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Consumer reactions to different forms of CSR communication

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Abstract:

Aim

Companies around the world are making sizeable investments into CSR initiatives, but ensuring appropriate returns on these investments remains challenging. Therefore, it is of value to study the communication of corporate CSR efforts. The purpose of this study is to investigate how consumers react to rational versus emotional message strategies in CSR communication. Two categories of consumer reactions were considered: trust and purchase intention.

Methods

Qualitative research with four focus groups was conducted. Participants discussed three texts regarding a CSR project, utilising a rational, emotional and a hybrid rational-emotional message strategy respectively. The conversations focused on trust towards the communication and purchase intention.

Results

Trust - All of the respondents viewed the rational text over the emotional text as more trustworthy, but they most positively reacted to the combined strategy. Rational information was viewed as more reliable by many participants, with emotional cues adding value by better holding their attention.

Purchase intention – Participants more positively reacted to the rational CSR communication strategy, compared to an emotional strategy. For approximately half of respondents, the hybrid strategy targeting both rational and emotional cues was the most successful in terms of purchase intention. Upon further analysis, it was identified that this division in respondents' opinions may reflect a gender difference, where men portrayed the more task oriented and women the socially sensitive consumers.

Conclusions

The findings support previous research championing the use of rational strategies over emotional strategies in CSR communication. A number of managerial implications that can be used by companies in order to better communicate their CSR activities and increase returns on CSR-related investments are provided.

Keywords:

Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Social Responsibility communication, corporate communication, trust, purchase intention

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1. Background

Do companies have responsibilities other than to maximise profits? This question has been greatly debated in the literature for a long time. According to Adam Smith's concept of the 'Invisible Hand' and 20th century economist Milton Friedman, corporations should be purely concerned with the profit motive. This concept argues that every individual pursuing his own interests will simultaneously also support society's advancement (Smith, 1776), completely negating the need for company's involvement in societal good. Present-day scholars, such as Petkus and Woodruff (1992), argue the usefulness of the invisible hand in today's world is limited due to a number of reasons, which impair its function. These include an inadequate level of consumer information and the absence of perfect competition in the market. Thus, the idea of corporations having responsibilities other than profitability has become popular.

1.1. Corporate Social Responsibility

The definition of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been much discussed. The International Standardization Organisation, with its ISO 26000 standard (2010) defines social responsibility as "[the] responsibility of an organisation for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour" (p. 3). Nowadays, companies are expected to work in a socially responsible manner and consumers are putting increasing pressure on them to behave in this way. In response to these demands, companies have shifted away from including meager statements about their CSR oriented activities within their annual reports. They now produce fully extended and transparent disclosures about the non-financial aspects of the business, plus well-presented CSR policies on their corporate websites (Whitehouse, 2006).

There are both supporters and opponents for the idea of CSR within the literature but nonetheless, it can be argued that in today's modern market situations there is

a need for companies to incorporate morals and ethics within their business conduct. They are a part of communities and through their business activities they leave both positive and negative effects on their surroundings, which need to be taken into account.

Much research has therefore investigated the influence of organisational CSR strategies on the consumer. A positive relationship between consumer's attitudes and the implementation of CSR initiatives has been supported by a wealth of experimental and survey data (e.g. Smith & Langford, 2009, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, Ellen, Webb & Mohr, 2006). However, in reality only a small number of consumers actually engage in socially responsible purchasing activities. Davies, Lee and Ahonkhai (2012) noted that whilst 30% of consumers said that they are willing to support and purchase ethical products and services, only 4% of consumers actually do. The resulting paradox has been termed the 'attitude-behaviour gap' (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

Converging evidence from a number of studies suggests that the gap may occur due to the generally weak awareness of consumers regarding the CSR activities of companies (e.g. Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006). This poor awareness is restraining the ability of organisations to maximise returns from investments in CSR projects, thus demonstrating the necessity of companies to adequately communicate CSR to stakeholders (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). These business benefits include in the short term the favourable attitudes and behaviours of stakeholders, such as purchasing the company's products, pursuing employment and investing in the organisation. Long-term benefits include improving the company's image, increased commitment from employees and enhanced advocacy behaviours of stakeholders, such as saying positive things about the company.

1.2. Corporate Social Responsibility Communication

Increasing attention is therefore being paid to the field of CSR communication, to maximise returns from investments in CSR. Within the confines of this paper, CSR communication is narrowly defined as information provided by an organisation, in an effort to reassure consumers of commitment to social and environmental issues (adapted from Tench, Sun & Jones, 2014). In addition to improving awareness, CSR communication is also challenged with reducing scepticism and increasing trust. CSR communication can elicit an adverse response if consumers detect predominantly self-serving motives for the organisation's social projects (Fein & Hilton, 1994).

Company's CSR communications can occur both through direct and indirect routes (Du et al., 2010). Direct communication routes typically encompass formal channels such as sustainability reports and webpages. Indirect routes involve journalists and word of mouth communication from employees or shareholders.

Little is known however about the mediating mechanisms that explain how effective or ineffective CSR communication can be (Du et al., 2010). Traditional advertising research can perhaps be informative here; it has demonstrated a role for a range of rational and emotional responses, underpinning the acceptance of and effectiveness of advertising (Batra & Ray, 1986). These generally-accepted rational and emotional mediating mechanisms have led advertising and the communications field to target both rational thinking and emotions. For example, advertising may try to elicit emotional responses such as feelings of joy or anger. Alternatively, it may target rational responses, for example by including price information (Du et al., 2010). Much research has been conducted, looking at the effectiveness of these strategies (e.g. Chaudhuri, 2006; Reisch, 2006; Bögel, 2015).

1.3.Targeting rational thinking and/or emotions with CSR communication

According to researchers such as Bögel (2015), it is rational thinking that needs to be targeted with CSR communication, rather than emotional cues. She proposes that all stakeholders, including consumers, expect and demand facts as a prerequisite to trusting the company. In contrast, Reisch (2006) promotes the use of positive emotional and entertaining factors to be more effective than the conventional fact-focused CSR communication. In addition, a third group of researchers in this field link the two counterparts; reason and emotions. Chaudhuri (2006) integrated both spheres of human decision making as equal and critical factors. After reviewing the current research conducted in the field, it is clear that researchers have divergent views on which communication strategy is most effective, in terms of generating desired consumer reactions.

1.4.Consumer reactions; trust and purchase intention

A great number of outcome measures are used to investigate the influence of CSR communications. Consumer trust has been selected as a critical issue that CSR communication often endeavours to address. Researchers have prolifically highlighted the challenge corporations face of needing to convince stakeholders of the pro-social side of their business without raising questions about trustworthiness and legitimacy (e.g. Jahn, Schramm & Spiller, 2005; Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009). The interplay between CSR communication strategy and consumer trust represents an interesting avenue for further exploration. For the purposes of this research, the authors of this paper will refer to trust towards the presented communication when using the term “trust”.

Purchase intention is also interesting to focus on because it (somewhat

imperfectly) predicts future purchasing behaviours (Stöttinger, Schlegelmilch & Zou, 2015). Although CSR communications may endeavour to produce a number of consumer responses, such as increased trust and advocacy behaviours, improving sales numbers can often be regarded as the ultimate end goal.

The authors were motivated to investigate these two consumer reactions as a pair because when reviewing the literature regarding rational versus emotional strategies, a curiosity was observed. Previous research suggests that for trust, consumers will more positively react to a rational message (e.g. Bögel, 2015). In contrast, consumers supposedly react more positively to an emotional message in regard to purchase intention (e.g. Hartmann, Apaolaza Ibáñez and Forcada Sainz, 2005). This is particularly interesting as trust and purchase intention are intuitively related; we can perhaps suppose that consumers who read a message they do not trust are unlikely to intend to purchase the product it refers to. However, in the context of rational versus emotional communication strategies, to the authors' knowledge no studies to date have used both consumer trust and purchase intention simultaneously as reaction measures. Differences between studies in terms of the emotional and rational message contents and the product to which the message refers to limit the extent to which we can make formal comparisons. Therefore, using this pairing enables a direct comparison of participant's reactions, to see if this curiosity is indeed observed with CSR communications.

The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate how consumers react to rational versus emotional message strategies in CSR communication. Two categories of consumer reactions have been considered: trust and purchase intention. From the existing literature, a number of propositions were developed and tested using a qualitative methodology.

2. Frame of Reference

2.1. Corporate Social Responsibility

As already discussed, there is no universally agreed upon definition of CSR and it has been the source of much academic debate in the last decades. In Dahlsrud's (2008) analysis of 37 definitions of CSR published between 1980 and 2003, he identified five recurring dimensions; voluntariness, stakeholders, social, environmental and economic responsibilities. In the context of this paper, the International Standardization Organisation's (2010) definition is utilised, defining social responsibility as "[the] responsibility of an organisation for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour" (p. 3).

2.2. CSR Communication

CSR communication has evolved out of the field of stakeholder management and communication. Within the confines of this paper, CSR communication is narrowly defined as information provided by an organisation, in an effort to reassure consumers of commitment to social and environmental issues (adapted from Tench et al., 2014). The authors of this paper acknowledge two potential discussion points with this definition. Firstly, definitions of CSR communication generally include other stakeholder groups such as investors, in addition to consumers as those concerned by CSR communications (e.g. Podnar, 2008; Cornelissen, 2011). The stakeholder group of consumers has been focused on due to the informative nature of advertising literature in this area, which has focused predominantly on the consumer. Therefore, this paper will focus on business-to-consumer companies, who directly serve the needs of consumers. Secondly, the word communication when taken literally refers to a two-way interaction between sender and receiver. However, in the articles that have been reviewed for this study, the term "Communication" is used in reference to both one-directional and two-directional information transfers. This study focuses on how consumers react

to one-directional information transfers due to the attention given to the different strategies organisations can employ. To be more specific, this study focuses on consumer reactions to textual messages about a product, that can be found on the company's website or any other digital or printed media. Using a textual message, as opposed to an image or video, enables better control of other factors that might account for changes in consumer reaction, other than communication strategy.

2.3.Linear Communication Model

In order to understand how CSR communications are interpreted, we can look at the Linear Communication model. Linear models can be informative in this context due to the one-directional definition of Communication employed in this study. Often in CSR communication, the feedback process and the initial communication are quite distinct. Based on historic models such as Shannon and Weaver (1949), linear models involve a sender who encodes and transmits the information and a receiver who then interprets the message.

A multitude of factors that may affect the process are acknowledged. The receiver's interpretation of the message may change, dependent on the choice of the medium through which it is transmitted. The term 'noise' covers a range of disruptions that may occur at any stage. For example, psychological noise refers to the receiver's psychological state; interpretation of a message can be affected by stress, anxiety etc. (Hackley, 2005). Interpretations can vary wildly from the intended meaning, due to many factors, e.g. social, cultural, biological, contextual. The background of the consumer plays a substantial role in this interpretation. An environmental activist may be more aware of environmental issues than the average person, resulting in a more positive and enthusiastic interpretation of the message. Additionally, gender may play an important role in interpretations of communications (Kim, Lehto & Morrison, 2007).

Although simple, this model remains highly informative. It highlights how messages can be encoded in different ways, distorted during transmission and

interpreted in an infinitely diverse manner. The field of Communications and the modern advertising industry must remain mindful of these potential problems at all times.

2.4.Targeting rational thinking and/or emotions

Citing the work of Ehrenberg (2000), Dens and De Pelsmacker (2010) point out the dual role of advertising. First of all, consumers need to be informed and second they need to be persuaded to pay for the product, service or in other ways support the company's cause. Following the conventional marketing research and strategies, scientists in the field of CSR communication have started exploring the precise nature of CSR related communication. There is an evident lack of consensus regarding whether it is rational thinking or emotional cues that need to be targeted in a consumer with CSR related communication. Previous research suggests that there are a number of factors which influence the use of different communication strategies, including whether the communication is related to a product or a service (Zinkhan, Johnson & Zinkhan, 1992; Cutler & Javalgi, 1993) and whether the communication is in print form or an advert on TV (Chaudhuri & Buck, 1995). Additionally, the findings of Albers-Miller and Royne Stafford (1999) suggest an important role for the consumer's culture in their preference for rational versus emotional strategies.

Although it is important to acknowledge that both industry and consumer characteristics are influential in the rational/emotional strategy debate, there remains immense value in investigating how consumers react to different strategies in the context of CSR communications. After reviewing the current research conducted in the field, it can be argued that scientists exploring this topic cluster into three different groups. The first group is supporting rational thinking oriented CSR communications, another group is opposing them and emphasizing the critical role of emotions and the third links the two, taking into account both rational and emotional aspects of the decision making process.

2.4.1. CSR communication strategy targeting rational thinking

When organisations and companies want to advertise their product, service or project they want to make sure the targeted group of consumers is given the appropriate amount of information in order to induce the desired behaviour (e.g. purchasing the product or service). So (2004) defines a rational thinking strategy as the extent to which the communication focuses on the “practical, functional or utilitarian needs of the consumer regarding the product” (page 49). For example, rational content may include information regarding how much the product costs and how it performs, compared with alternatives. A purely rational content in CSR related advertising is in line with researchers like Bögel (2015) and Morsing and Schultz (2006) who advocate the importance and superiority of rational thinking over emotional responses.

After conducting research in the German market, Bögel (2015) stated that CSR communication strategies should not follow the typical advertising concepts, focusing primarily on emotional communication as it is proven to be inefficient. She further elaborates by explaining how all stakeholders of any company will expect and demand facts as a prerequisite to trusting the company. Morsing and Schultz (2006) conducted their research within three Scandinavian countries and emphasised the importance of sharing information in the form of facts and statistics with consumers.

2.4.2. CSR communication strategy targeting emotions

In contrast, emotional appeals focus on the emotional and experiential aspects of consumption. An emotional strategy can be defined as efforts targeted at “building affective or subjective impressions of intangible aspects of a product” (Holbrook & O’Shaughnessy, 1984, cited in So, 2004, page 49). It is critical to be aware of different types of emotions and their classifications that have been used both for scientific and practical purposes. The authors of this paper use Plutchik’s (1980) classification of emotions due to its noted popularity and extensive use amongst

researchers (e.g. Richins, 1997, Marin, Pizzinatto and Giuliani, 2014). In his work, Plutchik (1980) names eight basic human emotions. Basic emotions according to Plutchik (1980) are; fear, anger, joy, sadness, acceptance, disgust, expectation and surprise.

Opposing the above mentioned studies, other researchers in the field accentuate the importance of targeting emotional cues with CSR communications. Reisch (2006) promotes the use of positive emotional and entertaining factors to be more effective than the conventional fact-focused CSR communications. He suggests that 'ecotainment' can act as a significant motivator to engage in more sustainable behaviours. As pointed out in Goldsmith's review (2006), Greenspan and Shanker (2004) take the discussion a step further and approach the topic from the perspective of developmental psychology. In their work they argue that emotional systems come before cognitive (reasoned) thinking. Therefore, emotions can be regarded as fundamental for decision-making and should not be neglected.

2.4.3. CSR communication strategy combining rational and emotional cues:

A third group of researchers in this field link the two counterparts; rational thinking and emotions. In his work, Chaudhuri (2006) has integrated both spheres of human decision making as equal and critical factors, as opposed to supporting the superiority of one over the other. He further explains that through the complexity of the human neurological system, we have two different ways of thinking - reasoned and emotional and both should be taken into account when researching decision making.

It is clear that experts in the field disagree when it comes to the nature of CSR communication. To this day, researchers do not share a unified opinion regarding the topic. The lack of a clear consensus in the CSR communication literature regarding targeting rational thinking versus emotions makes it challenging to formulate propositions about how the strategies will compare.

2.5. Propositions regarding Consumer Reactions

Previous research investigating CSR communications has looked at a number of different consumer reactions, such as intentions to say positive things about the company (e.g. Brown & Dacin, 1997; Romani, Grappi & Bagozzi, 2013) and participate in advocacy behaviours (e.g. Romani et al., 2013). This study considered two categories of consumer reactions: trust and purchase intention.

2.5.1. Trust

Trust issues that arise when dealing with CSR related communication are an apparent obstacle for the efficiency of CSR communication and CSR itself. Consumers often show certain levels of scepticism and doubt connected to the actual organisation, their CSR initiatives, the information pertaining to them and the motives behind the initiatives (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). It is apparent that consumers targeted with CSR communications can develop trust towards all of these dimensions, however the authors of this paper focus on trust towards the CSR communication itself. Keeping in mind other limitations, focusing on this specific aspect of trust enables monitoring trust towards a communication type regardless of a specific company or brand.

One possible explanation of low trust is information asymmetry. Scientist like Jahn et al. (2005) and Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) have suggested that due to a lack of available information, consumers are always unable to make decisions regarding whether or not to trust the company's CSR communication with absolutely certainty; they must therefore make decisions based on what is available. Companies are faced with the challenge of needing to convince stakeholders of the pro-social side of their business without raising questions about their trustworthiness and legitimacy. With their research, Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) point out that consumers will want to be updated on the company's CSR initiatives and their impact on the environment if there is to be a foundation for trust.

The study of Morsing and Schultz (2006) is in line with the previously named research but it adds another dimension to trust issues connected with CSR communication. They point out that consumers develop scepticism towards companies that send out too many CSR related communications. Not only do consumers distrust the mere information sent out but they also suspect that the company is trying to hide something with all the published CSR related communications.

It is therefore clear that it is critical for CSR communication to be trustworthy in the eyes of the public, in order to be accepted. Many of the academic articles highlighted above, which discuss rational versus emotional CSR communication strategies, lack the empirical research to provide direct support to their conclusions. Consequently, the authors have developed propositions according to studies conducted in fields related to CSR communication and based on the suggestions of academics who have conducted related research. Bögel (2015) recorded that the majority of participants contacted in her study suggested a rational strategy (in the form of more facts and statistics) as a possible way to improve trustworthiness of the publication. She also advised that by focusing purely on an emotional strategy, companies may heighten consumer scepticism and risk being accused of greenwashing. These findings have led to the formulation of proposition 1a.

Proposition 1a- In relation to trust, consumers will more positively react to a CSR communication strategy targeting rational components than a strategy targeting solely the emotional cues.

Dens and De Pelsmacker (2010) suggested that by incorporating emotional elements into a rational text, rational content may be better processed due to an increase in consumer interest and involvement with the communication's content. This has led to the formulation of proposition 1b.

Proposition 1b- In relation to trust, consumers will more positively react to a CSR communication strategy combining both rational and emotional components, than a strategy targeting exclusively the rational or emotional cues.

2.5.2. Purchase Intention

Purchase intentions are “personal action tendencies relating to the brand” (Spears & Singh, 2004, page 53). Purchase intention measures have been consistently used by marketing managers in new product launches, demand forecasting and when deciding upon the appropriate marketing mix for their products in particular markets (Morwitz, Steckel & Gupta, 2007). Intent is included by many formal consumer behaviour models as an intermediary, between attitude and choice behaviours (Warshaw, 1980). This suggests that intentions are more closely related to behaviours than either beliefs or alternative cognitive measures and therefore should be the preferred metric (Stöttinger et al., 2015).

A number of studies have demonstrated that CSR activities increase consumer’s purchase intention (e.g., Mohr and Webb, 2005; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Dodd & Supa, 2011). Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) examined the effect of an existing company’s CSR and new product information on a number of consumer outcomes, including purchase intention. By providing information about the company’s CSR efforts in the form of a BusinessWeek article excerpt and a review-style summary, they inadvertently demonstrated a positive relationship between the CSR communication and purchase intention. In a similar study by Mohr and Webb (2005), participants were supplied with short descriptions of a fictitious company’s environmental/philanthropic CSR activities and likewise, the communication was positively related to purchase intention.

Hartmann et al (2005) proposed a number of green brand positioning strategies and tested their effect on consumer attitudes. A comparison of functional versus emotional advertising strategies suggested a stronger role for emotional arguments on attitudes. Although this study explored consumer attitudes as opposed to

purchase intention, as highlighted earlier many consumer behaviour models postulate that intent is an intermediary between attitude and choice behaviours (Warshaw, 1980). Based on these findings, proposition 2a was formulated.

Proposition 2a- In relation to purchase intention, consumers will more positively react to a CSR communication strategy targeting emotional components than a strategy targeting solely the rational cues.

Hartmann et al's (2005) findings overall suggest that the strongest effects for brand attitude were however achieved with a combined rational and emotional approach. They demonstrated a positive effect for both dimensions. This is supported by Sierra and McQuitty (2007), who explored the influence of rational thinking and emotions when making purchase decisions for nostalgia products. Their research focused on historic products and put the variables in a nostalgic context, but it demonstrated the mutual effect of both cognitive and emotional factors when deciding whether to buy a product.

As already highlighted in relation to proposition 1b, Dens and De Pelsmacker (2010) pointed out the value that combining both rational and emotional cues may bring. They suggest that emotional content might lead to the better processing of rational content, by positively influencing consumer interest and involvement with the communication's content. These findings have led to the formulation of proposition 2b.

Proposition 2b- In relation to purchase intention, consumers will more positively react to a CSR communication strategy combining both rational and emotional components, than a strategy targeting exclusively the rational or emotional cues.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research strategy

The authors of this paper developed propositions based on previous results. In order to capture how consumers react to different CSR communication strategies, a qualitative methodology was chosen to generate non-numerical data (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Analysis of the data was conducted to create understanding of the meaning. This methodology was selected to produce richer results and a deeper understanding than is possible through quantitative methods.

The use of focus groups facilitated the exploration of complex consumer reactions and enabled the screening and sorting of ideas as discussions progressed (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). The participants were brought together to discuss their reactions to different CSR communications. This methodology was appealing due to its historic use in market research, for testing responses to advertising and products (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Several researchers have noted their usefulness when dealing with under-researched topics (e.g. Greenbaum, 1993). The rich data generated reflects both participant's individual contributions and the collective reality which has been constructed through peer interactions (O'Donohoe & Tynan, 1998).

3.2. Data collection; study design, sampling, stimuli

3.2.1. Study Design

Following the advice of previous research regarding what constitutes an adequate number of focus groups, the authors of this paper decided to conduct four discussions as Plummer-D'Amato (2008) in his methodology overview regards it as a sufficient number when dealing with a specific target group. Saunders et al. (2012) suggest that a focus group should contain between four and 12 participants. Five participants was selected as the optimal size as smaller groups

are often easier for the moderator to host and more comfortable for those participating.

Focus group interviews were conducted in April and May, 2016. The focus groups each lasted approximately 60 minutes and all were conducted in a study room, free from interruptions. A moderator oversaw all of the focus groups, leading the discussion with pre-formulated, open-ended questions (Appendix 1). These questions were developed in accordance with Plummer-D'Amato (2008) and Krueger and Casey (2014).

To begin the focus groups, the moderator explained the format to the participants and gained their consent for an audio recording of the ensuing discussion. As suggested by Plummer-D'Amato (2008), the discussion started with personal presentations. The moderator presented herself by providing some basic information, including age, country of origin, level and focus of education. With that the presentation model was set and when participants were asked to do the same, they followed the pattern and revealed the same type of information (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). Beginning focus group discussions in such a manner induces familiarisation between the participants, which through a more relaxed atmosphere supports a more open discussion (Hurworth, 1996). Other than stimulating a fluent discussion among participants, personal introductions give the researchers an insight into the specifics of the sample (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008).

After all of the participants have introduced themselves, the moderator presented the stimuli texts to all participants followed by questions formulated to guide the session and draw out their experiences and opinions. Simultaneously presenting the texts enabled the participants to make direct comparisons and avoided any order effects. The discussion enabled the participants to express their reactions to the stimuli texts.

Next to having an overview of basic information in the form of age, education and country of origin, it was valuable for the researches to get an insight into whether

any of the participants were specifically interested in socially oriented issues. It can be assumed that such information might reveal a specific type of consumer culture, which could impact the results of the research. For that reason, after the focus group discussions were finished, the moderator asked the participants about their opinions about social issues mentioned in the research and their interests in activities such as environmental activism.

3.2.2. Sampling

A young population of University undergraduate and postgraduate students was selected. All participants were registered students of Dalarna University, Sweden in Spring 2016, originating from Sweden and other European countries. The sample included 10 male and 10 female participants, from a range of academic disciplines and studying at either Bachelor or Master level (see Appendix 3 for a table of participant characteristics). They represented an interesting sample as they are well educated and may become opinion-leaders in the future. A further noteworthy reason for using students as a sample is that according to academics such as Peterson (2001), as a group they are more homogenous than others (non-students). Homogeneity of the sample group is profoundly advocated because the focus groups participants are more likely to feel relaxed enough to express their thoughts and opinions (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). Posters advertising the study were placed around the University and University accommodations. In order to encourage participation, a small incentive of free chocolate was advertised. Chocolate was selected as the texts presented to the participants were written from the viewpoint of a fictional chocolate manufacturer (see Section 3.2.3). Therefore, participants who were encouraged to participate by the incentive were likely to be potential consumers.

Interested parties were instructed to email in order to receive details of when and where the group would convene. A total of 28 responses were received. After confirming their current enrolment in studies at Dalarna University, Sweden, the first 20 responses were organised into four focus groups, each with five

participants. The participants were organised according to the time at which they contacted the researchers. The first five volunteering participants were invited to take part in the first focus group, the next five in the second focus group, etc. If an interested party was unable to attend their given time slot, another respondent was contacted. Focus group sizes were made consistent, following the suggestion of Plummer-D'Amato (2008) that different sized focus groups might impact the flow of discussion. A reminder email was sent on the day of the study to minimise the risk of non-attendance.

3.2.3. Stimuli

Stimuli in the form of textual messages enabled the researchers to control for other factors that might account for changes in consumer reaction, other than communication strategy. All of the stimuli texts were of the same length and in the same font, with only the contents differing to enable direct comparisons. Texts were selected ahead of other communication forms such as images or videos, as these formats may require careful consideration of other factors such as the use of colour and sound, familiarity of images etc. Although to the authors' knowledge there is a lack of clear conclusions regarding how these factors precisely relate to consumer reactions, the seismic amount of money spent on the careful selection of for instance a red versus yellow logo suggests that they are of importance.

The prepared texts (Appendix 2) reenacted a CSR related communication between a company in the food industry and the general public, as potential future consumers. The food industry was selected in order to maximise the number of participants who are potential consumers. Although individual preferences for certain food items vary, factors such as personal wealth will not influence our status as potential consumers of food items, as much as they will influence our status as a consumer of 'luxury' items e.g. cars. All texts relayed details relating to a fictional CSR Project undertaken by a chocolate manufacturer, created by the authors following a review of similar publications.

For the purposes of the research, the authors of this paper prepared a total of eight separate texts. Two texts contained emotional arguments and two contained rational arguments. These four texts were then used to create four hybrid texts, which were composites of the arguments used in the rational and emotional texts. The participants of each focus group all received one rational text, one emotional text and one hybrid text. Using variations of each strategy enabled conclusions to be drawn about the strategy itself, as opposed to the particular example used. This was envisioned as increasing the robustness of findings. The texts used in each focus group can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Texts used in each focus group.

Focus group	Rational text	Emotional text	Hybrid text
1	Practical	Joy	Sadness-Functional
2	Functional	Joy	Sadness-Practical
3	Practical	Sadness	Joy-Functional
4	Functional	Sadness	Joy-Practical

Source: Own source

One category of texts contained rational arguments. These texts were composed using So's (2004) definition of a rational strategy, as the extent to which the communication focuses on the "practical, functional or utilitarian needs of the consumer" (page 49). These typologies have been adapted for use in communicating CSR-related efforts, with one text focusing on the consumer's practical needs. The practical components aimed to include the reader (consumer) in the text. It elaborated on the connection between the consumer and product (e.g. simplicity of purchase) and the related CSR project (e.g. how does each consumer help the project). The second text related to the consumer's functional needs, highlighting the specifications of a product's CSR involvement. When including the functional components the authors of this paper focused on specifications of the product and the related CSR project (e.g. what type of

product is marketed; what the CSR project aims to achieve, and where).

The second text category utilised an emotional strategy and avoided rational arguments. Following Plutchik's (1980) ideas of eight basic emotions, the authors selected the emotions of 'joy' and 'sadness'. The emotion of 'joy' was selected due to its profoundly positive nature. Previous research has demonstrated a role for positive emotional appeals in generating interest in communications and positive judgements (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 1998; Morris, Woo, Geason & Kim, 2002, as cited in Dens and De Pelsmacker, 2010). Additionally, Marin et al's (2014) study assessing the incidence of emotional and rational strategies in advertising found that 'joy' was the most frequently employed emotional strategy, occurring in 64% of the reviewed adverts. Sadness was selected as Plutchik (1980) envisioned this emotion as the polar opposite to joy. Using polar opposites ensured the greatest possible level of variation in the emotional arguments used.

The third text category included was a hybrid text combining both rational and emotional cues in equal measure. Care was taken to avoid repeating components of the other texts as repetition could act to subconsciously strengthen arguments already heard, in previous texts.

3.3.Pilot Study

A pilot study was used to check the content and length of the stimuli texts, as well as the questions used to generate the discussion. Feedback led to the shortening of texts and ensuring that all texts were the same length. The amount of information within a message needs to be determined carefully. Lang's cognitive capacity theory (2000) points out that consumers may not be able to process all information shared with them, therefore the amount of information included needs to be considered. Furthermore, Stewart & Furse (1984) argue that a larger amount of information used in one advertisement will have a negative impact on expected brand recollection. Considering the mentioned implications, the authors of this paper made sure that texts provided to respondents were felt by the pilot study's

participants to be informative but not exceeding the amount of text needed in an ad/message.

The content of all eight texts was also discussed with the participants of the pilot test. Small changes were made to the language used to ensure clarity of meaning. Following this, the participants were asked what strategies they felt were being used in each text. In all cases, the relevant rational/emotional/hybrid strategy was identified by the participants.

3.4. Manipulation Check

A number of questions were also included in the proceeding focus groups to act as another manipulation check. Similar to the discussion carried out with the pilot study participants, these questions were targeted at ensuring that the stimuli texts could be adequately identified by the participants as employing the relevant rational/emotional or hybrid strategy. The manipulation check was carried out at the end of the study, to prevent knowledge of the strategy used from influencing participant's discussions.

All participants were able to identify the relevant strategies, either directly naming them as rational or emotional or describing them with key words. Both the joy and sadness texts were said by participants to be targeting the consumer's feelings or emotions. Synonyms such as "happy" and "fun" were used by participants to describe the text targeting joy and "upsetting" and "unhappy" were used for the sadness text. Participants used similar language to describe both the practical and functional texts, using words such as "informative" and "facts-based". The hybrid rational-emotional text was consistently identified by participants as representing a combination of the other two strategies.

3.5. Analysis

Prior to analysis, audio recordings of the group discussions were transcribed. This refers to the process of writing down the recordings into words (Saunders et al., 2012).

The transcribed recordings were then analysed in regard to the propositions. Following the ideas of Agndal and Elbe (2007), the authors developed a set of criteria for the propositions to be supported, partially supported or unsupported (see Table 2). The proposition was supported when it was in line with the consensus reached during the focus group's discussion. A lack of support recorded when there was no commonality between the proposition and the group's discussion. Partial support for the proposition reflected a lack of consensus, with some participants agreeing with the proposition and others disagreeing.

Table 2. Support criteria.

Proposition	Support criteria
1a	Supported when participants reach a consensus about more positively reacting to the rational text, as opposed to the emotional text.
1b	Supported when participants reach a consensus about more positively reacting to the combined text, over the rational or emotional texts.
2a	Supported when participants reach a consensus about more positively reacting to the emotional text, as opposed to the rational text.
2b	Supported when participants reach a consensus about more positively reacting to the combined text, over the rational or emotional texts.

Source: Own source.

3.6. Data quality; validity and reliability

The validity and reliability of the methods used was considered at all times throughout the formulation and conduction of the study. The term validity refers to the extent to which the data can be regarded as precise and accurate. A pilot test focus group was conducted to ensure that the stimulus texts were adequately identified as utilising rational/emotional strategies. Additionally, the list of pre-prepared questions was discussed and refined to ensure clarity of meaning.

None of the participants in any of the focus groups verbalized an inability to understand the texts or questions. The discussions had by all groups progressed naturally with minimal moderator interference in the form of prompting participation or preventing off-topic conversations. All participants appeared confident in contributing their viewpoint to the discussions.

In contrast, reliability refers to the extent to which results are consistent and can be yielded on repeated trials (Denscombe, 2010). Although the sample size utilised was relatively small (each focus group having five participants), by conducting a number of focus groups with similar participants, the transcripts could be compared to assess the reliability of methods used. Consistency across transcripts in terms of the discussions had and the recurrence of ideas raised by the participants involved suggests that the findings can be considered reliable. Furthermore, pre-prepared questions with specific wording, reviewed in a pilot test were utilised to increase the reliability.

Another crucial reliability issue relates to the role of the moderator in interpreting the group transcripts. Interpretations may vary depending on who is interpreting them; in order to counter this, firstly the researchers developed a set of support criteria beforehand. These criteria were used to decide whether the propositions were supported or unsupported. Secondly, two researchers conducted separate analyses using the criteria. Their analyses were then compared to see if similar categories were identified and any disagreements were discussed, to reach a

solution that both parties were happy with.

3.7.Potential problems

A frequently incurred problem is that of the time-consuming nature of participating. A volunteer sample was used, therefore participants were able to decide if they were willing to take part or not. Additionally, before agreeing to participate, subjects were informed that the discussion would last approximately 60 minutes. This enabled participants to adequately plan their time.

One common criticism of focus groups is that the sample used may not be representative of the wider population, therefore limiting the generalisability of the results (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, the controlled situation that a focus group provides enabled the researchers to know the study's population. Therefore, it is possible that the same results would be yielded amongst a similar population of young European University students from similar academic disciplines.

As with all research conducted on human participants, ethical considerations are of paramount importance. The voluntary nature of the study and the right to withdraw was made clear to all participants. Additionally, participants were reassured of the confidentiality of their answers and that all data would be anonymised.

4. Findings

A comparison of the focus group discussions with the propositions revealed that all four focus group discussions supported P1a and P1b. Also consistent across the groups, the discussions did not support P2a and P2b was partially supported. These findings are summarised in Table 3 and discussed in greater detail in the text that follows.

Table 3. Focus group findings.

	P1a	P1b	P2a	P2b
Focus group 1	S	S	F	P
Focus group 2	S	S	F	P
Focus group 3	S	S	F	P
Focus group 4	S	S	F	P

Source: Own source

Key: S reflects a supported proposition, P a partially supported proposition and F an unsupported proposition.

Consistency in findings across focus groups suggests that using different variations of the strategies (such as joy versus sadness for emotional strategies) did not produce markedly different results. Therefore, practical and functional texts can be regarded as parts of a broader 'rational' strategy. Likewise, both joy and sadness can be regarded as parts of a broader 'emotional' strategy. The difference in strategy preference for the different outcome measures also supports

the assumption that trust and purchase intention are two distinct (although intuitively related) consumer reactions.

4.1.Trust

Proposition 1a suggests that in relation to trust, consumers will more positively react to a CSR communication strategy targeting rational components than a strategy targeting solely the emotional cues. The proposition was supported; all participants were of the opinion that they had greater trust in the rational text, than the emotional text.

A representative quote from a focus group participant is as follows:

I feel like I'm not trusting the [emotional text] – it is the least trustful as it has a lack of transparency. With the [rational text], you have some data, some information to put it in context.

In addition to an association between the use of emotional strategies and a lack of transparency that was repeated by several participants, the words *reliable* and *proof* were used when discussing the rational texts.

Proposition 1b suggests that in relation to trust, consumers will more positively react to a CSR communication strategy combining both rational and emotional components, than a strategy targeting exclusively the rational or emotional cues. The proposition was supported; all the participants agreed that the hybrid text was the most trustworthy.

One focus group participant noted:

In the [emotional text] they are... trying to touch your heart, make you happy, but I think people need to know not just that they are doing something good, but they need data to trust.

Next to comparing the different texts that were presented to them, several participants also highlighted how a balance between rational and emotional content better held their attention, as illustrated by the following quote:

I would lose my concentration [with the rational text] because there are too many numbers.

4.2.Purchase Intention

Proposition 2a suggests that in relation to purchase intention, consumers will more positively react to a CSR communication strategy targeting emotional components than a strategy targeting solely the rational cues. The proposition was not supported by the discussions; almost all participants were of the opinion that they had a greater intention to purchase the product after reading the rational text, compared to the emotional text. When talking about the rational communication, participants used words such as *reliable, informative, convincing* and *serious*.

This preference for rational above emotional content is demonstrated in the following quote from a focus group participant:

For me it is the [rational text] that really makes me want to buy the product. It is very informative, I am given a lot of actual facts and information about the project and the product.

Proposition 2b suggests in relation to purchase intention, consumers will more positively react to a CSR communication strategy combining both rational and emotional components, than a strategy targeting exclusively the rational or emotional cues. The proposition was partially supported; some participants reacted best to the hybrid texts, whereas others expressed a preference for the rational text.

After determining a division in opinions in regard to proposition 2b, the authors of this paper examined the participant's background information (Appendix 3) to

explore possible explanations. The participants' background information included data about their age, level and focus of education, nationality, gender and possible interests in consumer social issues. Information about the participants' interests collected at the end of the focus group discussions gave the researchers an insight into possible differences between consumers. For example, it could be assumed that participants showing interest or spending time participating in consumer activism will be more socially engaged and might show a stronger interest for CSR than the average consumer. However, that was not the case with the participants within this research. All participants suggested that they felt that social and environmental issues are important, but nonetheless none presented explicitly firm viewpoints or for example stated that they might spend some of their time and energy being involved with such activities as campaigning or boycotting. In regard to the sample specifications it was noted that there were 10 male and 10 female focus group participants aged between 19 and 30. Additionally, although all participants were currently studying in Sweden, they originated from across Europe. Upon comparing this information with the voiced opinions linked to proposition 2b, gender was found to be the only variable with any explanatory power for the partial support of the proposition.

The participant's nationality or age did not appear to have an impact on the results of this research. Additionally, the focus of the participants' education did not seem to influence the participants' opinions even if there was a possibility that previous knowledge in marketing or humanitarian sciences might have had an impact.

As stated above, the findings suggested an important role for gender, with males reporting a preference for the purely rational text, followed by the hybrid text and the emotional text coming last.

A male focus group participant provided an illustrative quote:

The [rational text] is the best, in second position is the [hybrid text] and the worst one is the [emotional text] because they play only on the sensitivity of the people ... I don't want to buy this product if I have a communication like this.

Many male participants were very negative and sceptical about any use of emotional strategies.

I really, really don't like the [emotional text]. It's just trying to make me sad and it's so dramatic. Yes I get it, things they write about are sad but I would like some actual data about what they are talking about and definitely don't like it when somebody tries to make me feel a certain way and play with my emotions.

Words such as *dramatic* and *evasive* were used to describe the text utilising an emotional strategy.

In contrast, female participants expressed a preference for the hybrid text over the rational or emotional texts. This viewpoint is relayed in the following quote from a female focus group participant:

For me the best text was the [hybrid text]. It would surely make me buy the product. It gives me a lot of information... It is also a little more involved, it goes on my feelings. In second place I would put the [rational text]. It is also ok. It gives me information but only numbers. I feel like it doesn't have the same motivation as the [hybrid text] so it is not affecting me as strong and the [emotional text] was for me the weakest influence. It was for me in a way confusing because it talked about a project in a sad way but without any real information. So in a way, it makes me feel sad... but when I don't get any information about what and how they are doing, I lose interest in the project and the product.

Several female participants highlighted how the use of emotional content, or text that targeted feelings led them to feel more involved with the product. The following quote serves as an example of this:

I felt bad ... and I felt like I could help with purchasing this chocolate. It really got to me.

5. Discussion of findings

5.1. Trust

The lack of trust in the field of CSR is both a well-known and a rather complex issue. This study offered an insight into how influential communication strategy can be for consumer's trust in a text. Both of the developed propositions linking consumer trust with different CSR communication strategies have been supported by the discussions. Through such results, this study demonstrates the prevalence of rational over emotional content and that a hybrid rational-emotional text is considered to be the most trustworthy.

All participants demanded rational data in order to develop trust towards the presented communication. As stated in the Findings section, the respondents described texts containing rational cues as reliable and suggested that rational information equates to proof. It can be suggested that in order to enhance consumer trust, the consumers need to be given 'evidence' in the form of facts that would in a way serve as authentication. These findings are in line with the ideas of Bögel (2015), who recorded that the majority of participants contacted in her study evaluated a rational strategy as a possible way to improve the trustworthiness of the publication.

Additionally, through proposition 1b this study suggests that a text with a hybrid content (both rational and emotional cues) will have a more positive reaction in terms of consumer trust than a purely rational or emotional text. Several participants also highlighted how a balance between rational and emotional content better held their attention. Such statements are in line with Dens and De Pelsmacker's (2010) suggestion that emotional content might lead to better processing of rational content, by positively influencing consumer interest and involvement with the communication's content. Similarly to Dens and De Pelsmacker (2010), in his study Reisch (2006) talks about the term 'ecotainment'.

He promoted the value of using emotional and entertaining factors to act as motivators to engage in a greater number of sustainable behaviours.

5.2.Purchase Intention

After reviewing and analysing the results, the supremacy of the rational over the emotional strategy in terms of consumer purchase intention was apparent. Therefore, contrary to what was predicted by previously conducted research (e.g. Reisch, 2006; Greenspan and Shanker, 2004) the findings of this study support a more positive consumer reaction for the rational CSR text above the emotional text, for both purchase intention *and* trust. This alignment in consumer preference between the two reaction measures may be regarded as intuitive, as it is perhaps reasonable to assume that consumers who read a message they do not trust are unlikely to intend to purchase the product it refers to.

Even if the field of CSR communication can be considered somewhat socially sensitive with complex moral and emotional dimensions, the findings suggest that consumers still require factual content in order to make decisions regarding purchasing. This preference for rational information suggests that consumers are trying to make logical decisions about whether or not to purchase a CSR related product. These findings go against those of Hartmann et al. (2005), whose comparison of rational and emotional CSR advertising strategies suggested a stronger role for emotional arguments. This difference might be explained by the different outcome measures utilised in each study, with Hartmann et al's (2005) study focusing on consumer attitudes. Their study also explored different communication strategies in relation to an environmentally friendly car. Emotional strategies may have a strong influence on attitudes, but in some scenarios these attitudes may fail to translate into behavioural intentions. When purchasing high-cost items such as a car, it is likely that the initial positive attitude stimulated by an advert (utilising an emotional strategy) will be followed by an extensive review of rational information, in order to generate an intention to purchase. In contrast, when purchasing a relatively low-cost and low-risk item

such as that used in the current research, it might be that purchase intention was influenced to a greater extent solely by communication strategy. The gap between attitudes and purchase intention might have been further extended in Hartmann et al's (2005) research as they used a young student sample who are unlikely to be in the market for purchasing a car. Therefore, although attitudes can be regarded as the antecedents to purchase intention (Warshaw, 1980), they should still be regarded as separate entities.

The findings provided only partial support to proposition 2b so reviewing the participants' background information was needed to explain the clear division in opinions. The participants' age, country of origin as well as level or focus of their education showed to be irrelevant to the the proposition 2b. However, the results suggested a role for gender induced differences. The suggestion that males and females differ in terms of their interpretations of communications has been around for a long time (Kim et al. 2007). Linear models of communication involve the concept of 'noise', covering a range of factors, such as gender, which can be responsible for the interpretation of a message varying from the intended meaning (Hackley, 2005). Researchers exploring gender characteristics have assigned the gender specific differences to a range of social and biological determinants. Putrevu (2001) suggests that women are better at the so called socio-emotional activities. They are more likely to express themselves and are relationally focused. On the other hand, men tend to excel at different kinds of task oriented or instrumental endeavours.

The statements made by Putrevu (2001) suggest that due to their strong socio-emotional features, female consumers will react better to texts containing emotional stimuli. Unlike women, it is suggested that men would better react to rational stimuli as a result of their practical side. In line with the above mentioned gender research, the majority of male focus group participants chose the rational text as the one most likely to lead to the intention to purchase, as opposed to female participants who selected the hybrid text.

It is critical to take into account not only the male preference towards the rational texts, but also their striking disfavor of the emotional texts. Further analysis of the transcripts suggests that many male focus group participants feel that companies are purposely trying to take advantage of their emotional side by utilising emotional communication strategies. Such opinions might be a possible reason why male respondents displayed an obvious disliking of emotional texts. Using emotional content in CSR communications could result not only in a bad response to the mere communication, but also a more long term negative impact on the related product, project or company in the eyes of male consumers.

Oposing the male participants, the majority of female participants voiced an inclination towards the hybrid text. Several females explained how they felt more informed about the CSR project and product, after reading the hybrid text. Furthermore, a number of them suggested that they could better identify themselves as contributing to a positive change by purchasing the product. Similarly, Dens and De Pelsmacker (2010) proposed that emotional strategies might facilitate the processing of rational information by improving consumer interest and involvement with the communication's content.

It is clear that both male and female respondents needed enough facts in the communication in order to make a decision, however the obvious issue is the one of balancing the amount of emotional content between the sceptical male and socio-emotional female consumers. Despite this problem, which represents a substantial challenge for marketers and communications professionals, the idea of gender differences in communication strategy preference is, to the authors' knowledge, a very under-explored area. Previous research comparing the usage of rational and emotional strategies either failed to mention the variable of gender or suggested it as an important avenue for future research (for example, Hartmann et al, 2005; Sierra & McQuitty, 2007).

6. Conclusion

After reviewing the current literature in the field of CSR communication, the authors of this study identified a clear disparity between researchers' sentiments about whether the consumers should be targeted with rational or emotional cues. Hence, this study set out to investigate how consumers react to different message strategies in CSR communication.

In order to fulfil the aim, two categories of consumer reactions were considered: trust and purchase intention. Following a review of the existing literature, the authors of this study developed four propositions linking trust and purchase intention with the rational and emotional strategies frequently utilised in the CSR communication field. The propositions were tested using a qualitative methodology, more specifically by carrying out four focus group discussions.

In terms of consumer trust, this study adds to the literature supporting the preeminence of rational over emotional components. All of the respondents were of the opinion that they had greater trust in the rational text, than the emotional text, with many respondents suggesting that the rational texts used were more reliable. Moreover, this study points out that a combined strategy will produce a more positive reaction in terms of consumers' trust than a strategy targeting exclusively the rational or emotional cues. Consumers were also identified as more positively reacting to a rational CSR communication strategy in terms of their purchase intention, compared to an emotional strategy. However, for approximately half of the respondents, the hybrid strategy targeting both rational and emotional cues was the most successful in terms of purchase intention. Upon further analysis, it was identified that this division in respondents' opinions may reflect a gender difference, where men portrayed the more task oriented and women the socially sensitive consumers.

The conducted research has exhibited how consumers react to rational versus emotional strategies used by CSR communication. Through its results, this paper

contributes to the current scientific dialogue regarding the use of rational and emotional strategies in CSR communication. It unveils how consumers react when using different strategies through particular wording. Companies around the world invest sizeable amounts of their assets into various CSR initiatives, but ensuring appropriate returns on these investments remains a challenge. This lack of return in terms of benefits such as favourable attitudes of stakeholders and potential investors, increased employee commitment and purchasing of the company's products, can harm both the company and the wider community that may have profited from the company's support. This paper has explored one component of the overall problem and contributes by providing a number of managerial implications that can be used by companies in order to better communicate their CSR activities and increase returns on CSR-related investments.

6.1. Recommendations based on results

Based on the study's results, the authors have formulated the following recommendations for individuals responsible for writing CSR communications (referred to below as 'marketers' although the authors acknowledge that other individuals may hold this responsibility):

- The findings of this research strongly indicate that when consumers read a text relaying a CSR initiative, the strategy employed has an important relationship with their reactions
- Due to the differing relationship of these strategies to the consumer reactions of trust and purchase intention, marketers should be mindful of what they are trying to achieve through the CSR communication, in terms of the desired outcome
- It can be suggested that, when planning CSR communication strategies, marketers should take into account the suggested superiority of rational over emotional components. Any form of CSR communication should contain a reasonable amount of rational information in order to reinforce

the development of trust towards the communication and enable the consumers' purchase decision making

- Additionally, it is suggested to include a smaller amount of emotional content as it may enhance the impact of rational content
- Our findings of a gender difference reiterate the importance of marketers knowing their target consumer market. The predominantly negative and sceptical reactions of many male participants suggest that marketers need to be very careful with the use of emotional strategies in CSR communications. It is critical that marketers know how to navigate around this fine line and keep in mind what kind of consumers they wish to target

6.2. Limitations

Our sample consisted of University students, who can be regarded as well-educated and information hungry. It can be argued that using a rational communication strategy may be particularly effective for this audience, as their educational background may have led to an information-prone mindset. One participant touched upon this, suggesting that the rational strategy text targets “more deep thinkers, more informed people”.

The way this research was conducted also needs to be taken into account. The stimuli texts were presented simultaneously to eliminate any order effects, however the participants' discussions were started with the topic of trust followed by purchase intention. It can be speculated that the order of topics discussed might have impacted the answers collected. If the participants had considered purchase intention first they may have had different reactions opposed to the situation where they assessed the trust levels toward the communication first. It would be interesting to repeat the study but inverse the order of topics discussed to eliminate order effects during the discussion.

Considering that this study aimed to reveal how consumers react to different strategies utilised in CSR communication, it needs to be stated that the term CSR

communication includes more communication methods than used in this research. This study involved textual messages but CSR can be communicated through images, videos, annual reports, etc.

The research was conducted using an example of CSR communication related to a low cost food product, selected in order to ensure a wide consumer group. As the authors have already acknowledged, consumer reactions to different strategies are likely to depend on the specifics of the communication's subject. Previous research has suggested an important role for whether the text relates to a product or service (Zinkhan et al., 1992; Cutler & Javalgi, 1993). Additional important factors may include the cost of the item and whether it is regarded as more of a utilitarian or a hedonistic purchase. Chocolate may be regarded as quite an emotional purchase for consumers.

6.3. Recommendations for future research

In line with these limitations, the authors propose that future research could investigate how consumers react to different CSR communication strategies, according to whether they relate to a product or service. Other characteristics such as price could also provide fruitful avenues for further studies.

To the authors' knowledge there is a lack of adequate research targeting CSR communication that takes gender differences into account. Hence, the authors recommend further exploration of this emergent difference.

Another possible avenue for future research involves replicating this study in other countries. It can be argued that consumers in different countries may have different opinions and attitudes as a consequence of different social and cultural upbringings. The authors regard Sweden as a country that is well-known for better educating its population on social and environmental issues. Therefore, it would be beneficial to explore the same matter in countries with different cultural cues. The findings of Albers-Miller and Royné Stafford (1999) suggest a significant role

for the consumer's culture in their preference for emotional versus rational strategies.

This study focused on consumers, but there are many other stakeholder groups to whom CSR efforts must be communicated, including employees, shareholders and the wider community. With that being said, the authors of this study suggest analysing different forms of CSR communication targeting other stakeholders as well.

Additionally, CSR is a broad term covering an array of ethical behaviours. This study utilised a fictional CSR project in its methods. Future research could also explore consumer reactions to rational versus emotional strategies in the communication of other CSR efforts, for example the use of environmentally-friendly production methods.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Questions

Trust

1. Would you consider any or all or some of the texts as trustworthy sources of information?
2. Which would you regard as the most/least dependable text?
3. What was it about the text that made it trustworthy/untrustworthy?

Purchase Intention

1. How likely is it that you would purchase any, all or some of the chocolates mentioned?
2. Next time you wanted to buy chocolate, would you purchase any of these?
3. What is it about the text that makes you want to buy/not buy the chocolate?

Appendix 2. Stimuli

Emotion - Joy text

Recently, we have started a new project called “Back to the Playground” in Cameroon where we purchase our cocoa to produce our delicious chocolate. The “Back to the Playground” project has, thanks to your support through purchasing “Caring Cocoa”, succeeded in giving homeless and hungry children their childhood back. We have found them safe, loving homes and enrolled them in local schools. Today, they have caring families and bright futures, just like all children their age across the world deserve. We are happy to announce that the success of this project has brought joy to many children across Cameroon. Here’s to changing the world by eating chocolate.

Emotion - Sadness text

All of the cocoa used for our new range “Caring Cocoa” originates from Cameroon. In Cameroon, many children face homelessness and hunger at some point. Many are forced to live and work on the streets from an early age in order to provide for themselves. Without a safe home and the opportunity for basic education, there is little hope for the future. Increasing awareness of these devastating conditions in countries where our cocoa is grown has inspired project “Back to the Playground”. It aims to give children the homes and education they desperately need. By purchasing “Caring Cocoa”, you can help us stop the destruction of childhoods in Cameroon.

Rational - Practical text

In 2015, we launched a new range of chocolates under the name “Caring Cocoa”. All of the chocolates in this line are made of only the highest quality organically grown cocoa, originating from 3rd world countries. With every purchase from our “Caring Cocoa” range, 2 SEK automatically goes to the “Back to the Playground” project in Cameroon. This project aims to support homeless and hungry children in a country with a 50% poverty rate. All of the children we sponsored were

provided with local, family-based housing as well as a position in a nearby school. Of the 1Mil. SEK you helped raise last year, 100% went straight to helping the children of Cameroon.

Rational - Functional text

In 2015, we launched a new range under the name “Caring Cocoa”. All the chocolates in this line are made of only the highest quality organically grown cocoa, originating from 3rd world countries. With every purchase from our “Caring Cocoa” range, you donate 2 SEK to the “Back to the Playground” project, started in Cameroon with the goal of giving homeless children a home and an education. Last year, the project raised 1Mil. SEK, with 100% of this amount going straight to help the children of Cameroon. In order to support the project, all you need to do is purchase from our “Caring Cocoa” range; available in supermarkets and grocery stores nationwide.

Hybrid Sadness-Functional text

Last year, we launched a brand new chocolate range under the name “Caring Cocoa”. With every purchase, you donate 2 SEK to the “Back to the Playground” project in Cameroon. There, many children face homelessness and hunger and without a safe home and the opportunity for basic education, there is little hope for the future. Last year, the project raised 1Mil. SEK, with 100% of this going straight to help the children of Cameroon. It aims to give children the homes and education they badly need. Supporting the project is easy; purchase “Caring Cocoa”, available in supermarkets nationwide and help us stop the destruction of childhoods in Cameroon.

Hybrid Sadness-Practical text

Last year, we launched a brand new chocolate range under the name “Caring Cocoa”. With every purchase, 2 SEK automatically goes to the “Back to the Playground” project in Cameroon. With a 50% poverty rate, many are forced to

live and work on the streets from an early age. Without a safe home and the opportunity for basic education, there is little hope for the future. All of the children we sponsored were provided with local housing as well as a position in a nearby school. 100% of the 1Mil. SEK you raised went straight to helping those in desperate need. By purchasing “Caring cocoa”, you can help us stop the destruction of childhoods in Cameroon.

Hybrid Joy-Functional text

Last year, we launched a new chocolate range under the name “Caring Cocoa. Each purchase donates 2 SEK to the “Back to the Playground” project. The “Back to the Playground” project has succeeded in giving homeless and hungry children their childhood back. We found them loving homes and enrolled them in school. Today, they have caring families and bright futures. The project has raised 1Mil. SEK, with 100% of this going straight to help the children of Cameroon. To support the project, all you need to do is purchase from our “Caring Cocoa” range; available in stores nationwide. Here’s to bringing joy to Cameroon’s children by eating chocolate.

Hybrid Joy-Practical text

Last year, we launched a brand new chocolate range; with every purchase of “Caring Cocoa”, 2 SEK automatically goes to the “Back to the Playground” project in Cameroon. In a country with a 50% poverty rate, the project has succeeded in giving homeless and hungry children their childhood back. We have found them local, loving homes and enrolled them in nearby schools. Today, they have caring families and bright futures, just like all children their age across the world deserve. Of the 1Mil. SEK you helped raise last year, 100% went straight to helping the children of Cameroon. Here’s to bringing joy to Cameroon’s children by eating chocolate.

Appendix 3. Participant characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age	Description (nationality, education)
Participant 1	Female	19	French, Bachelor's in Tourism
Participant 2	Male	24	Spanish, Master's in Business Intelligence
Participant 3	Female	26	Spanish, Master's in Business Intelligence
Participant 4	Male	21	French, Bachelor's in Tourism
Participant 5	Female	22	German, Bachelor's in Management Science
Participant 6	Male	26	Spanish, Master's in Tourism
Participant 7	Female	24	German, Bachelor's in Event Management
Participant 8	Female	21	Romanian, Bachelor's in Tourism
Participant 9	Male	23	German, Master's in Solar Engineering
Participant 10	Male	22	German, Master's in Solar Engineering
Participant 11	Male	29	Italian, Master's in Business
Participant 12	Male	25	French, Bachelor's in Tourism
Participant 13	Male	25	Spanish, Bachelor's in Business
Participant 14	Female	26	Swedish, Bachelor's in Management
Participant 15	Female	21	French, Bachelor's in Tourism
Participant 16	Female	22	Italian, Master's in Tourism
Participant 17	Female	23	Swedish, Bachelor's in Human Resources
Participant 18	Male	28	German, Master's in Business Intelligence
Participant 19	Male	30	Spanish, Master's in Solar Engineering
Participant 20	Female	21	Italian, Bachelor in Tourism