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communicate about CSR:
A way to enhance credibility?

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Summary

Growing numbers of companies are developing CSR activities and communicating them to their consumers. However, CSR communication often triggers consumers' skepticism and finding ways to reduce consumers' skepticism is therefore critical for companies wishing to reap the benefits of their CSR efforts. While prior research has investigated the role of content-specific and channel-specific factors in enhancing the credibility of CSR communication, the influence of the communication format has been overlooked. This research investigates the effects that an infomercial, or long-form television advertisement promoting a company's product or image through information, in comparison with more traditional forms of advertising, may have on consumers' attitudes in a CSR communication context. Building on consumer responses to two real CSR communication campaigns, this research suggests that using an infomercial to communicate about CSR issues could be a better choice than a standard CSR advertisement, since infomercials appear more efficient in increasing credibility perceptions compared to standard advertisements, and can thereby generate more positive consumers' reactions. On the basis of our findings, we offer several recommendations to companies on how to communicate more effectively about their CSR activities with their consumers.

Keywords : Corporate social responsibility, Communication, Infomercials, Ad credibility, Experimentation

JEL CLASSIFICATION: M31, M37

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USING INFORMERCIALS TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT CSR: A WAY TO ENHANCE CREDIBILITY?

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Growing numbers of companies are developing CSR activities and communicating them to their consumers. However, CSR communication often triggers consumers' skepticism and finding ways to reduce consumers' skepticism is therefore critical for companies wishing to reap the benefits of their CSR efforts. While prior research has investigated the role of content-specific and channel-specific factors in enhancing the credibility of CSR communication, the influence of the communication format has been overlooked. This research investigates the effects that an infomercial, or long-form television advertisement promoting a company's product or image through information, in comparison with more traditional forms of advertising, may have on consumers' attitudes in a CSR communication context. Building on consumer responses to two real CSR communication campaigns, this research suggests that using an infomercial to communicate about CSR issues could be a better choice than a standard CSR advertisement, since infomercials appear more efficient in increasing credibility perceptions compared to standard advertisements, and can thereby generate more positive consumers' reactions. On the basis of our findings, we offer several recommendations to companies on how to communicate more effectively about their CSR activities with their consumers.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, Infomercials, Ad credibility.

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1. Introduction

Consumers appear to be particularly sensitive to corporate social responsibility (CSR), which can be broadly conceptualized as companies' status and activities with regards to their perceived societal obligations (Brown and Dacin 1997; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). A recent survey of 10,000 citizens in 10 countries (Cone/Ebiquity 2015) reports that 91% of global consumers expect companies to act responsibly (e.g., make effective social and environmental change). Furthermore, the academic literature amply documents the positive effects that CSR can have on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g., Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Sen et al. 2006). In response, growing numbers of companies are developing CSR activities, and they are increasingly communicating them, through their annual reports and corporate websites, but also by means of more traditional marketing tools such as advertising (Bhattacharya et al. 2011).

However, one of the greatest challenges facing CSR communication is its potential to trigger consumers' skepticism (Mohr et al. 2001; Pomeroy and Johnson 2009), which refers to consumer distrust or disbelief of a company's actions, including its perceived motives, specific claims, and public relations efforts (Forehand and Grier 2003). Finding ways to reduce consumers' skepticism toward their CSR communication therefore is critical for companies wishing to reap the benefits of their CSR efforts (Du et al. 2010). To do so, it has been suggested that companies should strive to make their CSR communication appear as credible as possible.

While prior research has investigated the role of content-specific and channel-specific factors in enhancing the credibility of a CSR communication (for a review, see Du et al. 2010), the potential influence of the communication format has been largely overlooked. Yet, in addition to regular advertising, companies use infomercials—or informational commercials—to promote their products in the marketplace (Martin et al. 2002; Donthu and Gilliland 1996; Singh et al. 2000). Because the primary objective of CSR communication is precisely to inform consumers about companies' CSR activities (Bhattacharya et al. 2011) and that advertising remains today the third most effective communication channel—after the product itself or its package and the traditional media (e.g., local newspaper)—to reach consumers with CSR messages (Cone/Ebiquity 2015), infomercials appear particularly suited for CSR communication. Existing literature, however, remains silent about the effects that infomercials, in comparison with more traditional forms of advertising, may have on consumers' perceptions and attitudes in a CSR communication context.

Building on consumer responses to two different, real CSR communication campaigns, this research investigates whether CSR infomercials may be perceived as more credible and lead to more positive consumer attitudes toward the ad and the brand than regular CSR ads. This paper thus provides valuable insights to marketers on how to design effective and credible CSR communications. The Main Text

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Ad credibility is defined as the “extent to which the consumer perceives claims made about the brand in the ad to be truthful and believable” (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989 p. 51). Both survey results and academic literature suggest that while advertising remains an effective way for companies to communicate about their CSR activities with consumers (Cone/Equity 2015; Matthes and Wonneberger 2014; Nielsen 2015), advertising is rarely perceived as a credible source when compared to more independent sources of information (Mohr et al. 2001; Nielsen 2015; Obermiller and Spangenberg 2000).

In this context, some companies may choose to advertise their products and services, as well as their CSR activities, by means of ‘infomercials’ – i.e., long-form television advertisements promoting a company’s product or image through information (Donthu and Gilliland 1996). Companies may indeed consider that by using an infomercial, they are delivering a more informative message that would be more credible in the eyes of consumers compared to a more traditional, shorter ad. Infomercials have some characteristics that set them apart from regular TV ads, which may make them appear more credible. First, whereas TV ads typically last about 30 seconds, the duration of an infomercial may range from a few minutes to up to two hours (Belch and Belch 1993; Donthu and Gilliland 1996). Second, infomercials contain more detailed information than traditional TV advertisements (Elliott and Lockard 1996). Infomercials also tend to use credible endorsers, such as experts, celebrities, and product users on a more regular basis than TV ads do, and they can also feature testimonials (Speck et al. 1997). Accordingly, we formulate the following first, general hypothesis:

H1: A CSR infomercial will be perceived as more credible than a standard CSR ad.

Infomercials also tend to resemble regular television programs or documentaries (Singh et al. 2000). For this reason, consumers might believe that the company uses deceptive formats, in an attempt to hide its self-serving motives for example (Speck et al. 1997). However, in a CSR communication context, this format might not appear as deceptive but instead indicate that the primary objective of the ad is to inform consumers about the CSR engagement of the brand, more than a regular TV ad. Thus, we formulate the two following hypotheses:

H2a: A CSR infomercial triggers stronger beliefs that the objective of the ad is to inform consumers about the CSR engagement of the brand than a standard CSR ad

H2b: In a CSR communication context, an infomercial appears as a less deceptive format of communication than a standard ad

Previous research suggests that when consumers perceive an advertisement as credible, they are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward the advertisement and the brand (Cotte et al. 2005; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). Along those lines, we expect a positive

relationship between the perceived credibility enjoyed by an infomercial and consumer attitudes toward the ad and the brand. In other words, we expect that the perceived credibility of the ad will mediate the effect of the ad format (infomercial versus standard ad) on consumer responses toward the ad and the brand.

H3a: The perceived credibility of CSR infomercials mediates the effect of the ad format (infomercial versus standard ad) on consumers' attitudes toward the ad, attitudes toward the brand, brand trust and purchase intentions.

H3b: Because it is perceived as more credible, a CSR infomercial leads to more positive consumer attitudes toward the ad, attitudes toward the brand, brand trust and purchase intentions than a standard CSR ad.

Some specific characteristics of an infomercial might explain that (hypothesized) higher ad credibility, and it is thus critical for brands to clearly identify what those characteristics are, in order to communicate about their CSR activities in an effective way. One of those characteristics might be the more pronounced informational orientation of infomercials, in comparison with standard ads. Puto and Wells (1984, p. 638) define an informational advertisement as one that “provides consumers with factual (i.e., presumably verifiable), relevant brand data in a clear and logical manner”. Previous literature suggests that advertising informativeness is the aspect of an ad that most strongly contributes to its overall perceived value (Ducoffe 1995). This effect likely is amplified in a CSR communication context given that 88% of consumers want to know what companies are doing for society (Cone/Ebiquity 2015). Thus, the ability of infomercials to provide detailed information to consumers about the company's CSR activities should have a positive influence on its perceived credibility:

H4a: The credibility of a CSR infomercial is positively impacted by the degree of perceived informational orientation.

Another key characteristic of CSR infomercials that can affect their perceived credibility might be their length. Existing literature investigating the effects of advertisements' length on consumer responses suggests that longer versus shorter ads provide consumers more opportunity to attend to and to process the message, leading to an enhancement of consumer learning (e.g., Pechmann and Stewart 1988). Following Mick (1992)'s finding that a deeper comprehension of an ad tends to be positively related to perceived ad credibility, we argue that the increased learning made possible by the length of the infomercial may in turn exert a positive influence on the perceived credibility of the infomercial's message. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H4b: The credibility of a CSR infomercial is positively impacted by the perceived length of the infomercial.

Perceived credibility of information is said to underlie consumers' confidence in a company's claims (Erdem and Swait 1998). When a brand communicates about its CSR activities, it generally hopes that consumers will perceive the brand as more socially responsible than they did before. Thus, next to ad credibility and its effects on consumers' ad and brand evaluations, another important indicator of the effectiveness of a CSR communication is whether the communication convinces consumers that the brand is socially responsible. CSR communication, compared to a communication without mention of the brand's CSR activities, should increase consumers' perceptions that the brand is a socially responsible brand (Du et al. 2010), regardless of the format of the communication (infomercial versus standard CSR ad). However, infomercials might influence the extent to which consumers will believe that their perceptions of the brand as a socially responsible brand are correct, or their attitude certainty (Gross et al. 1995) with regard to their CSR evaluation of the brand. Previous research has shown that attitudes held with greater certainty are more likely than attitudes held with less certainty to persist over time, to resist attempts to change them, and to influence behaviors (Bassili 1996; Rucker and Petty 2004; Tormala and Petty 2002; Tormala and Rucker 2007). Thus, it is highly desirable for a CSR communication to positively affect the extent to which consumers are certain of their CSR evaluation of the brand. Attitudes can notably become more certain when people possess more knowledge about an attitude object (Wood et al. 1995) or when they engage in more thought related to an attitude object (Abelson 1988). Considering that a CSR infomercial tends to have a more pronounced informational content and provides consumers more opportunity to attend to and to process the CSR message than a standard CSR ad—as mentioned previously—we expect that CSR infomercials will lead consumers to be more certain of their CSR evaluation of the brand than a standard CSR ad.

H5: A CSR infomercial will generate higher consumer certainty about their CSR evaluation of the brand than a standard CSR ad.

3. Research methods

To test our hypotheses, we developed a research design in which study participants were randomly exposed to one among eight different real commercials. We considered commercials from two well-known brands—Lipton (from Unilever) and Coca-Cola—that have used both infomercials and classical CSR ads to communicate about their CSR activities.

In the Lipton case, we considered commercials developed by Unilever in the context of its “Lipton for the Future” CSR communication campaign. Those commercials present Lipton's CSR achievements in its Kenyan tea plantations as well as Lipton's partnership with the Rainforest Alliance, a nonprofit organization that militates for more sustainable farming, forestry and tourism businesses. They also mention three CSR issues tackled by Lipton: the environment, working conditions, and the living conditions of workers and of

their families on the plantation. One study condition presents a standard 20-seconds ad that briefly mentions the three CSR issues addressed by Lipton as well as Lipton's partnership with the Rainforest Alliance. The three other conditions present one of the three versions of a 2-minutes infomercial, each infomercial developing only one of the three CSR issues in-depth—through testimonials of workers and of members of their families, and by providing detailed information about the various actions taken by Lipton with regards to that issue—and briefly mentioning the two other CSR issues. We also considered a control group where participants saw a standard, 29-seconds ad for Lipton, without any mention of its CSR activities.

In the Coca-Cola case, we considered commercials developed by Coca-Cola in the context of its “fight against obesity” campaign. One study condition presents a 2-minutes infomercial, titled “Coming Together”, which provides detailed information about the various actions taken by Coca-Cola to contribute to obesity reduction (such as offering of products without sugar/calories, collaboration with nutritionist on natural sweetener, reduction of package size, nutritional education of consumers, support of physical activity and sport initiatives). Another condition presents the standard 30-seconds ad of the same Coca-Cola campaign, titled “Be OK”, which highlights that a can of Coca-Cola contains 139 calories and that encourages people to have fun while burning those calories off. We also considered a control group where participants saw a standard, 30-seconds ad for Coca-Cola, without any mention of its CSR activities.

After viewing one of the commercials, participants were asked a series of questions measuring, on 7-point scales, their purchase intentions (3 items, Lutz et al. 1983 ; Cronbach's Alpha $\alpha = .966$) ; attitude toward the brand (4 items, Wagner et al. 2009; $\alpha = .969$), brand trust (4 items, Newell and Goldsmith 2001, $\alpha = .844$), attitude toward the ad (3 items, MacKenzie and Lutz 1989; $\alpha = .959$), perceived ad credibility (3 items, Mick 1992; $\alpha = .839$), perceived objective of the ad to inform (1 item), CSR perceptions (3 items, Wagner, et al. 2009; $\alpha = .92$); and CSR evaluation certainty (1 item, adapted from Tormala and Petty 2002). To gauge the deceptiveness of the advertisement, participants rated, on 7-point scales, the degree to which they perceived the advertisement as fair and honest (2 items, $r = .604$). In addition, three items were created to measure, on a 5-point Likert scale, participants' evaluation of the length of the communication, its informational orientation and its commercial orientation. At the end of the questionnaire, we included items pertaining to consumers' relationships with the brand (3 items; Yoo and Donthu 2001; $\alpha = .836$) and personal support for the CSR issues mentioned in the different ads (4 items), in addition to socio-demographic questions (age, gender, occupation, education).

Participants were recruited from the general population through emails sent by graduate master's students at a large European university to members of their social networks and invited to participate to our online survey. All participants were randomly assigned to one

of the eight experimental conditions. Of the 596 participants who completed the study, we deleted 144 participants who did not watch the entire ad/infomercial that was presented to them. Of the 452 remaining participants, 62.6% were female, their average age was 31.15 years, and the sample was quite diversified in terms of occupation (47.1% were students, 42.2% were working adults, 6.7% were retired or unemployed). Only 14.2% of them said they had seen the ad that was presented to them before. Finally, we found no significant differences in the distribution of age, gender, and perceived product quality across the different experimental groups, meaning that we can compare them to test our hypotheses.

4. Main Results

With respect to H1, the ANOVA analysis revealed significant effect of the CSR communication format (CSR infomercials versus standard CSR ad) on the perceived credibility of the CSR communication both in the Lipton case ($ML_{\text{infomercials}}=4.72$ vs $ML_{\text{standard}}=4.23$; $p=.027$) and in the Coca-Cola case ($MCC_{\text{infomercial}}=4.38$ vs $MCC_{\text{standard}}=3.61$; $p=.006$). H1 is thus supported.

We found partial support for H2a and H2b, which are validated in the Coca-Cola case only. The Coca-Cola CSR infomercial triggers stronger beliefs that the objective of the ad is to inform consumers ($M=5.44$) than a standard CSR ad ($M=3.9$; $p=.0001$) and appears less deceptive ($M=3.92$) than the standard CSR ad ($M=4.62$, $p=.007$). But we observed no significant difference between communication formats in the Lipton case, in terms of deception perceptions ($ML_{\text{infomercials}}=3.74$ vs $ML_{\text{standard}}=4.05$; $p=.134$) and beliefs about the objective to inform of the ad ($ML_{\text{infomercials}}=5.61$ vs $ML_{\text{standard}}=5.74$; $p=.534$).

We tested the prediction that ad credibility mediates the effect of ad format on ad attitude, brand attitude, brand trust and purchase intentions (H3a/H3b) using the PROCESS bootstrapping method (Hayes 2013; “model 4”; 5000 bootstrap samples). Results confirm our hypothesis. In the Lipton case, ad credibility positively influences ad attitude ($B=.7173$, $SE=.059$, $p=.0001$), brand attitude ($B=.4398$, $SE=.065$, $p=.0001$), brand trust ($B=.5452$, $SE=.0513$, $p=.0001$), and purchase intentions ($B=.2707$, $SE=.0772$, $p=.0006$). Moreover, the indirect effect of ad format, through ad credibility, on ad attitude ($B=.3531$, $SE=.1469$, $CI95: .0852$ to $.6694$), brand attitude ($B=.2166$, $SE=.1007$, $CI95: .0494$ to $.4532$), brand trust ($B=.2684$, $SE=.1172$, $CI95: .0598$ to $.5211$) and purchase intentions ($B=.1333$, $SE=.0683$, $CI95: .0349$ to $.3118$) are significant. In the Coca-Cola case, ad credibility positively influences ad attitude ($B=.5315$, $SE=.0759$, $p=.0001$), brand attitude ($B=.4674$, $SE=.1056$, $p=.0001$), brand trust ($B=.4827$, $SE=.073$, $p=.0001$), and purchase intentions ($B=.3152$, $SE=.095$, $p=.0012$). The indirect effect of ad format, through ad credibility, on ad attitude ($B=.4058$, $SE=.1559$, $CI95: .1323$ to $.7414$), brand attitude ($B=.3569$, $SE=.1629$, $CI95: .1018$ to $.7471$), brand trust ($B=.3685$, $SE=.1537$,

CI95: .1115 to .7190) and purchase intentions ($B=.2407$, $SE=.1133$, CI95: .0706 to .5370) are significant.

We also found support for H4a, but not for H4b. The perceived credibility of the CSR infomercial (both in the Lipton and the Coca-Cola case) is positively impacted by the degree of perceived informational orientation of the ad ($BCoca-Cola=.635$, $p=.0001$; $BLipton=.595$, $p=.0001$), but not by the perceived length of the infomercial ($BCoca-Cola=.059$, $p=.298$; $BLipton=-.044$, $p=.595$).

We found partial support for H5, which is validated in the Coca-Cola case only. The CSR infomercial generates higher consumer certainty about consumers' CSR evaluation of Coca-Cola than the standard CSR ad ($MCCinfomercial=4.85$ vs $MCCstandard=4.13$; $p=.013$). But we observed no significant difference in CSR evaluation certainty in the Lipton case ($MLinfomercials=4.43$ vs $MLstandard=4.16$; $p=.251$).

5. Discussion

The results of our study suggest that using an infomercial format to communicate about CSR issues could be a better choice than a short, standard CSR advertisement. Indeed, in comparison with a standard ad that contains CSR arguments, the infomercial format brings additional credibility to the CSR message. Moreover, our results show that this perceived credibility mediates the impact of the communication format on consumers' ad attitudes, brand attitudes, brand trust and purchase intentions. We also observed, in the Coca-Cola case, that using infomercials to communicate about CSR increases consumers' confidence in the evaluation they make about the socially responsible character of the company in comparison to a standard CSR advertisement.

With regards to the characteristics of infomercials that contribute to their higher perceived credibility, our study highlights that whereas the length of an infomercial does not add much, infomercials' perceived informational orientation positively impacts their perceived credibility. Finally, our results show that infomercials might also lead consumers to believe that an infomercial is more of an informational tool than a persuasive tool, and that consumers will thus perceive an infomercial as a less deceptive communication format than a standard, short advertisement. However, our results only confirm this prediction in one of the two brand cases. Many differences exist between the CSR campaign of Lipton and the one of Coca-Cola, including the type of CSR initiatives put forward and the general tone that the brands use in their respective campaigns. Those differences might help explain these results. Consumers' prior persuasion knowledge with respect to the two companies, or their initial brand attitudes might also play a moderating role. Future research should investigate further these specific conditions under which CSR infomercials might lead to lower perceptions of deception in comparison to more traditional forms of CSR communication.

Based on our results, we would recommend companies to use infomercials to communicate about CSR, since they do appear more efficient in increasing credibility perceptions compared to standard advertisements, and can thereby generate more positive returns for companies—in terms of attitudes, trust, and purchase intentions. They might also, to some extent, make consumers more certain of their evaluation of the company as a socially responsible company than a shorter advertisement. However, managers should not neglect the higher cost for infomercials to be aired on television channels. Previous research has notably shown that consumers might become suspicious about a company's CSR engagement if they get the impression that the company spends more on advertising its CSR activity than on supporting the CSR cause itself (Yoon et al. 2006). For infomercials to be effective, managers should also make sure that the communication can be perceived more as an information tool than a promotional tool, and that the informational orientation of their communication is clear for viewers.

Our study is not without limitations, which offer several avenues for future research. One of our research limitations is that it has been carried out with two well-known brands, which are both leader on their respective market in the country in which the study has been carried out. Furthermore, the brands' prior reputation may have affected our results. Future research could thus investigate the effects that infomercials may have for less known brands. Further research could also investigate the extent to which the various factors that have been shown to affect the effectiveness of CSR communication—including content-specific factors (e.g., the congruence between CSR issues and the company's core business), company-specific factors (e.g., industry reputation and prior CSR record), and consumer-specific factors (e.g., CSR support) (Du et al. 2010)—might moderate the effect that the communication format (infomercials versus standard advertisement) has on the perceived credibility of the CSR message and subsequent consumer responses toward the brand.

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