.18	.677
Impact*human interest	.08	1	.09	.759
Centrality*impact*human interest	.54	1	.62	.431
Error	200.47	232		

Note. * indicates statistical significance at the <.05 level.

4.2.3 Consumer perceived corporate social responsibility

The ANOVA conducted for the influence of the independent variables on CPCSR showed that only the main effect of human interest showed statistical significance, indicating that there is statistical significance between the human interest ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .64$) and no human interest ($M = 3.49$, $SD = .58$) condition. The independent variables centrality and impact yielded no statistically significant main effects. Further, there were no significant interaction effects. The statistical evidence supports hypothesis H3c), however, H1c) and H2c) need to be rejected within the context of this study.

Table 9. ANOVA results using CPCSR as dependent variable.

Predictor	Sum of Squares	Df	F	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	3046.32	1	8118.99	<.001
Centrality	.54	1	1.43	.233
Impact	.00	1	.00	.971
Human interest	2.49	1	6.65	.011*
Centrality*impact	.17	1	.46	.498
Centrality*human interest	.32	1	.85	.356
Impact*human interest	.23	1	.61	.437
Centrality*impact*human interest	.06	1	.15	.698
Error	87.05	232		

Note. * indicates statistical significance at the <.05 level.

4.2.4 Perceived authenticity of the CSR initiative

Last, the two-way analysis of variance on the influence of the three independent variables on perceived authenticity was conducted. In this analysis the main effect of centrality yielded statistical significance, indicating that there is a significant difference between high centrality ($M = 3.46$, $SD = .84$) and low centrality ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .74$). Additionally, the analysis showed a statistically significant main effect of human interest on perceived authenticity, indicating that there is a statistical difference between the conditions human interest ($M = 3.41$, $SD = .80$) and no human interest ($M = 3.15$, $SD = .79$). There was neither a statistically significant main effect of impact on perceived authenticity, nor were there any significant interaction effects. Thus, there is significant statistical

evidence supporting hypotheses H1d) and H3d). H2d) must be rejected, as there was no significant main effect of impact on perceived authenticity.

Table 10. ANOVA results using authenticity as dependent variable.

Predictor	Sum of Squares	df	F	p
(Intercept)	2552.79	1	4155.56	<.001
Centrality	6.33	1	10.31	.002*
Impact	.01	1	.01	.923
Human interest	4.22	1	6.88	.009*
Centrality*impact	.31	1	.50	.479
Centrality*human interest	.17	1	.28	.597
Impact*human interest	.30	1	.49	.487
Centrality*impact*human interest	1.35	1	2.20	.139
Error	142.52	232		

Note. * indicates statistical significance at the <.05 level.

In an effort to explain the absence of interaction effects and the unforeseen results of the rejected hypotheses regarding main effects of the independent variables, the two additional scales of participants' involvement with resorts and sustainability were examined. An analysis of the frequencies showed that a total of 14 participants demonstrated extremely low scores of below 2.5, meaning that they had close to no interest in resorts or tropic vacations, as well as no interest in the topics of food waste and sustainable behaviours. These responses were deleted from the data set and the previous analyses of variance were conducted again to explore, whether the aspect of general interest among the pool of participants would change the outcomes. However, there were no changes in the output data.

5. Discussion

5.1 Main findings

The present study, examining whether three identified aspects of CSR communication – centrality, impact, and human interest – can affect how potential consumers perceive the company in regards of authenticity and social responsibility, provides some interesting findings. In the following, the results will be carefully discussed in relation to the findings from previous CSR communication research.

First, taking a look at the aspect of centrality, the results of this study differ somewhat from previous findings. CSR fit, as the umbrella term under which centrality is often explained, has been an increasingly popular topic in literature. Even though contradicting evidence that led to an inconclusive stands regarding how CSR fit affects corporate perceptions exists (Elving, 2013), its relevance is unambiguous. In general, high centrality, as opposed to low centrality, leads to more favourable outcomes, as consumers evaluate the congruence between CSR activity and core business operations as indicating higher intrinsic motivation, rather than profit-making motivation to pursue CSR activities

(Elving, 2013). Nonetheless, CSR fit does not provide an automatic guarantee of favourable consumer perceptions, rather there is an interplay of different factors determining opinion-formulation (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2015).

The results from this study show that centrality only had statistically significant effects on consumers' purchase intention and perceived authenticity. There were no significant effects on consumers' impression of the company or CPCR. Specifically, the effect of centrality on authenticity is of interest here, as it is in line with several findings from previous literature (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2013; Kim & Lee, 2019; Alhouti, Johnson, & Holloway, 2016). Seen as perceived authenticity is one of the most prominent deciding factor in corporate-value creation, such as positive corporate reputation and customer attraction and retention (Alhouti, Johnson, & Holloway, 2016), this is a valuable insight. Lacking authenticity due to consumer scepticism and perceived hypocrisy is detrimental to organizations aiming to communicate their CSR efforts to comply with social and legal pressures (Elving, 2013). The evidence shows that centrality, is an important factor to take into consideration while formulating CSR and CSR communication strategies.

The most surprising results of this study have to do with the independent variable of impact. The impact of an CSR activity has been the subject of several prior studies, which demonstrated that higher impact leads to more favourable consumer perceptions (Barnett, Henriques, & Husted, 2020; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Specifically, in Barnett et al. (2020), the necessity of impact becomes apparent, as it is one of the most defining features that consumers should be aware of. The level of impact of any given CSR activity allows consumers to directly measure whether the company provides sufficient societal good, or if the company is trying to overexaggerate their involvement with sustainability (also Du et al., 2010). However, within this study, impact did not have significant effects on any of the dependent variables. This can be interpreted in two ways. First, the comparative means for the two conditions low impact and high impact showed no significant differences, making one question the effectiveness of the manipulation of this specific variable. Further, participants might not have realized the severity of impact, as they were not the targeted audience of the CSR activity (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Fatma & Khan, 2010). While impact has been identified as a factor that should be considered when planning CSR initiatives, it does not produce as much attention in research as other factors, allowing for the interpretation that perceptions might be the defining factor for successful CSR communication.

The final independent variable is human interest – a framing technique whereby a human face is emphasized during communication to establish emotional attachment and formulate favourable perceptions toward organizations (Valenzuela, Piña, & Ramírez, 2017). Within the context of the present study, human interest has shown the most noticeable statistically significant main effects, influencing three of the four dependent variables. This was surprising, as there seems to be little literature regarding the human-interest frame in corporate CSR communication (e.g., Lee & Riffe, 2017). Nonetheless, as the study by Kress-Ludwig et al. (2019) demonstrated, the general public

favours social initiatives over environmental initiatives when asked to evaluate the importance of corporate CSR programs. For this purpose, the inclusion of human interest during social activities can be a powerful communicative tool, seen by the evidence that human interest significantly affected perceived authenticity. Moreover, human interest was the only independent variable to statistically influence CPCSR, another valuable factor in value-formation like authenticity (Elving, 2013). This is specifically interesting when looking at the used combination of independent variables: centrality, as part of the umbrella term CSR fit, has been a stable part of CSR literature for a while. Nonetheless, human interest was shown to have a greater effect on perceived authenticity and CPCSR. There is great potential to further explore the effects of human interest when talking about CSR communication and corporate reputation and value-formation.

When looking at the significant change between the measures taken before and after participants were exposed to the altered CSR communication, it is noticeable that consumers' impression of the company decreased, whereas CPCSR increased after engaging with the stimulus. This is most likely in line with the findings from literature that consumers' impressions change not based on the way companies communicate, but rather based on how the communication is being perceived (Elving, 2013). There seems to be a fine line between eliciting emotions that interpret the CSR activity as favourable and eliciting doubt about the motives of the company, which could be seen as manipulative or self-serving.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The findings of the present study highlight interesting aspects that enrich previous literature and knowledge regarding the effects of CSR communication on corporate outcome variables. The importance of centrality and therewithin congruence between a company's core business and their CSR activities has been a focal point of literature regarding corporate communication. While the findings are in line with previous research, it can be interpreted that, when centrality and human interest are used within the same message, centrality is no longer the most defining factor. Rather, the study shows evidence for human interest to be the most prominent variable, which significantly affects consumers' impressions. There is great potential and incentive to further explore the inclusion of human-interest frames in CSR communication, and how they influence corporate value-formation. This becomes especially prominent with the continuous rise of social issues that companies are expected to address.

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration regarding the theoretical implications of this study are the results of the explorative analysis regarding potential interaction effects between the three independent variables. While this study demonstrated no significant interaction effects, future research could take a closer look at possible combinations of aspects that, in interplay, have an even greater effect on perceived authenticity of CSR initiatives. Specifically, it seems that human interest overshadowed the other two independent variables to a degree. While the inclusion of the human

interest frame needs to become more prominent in CSR communication research, it is proposed to test different levels of operationalization or various combination to test which aspects harmonize together for the best possible outcome.

5.2 Practical implications

The study demonstrates a distinct takeaway for practical implications. While CSR communication and corporate communication literature has paid limited attention to the human interest frame as a determining factor for companies to be perceived as authentic and socially responsible, it is naturally rarely present in actual CSR communication or press releases. However, this study clearly shows the great impact a focus on individuals as recipients of CSR initiatives can have. It is proposed for companies to take the time to clearly analyze and identify the targeted group meant to benefit from their CSR activity. With this target group in mind, representatives of the company could take the time to personally witness whether their CSR program comes to fruition, and how it is being received by the target group. Taking the time and spending resources to get to know specific individuals could have considerable benefits for the company and their perceptions as being credible and concerned for their social communities. The inclusion of quotations, pictures, or even personal stories makes the initiative more credible, due to the benefits being tangible and humanizing the company. Especially with the increasing demand for companies to not only address but ideally solve social problems in their area of operation, this aspect could become essential for communication strategies.

5.3 Further research

It is strongly encouraged to further research the phenomenon of human interest as a driving factor in CSR communication, as it might change existing perceptions of how CSR communication should be conducted. It is proposed to explore those effects in front of the background of human decision making. Whereas previously it was assumed that consumers made decisions based on some rational evaluations, such as through the assessment whether the impact of the CSR activity was significant enough, the results from the present study allow for the assumption that consumers may strongly follow the emotional route of decision-making, even when given rational arguments through distinct numbers for comparison of impact level. This finding is extremely interesting and further study in how this process of decision-making works would be valuable.

The aspect of human interest in CSR communication in general is severely overlooked. New combinations of different aspects of CSR communication with the human interest frame (e.g., how centrality was used in combination with human interest here= to see when the human interest is favoured would be another interesting study proposal. Further, there are several degrees and levels to human interest in literature. Testing different strategies of framing in combination with different companies would be another valuable insight, as previous knowledge of a company or existing associations, whether they be positive or negative, might also influence the effect human interest has

on authenticity, for example. In summary, this study may function as a significant stepping stone to further explore the implications of (emotional) framing in CSR communication.

5.4 Limitations

While there are limitations that need to be addressed to evaluate the study, they are not being regarded as pitfalls but rather as opportunities to encourage further research into the topic of how to frame CSR communication for optimal corporate outcomes.

First, the inconclusive manipulation check leads to a critical evaluation whether the independent variable impact had been operationalized ideally. There are several aspects that could be changed in future research to ensure that representative data is being collected. One possibility would be to conduct a pre-study to test the operationalization of all independent variables. Depending on the outcomes of the pre-study, a short interview to gather qualitative insights could be conducted as a follow-up, to improve on or change the approach by which the variables are being operationalized. Additionally, it might be worth to reconsider whether a Likert scale, as it was used in this research, is the optimal medium for direct manipulation check questions. Instead, closed statements to be answered with either 'yes' or 'no' might be better suited.

Staying in line with the variable impact of the CSR initiative; it was mentioned before that impact might not be tangible when one is not part of the targeted group meant to benefit from the CSR activity. Further research could be done within the more concrete dimension of 'personal fit', i.e., the degree to which the organization's choice of CSR is personally relevant. If the pool of participants is being tailored to be identical with the target group meant to benefit from the CSR activity, the aspect of impact might be viewed from another angle.

Another limitation has to do with the research materials. During the first part of the experiment, participants were being asked to carefully read a brand board. Here, the company was described as having an interest in sustainable behaviours. It is not clear, whether this material acts as a primer to elicit sustainable expectations. Hence, for future research it is encouraged to consider the possibility of including A/B testing to check whether preliminary information about the corporation affects consumers' perceptions regarding the company's perceived sustainability.

5.5 Conclusion

This paper aimed to enrich existing literature regarding CSR communication and how to formulate CSR messages in order for the company to be perceived as authentic and 'sustainable' by introducing the aspect of a human-interest frame to CSR communication and by choosing an unexplored combination of three independent variables meant to affect outcome variables. The results of the present experiment deliver interesting results. While being in line with previous literature insofar that centrality of the CSR initiative is one of the crucial and defining points affecting perceived authenticity, the study further highlights the great potential of the human interest frame in CSR

communication. The positive effects of human interest on authenticity and CCSR even surpassed the effects of centrality, demonstrating thought-provoking implications for both the theoretical knowledge, as well as practical implementation of CSR communication. Using this explorative study as a stepping-stone for further research allows for further consideration regarding how to optimize corporate communication.

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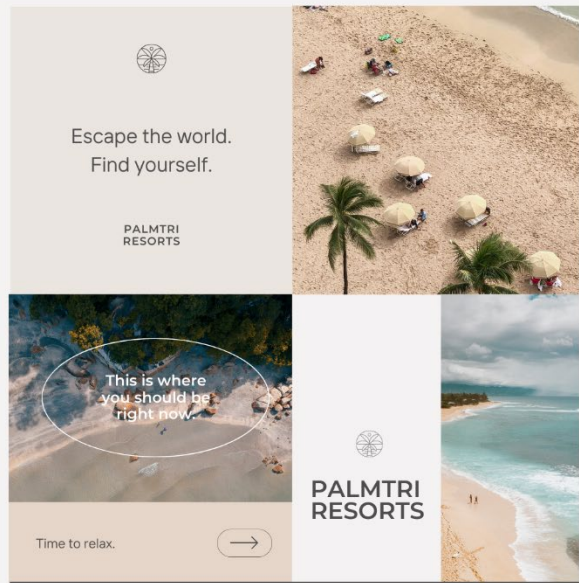
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Appendix I

Research materials





WELCOME TO PALMTRI HOTELS AND RESORTS

PALMTRI RESORTS offer luxury travel experiences with personalized service in elegant properties, each individually curated to reflect its location.



DISCOVER A SANCTUARY FOR YOUR SENSES

PALMTRI RESORTS embraces 21 resorts and hotels in various countries and continues to seek out awe-inspiring locations.

From Thailand to the Dominican Republic, from France to the USA, each property is as unique as the place it calls home.



OUR PHILOSOPHY

Reflecting the best of local culture with award-winning dining, wellness, and impeccable service, we delight our guests with unique experiences that are personal and memorable.

At PALMTRI RESORTS, we strive to bring a positive impact to people and communities while caring for the environment.





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PALMTRI RESORTS ANNOUNCE PROGRAM TO CUT DOWN ON FOOD WASTE

We at PALMTRI RESORTS are pleased to announce our new sustainability venture this year – a collaborative program with local foodbanks to reduce food waste. Food scarcity is a crucial humanitarian concern, with the hospitality industry substantially contributing to the problem of food waste. Our new program aims at donating leftovers to individuals struggling with food insecurity.

Strict food safety regulations must be adhered to when handling prepared food. Thus, after a banquet has ended, left-over food will be swiftly transferred to the nearest foodbank. Upon arrival, food will be quickly frozen, extending its storage life up to three months.

At PALMTRI RESORTS, we are constantly aiming to improve our internal processes to become more sustainable. We have made it part of our core philosophy to care for both the environment and local communities, which is an attitude embodied by everybody within the company. We are proud that with our new program, we can act out our passion to bring a positive impact to people while caring for the environment, as well as simultaneously play our part toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

With our new program, we can make a big difference. On average, one in six meals in hospitality is being wasted. We aim to reduce the amount to only one in twenty meals. Additionally, we can directly reduce the detrimental effect wasteful behaviours have on our environment, as food waste produces methane – a potent greenhouse gas. We are making significant progress toward becoming more sustainable; both socially and environmentally.

Through the donation of our leftover banquet food, we are directly combating food scarcity within our regions. Due to on-site assistance, we were confronted with the reality of food insecurity and how many individuals are affected by it. There, we got to know the story of Michael, who, after several unfortunate strokes of fate, arrived at the foodbank. "I hadn't eaten in two days. Never been hungrier in my life," Michael told us while waiting to be given a food parcel. We were happy to provide Michael with a hot, healthy meal.



Michael (name changed to protect privacy) visited the foodbank during our shift

These are experiences that encourage us to further develop our program to donate food.





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PALMTRI RESORTS FÜHREN MASSNAHMEN GEGEN LEBENSMITTELVERSCHWENDUNG EIN

Wir bei PALMTRI RESORTS freuen uns, diese Jahr ein neues Nachhaltigkeitsprojekt einführen zu können - ein Kooperationsprogramm mit lokalen Tafeln zur Reduzierung von Lebensmittelverschwendung. Nahrungsmittelknappheit ist ein grundlegendes humanitäres Anliegen, wobei das Gastgewerbe wesentlich zum Problem der Verschwendung beiträgt. Unser neues Programm zielt darauf ab, unseren Lebensmittelüberschuss an Menschen in Not zu spenden.

Der Umgang mit bereits zubereiteten Lebensmitteln unterliegt strengen Vorschriften zur Lebensmittelsicherheit. Daher werden nicht benötigte Mahlzeiten, direkt nach Ende eines Banketts, schnellstmöglich zur nächsten Tafel transportiert und dort schockgefroren.

Inspiziert von den Zielen der Vereinten Nationen für nachhaltige Entwicklung haben mehrere Branchen und Länder begonnen Nachhaltigkeitsprogramme zu initiieren. Bei PALMTRI RESORTS sind wir stolz, uns der Bewegung in Richtung Nachhaltigkeit anschließen zu können. Wir werden unsere internen Prozesse verbessern, um verschwenderisches Verhalten zu reduzieren.

Während unser neues Programm vielleicht nur einen kleinen Beitrag leisten kann, freuen wir uns über jeden Fortschritt. Im Durchschnitt wird jede sechste Mahlzeit im Gastgewerbe verschwendet. Unser Ziel ist es, dies auf eine von acht Mahlzeiten zu reduzieren. Darüber hinaus können wir die schädlichen Auswirkungen auf unsere Umwelt teilweise reduzieren, da Lebensmittelverschwendung Methan erzeugt, ein starkes Treibhausgas. So bewegen wir uns in Richtung Nachhaltigkeit; sowohl sozial als auch ökologisch.

Durch die Spende unseres Lebensmittelüberschusses bekämpfen wir gezielt die Nahrungsmittelknappheit in unseren Regionen. Durch unseren Einsatz vor Ort wurden wir mit der Realität der Nahrungsmittelknappheit konfrontiert. Dort sprachen wir mit Michael, der nach mehreren Schicksalsschlägen die Tafel aufsuchte. "Ich hatte seit zwei Tagen nichts mehr gegessen. Ich war noch nie zuvor hungriger", erzählte uns Michael, während er darauf wartete, ein Lebensmittelpaket zu bekommen. Wir haben uns gefreut, Michael mit einer warmen, gesunden Mahlzeit versorgen zu können.



Michael (Name durch die Redaktion geändert) besuchte die Tafel während unseres Einsatzes

Dies sind Erfahrungen, die uns ermutigen, unser Programm der Lebensmittelspende weiterzuentwickeln.





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Mit unserem neuen Programm können wir einen großen Unterschied machen. Im Durchschnitt wird jede sechste Mahlzeit im Gastgewerbe verschwendet. Unser Ziel ist es, dies auf eine von zwanzig Mahlzeiten zu reduzieren. Darüber hinaus können wir die schädlichen Auswirkungen auf unsere Umwelt direkt reduzieren, da Lebensmittelverschwendung Methan erzeugt - ein starkes Treibhausgas. Wir machen bedeutende Fortschritte auf dem Weg zur Nachhaltigkeit; sowohl sozial als auch ökologisch.

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Wir bei PALMTRI RESORTS freuen uns, diese Jahr ein neues Nachhaltigkeitsprojekt einführen zu können - ein Kooperationsprogramm mit lokalen Tafeln zur Reduzierung von Lebensmittelverschwendung. Nahrungsmittelknappheit ist ein grundlegendes humanitäres Anliegen, wobei das Gastgewerbe wesentlich zum Problem der Verschwendung beiträgt. Unser neues Programm zielt darauf ab, unseren Lebensmittelüberschuss an Menschen in Not zu spenden.

Der Umgang mit bereits zubereiteten Lebensmitteln unterliegt strengen Vorschriften zur Lebensmittelsicherheit. Daher werden nicht benötigte Mahlzeiten, direkt nach Ende eines Banketts, schnellstmöglich zur nächsten Tafel transportiert und dort schockgefroren.

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Während unser neues Programm vielleicht nur einen kleinen Beitrag leisten kann, freuen wir uns über jeden Fortschritt. Im Durchschnitt wird jede sechste Mahlzeit im Gastgewerbe verschwendet. Unser Ziel ist es, dies auf eine von acht Mahlzeiten zu reduzieren. Darüber hinaus können wir die schädlichen Auswirkungen auf unsere Umwelt teilweise reduzieren, da Lebensmittelverschwendung Methan erzeugt, ein starkes Treibhausgas. So bewegen wir uns in Richtung Nachhaltigkeit; sowohl sozial als auch ökologisch.

Durch die Spende unseres Lebensmittelüberschusses bekämpfen wir gezielt die Nahrungsmittelknappheit in unseren Regionen. Durch unseren Einsatz vor Ort wurden wir mit der Realität der Nahrungsmittelknappheit konfrontiert. Dort sprachen wir mit Michael, der nach mehreren Schicksalsschlägen die Tafel aufsuchte. "Ich hatte seit zwei Tagen nichts mehr gegessen. Ich war noch nie zuvor hungriger", erzählte uns Michael, während er darauf wartete, ein Lebensmittelpaket zu bekommen. Wir haben uns gefreut, Michael mit einer warmen, gesunden Mahlzeit versorgen zu können.



Michael (Name durch die Redaktion geändert) besuchte die Tafel während unseres Einsatzes

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Appendix II

Complete Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

the following study is being conducted as part of the academic requirements for the Master of Science in communication science at the University of Twente.

This survey is being used to conduct market research to collect input regarding the rebranding strategy of a resort chain. Therefore, in the following, you will be introduced to the company and subsequently asked several questions about your perceptions of and attitudes toward the company. This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

All answers given in this survey will be handled confidentially. Your responses will be recorded anonymously and no identifiable data will be stored. Further, your participation is entirely voluntary. If you would like to stop participating, you can do so at any time.

If you have any questions regarding this research, please feel free to contact the responsible researcher at k.holscher@student.utwente.nl

I have read and understood the information and agree with participating in this study.

- Vacation involvement (existing scale)
 - I like having a vacation.
 - Having a regular vacation is part of my lifestyle.
 - Having a vacation frequently makes me happy.
 - I would rather stay at home than take a trip.

Items being asked before and after having read the CSR statement (repeated measures)

- Impression of the brand
 - I expect the service of PALMTRI RESORTS to be of high quality.
 - My opinion of PALMTRI RESORTS is very favourable.
 - I expect PALMTRI RESORTS to have a good reputation.
 - I perceive PALMTRI RESORTS to be a prestigious brand.
- Purchase interest
 - I would likely consider PALMTRI RESORTS for a vacation.
 - I am interested in PALMTRI RESORTS as potential accommodation.
 - I would like to have more information about a vacation with PALMTRI RESORTS.
 - I am not interested in booking a vacation at PALMTRI RESORTS.
- CPCR
 - I expect PALMTRI RESORTS to engage in sustainability programs.
 - In my opinion PALMTRI RESORTS uses eco-friendly processes.
 - I believe PALMTRI RESORTS makes social contributions.
 - I think PALMTRI RESORTS donates and offers volunteer work to local communities.
 - I do not expect PALMTRI RESORTS to be concerned with improving the general well-being of society.
 - I do not think PALMTRI RESORTS is concerned with respecting and protecting the natural environment.

To be measured after having read the CSR statement

- Authenticity
 - I believe that PALMTRI RESORTS' social responsibility activities are genuine.
 - I think that PALMTRI RESORTS is committed to environmental sustainability.
 - In my opinion PALMTRI RESORTS is sincerely concerned about food waste.
 - I find the socially responsible actions of PALMTRI RESORTS to be insincere.
 - I believe that PALMTRI RESORTS does not genuinely care about its environmental impact.

Manipulation checks

- Centrality
 - I believe that CSR is already embedded into PALMTRI RESORTS' business strategy.
 - I believe that PALMTRI RESORTS is intrinsically motivated to engage in CSR.
 - PALMTRI RESORTS' CSR program was initiated solely to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- Level of impact
 - I believe that PALMTRI RESORTS' CSR program makes an important contribution to reducing food waste.
 - I believe that PALMTRI RESORTS' CSR program only plays a small part in the overall issue of food waste.
- Human interest
 - I was able to learn the story of an individual profiting from PALMTRI RESORTS' program.
 - In the CSR campaign a very specific individual is highlighted as the recipient.

Demographics

- Age
- Gender
- Educational level
- Involvement regarding food waste / sustainability issues (existing scale)
 - I am generally interested in sustainability issues.
 - I consider myself to be well-informed regarding environmental issues and their causes.
 - I am aware of the food waste issue and its environmental and social consequences.
 - I believe food waste to be an important sustainability issue that needs to be addressed.
 - I am concerned about the issue of food waste.
 - I do not pay attention to my own contribution to the problem of food waste.

This is the end of the survey.

In the beginning, you were told that you are participating in a market research survey regarding the rebranding strategy of a resort chain. However, the true focus of this study is whether the framing of a company's CSR communication affects consumers' perceptions of the firm as authentic and green. It was necessary to use deception in the beginning of the study to ensure that your indicated attitudes have not been manipulated.

While confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed, you are free to withdraw your participation from this study if you do not agree with its focus. In this case, please contact the researcher (k.holscher@student.utwente.nl) and your data will be deleted completely.

Thank you for your participation.