



Attribute framing in CSR communication: Doing good and spreading the word – But how?[☆]

Boris Bartikowski^a, Guido Berens^{b,*}

^a Kedge Business School, Domaine de Luminy, BP 921, 13288 Marseille Cedex 9, France

^b Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In two experiments, we investigated the effects of positive and negative attribute framing in corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication on consumer attitudes toward the firm and purchase intentions. Study 1 shows a positive main effect of positively framed CSR communication with consumer perceived corporate hypocrisy and CSR associations as mediators. This effect tends to be stronger for products that consumers can evaluate more (as compared to less) easily. Study 2 replicates the positive main effect of Study 1 and finds the effect to be stronger for CSR communication with concrete (as compared to vague) arguments. In combination, the findings provide new insights into how attribute framing in CSR communication affects consumer reactions, additionally demonstrating product type and message specificity as boundary conditions.

1. Introduction

Firms commonly look to enhance their image through corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication (e.g., Aerts & Cormier, 2009; Andreu, Casado-Díaz, & Mattila, 2015; Balmer, Powell, & Greyser, 2011; Korschun, Bhattacharya, & Swain, 2014; Verk, Golob, & Podnar, 2019). They may emphasize their ethical or socially responsible behavior or, contrariwise, communicate that they avoid irresponsible behavior (e.g., Barkemeyer, Comyns, Figge, & Napolitano, 2014). For example, Unilever's 2014 Sustainable Palm Oil Report states that more than 98% of all palm oil directly sourced for Unilever is traceable and certified sustainable. Would it make a difference if Unilever stated identical facts negatively framed, such that “less than 2% of all directly sourced palm oil is not traceable and certified”? This communication example is referred to in the literature as “attribute framing,” meaning that a firm's attributes may be described using either positive (e.g., “traceable”) or negative (e.g., “not traceable”) labels (e.g., Freling, Vincent, & Henard, 2014; Levin & Gaeth, 1988).¹ Studies concerned with attribute framing tend to conclude that positively framed messages promote more positive consumer reactions than negatively framed ones (for meta-analyses, see

Freling et al., 2014; Piñon & Gambara, 2005).

Attribute framing may work differently in the specific context of CSR communication. Consumers may be skeptical or even cynical about CSR messages, seeing them as potential attempts at greenwashing (Illia, Zyglidopoulos, Romenti, Rodríguez-Cánovas, & del Valle Brena, 2013). Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz (2009) referred to such reactions as “corporate hypocrisy” (cf., Wu, Zhang, & Xie, 2020), a perception that the company's actual behavior or intentions do not match with its claims. Hence, instead of promoting positive consumer reactions, positively framed CSR messages may promote negative reactions. Indeed, Olsen, Slotegraaf, and Chandukala (2014) found negative effects of positive attribute framing on consumers' brand attitudes for a sample of “green” products (i.e., products that offer environmentally sustainable features). However, other studies concerned with attribute framing in CSR communication do not generally corroborate this finding. For example, Tu, Kao, and Tu (2013) found that advertising that emphasizes environmental friendliness of a dishwashing liquid in a positive (as compared to negative) way produce more positive consumer reactions. Meanwhile, Ayadi and Lapeyre (2016) report no significant effect differences between positively and negatively framed messages for

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: boris.bartikowski@kedgbs.com (B. Bartikowski), gberens@rsm.nl (G. Berens).

¹ Attribute framing is an example of what has been referred to as “equivalency frames” (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014) or “pure framing manipulation” (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009), in which the informational content remains equivalent. In contrast, in “issue frames” (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014) or “pure information effects” (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009) the content of the message is changed.

consumer attitudes toward a green laptop computer. Taken together, research evidence does not support definite conclusions regarding why and how attribute framing in CSR communication affects consumer behavior. We aim to offer new insights to clarify this issue.

The findings by Olsen et al. (2014) and Ayadi and Lapeyre (2016) of no or negative effects of positive framing may be due to fact that most products examined are experience products, which require high cognitive effort to be processed. As we shall argue, attribute framing may have weaker effects for products that are more difficult to evaluate. Second, several of the messages examined by Olsen et al. (2014) were vague rather than specific, which may explain why positive attribute framing had a less positive effect in their study. The meta-analysis by Freling et al. (2014) also suggests that for decisions with a low abstraction level (e.g., a concrete product or company), the effect of positive attribute framing is larger for specific messages than for abstract ones. However, none of these studies (Ayadi & Lapeyre, 2016; Freling et al., 2014; Olsen et al., 2014) provides experimental evidence for these arguments.

We report two complementary experiments offering three main contributions to the literature on corporate marketing and CSR communication (e.g., Balmer et al., 2011; Korschun et al., 2014; Verk et al., 2019) in general, and the literature on persuasion effects of message framing (e.g., Freling et al., 2014; Levin & Gaeth, 1988) in particular. *First*, we show that positively (as compared to negatively) framed CSR communication elicits more positive attitudes toward the firm and purchase intentions. *Second*, we find that consumer perceived corporate hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009), as well as CSR associations, but not corporate ability (CA) associations,² mediate effects of attribute framing, thereby shedding light on the psychological mechanisms that explain effects of attribute framing in the context of CSR communication. *Third*, we find that attribute framing effects are (a) stronger for products that are easier (as compared to more difficult) for consumers to evaluate, and (b) stronger for messages containing concrete (as compared to vague) arguments. Hence, we provide new insights into the boundary conditions under which attribute framing effects occur in CSR communication. We discuss the theoretical and managerial contributions of our findings and offer an outlook for future research.

2. Corporate marketing and CSR communication

Literatures on corporate and organizational identity, corporate personality, corporate branding as well as corporate communication have contributed to forming building blocks of what is now known as corporate marketing (Balmer, 1998, 2009, 2017a). Corporate marketing is an organization-wide philosophy with a key focus on creating a good and valuable corporate identity among customers, employees, shareholders and other key stakeholder groups (Balmer, 2012; Balmer, 2017b). Ethos and values constitute key corporate identity traits that senior managers should pay special attention to (cf., Balmer & Gray, 2003; Balmer, 2017b; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, 2004; Podnar & Golob, 2007; Powell, 2011). Indeed, the literature recognizes ethics and social responsibility as important aspects of organizational identity or “character”, underlying the six elements (6Cs) of the corporate marketing mix (Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Balmer et al., 2011). Authors, therefore, consider the critical role that CSR plays in effective corporate marketing and communication strategies (Balmer et al., 2011; Hildebrand, Sen, & Bhattacharya, 2011; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). CSR is broadly defined as the obligations that firms have to “assume their core economic responsibility and voluntarily go beyond legal minimums so that they are ethical in all of their activities” (Sarkar & Searcy, 2016, p. 1433). Numerous studies have focused on what Crane and Glozer (2016) term

² Corporate social responsibility (CSR) associations are consumers’ perceptions of a company’s social responsibility, and corporate ability (CA) associations are consumers’ perceptions of a company’s capabilities for producing products (Brown & Dacin, 1997).

“CSR Identity,” which signifies how companies communicate about existing CSR activities. Although the field of CSR communication is multidisciplinary and characterized by porous boundaries (see Verk et al., 2019), in this paper we consider CSR communication from the perspective of corporate marketing. From this perspective, the main goals of CSR communication include informing stakeholders about CSR activities and persuading them about the legitimacy or authenticity of such activities (cf., Balmer et al., 2011).

Studies concerned with persuasion effects of CSR communication found, for example, that reactive (but not proactive) CSR communication has a positive effect on a company’s environmental legitimacy (Aerts & Cormier, 2009), or that rational appeals are more effective for environmental CSR communication, whereas emotional appeals are more effective for employee-related CSR communication (Andreu et al., 2015). Other studies considered framing in CSR communication – techniques that stimulate a certain interpretation of a given piece of information (e.g., Elving, Golob, Podnar, Ellerup-Nielsen, & Thomson, 2015; Weder, Koinig, & Voci, 2019). While the literature differentiates numerous types of framing (e.g., Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009), the central focus of the present study is on attribute framing (e.g., Freling et al., 2014; Levin & Gaeth, 1988), thus on messages where the wording used to describe the attributes of an object varies in valence, while the message content remains logically equivalent, as illustrated with the introductory corporate communication example. Strategic message framing, attribute framing in particular, has thus far been rather rarely considered in the literature on corporate marketing and CSR communication. Therefore, efforts to better understand message framing effects are of considerable importance for corporate marketing and CSR communication in particular.

3. Hypotheses development

As shown in Fig. 1, we expect a positive main effect of positive attribute framing in CSR communication on consumer reactions (attitudes toward the firm; purchase intentions), with perceived corporate hypocrisy, CA and CSR associations as mediator variables. Moreover, we expect attribute framing effects to be contingent on (a) the type of product marketed by the firm, and (b) the specificity of the CSR communication.

3.1. Direct effects of message framing in CSR communication

Levin and Gaeth (1988) suggest that attribute framing effects occur because consumers encode information relative to its descriptive valence. Therefore, positive framing of a piece of information elicits favorable memory associations, whereas negative framing of what is objectively the same information elicits unfavorable associations. This, in turn, promotes object evaluations consistent with the valence of the information received (Levin & Gaeth, 1988). Petty and Cacioppo (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) leads to the same prediction, assuming that attribute framing is a peripheral cue that does not provide relevant arguments (e.g., Zhang & Buda, 1999). Accordingly, the statement “98% of palm oil is sustainable” provides objectively the same information as the statement “2% of palm oil is not sustainable,” but consumers may shorten the former to “... is sustainable” while shortening the latter to “... is not sustainable.” Such a heuristic implies a more positive CSR performance from the former statement than from the latter. Hence, we hypothesize:

H1: Positive attribute framing in CSR communication elicits more positive attitudes toward the firm and higher purchase intentions than negative attribute framing.

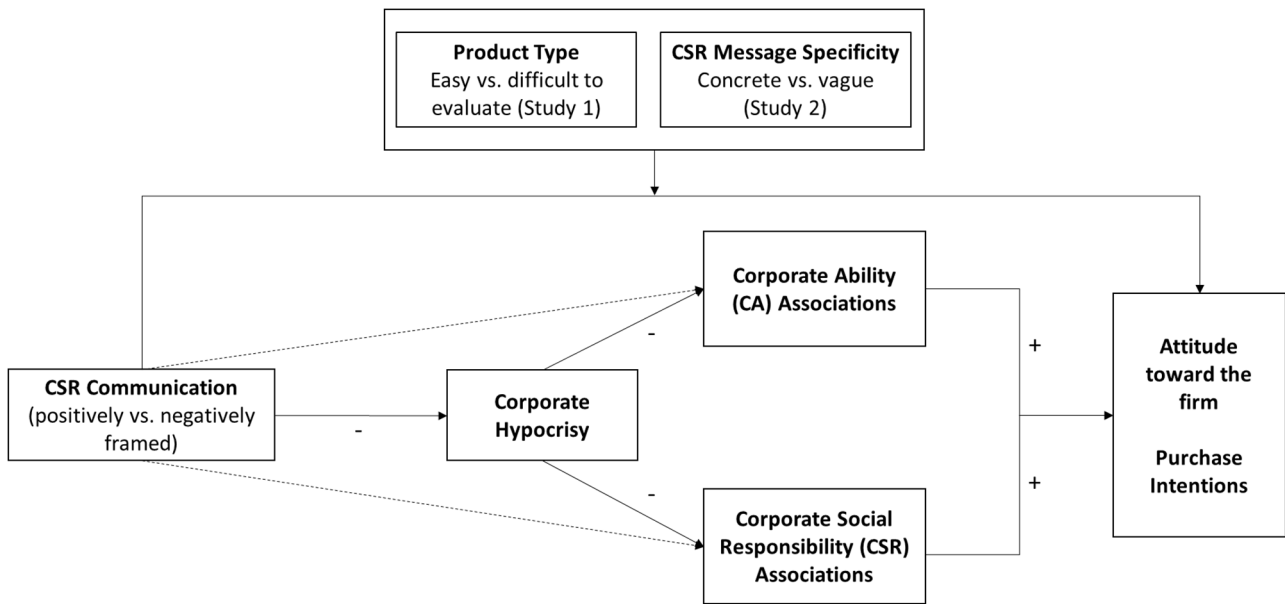


Fig. 1. Conceptual Model.

3.2. Mediatlional chains

Memory associations that arise from attribute framing may not only affect attitudes toward the firm and purchasing intentions, but also the cognitive antecedents of these reactions. One such antecedent is corporate hypocrisy, which Wagner et al. (2009, p. 79) define as "... the belief that a firm claims to be something that it is not." In line with the idea of memory consistency effects (HI), we expect positively (negatively) framed CSR information to elicit lower (higher) levels of corporate hypocrisy. Moreover, drawing from Wagner et al. (2009), we expect corporate hypocrisy to be a "key psychological mechanism that affects both consumers' overall CSR associations and their attitudes toward the firm" (p. 79), leading to the following hypothesis.

H2a: The positive effect of positive attribute framing in CSR communication on consumer attitudes toward the firm and purchase intentions is serially mediated by consumers' perceptions of corporate hypocrisy and CSR associations.

Corporate hypocrisy perceptions may also affect consumers' beliefs about the company's ability to produce or deliver quality products (CA associations), as suggested by cognitive consistency theories. Accordingly, people strive for harmony in their beliefs and avoid cognitive dissonances (e.g., Festinger, 1957). Therefore, when consumers perceive that a firm acts hypocritically, we conceive that they develop belief-consistent ideas about CA which, in turn, affects their overall evaluation of the firm. For example, Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, and Avramidis (2009) found consumer skepticism about a company's CSR to predict trust toward the company and, in turn, purchase intentions. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2b: The positive effect of positive attribute framing in CSR communication on consumer attitudes toward the firm and purchase intentions is serially mediated by consumers' perceptions of corporate hypocrisy and CA associations.

3.3. Boundary conditions

3.3.1. Product type

Products may be differentiated based on how easily consumers can evaluate them prior to purchase or trial. Products that predominantly

consist of experience or credence attributes require more cognitive effort to be processed and cannot be evaluated easily, whereas products that predominantly consist of search attributes can be evaluated easily and with little cognitive effort (Franke, Huhmann, & Mothersbaugh, 2004; Nelson, 1974). Moreover, products that are more difficult to evaluate present higher risks to consumers, which may increase their motivation to process product information (cf., Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Therefore, following the argument that attribute framing constitutes a peripheral cue (HI), it may be less effective for products that are more difficult to evaluate, as people rely more on central processing for these products. Indeed, Cheng and Wu (2010) found higher involvement and motivation to process information to weaken attribute framing effects. Hence, we hypothesize:

H3: The positive effect of positive (as compared to negative) attribute framing in CSR communication on consumer reactions is stronger for products that consumers can more easily (as compared to less easily) evaluate.

3.3.2. Message specificity

Freling et al. (2014) meta-analysis on framing effects suggests that for decisions with a low abstraction level (such as evaluating a concrete product or company), the effect of positive attribute framing is larger for specific than for abstract (or vague) messages. This difference resonates with construal level theory of psychological distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Accordingly, the construal level of a situation or object is marked by its level of abstractness. Following Freling et al. (2014), when a judgment task has a similar construal level to a message related to a given task, the message will be more persuasive. Because the task of evaluating a concrete company is typically concrete (i.e., has a low construal level), messages using concrete information would fit better with such a task than messages using abstract or vague information. Indeed, studies found more concrete CSR messages tend to be more credible (Ganz & Grimes, 2018), and lead to more trust in the company as well as more positive attitudes toward the company's product (Robinson & Eilert, 2018). We accordingly hypothesize:

H4: The positive effect of positive (as compared to negative) attribute framing in CSR communication on consumer reactions is stronger for messages with concrete than with vague arguments.

4. Method

We test our hypotheses in two related experiments. Study 1 tests the main effect of attribute framing in CSR communication (*H1*), the roles of perceived hypocrisy, CA and CSR associations as mediator variables (*H2a, b*) as well as product type as a boundary condition of the attribute framing effect. Study 2 retests *H1*, while additionally examining message specificity as another boundary condition (*H4*).

4.1. Study 1

4.1.1. Experimental design

The experimental design was a 2 (CSR communication: positively vs. negatively framed) \times 2 (product type: easy vs. difficult to evaluate) between-subjects design. Participants saw a mock website that mimicked either a brand of apparel or electronics. Following Franke et al. (2004), apparel is an example of search products, hence products that consumers can easily evaluate, whereas electronics are experience products that are more difficult to evaluate. The websites displayed invented brand names (“Rovan” for apparel; “Vero” for electronics) so as to avoid prior brand knowledge biasing reactions.

Participants saw first the homepage, followed by a product page (i.e., jeans trousers for apparel, and accessories for electronics), and then read the “About us” page containing the experimental framing manipulation. In the corporate marketing literature, such messages are known as “secondary corporate communications” (Balmer & Yen, 2017). Drawing from Sarkar and Searcy (2016) definition of CSR, we formulated four statements that describe the firm’s voluntary CSR activities in terms of employee-oriented and environmental aspects of CSR (see Appendix A).³ The wording was the same for both product categories. We disregarded economic responsibilities, as consumers may not consider them an important constituent of CSR (Maignan, 2001; Podnar & Golob, 2007). We also disregarded philanthropic and product-related types of CSR, so as to avoid information overload. Hence, the four CSR statements focused on what Pelozo and Shang (2011) term CSR related to “business practices”. For example, the *positive* framing condition stated “more than 83% of our employees are satisfied or highly satisfied with their jobs,” while the *negative* condition stated “less than 17% of our employees are dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied with their jobs.”

4.1.2. Pretest

We discussed the experimental stimuli qualitatively with two colleagues and four undergraduate students. The discussions revealed that all participants were unfamiliar with the mock brands, could not guess the original brand from which the website was taken and found both mock websites were realistic. Moreover, the participants largely agreed that products marketed by the apparel brand are generally easier to evaluate and present lower purchasing risk than those of the electronics brand. Finally, all participants considered the framing messages to be realistic and effective to represent positively and negatively framed CSR communication.

4.1.3. Data collection and manipulation check

We collected data from a convenience sample of $N = 204$ (59.8% female, 40.2% male) undergraduate students from a French business school who received class credit for participation. All study participants were fluent in English, were enrolled in an international program following classes in English, including classes on CSR. Therefore, the questionnaire was written in English. Moreover, students are typical buyers of the considered product categories.

We measured the constructs of interest using established scales that we adapted to the study context (see Appendix B). We used six items from Wagner et al. (2009) to measure perceived corporate hypocrisy (e.

g., “This company acts hypocritically”), five items from Berens, van Riel, and van Bruggen (2005) to measure CA associations (e.g., “This company employs more talented people than its competitors”), five items from Homer (1995) to measure CSR associations (e.g., “This company is a socially responsible company”), and four items from Wagner et al. (2009) to measure attitudes toward the firm (e.g., “Overall, my feelings toward this company are ... unfavorable/ favorable.” We assessed participants’ intentions to purchase products from the focal brand using a 11-point Juster scale, as described by Wright, Sharp, and Sharp (2002) (i.e., “What is the probability that you would buy [product] from this company?”). Finally, we adapted four items from Grohmann et al. (2007) to measure attitude certainty (e.g., “I am very certain about my assessment of this company”), which served as an additional post-hoc manipulation check of the product type manipulation. With the exception of the scale to measure purchase intention, we used five-point rating scales throughout.

4.1.4. Results

Cronbach’s alpha was reasonably high for all constructs measured on multi-item scales (CA associations: $\alpha = 0.70$; CSR associations: $\alpha = 0.85$; attitude toward the firm: $\alpha = 0.91$), but not for the 6-item hypocrisy scale ($\alpha = 0.39$), which contains three reverse (positively) worded items (Wagner et al., 2009). Since reverse coded items can be confusing to respondents (Weijters & Baumgartner, 2012), we decided to keep only the negatively worded items in line with the idea of hypocrisy being a negatively valenced construct. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.83 for the 3-item hypocrisy scale. We created composite scores for the constructs of interest (see Table 1).

We next engaged in a post-hoc manipulation check related to the product type, using the measures of attitude certainty. We expected higher attitude certainty scores in relation to products that are easier to evaluate (apparel) than for products that are more difficult to evaluate (electronics). Accordingly, the results show that attitude certainty is significantly higher in relation to the apparel brand than in relation to the electronics brand ($M_{\text{Apparel}} = 4.17$, $M_{\text{Electronics}} = 3.80$, $p < .05$). Moreover, the ANOVA results show no interaction between product type and framing ($F(1, 200) = 0.119$, $p > .1$), suggesting that the certainty assessments related to the product type are independent of the framing manipulation, in support of the robustness of the product type manipulation.

We tested *H1* and *H3* through comparisons of the composite scores of attitudes toward the firm and purchasing intentions as the dependent variables and type of framing and product type as factors. We used Hayes (2012) PROCESS tool (model 6) to test the mediation hypotheses (*H2a, b*), with 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals and 1000 resamples. The treatment cell means appear in Table 2, and the results of the mediation tests in Table 3.

Regarding *H1*, we find overall positive effects of positive (as compared to negative) framing on consumers’ attitudes toward the firm ($M_{\text{positive}} = 5.17$ vs. $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.60$, $F(1, 202) = 12.38$, $p < .01$) as well as on their purchase intentions ($M_{\text{positive}} = 4.95$ vs. $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.37$, $F(1, 202) = 3.54$, $p < .1$) in support of *H1*. With *H2a*, we hypothesized that consumer perceptions of corporate hypocrisy and CSR associations serially mediate the relationship between CSR message framing and attitudes toward the firm and, respectively, purchase intentions. The PROCESS results (Table 3) show a significant serial mediation for both attitudes toward the firm ($B = 0.01$; $p < .05$) and for purchase intentions ($B = 0.02$; $p < .05$) as the dependent variables. Hence, the empirical results support *H2a*. With *H2b*, we hypothesized that consumer perceptions of corporate hypocrisy and CA associations serially mediate the relationship between CSR message framing and attitudes toward the firm and, respectively, purchase intentions. However, the PROCESS results (Table 3) show no significant serial mediation, neither for attitudes toward the firm ($B = 0.001$; $p > .05$) nor for purchase intentions ($B = 0.003$; $p > .1$) as the dependent variables. Hence, *H2b* receives no support. While the overall results show, as expected, that negative framing

³ The exact stimuli, including visuals, are available upon request.

Table 1
Correlations and scale reliabilities (Study 1).

	M	SD	α	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
(a) Corporate hypocrisy	3.70	1.08	0.83	1					
(b) CA associations	4.55	0.68	0.70	-0.128	1				
(c) CSR associations	5.12	0.83	0.85	-0.276**	0.384**	1			
(d) Attitude toward the firm	5.37	0.91	0.91	-0.184**	0.253**	0.286**	1		
(e) Purchase intentions	3.97	1.20	-	-0.156*	0.312**	0.262**	0.338**	1	
(f) Attitude certainty	3.97	1.20	0.89	0.011	0.276**	0.084	0.007	0.258**	1

Table 2
Treatment cell means (Study 1).

Product Category	Attribute Framing	N	Corporate Hypocrisy		CA Associations		CSR Associations		Attitude toward firm		Purchase Intent		Attitude certainty	
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Apparel	Negative	52	3.93	1.15	4.33	0.56	4.80	0.92	5.09	0.80	4.75	1.92	4.16	1.07
	Positive	41	3.49	1.15	4.59	0.68	5.32	0.79	5.73	0.75	5.66	1.91	4.18	1.30
	Total	93	3.73	1.16	4.44	0.63	5.03	0.90	5.37	0.84	5.15	1.96	4.17	1.17
Electronics	Negative	56	3.81	0.92	4.65	0.71	5.13	0.82	5.25	1.13	4.02	2.53	3.73	1.25
	Positive	55	3.52	1.06	4.63	0.72	5.25	0.69	5.51	0.74	4.42	2.08	3.87	1.16
	Total	111	3.66	1.00	4.64	0.71	5.19	0.76	5.38	0.96	4.22	2.31	3.80	1.20
Total	Negative	108	3.87	1.03	4.49	0.66	4.97	0.88	5.17	0.98	4.37	2.27	3.94	1.18
	Positive	96	3.50	1.09	4.61	0.70	5.28	0.73	5.60	0.75	4.95	2.09	4.01	1.22
	Total	204	3.70	1.08	4.55	0.68	5.12	0.83	5.37	0.91	4.64	2.20	3.97	1.20

Table 3
Indirect effects (PROCESS) (Study 1).

						B	SE	LLCI	ULCI	
Positively framed CSR message	→	Hypocrisy	→	CSR Associations	→	Attitude toward the firm	0.01*	0.008	0.001	0.037
				CA Associations			0.001 ^{NS}	0.004	-0.005	0.014
	→	Hypocrisy	→	CSR Associations	→	Purchase intention	0.02*	0.015	0.002	0.069
				CA Associations			.003 ^{NS}	0.014	-0.022	0.041

Notes: * $p < .05$; ^{NS} = non-significant.

leads to enhanced perceptions of corporate hypocrisy ($M_{\text{positive}} = 3.50$ vs. $M_{\text{negative}} = 3.87$, $F(1, 202) = 5.96$, $p < .01$), they show no significant effect of hypocrisy on CA associations ($B = -0.014$; $p > .1$), thereby contradicting the assumption that consumers develop belief-consistent feelings between corporate hypocrisy and CA associations (H2b). Moreover, the type of framing has overall no direct effect on CA associations ($M_{\text{positive}} = 4.61$ vs. $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.49$, $F(1, 202) = 1.13$, $p > .1$), but a direct effect on CSR associations ($M_{\text{positive}} = 5.28$ vs. $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.97$, $F(1, 202) = 7.29$, $p < .01$). This suggests that consumers' CA associations have a very different origin than CSR associations and emphasizes the importance of considering both pathways as suggested in Brown and Dacin (1997) seminal work.

Regarding H3, the results suggest that the effect of positive framing on attitudes toward the firm is positively stronger for apparel ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 5.73–5.09 = 0.64) than for electronics ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 5.51–5.25 = 0.26). The difference between these mean differences is marginally significant at $p < .1$ ($z = 1.567$, one-tailed $p = .059$). Similarly, we find that the effect of the positive framing on purchase intentions is positively stronger for apparel ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 5.66–4.75 = 0.91) than for electronics ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 4.42–4.02 = 0.4); however, the difference between these mean differences is statistically not significant with $p > .1$ ($z = 0.859$, $p = 1.952$). Moreover, although not hypothesized, the results show that the effect of positive framing on CSR associations is stronger for apparel ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 5.32–4.80 = 0.52) than for electronics ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 5.25–5.13 = 0.12), and the difference between these effects is statistically significant at $p < .05$ ($z = 1.75$, $p = .04$). Similarly, the effect of positive framing on CA associations is stronger for apparel ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 4.59–4.33 = 0.26) than for electronics ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 4.63–4.65 = -0.02), and the

difference between these effects is statistically significant at $p < .1$ ($z = 1.481$, $p = .07$). Finally, the results show that the effect of positive framing on corporate hypocrisy is stronger for apparel ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 3.49–3.93 = -0.44) than for electronics ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: 3.52–3.81 = -0.29), but the difference between these effects is statistically not significant with $p > .1$ ($z = 0.491$, $p = .312$). In sum, the results point in the expected direction suggesting consistently stronger effects of negative framing for products that are easy to evaluate (apparel) than for products that are more difficult to evaluate (electronics). However, because the effect was only marginally significant for attitudes towards the firm, and not significant for purchase intentions, our statistical tests do not confirm H3.

4.2. Study 2

4.2.1. Experimental design and data collection

The experimental design was a 2 (attribute framing: positive vs. negative) \times 2 (message specificity: concrete vs. vague) between-subjects design. We used the apparel mock website from Study 1 because of the stronger attribute framing effect that we found for this category. The CSR statements used in Study 1 are arguably all concrete, given that they contain explicit percentages of CSR performance. We created additional statements by replacing the percentages by vague quantifiers. For example, a concrete statement in the positive framing condition was "more than 83% of our employees are satisfied or highly satisfied," while the vague counterpart was "most of our employees are satisfied or highly satisfied." We asked three colleagues to read all statements, and they confirmed the meaningfulness of the message specificity manipulation for all pairs of statements. Hence, participants in Study 2 saw the same

apparel brand website as in Study 1, with the difference that the “About us” page contained both the valence and the message specificity manipulation.

We collected data from a convenience sample using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (N = 211; all in the US, fluent in English). After deleting individuals who failed the attention checks, the final sample was N = 201 (66.2% male; 33.8% female; 89% were 25 years or older). We measured attitudes toward the firm and participants’ intentions to purchase products from the focal brand using the same scales as in Study 1.

4.2.2. Results

Cronbach’s alpha was high for attitude toward the firm ($\alpha = 0.96$). The treatment cell means appear in Table 4.

As in Study 1, we find a significant positive effect of positive (as compared to negative) attribute framing on consumers’ attitudes toward the firm ($M_{\text{positive}} = 5.46$ vs. $M_{\text{negative}} = 5.02$, $F(1, 199) = 4.82$, $p < .05$), but not for purchase intentions ($M_{\text{positive}} = 6.70$ vs. $M_{\text{negative}} = 6.30$, $F(1, 199) = 0.92$, $p > .1$). Hence, the statistical tests support *H1* only for attitudes toward the firm.

The effect of positive framing on attitudes toward the firm is significant for concrete messages ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: $5.86 - 5.16 = 0.70$, $p = .004$), but not for vague ones ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: $5.10 - 4.87 = 0.22$, $p = .486$), while the effect is also larger for concrete messages. However, the difference between these mean differences is not statistically significant ($z = 1.206$, one-tailed $p = .113$). For purchasing intentions, we find the effect of positive framing is marginally significant for concrete messages ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: $7.52 - 6.42 = 1.10$, $p = .052$) but not for vague ones ($M_{\text{positive}} - M_{\text{negative}}$: $5.94 - 6.16 = -0.22$, $p = .718$), while the effect is also larger for concrete messages. The difference between these mean differences is marginally significant ($z = 1.594$, $p = .0554$). Hence, the statistical tests tentatively support *H4* only for purchasing intentions, not for attitudes toward the firm, thereby corroborating message specificity as a potentially important boundary condition of attribute framing effects in CSR communication.

5. Discussion

5.1. General discussion

CSR communication is a pivotal aspect of corporate marketing (Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Balmer et al., 2011; Balmer, 2017b). The literature on corporate marketing has provided valuable insights into the role of different elements of the corporate marketing mix in establishing stakeholder attitudes and behaviors—particularly, it has demonstrated the importance of alignment between these elements (e.g., Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Balmer et al., 2011). However, the literature so far has focused less on the question of how specific CSR messages can be most effectively framed. Particularly, we still know little about how

attribute framing in CSR communication affects consumer attitudes and behavior. Our study addresses this gap by examining factors likely to mediate and moderate such effects. Consistent with previous literature on attribute framing (Freling et al., 2014; Piñon & Gambaro, 2005), the results of our two experiments show a positive main effect of positive attribute framing on consumer attitude toward the company and purchase intentions. Study 1 provides empirical support for the role of corporate hypocrisy and CSR associations as mediator variables that explain the effect of attribute framing in CSR communication on consumers’ attitudes and purchasing intentions; however, the results do not confirm the hypothesized mediating role of CA associations. Study 1 also shows that the effect of positive attribute framing tends to be stronger for products that are relatively easy to evaluate (apparel) than for products that are more difficult to evaluate (electronics). Moreover, Study 2 demonstrates message specificity as another potentially important boundary condition of attribute framing effects.

The positive effect of positively framed attributes on consumer responses is consistent with most studies on the effects of attribute framing in general. The limited pool of studies on the effect of attribute framing in CSR communication have provided inconsistent results, reporting positive (Tu et al., 2013), negative (Olsen et al., 2014) as well as insignificant (Ayadi & Lapeyre, 2016) effects. Our study helps to clarify this inconsistency by examining the type of product that a firm markets as a moderator of this effect. Specifically, although only marginally significant, our results suggest that the ease with which a product can be evaluated determines the degree to which positive attribute framing is effective. The trend in our results is consistent with earlier findings suggesting that the effect of attribute framing is stronger when consumer involvement is low (Cheng & Wu, 2010; Donovan & Jalleh, 1999), as well as with the pattern across previous studies examining attribute framing in CSR communication (Ayadi & Lapeyre, 2016; Olsen et al., 2014; Tu et al., 2013), which suggests that the effect of positive attribute framing may be stronger for search products than for experience products.

Similarly, our finding of a stronger effect of attribute framing for concrete messages than for abstract ones is consistent with the pattern in earlier studies on attribute framing in general (see Freling et al., 2014). One explanation why these effects did not reach statistical significance in our study could be that the CSR message was not directly relevant for the product itself, so that the attributes of the product had less effect on the processing of the message.

In addition, our findings confirm the important role of consumer perceptions of corporate hypocrisy and CSR associations as mediators between marketing CSR communication and consumer attitudes and behavior. The absence of a mediating role of CA associations underlines the importance of considering the different pathways of CSR versus CA as implied by Brown and Dacin (1997). Future research should explore under what conditions perceptions of hypocrisy could affect consumers’ CA associations.

5.2. Practical implications

We envision several broad implications of our empirical findings for corporate marketing and CSR communication in particular. The most important is that firms should frame CSR communication positively, especially for products that are easy to evaluate (such as apparel) and for concrete CSR communication (such as messages mentioning concrete activities or percentages). Negatively framed messages may be detrimental for such products and types of communication for two reasons. First, they may activate negative associations which, in turn, lead to negative evaluations of the firm, a path this study has empirically confirmed. Second, negatively framed messages may stimulate effortful processing, which, especially for messages about CSR, can increase skepticism and lead to perceived corporate hypocrisy among consumers. However, firms that market products that are more difficult to evaluate (such as electronics or services) or communicate mainly abstract CSR

Table 4
Treatment cell means (Study 2).

Message specificity	Attribute Framing	N	Attitude toward the firm		Purchase Intentions	
			M	SD	M	SD
Concrete	Negative	52	5.16	1.41	6.42	2.99
	Positive	48	5.86	0.84	7.52	2.57
	Total	100	5.50	1.22	6.95	2.83
Vague	Negative	49	4.87	1.77	6.16	3.22
	Positive	52	5.10	1.43	5.94	2.92
	Total	101	4.99	1.60	6.05	3.05
Total	Negative	101	5.02	1.60	6.30	3.09
	Positive	100	5.46	1.24	6.70	2.86
	Total	201	5.24	1.44	6.50	2.97

messages (e.g., focusing on general principles or using vague quantifiers) have less cause to be concerned about how their CSR communication is framed; they might then focus their attention more on the content of their CSR messages (e.g., the types of motives and benefits they communicate). On the other hand, from a societal perspective, the deliberate use of positive attribute framing could be a form of hypocrisy in itself, contributing to what Christensen, Morsing, and Thyssen (2020) have termed “re-narration” or “re-telling an irresponsible past”. That is, using positive attribute framing might be an attempt by companies to reposition activities that are actually less responsible or even harmful to society as ‘CSR’. For example, a company could use a positively framed phrase like “95% of our raw materials are certified sustainable” to hide the harmful nature of the other 5% of their materials (which the negatively framed phrase “5% of our raw materials are not certified sustainable” would draw more attention to). Such acts of hypocrisy are in themselves not necessarily harmful to society, as they may serve as a starting point for a constructive dialogue with the company (Christensen et al., 2020). However, the latter only works if stakeholders have a sufficiently critical attitude, which they might not always have. For campaigning NGOs or public policy makers, who aim to stimulate consumers and other stakeholders to think critically about CSR communication, our findings imply that they could use negative attribute framing in their own communication about CSR. This negative framing could then lead to more skeptical attitudes regarding the company’s own communication about its activities, and to more dialogue about these activities.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Like all research, our current study is not without limitations. While the experimental scenario method is well suited to examine the effects of attribute framing, it typically lacks ecological validity. Particularly, the hypothetical and limited nature of the scenarios used can make it sensitive to demand artifacts. Respondents may find it difficult to evaluate the company, especially in terms of multidimensional concepts like CSR, and may therefore answer questions about such concepts based on their idea of what the researchers want to know instead of their true opinion (which they may not really have). We therefore envisage field experiments to see whether the study’s findings generalize to real consumption situations.

Furthermore, the results could be sensitive to the exact information included in the scenarios. For example, our results could be driven by the particular percentages (e.g., 83% satisfied or 17% dissatisfied) and vague quantifiers (e.g., “most of” or “negligible amounts of”) that we used. Different percentages or quantifiers (such as 70% satisfied versus 30% dissatisfied or “substantial” versus “insubstantial”) may produce different results. Future studies could, therefore, examine the effects of

attribute framing across a range of ratios or quantifiers with equivalent informational content. Similarly, CSR message framing may be sensitive to the specific type of CSR initiative that the communication highlights, such as workplace safety or the environmental friendliness of materials in relation to the products that the company markets. Other types of CSR initiatives, such as the firm’s community involvement, might produce different results.

One explanation for the missing of statistical support for the moderating effect of the type of product (*H3*) could be the lack of direct relevance of the product type for the CSR message. Therefore, more research is needed to clarify the role of other potentially relevant moderator variables, such as the strength of CSR message arguments, the degree of risk implied by the CSR context (rather than the product context), the vividness of the message, or the degree to which individuals feel accountable for the evaluation they make. Our study operationalized CSR communication in terms of corporate communication, in particular the “About us” part of a firm’s website, hence a form of “secondary corporate communication” (cf., Balmer & Yen, 2017). Such communication aims to disclose information about the company, rather than to sell a product, and such information is typically analyzed and verified by third parties such as analysts or journalists. Therefore, consumers might see secondary corporate communication as less exaggerated and perhaps more trustworthy than product advertising. Future studies should consider and compare attribute framing effects for different types of CSR communication, such as product ads, recruitment ads, or press releases.

Finally, how CSR communication affects consumer thought and behavior may also depend on the type of communication channel. Communication channels differ in terms of how interactive and how ‘rich’ they are (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). A fruitful avenue for future research therefore is to explore CSR message framing effects with different communication channels, such as CSR social media posts, CSR in-store communication, or CSR messages on product packages, to name a few.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Wording of the CSR communication

Positive framing, concrete message (Studies 1 & 2)	Negative framing & concrete message (Studies 1 & 2)
<p>People who work for us enjoy good working conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies conducted by an independent research organization show that more than 83% of our employees are satisfied or highly satisfied with their jobs. • More than 80% of workers in our factories have already participated in trainings to prevent harms or accidents at their workplace. <p>We help to protect the environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than 95% of raw materials used for our jeans are certified sustainable. • More than 80% of our production waste is traceable to be disposed in an environmentally responsible way. 	<p>People who work for us don’t suffer from bad working conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies conducted by an independent research organization show that less than 17% of our employees are dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied with their jobs. • Less than 20% of workers in our factories have not participated in trainings to prevent harms or accidents at their workplace. <p>We avoid harm to the environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 5% of raw materials used are not certified sustainable. • Less than 20% of our production waste is not traceable to be disposed in an environmentally responsible way.
Positive framing, vague message (Study 2)	Negative framing & vague message (Study 2)
<p>People who work for us enjoy good working conditions:</p>	<p>People who work for us don’t suffer from bad working conditions:</p>

(continued on next page)

(continued)

Positive framing, concrete message (Studies 1 & 2)	Negative framing & concrete message (Studies 1 & 2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies conducted by an independent research organization show that most of our employees are satisfied or highly satisfied with their jobs. • Most workers in our factories have already participated in trainings to prevent harms or accidents at their workplace. <p>We help to protect the environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant parts of raw materials used for our jeans are certified sustainable • Most of our production waste is traceable to be disposed in an environmentally responsible way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studies conducted by independent research organizations show that only few of our employees are dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied with their jobs. • Only few workers in our factories have not participated in trainings to prevent harms or accidents at their workplace. <p>We avoid harm to the environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insignificant parts of raw materials used for our jeans are not certified sustainable • Negligible amounts of our production waste are not traceable to be disposed in an environmentally responsible way

Appendix B. Measures

Construct/Items	Source
<p>Corporate Hypocrisy This company acts hypocritically. What this company says and does are two different things. This company pretends to be something that it is not. This company does exactly what it says.* This company keeps its promises.* This company puts its words into action.*</p>	Wagner et al. (2009)
<p>Corporate Ability (CA) Associations This company employs more talented people than its competitors. This company offers innovative products. This company offers high quality products. This company is well managed. This company offers products with a good price–quality ratio.</p>	Berens et al. (2005)
<p>Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Associations This company is a socially responsible company. This company is concerned to improve the well-being of society. This company follows high ethical standards. This company supports good causes. This company behaves responsibly regarding the environment.</p>	Homer (1995); Wagner et al. (2009)
<p>Attitude toward the Firm Overall, my feelings toward this company are unfavorable/favorable ... bad/good ... unpleasant/pleasant ... positive/negative</p>	Wagner et al. (2009)
<p>Purchase Intentions What is the probability that you would buy [product] from this company? 10 – Certain, practically certain [99 in 100] 9 – Almost sure (9 in 10) 8 – Very probable (8 in 10) 7 – Probable (7 in 10) 6 – Good possibility (6 in 10) 5 – Fairly good possibility (5 in 10) 4 – Fair possibility (4 in 10) 3 – Some possibility (3 in 10) 2 – Slight possibility (2 in 10) 1 – Very slightly possible (1 in 10) 0 – No chance, almost no chance (1 in 100)</p>	Wright et al. (2002)
<p>Attitude certainty I am very certain about my assessment of this company I am very confident about my evaluation of this company I feel very capable to evaluate this company My evaluation of this company is very accurate</p>	Grohmann, Spangenberg, and Sprott (2007)

Note: * denotes removed items.

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Boris Bartikowski is Professor of Marketing at Kedge Business School in Marseille/ France. His research emphasis is in the areas of cross-cultural consumer behavior, online marketing and brand management. He serves as associate editor of the Canadian Journal of Administrative Science. His work has been published in journals such as *Journal of Business Research*, *British Journal of Management*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Psychology and Marketing*, and *European Journal of Marketing*.

Guido Berens is an assistant professor at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. His research and teaching interests include corporate communication, consumer reactions to CSR, and quantitative research methods. He is editor-in-chief of the *Corporate Reputation Review* and his research has been published in the *Journal of Marketing* and the *Journal of Management Studies*, among others.