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## “Do Good and Be ‘Liked’”: CSR Messages on Social Media during COVID-19 Pandemic and Consumer Responses

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the types of corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages communicated on social media during the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States and its corresponding effects in driving consumer engagement and related psychological responses. Two studies were conducted. In Study 1, we analyzed corporations' social media posts. We identified and compared four different CSR message types (i.e., employee-relevant CSR, community-relevant CSR, promotional CSR, and company statement) in their effects on consumers' behavioral engagement. In Study 2, we conducted an online experiment to extend the findings of Study 1 further. Study 1 revealed that employee-relevant CSR received the highest consumer behavioral engagement among all types of CSR messages. Study 2 revealed a mediation effect of consumers' engagement intention between the CSR message types and consumers' brand attitudes and trust. In addition, community-relevant CSR and company statements received higher evaluations of brand attitude and brand trust.

Crisis is often understood as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs 2015, 3). The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global-scale crisis since 2020. However, scholars suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic is distinctive from traditional organizational crises, which focus on the evaluation of an organization's responsibility and reputational risk (Ecklebe and Löffler 2021). Viewed as a unique, external, and societal-level health crisis (J. Y. Li et al. 2021), its impact is extended globally across various sectors (Bailey and Breslin 2021; Ruck and Men 2021). This unprecedented situation has forced organizations to swiftly adjust (Bailey and Breslin 2021; Chon, Tam, and Kim 2021; J. Y. Li et al. 2021) and improvise responses to novel challenges without existing models to follow (Bailey and Breslin 2021; Chon, Tam, and Kim 2021).

The isolation measures that followed the United States' emergency declaration on March 17, 2020, generated significant social, cultural, and financial changes (Falkheimer et al. 2022). Job losses and reduced consumer confidence prompted changes in spending habits across sectors. Grocery stores saw increased demand due to stockpiling, whereas restaurants, travel, and leisure activities experienced significant declines (Baker et al. 2020; Stock 2020;). This upheaval

emphasized corporations' need to adapt, with some companies shifting their focus to producing essential products (Santamaria 2020).

Additionally, isolation measures led to increased consumer use of social media (Clement 2020; Valdez et al. 2020), acting as a catalyst for more diverse and innovative corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices (He and Harris 2020). As noted by Crane and Matten (2021), COVID-19 pushed companies to reconsider their social responsibilities concerning stakeholders, societal risk, and supply chains, as well as political economy. As such, this has increased the responsibilities of their communication activities. Empirical research on consumers' reactions to CSR messages during COVID-19 is still relatively limited, yet critical to advance our understanding of CSR communication's changing dynamics and social impacts.

The pandemic triggered a reassessment of the nature of social responsibility and highlighted the importance of care, empathy, and psychological well-being (Qin and Men 2023). American consumers have indicated that a brand's/corporation's treatment of employees and consumers during the pandemic would likely impact their postpandemic purchase intentions (Field 2020). Furthermore, inappropriate brand responses during this period could lead to brand switching (Rogers 2020). Moreover, the pandemic drew attention to consumers' expectations for brands to address societal responsibilities, prompting brands and corporations to reevaluate their communication strategies with various stakeholders in light of the pandemic's impact.

This reconsideration of CSR communication strategies during a crisis carries risks and potential positive and negative outcomes. As Ham and Kim (2019) synthesized, the role of CSR communication, in noncrisis contexts, is to improve reputation and perceptions of authenticity as well as legitimize the corporation's role within society in its stakeholders' minds. Postcrisis, the role of CSR communication is to offset the potential reputational harm by showcasing the positive precrisis traits of the organization (Ham and Kim 2019). Postcrisis CSR communication can mitigate or exacerbate the effects of a crisis in terms of stakeholders' attitudes toward the corporation. For example, if stakeholders perceive that a corporation's actions undermine its CSR claims, its reputation may be diminished (Coombs and Holladay 2015). Additionally, research indicates that when companies are not transparent about the motives behind their CSR actions (self-serving and societally serving), stakeholders tend to become more skeptical of the company's intentions (Y. Kim 2014).

However, it is important to note that the influence of CSR-based crisis responses, such as CSR motives and CSR history, on crisis responsibility attribution does not fully explain why CSR messages influence stakeholders' behaviors, such as word-of-mouth and purchase intentions, during a crisis. Furthermore, established work on CSR-based crisis responses focuses on the effect of such responses concerning accidental and intentional crises (Ham and Kim 2019). As such, they may not directly translate to a unique, external, and societal-level health crisis (J. Y. Li et al. 2021) such as COVID-19.

Existing studies have contributed valuable insights to our understanding of CSR communication on social media during the pandemic. Mueller et al. (2022) identified society, consumers, and the company as three key audiences who benefited from COVID-19-related health messages in CSR ads, specifically within the context of adhering to health behavior recommendations. In a nonpandemic context, Al-Haddad et al. (2022), examined the impact of CSR communication of ethical, environmental, philanthropic, and economic responsibilities on consumer purchase intentions, mediated by consumer engagement on social media. The authors identified ethical and environmental responsibilities as having a positive and significant effect on consumer engagement and purchase intentions. In contrast, philanthropic and economic responsibilities did not significantly impact consumer engagement (Al-Haddad et al. 2022). More pandemic-oriented work, such as Mata, Buil, and Gómez-Campillo (2022), identified a "reorientation towards CSR" (3168) messaging, including the emergence of several new CSR-related topics on social media, such as safety, alternative sales, and product delivery methods; support for vulnerable customers; and employee protection and well-being (see also Mazza et al. 2022).

Our work presents several theoretical contributions that enhance our understanding of consumer responses to CSR messaging during a global health crisis. Firstly, we identify and compare

different types of CSR messages companies employ during the crisis. This analysis provides valuable insights into the diverse communication strategies utilized by brands to convey their CSR initiatives. Furthermore, it builds on existing research that identifies companies, consumers, and employees as the primary beneficiaries of COVID-19-related CSR messaging (e.g., Mueller et al. 2022). In particular, we differentiate between CSR-oriented company statements and promotional messages, shedding light on their unique effects on consumer responses. This distinction contributes to a nuanced understanding of the implications and outcomes of different company-focused CSR messaging types. Secondly, drawing on attribution theory, this study examines the underlying psychological mechanism that explains the various effects of different types of CSR messages on consumer outcomes. Thirdly, our research examines the effects of CSR message types on brand attitudes and trust. These findings contribute to the existing literature on brand–consumer interactions and emphasize the role of CSR messaging in shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes toward brands.

Our study offers practical implications for companies seeking to engage consumers effectively through CSR communication on social media. By understanding which message types generate higher consumer engagement and positively influence brand attitude and trust, companies can tailor their strategies to better connect with their target audience, particularly during global or societal crises. This includes focusing on message types like employee-relevant CSR, community-relevant CSR, and transparent company statements. Companies can enhance their reliability, build consumer trust, and establish stronger consumer–brand relationships by conveying genuine care and commitment to stakeholders and emphasizing efforts to mitigate adverse outcomes. Our findings offer actionable insights for companies to develop CSR messaging strategies that foster trust, a positive brand image, and deeper connections with consumers.

## Literature review

### *Corporate social responsibility communication*

CSR is a concept that has been defined and interpreted in various ways. Early work, attributed to Howard Bowen's *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* (1953), emphasizes that CSR is the “obligation of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action that are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society” (6). Bowen's work has since laid the groundwork for various interpretations of CSR that emphasize the integration of societal considerations into business decisions, resulting in diverse definitions. Some definitions position CSR as an integral part of civil society. Such definitions frame CSR as “a citizenship function with moral, ethical, and social obligations that provide the scaffolding for mutually beneficial exchanges between an organization and its publics” (David, Kline, and Dai 2005, 293). Others, such as Schultz, Castelló, and Morsing (2013), consider CSR a communicative event and symbolic resource that reflects the societal role of corporations.

Basil and Erlandson (2008) proposed a dual perspective on CSR that helps bridge the gap between society- and corporation-centered definitions. This perspective encompasses two main aspects: first, the notion of benefiting society as a whole and, second, addressing the diverse needs and interests of various stakeholders. However, the interchangeable use of CSR with terms like corporate ethics, sustainability, citizenship behavior, and corporate conscientiousness can sometimes blur the lines between these perspectives. Despite this, the fundamental essence of CSR remains intact, emphasizing that brands are interconnected with the social system and are expected to act responsibly (Iglesias et al. 2020; Singh 2014). In short, CSR reflects how a business considers its decisions' impacts on society, stakeholders, and the overall environment of human beings.

In addition to a spectrum of definitions, scholars have proposed various categorizations of CSR. Within the field of public relations, CSR is often classified as internal and external CSR, differentiating based on corporations' critical stakeholders in their CSR initiatives. Internal CSR

refers to a corporation's practices benefiting employees' psychological and physical well-being (Brammer, Millington, and Rayton 2007; Turker 2009). For instance, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies disseminated information about store/factory rules to protect their employees, provided financial support for employees to work from home, and increased insurance coverage for those affected by the virus. External CSR entails a corporation's efforts in environmental protection and social contributions, which can enhance its social legitimacy and reputation among external stakeholders (Brammer, Millington, and Rayton 2007; Carroll 1979). Examples of external CSR initiatives during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic include corporations' donations to health-related institutions, supporting their need for personal protective equipment, research funding, and other related requirements.

Another approach to classifying CSR initiatives is by identifying goal-specific orientations, such as philanthropic CSR, promotional CSR, and value-creating CSR (Austin 2000; Chen et al. 2018; Pirsch, Gupta, and Grau 2007; Varadarajan and Menon 1988). Philanthropic CSR encompasses one-way donation behaviors, such as providing monetary or material support without expecting anything in return from the consumer. Promotional CSR refers to initiatives to enhance promotional effectiveness and foster mutually beneficial outcomes between consumers and corporations. Lastly, value-creating CSR aligns a company's mission with social causes.

Organizations rely on CSR communication to relay their CSR initiatives and navigate the interpretation and understanding of them among various stakeholders. This mechanism enables organizations to interact with external stakeholders, such as consumers, the press, and nongovernmental organizations, and internal stakeholders, such as employees (Crane and Glozer 2016; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010). Through these interactions, organizations seek to shape and convey the meaning of their CSR efforts, foster transparency, build trust, and facilitate dialogue with their stakeholders (Dong et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2021).

### ***CSR communication through the lens of attribution theory***

The diverse definitions and interpretations of CSR highlight the importance of integrating societal considerations into business decisions and accommodating various stakeholders and goal-specific orientations. Such categorizations serve as valuable frameworks for understanding the multifaceted nature of CSR initiatives. To obtain a thorough understanding of how corporations and brands influence consumer behavior, it is imperative to adopt a comprehensive approach that concerns both internal and external stakeholders (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010). It is also necessary to acknowledge the various forms of CSR messaging and explore the interplay between society- and corporation-centered perspectives (e.g., Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006).

The application of attribution theory can serve as a valuable framework to comprehend the varying interpretations of CSR communication among stakeholders (Ji, Tao, and Rim 2022; S. Kim and Choi 2018; Pérez 2019). Attribution theory explores how individuals attribute meaning to the motives behind a corporation or brand's behavior (Groza, Pronschinske, and Walker 2011; Kelley and Michela 1980; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013), which is insightful in understanding consumer skepticism and engagement (Chen et al. 2018; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). The attribution of meaning ascribed to perceived motivations can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivations are driven by societal or ethical obligations (Vlachos, Panagopoulos, and Rapp 2013), and extrinsic motivations are driven by situational factors, such as environments that encourage increased profit seeking (Vlachos, Panagopoulos, and Rapp 2013). When consumers perceive extrinsic motives, it negatively impacts a brand/corporation's credibility and organizational legitimacy (Jahn, Eichhorn, and Brühl 2020).

Drawing on attribution theory, Ellen, Webb, and Mohr (2006) further identified four specific CSR motives: egoistic, strategic, stakeholder, and value-driven. These self-centered motivations can be classified as strategic or egoistic (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006). Strategic motivations focus on fulfilling typical business objectives, whereas egoistic motivations focus on fulfilling self-serving ones (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006).

Guided by Ellen, Webb, and Mohr (2006) and others' typologies, this study focuses on four key CSR messages showing different motives: (1) employee-relevant CSR, (2) community-relevant CSR, (3) promotional CSR, and (4) company statement. Within our typology, we conceptualize four different types of motives—two extrinsic and two intrinsic.

Promotional CSR and company statements are extrinsically motivated and benefit the brand/corporation in addition to any perceived societal benefits that they may have (Jahn, Eichhorn, and Brühl 2020). We characterize these types of CSR as those that companies utilize to either gain benefits or prevent negative consequences from their stakeholders (Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). Promotional CSR is driven by financial pressure and can be interpreted as egoistic in that it takes advantage of the pandemic as a social cause in its self-interest to generate profit (Jahn, Eichhorn, and Brühl 2020). Similarly, company statements respond to stakeholder pressure (Vlachos et al. 2009). Both promotional CSR and company statements should be egoistically and strategically motivated to drive profits, retain current customers, or appeal to new consumers engaging in brand-switching behaviors (Jahn, Eichhorn, and Brühl 2020).

When consumers attribute egoistic and stakeholder-driven motives rather than value-driven motives, they are more likely to be skeptical of CSR (Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). Furthermore, when consumers perceive CSR tactics as misleading or unethical, their perceptions and purchase intentions are negatively impacted (Ginder, Kwon, and Byun 2021). However, when consumers can clearly identify CSR activities as such, such as through a company statement, companies have the potential to establish themselves as socially responsible enterprises, leading to performance benefits (Zhao et al. 2020).

In contrast, we conceptualize employee-relevant CSR and community-relevant CSR as values driven and intrinsically motivated, or those perceived to be for the benefit of others (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006). Employee-relevant CSR is ethically oriented and communicates efforts that support fair treatment of employees, particularly in satisfying their higher-order needs, such as instrumental-, relational- and morality-based needs (Rupp et al. 2006; Vlachos, Panagopoulos, and Rapp 2013; Vlachos, Theotokis, and Panagopoulos 2010). Similarly, community-relevant CSR is altruistic and outlines a genuine attempt to contribute to the overall well-being of society (Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013).

CSR that is attributed to value-driven motives leads to consumers' perceptions of genuineness (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill 2006). Furthermore, when consumers are more engaged, they are more willing to support the company and purchase its products when they perceive high sincerity in serving the public (Kim and Lee 2012). Additionally, consumers' purchase intentions are more positively influenced by perceptions of value-driven motives, whereas stakeholder-driven motives negatively influence purchase intentions (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006). Because the attribution inference of CSR motives is a contextualized process showing stakeholders' varying interpretations of what drives companies to be socially responsible, it is essential to examine this inferential process in the context of the global health crisis to capture the new CSR expectations and demands that arise from consumers (He and Harris 2020).

### ***CSR on social media during the pandemic***

Social media has become vital for brands to communicate their CSR messages (Lee, Van Dolen, and Kolk 2013), especially during the pandemic (Mata, Buil, and Gómez-Campillo 2022). Companies have adjusted their communication strategies (Mangiò, Pedeliento, and Andreini 2021; Mata, Buil, and Gómez-Campillo 2022) and adopted new forms of CSR advertising to encourage responsible behaviors or showcase community support (Mueller et al. 2022).

During the pandemic, CSR communication strategies and practices underwent significant changes. Initially, brands and corporations shifted to posting COVID-19 information, safety-related CSR content, and schedule changes (Mata, Buil, and Gómez-Campillo 2022; Mazza et al. 2022; Shang, Liou, and Rao-Nicholson 2022). Over time, they added philanthropic information, business-related content, positive and optimistic messages, and support for the public and



frontline workers (Mata, Buil, and Gómez-Campillo 2022; Shang, Liou, and Rao-Nicholson 2022). The pandemic also increased social media CSR content addressing people-related issues such as human rights and employee relations (Mazza et al. 2022).

Corporations and brands made notable shifts in their consumer engagement strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. They delivered uplifting and positive content (Hesse et al. 2021), recognized the importance of increasing CSR communication in response to heightened CSR actions (Mata, Buil, and Gómez-Campillo 2022), and adjusted their rhetorical approaches on specific platforms to foster a “sense of community and promote social and economic solidarity” (Mangiò, Pedeliento, and Andreini 2021, 249). Financially resilient brands and corporations were more likely to adopt socially oriented behaviors and generate COVID-19-related CSR content than their less financially resilient counterparts (Baboukardos, Gaia, and She 2021).

As such, these changes in CSR communication practices influenced consumer engagement, providing valuable insights into the relationship between communication strategies and consumer responses, particularly attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. Companies that addressed pandemic-related ethical issues were perceived more positively (Mangiò, Pedeliento, and Andreini 2021). Consumers’ willingness to advocate for a brand was influenced by their expectations and perceived brand motivation and skepticism, with community-, consumer-, and employee-centered CSR initiatives generating higher brand advocacy than promotional messages (K. H. Kim, Xu, and Rim 2023).

Given the crucial period in the early stages of the pandemic when social media CSR practices underwent significant changes, it is imperative to examine the nature of CSR messages to better understand the relationship between CSR communication and consumer engagement during this period. Therefore, we propose the following research question:

Research Question 1: What are the types of CSR messages on social media platforms during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States?

### ***CSR communication and consumer engagement***

Consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept encompassing behavioral (e.g., Van Doorn et al. 2010) and psychological (e.g., Hollebeek 2011) dimensions. Behavioral consumer engagement on social media, indicated by actions such as likes and shares, has been widely studied in the context of CSR communication (Chae 2021; Coursaris, van Osch, and Balogh 2016; Al-Haddad et al. 2022). This approach aligns with social media content’s cognitive and affective engagement, reflecting consumers’ interactions and connections with the brand (Van Doorn et al. 2010). Public engagement with brand content demonstrates support and alignment with the brand (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu 2007). Thus, studying consumer engagement as a behavioral construct is valuable for understanding the sequential consumer–brand relationship variables. In our case, consumer engagement refers to “the level of the customer’s interactions and connections with the brand’s or firm’s offerings or activities” (Vivek et al. 2014, 401), specifically CSR messages posted on social media during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Existing literature on CSR on social media has explored different types of CSR messages and their impact on consumer engagement. For instance, Al-Haddad et al. (2022) found that CSR messages focusing on philanthropic, environmental, ethical, and economic responsibilities positively influenced consumer engagement and purchase intentions. Chae (2021) investigated the effects of various call-to-action elements in CSR messages, such as likes and shares, on consumer behavior. Building on this research, we aim to examine how different types of CSR messages during the early stages of the pandemic affected consumer behavioral engagement. Thus, we propose the following research question:

Research Question 2: Which type of CSR message would result in higher consumer engagement on social media platforms during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States?

## ***Effects of corporate communication on consumer attitude and brand trust***

Consumers' attitudes and perceptions of brands/corporations are often formed based on their judgment of a corporation's quality of work and the value it delivers (Thomson, MacInnis, and Whan Park 2005). Many consumers expect corporations to contribute to society and the public (Quelch and Jocz 2009), and studies have shown that when such expectations are fulfilled, consumers will hold a positive attitude and evaluation of corporations or brands (Lii and Lee 2012; Maignan and Ferrell 2001; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). Thus, presenting a corporation's CSR initiatives on social media during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak becomes essential to the brand in achieving a favorable consumer attitude.

Trust, a critical component in any relationship, has also been found to be a crucial outcome of companies' communication of CSR initiatives (e.g., Brown and Dacin 1997; H. Kim, Hur, and Yeo 2015; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Singh, Iglesias, and Batista-Foguet 2012). Brand trust refers to one's willingness to rely on a brand based on their beliefs and evaluation of the brand in conditions of uncertainty or risk (e.g., Becerra and Korgaonkar 2011). Such trust is built on consumers' confidence in the exchange partner's reliability, integrity, safety, and honesty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Communicating a brand's CSR initiatives highlights the values and characters of a brand, thus potentially leading to the development of brand trust.

However, although extant studies have revealed the positive influence of CSR communication on consumers' attitudes and brand trust, studies have rarely examined which type of CSR message would yield better consumer psychological responses in global health crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique case study exploring the convergence of a global health crisis, CSR messaging strategy, brand attitude and trust, and digital dependence on CSR messaging dissemination.

Therefore, based on the above discussion, we propose the following research question:

Research Question 3: Which types of messages would result in higher brand attitude and brand trust in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States?

The active participation of consumers on a brand's social media may also lead to higher levels of consumer loyalty and purchase intention (Al-Haddad et al. 2022; Casaló, Flavián, and Guinaliú 2007; Koh and Kim 2004). However, previous scholars investigating consumer engagement and its impact on brand attitude and trust have revealed mixed findings (Vander Schee, Peltier, and Dahl 2020). For example, Tuten and Ashley (2016) found that consumer engagement could positively impact consumers' brand attitudes in the context of advergames. However, Z. Li and Li (2014) found no significant relationship between consumer engagement and brand attitude in the computer-mediated communication environment. Moreover, Liu et al. (2018) found that consumer engagement is positively associated with brand trust. However, Laroche et al. (2012) found no positive relationship between consumer engagement and brand trust in online social communities. Specifically, in the domain of CSR communication on social media, fewer studies have investigated the relationships between consumer engagement, brand attitude, and brand trust. Therefore, based on the above discussion, we propose the following research question:

Research Question 4: To what extent (if any) would consumers' engagement intention, as a result of responding to different CSR messages on social media, further influence consumers' brand attitude and brand trust?

## **Study 1**

### ***Method***

Study 1 employed data collected from corporations' official social media platforms and corresponding consumer engagement data (i.e., number of likes) to investigate Research Questions 1 and 2. We focused on Fortune 500 companies specializing in fast-moving consumer goods



(FMCG) due to their financial resources and capacity to implement new CSR policies. FMCG products are closely tied to essential consumer needs. They are frequently purchased on a recurring basis, providing an appropriate context for studying the influence of corporate communication on consumer responses during crises such as COVID-19. Companies were categorized as FMCG for inclusion in our data set based on two criteria: (1) the foods are at least consumed monthly, and (2) the goods are usually low-cost products that involve low involvement during consumers' purchase decision making.

Data collection involved gathering brands' posts related to COVID-19 from March 10 to April 30, 2020, across popular social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This time frame was selected to capture corporations' early-stage responses to the pandemic, characterized by heightened chaos and uncertainty. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, followed by the U.S. president declaring it a national emergency on March 13, 2020. Thus, the collected data reflect corporations' initial reactions to the global pandemic.

Our choice of social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) was based on their prominence and ability to provide a range of post content richness, from low to high media richness (Shearer and Mitchell 2021). Posts in textual, image, or combined formats that incorporated "COVID-19" in their hashtags, textual descriptions, or images were included in the study. The final data set consisted of 938 posts from forty-seven companies distributed across Facebook ( $n=328$ ), Instagram ( $n=264$ ), and Twitter ( $n=328$ ). The list of these forty-seven companies can be found in Online [Appendix A](#).

### ***Content analysis procedure and results***

In this study, the focus is on social media posts as the unit of analysis. These posts encompass the coded categories of CSR messages determined by the researchers and the corresponding consumer engagement data, specifically the number of likes on social media platforms. This method of analyzing messages has been widely used in advertising research to understand how different characteristics of ads can influence consumer perceptions and behavioral responses (e.g., Allan 2008; Young, Gillespie, and Otto 2019). Similarly, our study applies this logic to explore the types of posts shared by brands/corporations on social media platforms and their impact on consumer engagement.

To inductively categorize the typology of corporate messaging during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, we adopted a coding approach using multigrounded theory (Goldkuhl and Cronholm 2010), which included both empirical and theoretical grounding. First, using empirical grounding, two researchers on this project took a random sample of 100 posts out of the 938 posts to categorize the types of messaging using the bottom-up approach. Then, following the literature on CSR communications (Carroll 1979; Dahlsrud 2008; Wang and Huang 2018), the researchers further refined the categories of CSR messages in a top-down approach. Thus, the researchers categorized the posts into four kinds of corporate messages: community-relevant CSR, employee-relevant CSR, promotional CSR, and company statements.

Employee-relevant CSR is classified as any post related primarily to the well-being of the company's employees. These messages outline measures the company is taking to improve the well-being of its employees in light of the difficult circumstances resulting from COVID-19. These messages could include improvements in benefits, hourly pay, time off, or others. However, they are all directly related to alleviating the financial and personal stress that COVID-19 caused their employees. In comparison, community-relevant CSR is classified as any post primarily about helping the community during the pandemic. These messages show the company's commitment to helping serve the community they are in and can range from helping transport supplies, making monetary donations, or reworking their supply chain to assist in making the supplies needed on the frontlines of COVID-19. These messages differ from employee-relevant CSR messages because the recipient of these contributions is the

public rather than internal employees. Therefore, these messages are purely philanthropic to the community and do not directly benefit the company monetarily.

Moreover, promotional CSR messages are classified as any post that benefits both the consumer and the company through discounted prices, new offerings, or other things. These CSR initiatives are mutually beneficial and can include discounted offerings or new delivery methods to make purchases easier for the consumer. Though these messages benefit the consumer, they are inherently related to driving more sales and helping the company monetarily. Last but not least, a new categorization the researchers adopted due to the evolving nature of COVID-19, company statements include any general information about a company's plan and response to COVID-19. These statements notified consumers about store closures, new in-store policies, and other general information that could not have been classified primarily as employee-relevant, community-relevant CSR, or promotional content. An example of a company statement would be a grocery store alerting consumers that it will have reduced hours for the next few weeks, mandating that masks be worn in the stores at all times, and explaining their new sanitization processes.

Following the above coding scheme, researchers in this project coded the 938 posts independently, with a Cohen's kappa of 0.80 (i.e., substantial agreement; cf. Landis and Koch 1977) showing satisfactory intercoder reliability. The researchers then collaboratively discussed and resolved the differences, which resulted in final data consisting of 338 community-relevant CSR posts, 108 employee-relevant CSR posts, 375 company statement posts, and 117 promotional CSR posts. Table 1 provides some illustrative examples of the corporate messaging found in the data set.

### **Engagement data analysis**




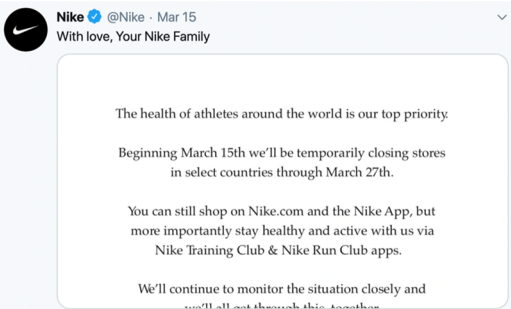







The engagement data were retrieved as the number of likes each post received from consumers on June 11, 2020. Because different brands have different numbers of followers on various social media platforms, the researchers calculated the engagement ratio by dividing the number of likes received by the number of followers of each brand on each social media platform. Moreover, to reach the normal distribution of this ratio, the researchers log-transformed the engagement ratio. Therefore, the final dependent variable of this study is the log-transformed engagement ratio of each brand post.

To investigate the proposed Research Question 2, which addressed the types of corporate messaging that were more engaging for consumers on social media platforms, the researchers performed a one-way analysis of variance using the statistical analysis tool SPSS (Levine and Hullett 2002). Results indicated a significant difference across the four types of CSR messages,  $F(3, 934) = 13.87$ ,  $p < .001$ . Employee-relevant CSR ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) was found to be the most engaging type of CSR message across all CSR types, followed by community-relevant CSR ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ), company statement ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ), and promotional CSR ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ); see Figure 1 for details. Post hoc least significant difference analysis also showed that for each pair of comparisons, there were significant differences. See Figure 1 and Table 2 for details.

### **Discussion**

Our findings indicate that employee-relevant CSR posts addressing corporations' policies or practices in protecting or benefiting their employees during the COVID-19 outbreak received the highest level of behavioral engagement across various brands and social media platforms. This aligns with previous research highlighting consumers' positive reception of internal CSR messaging (Chen et al. 2018; Wang and Huang 2018). By demonstrating a company's genuine concern for its employees and prioritizing their well-being, employee-relevant CSR messaging establishes a positive brand image and resonates with consumers. It is therefore understandable why this type of messaging performed exceptionally well in our study.

**Table 1.** Examples of corporate messages on social media.

|   |   |
|---|---|
|  <p><b>Kellogg's</b>  March 20 · 🌟</p> <p>To help people get access to the food they need, Kellogg has increased our global donations of food and funds to coronavirus relief efforts to nearly \$4 million. We're helping our <a href="#">#BetterDays</a> partners – including <a href="#">The Global FoodBanking Network</a> and <a href="#">Feeding America</a> – that support communities worldwide, especially in areas with school closures where kids rely on breakfast clubs and school meals. Read more: <a href="https://bit.ly/2Wxw6lm">https://bit.ly/2Wxw6lm</a></p>  |  <p><b>Nike</b>  @Nike · Mar 15</p> <p>With love, Your Nike Family</p> <p>The health of athletes around the world is our top priority.</p> <p>Beginning March 15th we'll be temporarily closing stores in select countries through March 27th.</p> <p>You can still shop on Nike.com and the Nike App, but more importantly stay healthy and active with us via Nike Training Club &amp; Nike Run Club apps.</p> <p>We'll continue to monitor the situation closely and we'll get through this together.</p> |
| Community-relevant CSR  | Company statement   |
|  <p><b>The Hershey Company</b>  @HersheyCompany</p> <p>Our remarkable employees make everything we do possible. We're proud to share that we're committing \$1 million for the installation and staffing of a new mask production line in Hershey, PA to help protect the health and safety of our community. <a href="https://bit.ly/3bAH8RD">bit.ly/3bAH8RD</a></p>    |  <p><b>CVS Health</b>  @CVSHealth · Mar 19</p> <p><a href="#">.cvsparmacy</a> waiving charges for home delivery of prescription medications due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Learn more: <a href="https://cvs.co/2IDOVPR">cvs.co/2IDOVPR</a> <a href="#">#COVID19</a></p>  <p>CVS Health Announces Additional COVID-19 Resources Focused on Patient Access<br/><a href="https://cvshealth.com">cvshealth.com</a></p>         |
| Employee-relevant CSR   | Promotional CSR   |

In contrast, promotional CSR messaging was the least engaging during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with earlier research, our data reaffirmed that consumers generally disapprove of promotional CSR messages from larger corporations, which can implement more substantial and altruistic CSR initiatives like community-relevant CSR (Chen et al. 2018). This finding highlights the importance of aligning CSR efforts with consumer expectations and showcasing a genuine commitment to social responsibility. Further exploration of the reasons behind consumer disapproval of promotional CSR messaging and its implications for brand perception would provide valuable insights for future research.

**Study 2**

To further validate the findings of Study 1 and to also extend the understanding of how these different types of corporate messaging would influence consumers' psychological evaluation of brands, we conducted an online 2 (brand type: hedonic vs. utilitarian) × 4 (corporate messaging: employee-relevant CSR vs. community-relevant CSR vs. promotional CSR vs. company statement)

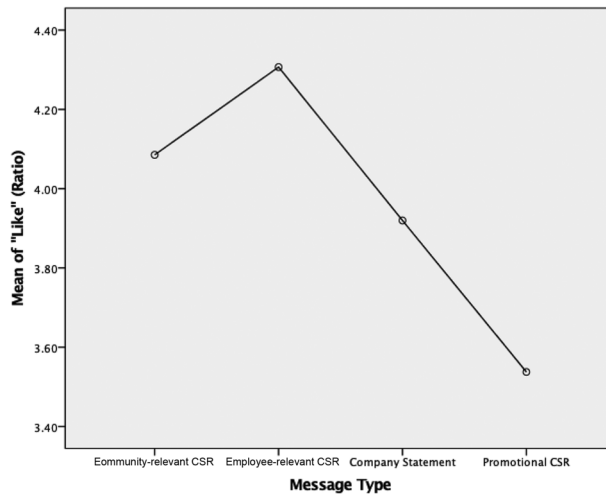


Figure 1. One-way analysis of variance of social media engagement data.

Table 2. Multiple comparisons (Study 1).

| Message type           | Message type           | Mean difference | SE     | Sig. | 95% CI      |             |
|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|--------|------|-------------|-------------|
|                        |                        |                 |        |      | Lower bound | Upper bound |
| Community-relevant CSR | Employee-relevant CSR  | −0.2214*        | 0.1078 | .040 | −0.4329     | −0.0099     |
|                        | Statement              | 0.1656*         | 0.0731 | .024 | 0.0221      | 0.3091      |
|                        | Promotional CSR        | 0.5479***       | 0.1046 | .000 | 0.3426      | 0.7531      |
| Employee-relevant CSR  | Community-relevant CSR | 0.2214*         | 0.1078 | .040 | 0.0099      | 0.4329      |
|                        | Statement              | 0.3871***       | 0.1065 | .000 | 0.1781      | 0.5960      |
|                        | Promotional CSR        | 0.7693***       | 0.1301 | .000 | 0.5140      | 1.0246      |
| Statement              | Community-relevant CSR | −0.1656*        | 0.0731 | .024 | −0.3091     | −0.0221     |
|                        | Employee-relevant CSR  | −0.3871***      | 0.1065 | .000 | −0.5960     | −0.1781     |
|                        | Promotional CSR        | 0.3822***       | 0.1033 | .000 | 0.1796      | 0.5848      |
| Promotional CSR        | Community-relevant CSR | −0.5479***      | 0.1046 | .000 | −0.7531     | −0.3526     |
|                        | Employee-relevant CSR  | −0.7693***      | 0.1301 | .000 | −1.0246     | −0.5140     |
|                        | Statement              | −0.3822***      | 0.1033 | .000 | −0.5848     | −0.1796     |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

factorial design experiment. Specifically, we included hedonic and utilitarian brands in the second study to avoid single-message effects. In addition, prior studies have shown that the service type (utilitarian vs. hedonic) provided by companies could influence consumers' evaluation of the CSR message (e.g., Andreu, Casado-Díaz, and Mattila 2015). Therefore, we included both hedonic and utilitarian brands to see whether such differences also apply to the context of CSR communication on social media during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Pretests for stimuli development

Pretest 1 ( $n=40$ , 60% males, ages 25–59) was conducted using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online research platform that recruits participants and offers them monetary compensation. Examined corporations were selected from the Fortune 500 list, including Ralph Lauren, Dillard's, Nordstrom, Gap, Nike, Target, and P&G. We used a seven-point bipolar scale to measure the brands' utilitarian value (= 1) or hedonic value (= 7). The results showed significant differences across the brands in consumers' perceptions of each brand being hedonic or utilitarian,  $F(39, 6) = 7.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , such that P&G was perceived as the most utilitarian ( $M=3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ). Conversely, Ralph Lauren was perceived as the most hedonic ( $M=5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ). Therefore, P&G and Ralph Lauren were selected to build the stimuli.

To ensure corporate messaging type manipulation, we also pretested eight messages developed for the stimuli. The messages were adapted from corporations' posts in the prior social media data. These messages were tested with the sample recruited from MTurk ( $n=40$ , 55% males, ages 20–65). Each participant reviewed eight messages and was asked to identify the type of CSR messaging (single choice) in the four categories (i.e., employee-relevant CSR, community-relevant CSR, promotional CSR, and company statement). We selected those with the highest percentage (ranging from 67.5% to 87.5%) of matching identification. Based on this, we created the stimuli for the main study. Moreover, we framed the stimuli under the context of Instagram because results in Study 1 showed that Instagram had a significantly higher engagement rate than the other social media platforms ( $M_{\text{difference with Facebook}} = 1.41$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ;  $M_{\text{difference with Twitter}} = 1.45$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ),  $F(2, 935) = 335.78$ ,  $p < .001$ . See Online [Appendix B](#) for examples of the final stimuli.

## Main study

### Sample and procedure

The primary study was conducted online, with participants recruited again from MTurk. A total of 380 valid responses were collected in early June 2020. More than half of the sample was male ( $n=239$ , 62.9%), and the majority were Caucasian ( $n=275$ , 72.4%), aged 18 to 74. See [Table 3](#) for the demographic information of the pretests and the main study.

Upon consent, participants were first asked to answer a screening question regarding their use of Instagram. Those who were not active users of Instagram were excluded from continuing the online experiment. Before randomizing the experimental condition exposure, they were asked about their social media dependency and involvement with the current issue of COVID-19. They were then randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. The participants were first asked to evaluate their preexisting attitudes toward, familiarity with, and product involvement with the assigned brand, followed by exposure to the stimuli. After viewing the stimuli,

**Table 3.** Demographic information of pretests and main study (Study 2).

|                               | Pretest 2 ( $N=40$ ) |            | Pretest 1 ( $N=40$ ) |            | Main study ( $N=380$ ) |            |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|------------------------|------------|
|                               | <i>N</i>             | Percentage | <i>N</i>             | Percentage | <i>N</i>               | Percentage |
| Gender                        |                      |            |                      |            |                        |            |
| Male                          | 22                   | 55         | 24                   | 60         | 239                    | 62.9       |
| Female                        | 18                   | 45         | 16                   | 40         | 141                    | 37.1       |
| Age                           |                      |            |                      |            |                        |            |
| 18–25                         | 4                    | 10         | 3                    | 7.5        | 22                     | 5.8        |
| 26–30                         | 6                    | 15         | 14                   | 46.4       | 190                    | 50         |
| 31–35                         | 11                   | 27.5       | 4                    | 10         | 87                     | 22.9       |
| 36–40                         | 7                    | 17.5       | 4                    | 10         | 57                     | 15         |
| 41–45                         | 4                    | 10         | 6                    | 15         | 20                     | 5.3        |
| >45                           | 8                    | 20         | 9                    | 22.5       | 4                      | 1.1        |
| Race/ethnicity                |                      |            |                      |            |                        |            |
| White/Caucasian               | 33                   | 82.5       | 31                   | 77.5       | 275                    | 72.4       |
| Black/African American        | 3                    | 7.5        | 5                    | 12.5       | 82                     | 21.6       |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 2                    | 5          | 0                    | 5          | 6                      | 1.6        |
| Asian                         | 2                    | 5          | 2                    | 5          | 14                     | 3.7        |
| Other                         | n/a                  | n/a        | n/a                  | n/a        | 3                      | 0.8        |
| Employment status             |                      |            |                      |            |                        |            |
| Employed full-time            | 28                   | 70         | 35                   | 87.5       | 141                    | 37.8       |
| Employed part-time            | 8                    | 20         | 2                    | 5          | 45                     | 12.1       |
| Unemployed looking for work   | 1                    | 2.5        | 2                    | 5          | 86                     | 23.1       |
| Retired                       | 1                    | 2.5        | 1                    | 2.5        | 1                      | 0.3        |
| Student                       | 1                    | 2.5        | n/a                  |            | 95                     | 25.5       |
| Disabled                      | 1                    | 2.5        | n/a                  |            | 5                      | 1.2        |

**Table 4.** Multiple comparisons among CSR message types regarding brand attitude and trust (Study 2).

| Message type           | Message type       | Dependent variable: Brand attitude |       |      | Dependent variable: Brand trust |       |      |
|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|-------|------|---------------------------------|-------|------|
|                        |                    | Mean difference                    | SE    | Sig. | Mean difference                 | SE    | Sig. |
| Promotional CSR        | Statement          | −0.365**                           | 0.114 | .002 | −0.377***                       | 0.096 | .000 |
|                        | Community-relevant | −0.367**                           | 0.117 | .002 | −0.318**                        | 0.098 | .001 |
|                        | Employee-relevant  | −0.223*                            | 0.113 | .049 | −0.318**                        | 0.096 | .001 |
| Statement              | Promotional        | 0.365**                            | 0.114 | .002 | 0.377***                        | 0.096 | .000 |
|                        | Community-relevant | −0.002                             | 0.116 | .983 | 0.059                           | 0.098 | .548 |
|                        | Employee-relevant  | 0.141                              | 0.113 | .211 | 0.059                           | 0.095 | .539 |
| Community-relevant CSR | Promotional        | 0.367**                            | 0.117 | .002 | 0.318***                        | 0.098 | .001 |
|                        | Statement          | 0.002                              | 0.116 | .983 | −0.059                          | 0.098 | .548 |
|                        | Employee-relevant  | 0.144                              | 0.116 | .213 | 0.000                           | 0.098 | .997 |
| Employee-relevant CSR  | Promotional        | 0.233*                             | 0.113 | .049 | 0.318***                        | 0.096 | .001 |
|                        | Statement          | −0.141                             | 0.113 | .211 | −0.059                          | 0.095 | .539 |
|                        | Community-relevant | −0.144                             | 0.116 | .213 | 0.000                           | 0.098 | .997 |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

participants were asked to answer a manipulation check question, followed by their evaluation of brand attitude, brand trust, and behavioral engagement intention. Two attention check questions were also inserted in the survey.

### Measurement

**Brand attitude.** Consumers' brand attitudes (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .886$ ) were measured with a scale adapted from Lutz, MacKenzie, and Belch (1983), which used a seven-point bipolar scale with three items: "negative/positive," "bad/good," and "unfavorable/favorable."

**Brand trust.** The measurement of brand trust (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .822$ ) was adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), which used a four-item index with seven-point ratings of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The items included "I trust this brand," "I rely on this brand," "This is an honest brand," and "This brand is safe."

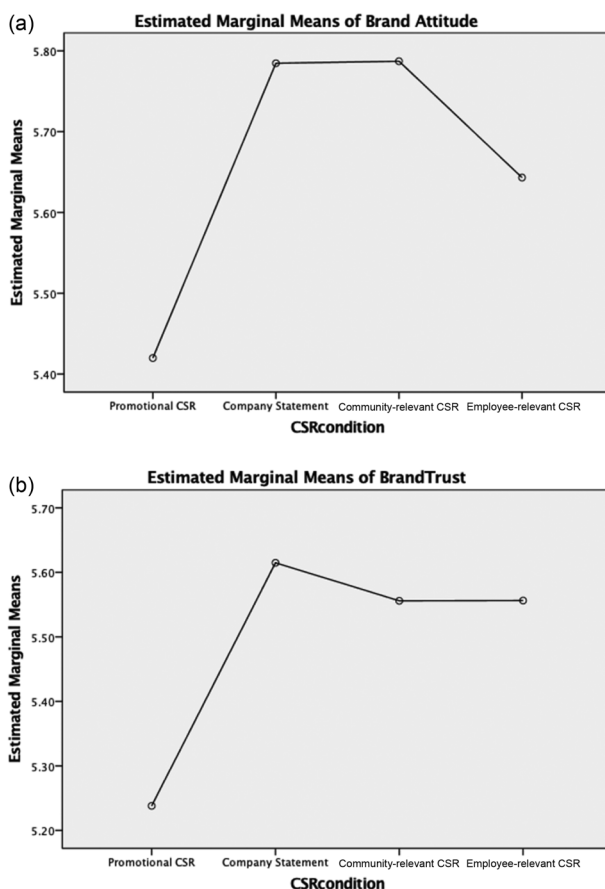
**Behavioral engagement intention.** Participants' behavioral engagement with the social media post was measured with a single-item scale from Alhabash and McAlister (2015), which used seven-point ratings of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) to answer, "I will 'like/heart' this post on my Instagram."

**Control variables.** To avoid potential confounding effects, we measured individuals' social media dependence (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .834$ ; Tsai and Men 2013), issue involvement with COVID-19 (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .833$ ; J. N. Kim and Grunig 2011), preexisting attitude toward the brand (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .889$ , Lutz, MacKenzie, and Belch 1983), familiarity with the brand (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .849$ , Lutz, MacKenzie, and Belch 1983), and product involvement (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .867$ , Zaichkowsky 1985).

### Data analysis

A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was first performed to examine whether there were significant differences in the dependent variables of interest (e.g., behavioral engagement intention, brand attitude, and brand trust) across the two brand types (i.e., hedonic vs. utilitarian), controlling for participants' brand familiarity, existing brand attitude, issue involvement with COVID-19, dependency on social media, and product involvement. Results revealed insignificant differences in consumers' behavioral engagement intentions,  $F(1, 375) = 1.86$ ,  $p > .05$ , brand attitude,  $F(1, 375) = 2.91$ ,  $p > .05$ , and brand trust,  $F(1, 375) = 0.06$ ,  $p > .05$ . Therefore,





**Figure 2.** One-way ANCOVA: (a) brand attitude and (b) brand trust.

we proceeded with data analysis by combining both brands to examine the differences across CSR message types for the dependent variables of interest.

To examine how the four types of corporate messaging would result in different consumer attitudes and trust toward the brand, we conducted one-way ANCOVA analyses, controlling for individuals' preexisting brand attitudes, familiarity, issue involvement with COVID-19, product involvement, and dependence on the social media platform Instagram.

When an individual's brand attitude was the dependent variable, their preexisting attitude toward the brand,  $F(1,371) = 179.67$ ,  $p < .001$ , was a significant covariate. Individuals' dependence on Instagram,  $F(1,371) = 3.40$ ,  $p > .05$ , brand familiarity,  $F(1,371) = 3.60$ ,  $p > .05$ , product involvement,  $F(1,371) = .733$ ,  $p > .05$ , and issue involvement with COVID-19,  $F(1,371) = 0.62$ ,  $p > .05$ , were not significant covariates. The results revealed significant differences across the four types of corporate messaging,  $F(3,371) = 4.51$ ,  $p < .01$ , such that both community-relevant CSR ( $M = 5.79$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95% confidence interval CI [5.62, 5.95]) and company statement ( $M = 5.79$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95% CI [5.62, 5.94]) resulted in high brand attitude, followed by employee-relevant CSR ( $M = 5.65$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95% CI [5.49, 5.80]) and promotional CSR ( $M = 5.42$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95% CI [5.26, 5.58]). See in Table 4 for pairwise comparisons.

In addition, when assigning individuals' brand trust as the dependent variable, individuals' dependence on Instagram,  $F(1,371) = 16.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , preexisting attitude toward the brand,  $F(1,371) = 213.58$ ,  $p < .001$ , and their brand familiarity,  $F(1,371) = 9.63$ ,  $p < .01$ , were all significant covariates. Individuals' issue involvement with COVID-19,  $F(1,371) = 0.46$ ,  $p > .05$ , and product involvement,  $F(1,371) = 3.75$ ,  $p > .05$ , were not significant covariates. Results once again

**Table 5.** Results of mediation effects (Study 2).

|    | Indirect effect       |        |          |          | Indirect effect       |        |          |          |
|----|-----------------------|--------|----------|----------|-----------------------|--------|----------|----------|
|    | CSR message           |        |          |          | CSR message           |        |          |          |
|    | → Consumer engagement |        |          |          | → Consumer engagement |        |          |          |
|    | → Brand attitude      |        |          |          | → Brand trust         |        |          |          |
|    | Effect                | BootSE | BootLLCI | BootULCI | Effect                | BootSE | BootLLCI | BootULCI |
| X1 | 0.072                 | 0.047  | 0.003    | 0.181    | 0.112                 | 0.061  | 0.009    | 0.251    |
| X2 | 0.111                 | 0.051  | 0.030    | 0.226    | 0.172                 | 0.063  | 0.066    | 0.314    |
| X3 | 0.098                 | 0.048  | 0.024    | 0.207    | 0.153                 | 0.058  | 0.056    | 0.279    |

indicated significant differences among the four types of CSR messages,  $F(1,371) = 6.28, p < .001$ , such that company statement resulted in the highest brand trust ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI [5.48, 5.75]), followed by employee-relevant CSR ( $M = 5.56$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI [5.43, 5.69]) and community-relevant CSR ( $M = 5.56$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI [5.41, 5.70]). Promotional CSR ( $M = 5.24$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI [5.10, 5.38]) received the least brand trust. See Table 4 for pairwise comparisons. Table 4 and Figures 2a and 2b present the findings in detail.

Moreover, to answer Research Question 4, which addresses the potential mediating role of consumer engagement between the CSR message types and consumers' attitudes and trust toward the brand, we performed multiple mediation analyses using Model 4 in Hayes' (2017) PROCESS model. Specifically, the CSR message type condition was entered as the categorical independent variable (0 = promotional CSR, 1 = company statement, 2 = community-relevant CSR, 3 = Employee-relevant CSR), consumers' behavioral engagement intention was entered as a mediator, and brand attitude and brand trust were entered as outcome variables independently. We also controlled for individuals' preexisting brand attitudes, familiarity, issue involvement with COVID-19, product involvement, and dependence on social media.

When assigning brand attitude as the outcome variable, results indicated significant mediation effects of consumer engagement between the CSR message types and consumers' brand attitudes. Specifically, with promotional CSR as the baseline, company statement ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ), community-relevant CSR ( $\beta = 0.69$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and employee-relevant CSR ( $\beta = 0.62$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ) all resulted in higher behavioral engagement, which further influenced consumers' brand attitudes ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The results of the indirect effects of CSR message type → consumer engagement → brand attitude are reported in Table 5.

When assigning brand trust as the outcome variable, results also indicated significant mediation effects of consumer engagement between the CSR message types and consumers' brand attitudes. Similarly, with promotional CSR as the baseline, company statement ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ), community-relevant CSR ( $\beta = 0.69$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and employee-relevant CSR ( $\beta = 0.62$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ) all resulted in higher behavioral engagement, which further influenced consumers' brand trust ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The results of the indirect effects of CSR message type → consumer engagement → brand trust are reported in Table 5.

## Discussion

The findings of the experimental study (i.e., Study 2) further extend the findings of Study 1 by revealing differences across the four types of CSR messages and their impact on consumers' brand attitudes and trust. Results consistently revealed that promotional CSR was the least engaging type of CSR message on social media during the pandemic. Such a finding is consistent with previous literature, which suggested promotional CSR could cause negative attributions of CSR activities, thus further influencing a corporation's relationship with its stakeholders (e.g., Bhattacharya and Sen 2004; Coombs and Holladay 2012, 2013). In addition, results showcased that both community-relevant CSR and company statements significantly impact consumers' brand attitudes, followed by employee-relevant CSR. Company statements were found to be the

most influential type of CSR message in driving brand trust, followed by employee-relevant and community-relevant CSR messages. Moreover, results showcased the mediating role of consumer engagement between the CSR message types and consumers' psychological responses toward the brand (i.e., brand attitude and brand trust).

## General discussion

### *Theoretical contributions*

Our study contributes valuable insights by serving as a critical juncture between the CSR and crisis communication fields within the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers a specific investigation of consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses toward different CSR communication strategies. Our findings suggest that focusing on employee-related CSR messages can effectively drive consumer engagement during a global crisis. Additionally, community-relevant CSR and clear company statements play important roles in fostering positive brand attitudes and building consumer trust.

First, Study 1 contributes to understanding CSR communication during societal crises, specifically a global health crisis, by categorizing the types of CSR messages deployed by brands/corporations on social media. Drawing on CSR communication literature (e.g., Austin 2000; Brammer, Millington, and Rayton 2007; Varadarajan and Menon 1988) and a bottom-up approach to social media, we identified four types of CSR messages that may be employed during such periods: employee-relevant CSR, community-relevant CSR, company statements, and promotional CSR. Such a finding also revealed the adaptive nature of CSR strategies in unprecedented crises.

Furthermore, we expanded on earlier work that identified companies, communities, and consumers as the beneficiaries of CSR messaging (Mueller et al. 2022) to address how consumers may interpret alternative underlying motives to better understand consumer engagement outcomes. To accomplish this, we drew on attribution theory to connect our identified message types to intrinsic (e.g., community-relevant CSR and employee-relevant CSR) and extrinsic (e.g., promotional CSR and company statements) motivations to better understand the underlying psychological mechanisms that explain the various effects of different types of CSR messages on consumer outcomes.

Though prior studies on CSR communication on social media investigated message effects in driving consumer engagement responses (e.g., Al-Haddad et al. 2022), they did not compare different types of CSR messages or examine the differences among the CSR message types. Therefore, our study fills the gap by revealing that during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, employee-relevant CSR received the highest behavioral engagement compared to community-relevant CSR, company statements, and promotional CSR.

Our findings provide insights into the effects of CSR message types on brand attitudes and trust. Company statements were found to be associated with the highest levels of brand trust and were equally important as community-relevant CSR in generating more positive brand attitudes. This is consistent with the literature emphasizing the significance of trust in brand-consumer interactions (Barney and Hansen 1994; Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Aleman, and Yague-Guillen 2003). When corporations communicate their efforts to mitigate adverse outcomes during a global health crisis, it showcases their reliability and commitment to protecting consumers, strengthening trust in the brand.

Moreover, our findings support previous research highlighting the positive impact of effective CSR communication on consumer attitudes and perceptions of the brand or corporation (Lii and Lee 2012; Maignan and Ferrell 2001; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). Additionally, consumers showed a stronger resonance with corporate posts focusing on employee-relevant CSR, community-relevant CSR, and company statements compared to promotional CSR activities during the early stages of the pandemic. This may be attributed to the heightened empathy conveyed through these CSR initiatives, which resonated with consumers (Hesse et al. 2021; K.

H. Kim, Xu, and Rim 2023), especially considering the financial hardships and risks faced by individuals in the health care sector.

In contrast, promotional CSR, highlighting a corporation's willingness to sacrifice profits, was the least favored type of CSR message and received the lowest level of consumer behavioral engagement. This shift in consumer perception can be explained by psychological contracts formed between consumers and brands based on implicit promises (Kirk and Rifkin 2020). When brands or corporations are perceived as acting in a self-serving manner, it creates a sense of betrayal among consumers, contradicting the positioning promises made during the pandemic (Kirk and Rifkin 2020). Previous studies have also indicated disapproval of promotional CSR messages, particularly from larger or more competent corporations within the industry (Chen et al. 2018).

The findings of this study advance the literature on CSR communication and crisis communication in social media by connecting CSR message effects with consumer-brand relationship outcomes through the investigation of consumer engagement as a mediating role during the unprecedented global pandemic crisis. Different CSR messages can result in different consumer engagement levels, significantly impacting consumer-brand relationships, including brand attitude and brand trust.

### ***Managerial implications***

Our study offers valuable insights for social media managers, particularly those who care about societal crisis communication and CSR communication, to reconsider consumer culture shifts in the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic and develop effective content posting strategies during societal crises. It is crucial for brands and corporations to carefully navigate their response and communication during such crises, because they significantly impact consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions (Edelman 2020; Rogers 2020).

Due to the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, managers should prepare to adapt their CSR and crisis communication swiftly. As indicated in our research, three major types of CSR messages were effective during the pandemic's early stages: employee-relevant CSR, community-relevant CSR, and company statements. These types of messages align with consumer expectations (Iglesias et al. 2020) and result in higher consumer engagement, positive attitudes, and trust. Therefore, social media managers should consider incorporating these types of CSR messages into their content strategy.

Furthermore, one critical managerial implication that emerges from our study is the need to be cautious about incorporating promotional CSR or any communication that may be perceived as self-benefit-driven during periods of upheaval or crisis. During a crisis, especially one of a global scale like the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers are highly sensitive to the tone and content of messages from organizations. Attempts to promote products or services under the cover of CSR can be perceived as opportunistic (Yang and Mundel 2021) and may trigger consumer resistance.

From a higher-level point of view, social media managers should be aware that CSR initiatives can be a part of their crisis communication plans, especially in the face of a global societal crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, ongoing CSR programs can be leveraged further during the societal crisis to demonstrate the company's commitment to social responsibility and aim to generate a positive impact during the crisis.

Overall, our findings can guide social media managers in assessing the potential outcomes of posting different CSR content while strategizing their response, particularly during complex periods of widespread uncertainty, upheaval, or crisis among their consumers.

### ***Limitations and future studies***

Future research should consider addressing several important aspects not covered in our study because of the broad impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, our research focused on large

corporations, particularly Fortune 500 companies, and it is essential to explore whether the perceived competence of corporations moderates the effects of CSR types on consumer responses. Including smaller companies and brands, such as local shops, in future studies would provide insights into potential differences in consumer reactions.

Additionally, our study solely examined the behavioral response of likes on social media. Previous research (C. Kim and Yang 2017) has shown that different actions like comments and shares elicit distinct cognitive and affective responses. These distinctions are important for subsequent engagement. For instance, “like” is more related to sensory and visual features of social media content that drive affective responses, whereas “comment” is more associated with rational and interactive features of social media content that drive cognitive responses. Furthermore, “share” combines both, often used for self-expression (Swani and Labrecque 2020). Exploring how different CSR messages relate to consumers’ intentions to share, comment, or engage in word-of-mouth discussions would provide valuable insights into the broader consumer engagement landscape.

In addition, our research focused exclusively on the U.S. population, but considering people from other countries and cultures would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the global impact. Consumers’ different cultural backgrounds may influence how corporations and consumers cope with the situation and the underlying mechanisms involved. Therefore, future studies should consider investigating a multicountry population and comparing the differences to gain insights into global change.

Moreover, our study examined the effects of individual types of corporate messages rather than the combinations of different messages. In reality, a corporation will release different combinations of information to its key stakeholders. Future research could explore the synergy effects that occur with different combinations of messages and examine how message characteristics, such as perceived authenticity, narrative storytelling, and CEO personal letters, influence communication effectiveness.

Another area for exploration is the boundary conditions of corporate communication effectiveness during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the modality of CSR messages (e.g., horizontal video, vertical video, audio, image, text) may influence consumer responses. Additionally, the impact of individuals’ CSR skepticism could moderate the relationships we discovered in our study. Further empirical studies are needed to uncover these insights.

Lastly, it would be valuable to investigate whether the new norm of living with the virus will create a new marketing environment where corporate reputation, in the long run, is influenced by CSR messages communicated on social media. Longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into how CSR messages truly impact corporate performance, such as corporate image and reputation, over time and how this affects the lifetime value of customers.

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