



# The role of message specificity in corporate social responsibility communication<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Companies vary in how they communicate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) endeavors, either reporting the specific causes supported (e.g., “We support the American Lung Association, Kidney Foundation, and Multiple Sclerosis Society”) or mentioning the issue in general (e.g., “We support advancing health”). This study investigates which message strategy (general or specific) is more effective and shows that when companies donate to a single issue (e.g., health), a specific rather than a general message strategy produces more positive evaluations. This is because consumers trust companies more when they communicate their cause support with more specificity. However, when a company donates to a diverse set of issues (e.g., health, environment, and education), a boundary condition to the effect occurs. This research has important implications for managers' decisions on how best to advertise their CSR efforts.

## 1. Introduction

Companies actively engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and often donate their resources—time, money, or products and services—to causes. In 2015, corporate donations to causes totaled \$17.8 billion (Double the Donation, 2016). Research shows that CSR, including donations to causes, can improve relationships between the company and various stakeholder groups such as consumers, employees, and investors (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Pelozo, 2006; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). To benefit from these donations, companies need to disseminate information about the donations to their stakeholders, who are often unaware of their efforts (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). In general, companies can communicate information about their CSR activities through websites, social media, press releases, and promotional material, among other outlets. Given that stakeholders are often skeptical of CSR efforts, due to the positive impact of CSR on the company's bottom line, companies must provide effective messages perceived as sincere and truthful to translate the CSR activities into firm benefits.

To communicate CSR, companies can choose to adopt a general or a specific message strategy. With a general message strategy, companies do not advertise the specific cause or causes supported but only convey

high-level information about their efforts, focusing on the overall issues they support (“We support the environment”).<sup>2</sup> For example, 34 Degrees advertises that “We support causes that fight hunger,” and Diet Coke advertises its support for “heart health programs.” By contrast, with a specific message strategy companies mention the individual cause or causes supported (e.g., “We support the Rainforest Alliance and Nature Conservancy”). For example, TJ Maxx advertises its support for Save the Children, and Hovis bread boasts support for the Royal British Legion's annual Poppy Appeal. Companies have also used both types of campaigns over time. CVS has used a general message promoting how it is helping advance health and also a more specific message detailing its partnership with the American Lung Association. Wendy's has used a general message promoting helping children in the community and has also run a specific message campaign featuring the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

Because consumers do not spend a great deal of time or effort processing CSR information, conveying simple, general messages may be effective to garner attention. Indeed, many companies use general messages as a means to appeal to a diverse set of stakeholders (Scandellius & Cohen, 2016) and for marketing sensitive topics (Dickinson-Delaporte, Beverland, & Lindgreen, 2010). However, research in advertising suggests that specific messages are also favorable.

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<sup>2</sup> We define a cause as the specific charity or non-profit organization supported, such as the American Heart Association, and an issue as the overall objective that an individual cause aims to achieve, such as improvements to health, education, or the environment.

For example, potential candidates found specific job placements ads more informative (Feldman, Bearden, & Hardesty, 2006), and consumers responded more favorably to specific nutrition information (Burton, Andrews, & Netemeyer, 2000). Therefore, both general and specific information can reach favorable outcomes. To our knowledge, however, our study is the first to investigate the best communication strategy (general vs. specific messages) when companies want to convey their support for charitable causes. We predict and provide evidence that consumers prefer specific CSR messages because they generate more trust than campaigns with general CSR messages.

With so many companies advertising both general and specific messages, are there instances when a company can be just as successful with a general message? To answer this question, we consider the number of issues supported in a CSR campaign. Companies indicate that they use a variety of methods, such as customer input, leadership discretion, employee interest, and historical partnerships (CECP, 2013), to determine which issues to support and therefore often support different issues at the same time. For example, Procter & Gamble specifies that it supports only causes tied to “Comforts of Home” and “Health and Hygiene,” while Wells Fargo supports many issues, including the environment, housing, community development, and others. Within each issue, firms may donate to any number of causes. We propose that the effectiveness of message specificity is dependent on the structure of the cause portfolio (i.e., the total number of issues a company supports). Specifically, when a company has a diverse cause portfolio and thus supports several different issues (e.g., health, education, and the environment), the current study tests and finds that consumers are less sensitive to the specificity of the CSR message strategy than when the company has a focused cause portfolio and supports one issue (e.g., health).

Our research makes several contributions. We add to the CSR communication literature (Andreu, Casado-Díaz, & Mattila, 2015; Chang, 2011; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Green & Peloza, 2014) by showing how the level of specificity of the CSR information influences consumers' evaluations of the company. Specifically, we extend theory on message specificity that has focused on CSR-related messages (Connors, Anderson-MacDonald, & Thomson, 2017; Yang, Lu, Zhu, & Su, 2015) and show that consumers perceive the company as more trustworthy when the CSR message is specific (i.e., the supported cause is stated) rather than general (i.e., the supported cause is not stated). We demonstrate that with a focused (but not a diverse) portfolio, consumers are more receptive to a specific than a general message.

Companies engage in a multitude of activities, often supporting a range of causes and issues. This research investigates how companies can communicate these activities in a way that enhances perceptions of trust in the company. Trust is at the core of managing relationships with stakeholders (e.g., Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and research in marketing highlights the importance of this construct in driving positive outcomes for companies, such as word of mouth, loyalty, and performance (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Particularly in CSR, trust in the company plays a central role in whether the company can improve stakeholder relationships through charitable efforts (e.g., Connors et al., 2017). Thus, this research adds to literature on trust and relationship marketing by underscoring the conditions under which consumers are more or less likely to infer that companies are trustworthy in the context of CSR (e.g., Marín, Cuestas, & Román, 2016).

Last, we extend theory on charitable giving by focusing on the cause portfolio that firms can use to garner positive responses from consumers (Robinson, Irmak, & Jayachandran, 2012; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). While many companies donate to more than one cause, to date research has mainly examined corporate partnerships with a single cause (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2005; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004) and has not considered different configurations of a cause portfolio. Here, we show the importance of considering a company's cause portfolio structure and explain how to communicate that portfolio effectively. As companies donate to a multitude of issues, managers must think strategically about

the effect of these efforts on their promotional materials, websites, and press releases.

Our findings suggest that companies should be mindful of their CSR messaging strategy. While many managers may prefer using a general strategy, which allows for more flexibility to determine and possibly change specific causes to donate to, consumers may prefer that companies commit explicitly to particular causes with a specific message strategy when focusing their activities on a single issue. Given that practitioners and researchers have called for companies to establish a clear focus for their CSR activities and to improve consumer perceptions (Bruch & Walter, 2005; Drumwright, 1996), our findings hold particular importance as they highlight that consumers are more sensitive to the message strategy for more focused cause portfolios.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. CSR as a relationship-building activity

When companies engage in CSR, their behavior is usually associated with positive outcomes, such as higher evaluations of the company and increased moral capital (Godfrey, Merrill, & Hansen, 2009; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Vanhamme & Grobbsen, 2009). Such outcomes increase their ability to be sustainable in the long run (Bansal & Roth, 2000). A McKinsey and Company (2006) survey finds that many executives engage in CSR because they believe that doing so will cause stakeholders to hold a positive image of the company, and indeed it does. CSR builds strong relationships between the company and consumers but also between the company and employees or shareholders (De Roeck & Delobbe, 2012; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006). Thus, CSR can be conceived as a relationship marketing activity because relationship marketing encompasses “all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22).

To build relationships with key stakeholders, companies can communicate CSR activities in many ways, including promotions on their website, press releases, and/or specific CSR activities (e.g., customer relationship management, sponsorships). Yet communicating CSR is a delicate matter (Du et al., 2010). Consumers like when companies engage in CSR (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) but often dislike when they brag about their good deeds (Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). Therefore, creating awareness and managing consumer reactions are imperative for a successful CSR campaign, and managers must understand what to communicate in particular about their CSR endeavors. One such factor is the message content. The content of the message has a strong influence on the credibility of the CSR message (Du et al., 2010) and is a crucial component for a successful message (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). Thus, managers need to be mindful of the best message to communicate to consumers: a general or specific one. At first glance, a general CSR message strategy may seem to be the best choice for managers. Unlike a specific strategy, which requires a company to make an explicit commitment to the particular causes it donates to, a general strategy gives the company *flexible commitment*, in which it can support an overall issue (i.e., health) but make changes as necessary to the cause portfolio without drawing unnecessary attention to the change.

While managers may prefer a general message, consumers tend to respond more favorably to specific messages (Burton et al., 2000; Connors et al., 2017; Ganz & Grimes, 2018; Maronick & Andrews, 1999). Specific claims give more detailed information and are perceived as more verifiable (Darley & Smith, 1993). This type of message strategy is also easier to process (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998), is more attractive, and keeps consumers' attention longer than a general strategy (MacKenzie, 1986). By contrast, general claims tend to be perceived as more ambiguous and subjective, which can negatively influence the believability of the message.

We therefore predict that when a company has a specific CSR message emphasizing the specific causes supported, consumers will respond more favorably than when a company has a general CSR message. Given that information sharing is imperative for fostering relationships between the company and stakeholders (e.g., [Palmatier et al., 2006](#)), especially in the context of CSR, we posit that consumers will prefer the specific message strategy.

**H1.** Consumers have more positive brand evaluations when a company uses a specific rather than general CSR message strategy.

## 2.2. Communicating trust

Although CSR has the potential to enhance the quality of the stakeholder (i.e., consumer–company) relationship overall ([Bhattacharya et al., 2009](#)), it is only successful in doing so when stakeholders trust the activities the company engages in and, ultimately, the company itself ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)). Trust is a core element of relationship marketing ([Palmatier et al., 2006](#)) and reflects “confidence in the exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#), p. 23).

Companies can build trust through communication and information sharing ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)). In channel relationships, for example, communication aids in aligning perceptions and expectations between different channel members ([Geyskens, Steenkamp, & Kumar, 1998](#)). In CSR, communication can play a major role by making information available for consumers to use to assess the company’s sincerity. Communication of the behavior can serve as an important cue for consumers, helping form their overall evaluations of the company and its CSR activities. For example, research in another context characterized by high uncertainty (i.e., online shopping) shows that consumers rely on third-party information and depth of information to influence their attitudes toward the company (e.g., [Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005](#); [Jiang, Jones, & Javie, 2008](#)). Research also suggests that consumers pay attention to similar cues in a CSR context (e.g., [Parguel, Benoit-Moreau, & Larceneux, 2011](#)).

As consumers perceive specific information as more objective and truthful ([Feldman et al., 2006](#)), they are more likely to trust a company when presented with this type of message ([Connors et al., 2017](#)), which in turn should lead to more favorable responses toward the company. Likewise, consumers respond less favorably to a message they perceive as less truthful ([Chen & Chang, 2013](#); [Connors et al., 2017](#); [Forehand & Grier, 2003](#)). Companies must therefore communicate CSR information in a way that increases trust in the company. For example, consumers find a CSR campaign more credible when the company specifies the exact amount of money donated to a cause rather than stating that “a portion of proceeds” is donated ([Maronick & Andrews, 1999](#)). Therefore, we predict that consumers will find a company more trustworthy when it uses a specific CSR message rather than a general CSR message. Furthermore, we posit that this increased trust in a specific message will cause consumers to have more favorable evaluations of a specific than a general message strategy.

**H2.** Consumers have more trust in a company that uses a specific rather than a general CSR message strategy.

**H3.** Trust mediates the relationship between type of CSR message strategy and consumer brand evaluations.

## 2.3. Moderating role of cause portfolio diversification

The theory so far suggests that consumers perceive a company with a specific (vs. general) CSR strategy as more trustworthy, leading them to have more positive evaluations of a company that shares specific rather than general CSR information. Next, we investigate when a general strategy is as effective as a specific strategy. Specifically, we posit that cause portfolio diversification presents such a boundary

condition.

Research shows that consumers respond differently to various types of portfolio diversification ([Dacin & Smith, 1994](#)), and we expect that consumers may also do so in the context of CSR portfolio diversification. Prior research acknowledges that diversity in CSR can promote different stakeholder interests ([Drumwright, 1996](#); [Varadarajan & Menon, 1988](#)). For example, in 2012 Walgreens announced that it would donate \$1 to the American Heart Association for each blood pressure checkup a consumer received at one of its stores. Walgreens’ employees, however, may be more interested in donating to different causes unrelated to health. Because these and other stakeholders can differ in their expectations of which causes a company should support, companies can use a portfolio of issues to promote these varying interests ([Drumwright, 1996](#); [Varadarajan & Menon, 1988](#)). As [Varadarajan and Menon \(1988, p. 65\)](#) note, “a firm whose product offerings are targeted to multiple market segments might be in a position to achieve better results by associating with a portfolio of causes that appeal to those constituencies rather than a single cause.” Moreover, while awareness of the community involvement is imperative for influencing stakeholder perceptions, many consumers are unaware of companies’ CSR initiatives ([Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004](#); [Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009](#)). Therefore, consumers and other stakeholders are likely to notice a company’s activities if it donates resources to a diverse set of issues. This increased awareness will help the firm establish itself as a good community citizen.

Companies can strategically use cause portfolios to engage their stakeholders by signaling that they are a multi-faceted entity concerned with and committed to making an impact in multiple areas. Thus, while a general message strategy decreases perceived trust in the issue in a focused cause portfolio, a diverse cause portfolio should overcome this limitation and should not be perceived in the same negative manner. Thus, we predict that a general message strategy will not be detrimental to a diverse portfolio.

**H4.** For a focused cause portfolio, consumers’ brand evaluations are higher for a specific than a general CSR message strategy; however, for a diverse cause portfolio, consumers’ brand evaluations are similar for both specific and general CSR message strategies.

Across three studies, we investigate the impact of CSR message strategy on consumer brand evaluations. [Fig. 1](#) depicts the hypothesized relationships.

## 3. Study 1

The objectives of Study 1 are twofold. First, we test the hypothesis that consumers respond more favorably to a specific than a general CSR message (**H1**). Second, because previous research indicates that consumers prefer what they are familiar with ([Zajonc, 1968](#)), we wanted to ensure that a specific message is more effective not only because the cause is familiar to consumers. We therefore test different causes that range in level of familiarity to consumers. Doing so helps rule out the explanation that a certain strategy is more effective because consumers are familiar with the cause in that strategy. Specifically, we test a general message strategy against three different specific strategies: (1) a company supporting several named causes within the same issue, (2) a company supporting one familiar cause, and (3) a company supporting an unfamiliar cause. Thus, we can test whether our prediction regarding the specificity of information holds regardless of the amount of information (i.e., one vs. five causes) or familiarity with the causes in the specific campaign.

### 3.1. Participants and procedure

Two hundred people completed an online study on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in exchange for monetary compensation ( $M_{age} = 33$  years, 50% female). Participants were told to imagine that

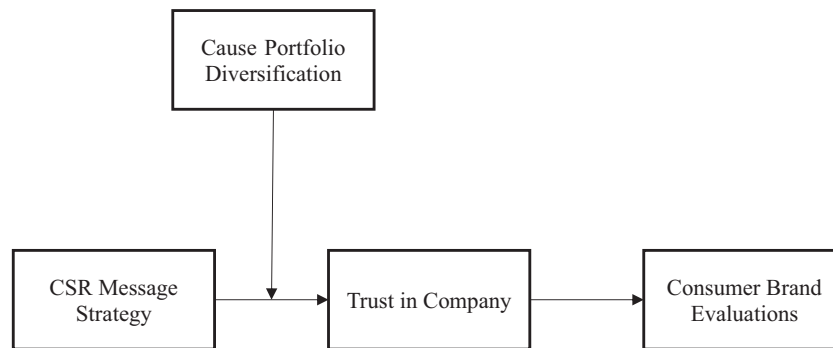


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

they were having friends over for pizza and that they needed to go to the grocery store to buy some items for their get-together, including paper plates. While shopping for paper plates, they come across one particular brand (referred to as Company X) running a social responsibility campaign. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. We wanted to keep the conditions as similar as possible, and therefore we controlled for the amount donated and the type of issue supported, so as to alter only whether specific information about the cause(s) was shown or not shown. This process helped ensure that we were strictly testing the type of message strategy. Thus, participants in the general condition were told that 5% of the sales from the paper plates would be donated to a portfolio of health causes. Participants in the specific five cause condition were told that 5% of the sales would be donated to a portfolio of five health-related causes: American Lung Association, American Heart Association, Foundation for AIDS Research, Kidney Foundation, and Multiple Sclerosis Society. Participants in the single familiar (unfamiliar) condition were told that 5% of the sales would be donated to one health cause: American Heart Association (Kidney Foundation).

The main dependent variable of interest is overall consumer brand evaluations, which we measured with two items: Based on what you read, how likely are you to purchase this brand of paper plates over another brand? (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely) and “Based on what you read, how much do you like this brand?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much;  $r = 0.72$ ). At the conclusion of the study, participants indicated their age, gender, and primary language.

We conducted a pretest to ensure that consumers perceived the general CSR strategy as more general than the three specific CSR strategies and that the familiar cause was more familiar than the unfamiliar cause. One hundred twenty-four participants completed an online study on MTurk in exchange for monetary compensation and read one of the four conditions stated previously. Participants answered three measures related to the CSR message (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$ ): “Please rate your level of agreement with the following statement: The specific cause(s) (i.e., charities) supported were named in Company X's campaign” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree); “Company X's campaign did the following...” (1 = named the specific causes, 7 = named only the supported issue [reverse coded]); and “In the above scenario, the presented information about Company X's campaign is...” (1 = very general, 7 = very specific). The results show a significant effect of message strategy ( $F(3, 120) = 88.93, p < .01$ ), such that participants found the general campaign ( $M_{\text{general}} = 1.92$ ) to be more general than each of the three specific campaigns ( $M_{\text{specific, five}} = 5.96, M_{\text{specific, single familiar}} = 6.13, M_{\text{specific, single unfamiliar}} = 5.75$ ; all  $ps < .01$ ). Moreover, there were no differences among the three specific campaigns (all  $ps > .20$ ). Participants were then asked to rate their familiarity with each cause (1 = not at all familiar, 7 = very familiar). We found that the Kidney Foundation ( $M = 2.60$ ) was the least familiar and the American Heart Association ( $M = 5.24$ ) was the most familiar.

### 3.2. Results and discussion

We ran a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with consumer brand evaluations as the dependent variable and CSR message strategy as the independent variable. The results show an overall significant difference ( $F(3, 196) = 2.81, p < .05$ ), such that participants responded less favorably to a cause portfolio when it was communicated in a general ( $M_{\text{general}} = 4.33$ ) than a specific manner, regardless of whether the message included information that the company donated to a single familiar cause ( $M_{\text{specific, single familiar}} = 4.94, p < .05$ ), single unfamiliar cause ( $M_{\text{specific, single unfamiliar}} = 4.93, p < .05$ ), or the five causes within the issue ( $M_{\text{specific, five}} = 4.88, p < .05$ ; see Fig. 2). Therefore, H1 is supported. A comparison of the three specific conditions indicated no significant differences (all  $ps > .80$ ).

Study 1 validates our prediction that consumers respond more favorably to specific than general information about a cause portfolio and that this effect holds regardless of the number of causes supported and familiarity with the cause. This finding is in line with prior research showing that consumers are more likely to respond favorably to detailed information about the health, environmental, or social impact of a firm's product (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014; Cao & Yan, 2016).

## 4. Study 2

The objectives of Study 2 are twofold. First, we aim to replicate the results from Study 1 (H1) using a new product domain and sample. Such a replication will show the generalizability of our effect. The second purpose is to test the hypothesis that consumers trust a company more with a specific than a general message (H2) and whether trust in the company mediates the relationship between CSR message strategy and consumer brand evaluations (H3).

### 4.1. Participants and procedure

One hundred forty-five undergraduate students from a large public university completed the study. Participants were told to imagine they were looking for different options for spaghetti sauce and noted that one particular brand (referred to as Company X) had a sign on display indicating that the company was running a campaign. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the general condition were told that 5% of the sales from the spaghetti sauce would be donated to five causes that support advancing health in the community. Participants in the specific condition were told that 5% of the sales would be donated to five causes that support advancing health in the community: American Lung Association, American Heart Association, Foundation for AIDS Research, Kidney Foundation, and Multiple Sclerosis Society. Then, participants were asked the same two questions as in study 1 regarding brand evaluations. Next, they were asked, “How much do you trust Company X?” (1 = not at all, 7 = completely). At the conclusion of the study, participants indicated

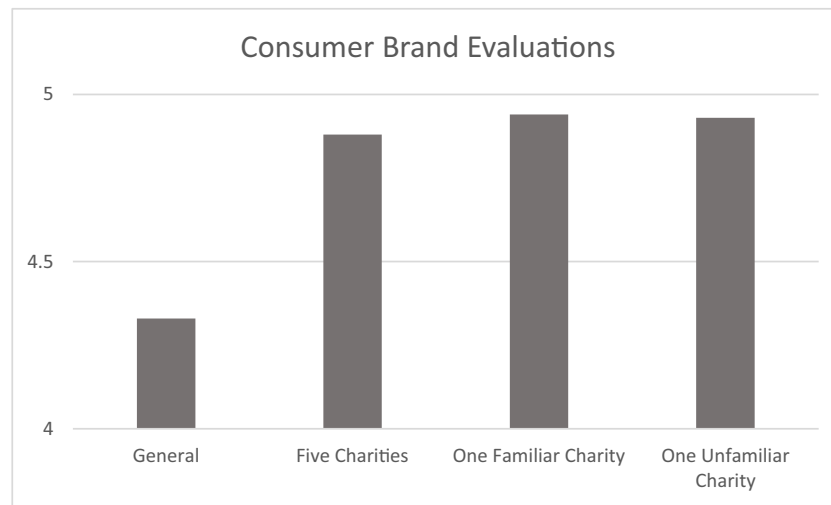


Fig. 2. Study 1: Consumer brand evaluations of CSR message strategies.

their age and gender.

#### 4.2. Results and discussion

To test our predictions, we conducted a one-way ANOVA with consumer brand evaluations as the dependent variable and CSR message strategy as the independent variable. The results show a significant main effect for consumer brand evaluations ( $M_{\text{specific}} = 4.44$ ,  $M_{\text{general}} = 3.96$ ;  $F(1, 143) = 5.48$ ,  $p < .05$ ), supporting H1. We also found a similar pattern for trust in the company ( $M_{\text{specific}} = 4.36$ ,  $M_{\text{general}} = 3.96$ ;  $F(1, 143) = 4.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ), supporting H2. Using PROCESS MODEL 4 (Hayes, 2012; Preacher & Hayes, 2004), we found that trust mediated the effect of the CSR message strategy on consumer brand evaluations. Specifically, the regression model predicting consumer brand evaluations with CSR message strategy and trust as independent variables showed a significant effect of trust ( $t(142) = 9.86$ ,  $p < .01$ ), while the conditional direct effect of CSR message strategy was not significant ( $t(142) = -1.35$ ,  $p = .18$ ). However, we found evidence of a conditional indirect effect of CSR message strategy on consumer brand evaluations through trust (95% confidence interval [CI]  $[-0.2833, -0.0050]$ , bias corrected, based on 1000 bootstrap samples). Thus, H3 is supported.

Study 2 provides further support for our prediction that consumers respond more favorably to more detailed information than general information about a cause portfolio. This differential response occurs because consumers perceive companies that use specific CSR message strategies as more trustworthy than companies that use more general strategies. Next, we examine a boundary condition by investigating the circumstances under which companies can successfully use a general message strategy.

#### 5. Study 3

The objectives of Study 3 are fourfold. First, we aim to replicate the results from the previous studies with a different product domain (H1, H2, and H3). Second, we examine whether cause portfolio diversification is a boundary condition to the relationship (H4). Third, we examine other alternative mediating processes that the CSR literature indicates as relevant: attributions (value-, stakeholder-, egoistic-, and strategic-driven) (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006), perceived beneficial impact on society (Alhouthi, Johnson, & Holloway, 2016), and perceived size of the donation (Lev, Petrovits, & Radhakrishnan, 2010). Fourth, previous research shows that consumers' perceptions of the cause itself can influence their overall evaluations of the CSR campaign. Therefore, we rule out alternative explanations such as affinity to the causes (Sen

& Bhattacharya, 2001), identification with the company (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), and perceived company–cause fit (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki, 2007).

#### 5.1. Participants and procedure

One hundred fifty students at a major public university completed the study. Participants were told to imagine they were looking for different options for hand soap and noted that one particular brand (referred to as Company X) had a sign on display indicating that the company was running a campaign. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Similar to the previous studies, participants in the general-focused condition were told that 5% of the sales from the hand soap would be donated to five causes that support advancing health in the community. Participants in the general-diverse condition were told that 5% of the sales would be donated to five causes that support protecting the environment, promoting education, advancing health in the community, helping children, and preventing homelessness. Participants in the specific-focused condition were told that 5% of the sales would be donated to five causes that support advancing health in the community: American Lung Association, American Heart Association, Foundation for AIDS Research, Kidney Foundation, and Multiple Sclerosis Society. Finally, participants in the specific-diverse condition were told that 5% of the sales would be donated to five causes that support protecting the environment (Rainforest Alliance), promoting education (National Education Association), advancing health in the community (American Lung Association), helping children (Boys & Girls Clubs of America), and preventing homelessness (Habitat for Humanity). Thus, this study employed a 2 (portfolio: diverse vs. focused)  $\times$  2 (message: general vs. specific) between-subjects design. We used the same measures as in Study 2 to measure consumer brand evaluations and trust in the company. We also measured company attributions, perceived beneficial impact on society, perceived size of the donation, affinity to the causes, identification with the company, and perceived company–cause fit. Please see Ellen et al. (2006) for the company attribution measures and the Appendix A for all other specific measures used to measure potential alternative processes and explanations. Finally, participants also indicated their age and gender.

We conducted a pretest to ensure that consumers would perceive the diverse portfolio as supporting more issues than the focused portfolio and the general message as more general than the specific message. One hundred twenty-one participants completed an online study on MTurk in exchange for monetary compensation and were asked to read one of the four conditions stated previously. To measure diversity,

they were asked the following question: “Company X supports causes that are...” (1 = focused on one issue, 7 = focused on several issues). We measured message with the same measures as in Study 1’s pretest. First, we conducted an ANOVA with number of issues as the dependent variable and message strategy, cause portfolio, and their interaction as the independent variables. The results show only a main effect for cause portfolio ( $F(1, 117) = 19.78, p < .01$ ), such that participants perceived a diverse cause portfolio as supporting more issues ( $M = 5.97$ ) than a focused cause portfolio ( $M = 4.56$ ). All other effects were non-significant (both  $ps > .20$ ). Second, we conducted an ANOVA with message as the dependent variable and message strategy, cause portfolio, and their interaction as the independent variables. The results show only a main effect for message strategy ( $F(1, 117) = 57.56, p < .01$ ), such that participants perceived a general message as more general ( $M = 3.20$ ) than a specific message ( $M = 5.42$ ). All other effects were non-significant (both  $ps > .40$ ).

## 5.2. Results

### 5.2.1. Consumer evaluations

We conducted an ANOVA with consumer brand evaluations as the dependent variable and portfolio, message, and their interaction as the independent variables. The results show a significant interactive effect of portfolio and message ( $F(1, 146) = 7.27, p < .01$ ). Follow-up analyses indicated that in the focused condition, consumers’ brand evaluations were higher when presented with a specific than a general message ( $M_{\text{specific/focused}} = 4.34, M_{\text{general/focused}} = 3.78, p < .05$ ). In the diverse condition, though only marginally significant, consumers’ evaluations of the general message were greater than those of the specific message ( $M_{\text{specific/diverse}} = 4.62, M_{\text{general/diverse}} = 5.05, p = .09$ ; see Fig. 3). These results provide support for the pattern predicted for focused cause portfolios, supporting H1. However, contrary to our predictions, we found that for diverse portfolios, a general strategy could lead to more favorable responses than a specific strategy. Given that we predicted that there would be no difference in evaluations of a general and a specific message strategy, H4 is only partially supported.

### 5.2.2. Trust

Next, we investigate trust. We conducted an ANOVA with trust as the dependent variable and message, portfolio, and their interaction as the independent variables. We found a significant interaction for trust in the company ( $F(1, 146) = 4.09, p < .05$ ). Consistent with Study 2 and H2, we find that in the focused condition, consumers trusted the company more when presented with a specific than a general message ( $M_{\text{specific/focused}} = 4.05, M_{\text{general/focused}} = 3.46, p < .05$ ). However, in

the diverse condition, trust did not differ ( $M_{\text{specific/diverse}} = 4.45, M_{\text{general/diverse}} = 4.53, p = .74$ ; see Fig. 4).

### 5.2.3. Robustness checks

Next, we investigate other potential variables, including attributions (value-, stakeholder-, egoistic-, and strategic-driven), perceived beneficial impact on society, and perceived size of the donation. We conducted an ANOVA with value-driven attributions as the dependent variable and message, portfolio, and their interaction as the independent variables. We found a significant interactive effect of portfolio and message on value-driven attributions ( $F(1, 146) = 6.42, p < .05$ ). Follow-up analyses showed that in the focused condition, value-driven attributions were the same in the specific and general message conditions ( $M_{\text{specific/focused}} = 4.19, M_{\text{general/focused}} = 3.89, p = .12$ ), while in the diverse condition, value-driven attributions were greater in the general than the specific message condition ( $M_{\text{specific/diverse}} = 4.32, M_{\text{general/diverse}} = 4.70, p < .05$ ). Unlike trust, here we found differences in the diverse condition; specifically, participants perceived the company as having greater value-driven attributions with the general than the specific message.

We then conducted an ANOVA with perceived impact on society as the dependent variable and message, portfolio, and their interaction as the independent variables. We found a marginally significant interaction for impact on society ( $F(1, 146) = 3.52, p = .06$ ). In the focused condition, consumers perceived the impact on society as the same with a specific and a general message ( $M_{\text{specific/focused}} = 4.33, M_{\text{general/focused}} = 4.13, p = .34$ ), while in the diverse condition, the difference was marginal, such that consumers perceived a diverse portfolio as having a greater impact on society than a specific portfolio ( $M_{\text{specific/diverse}} = 4.47, M_{\text{general/diverse}} = 4.84, p = .09$ ). Similar to value-driven attributions, participants perceived the company as having a greater impact on society with the general than the specific message.

Finally, we ran four separate ANOVAs with stakeholder-, egoistic-, and strategic-driven attributions and perceived size of the donation as the dependent variables and message, portfolio, and their interaction as the independent variables. Across all four models, we found no significant interactions (all  $ps > .25$ ). Therefore, we can rule out these constructs as alternative mediating processes.

### 5.2.4. Mediating processes

To investigate whether value-driven attributions and perceived impact on society mediate the relationship between message strategy and consumer brand evaluations beyond the previously identified process of trust, we ran PROCESS MODEL 8 (Hayes, 2012; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Specifically, the regression model predicting consumer

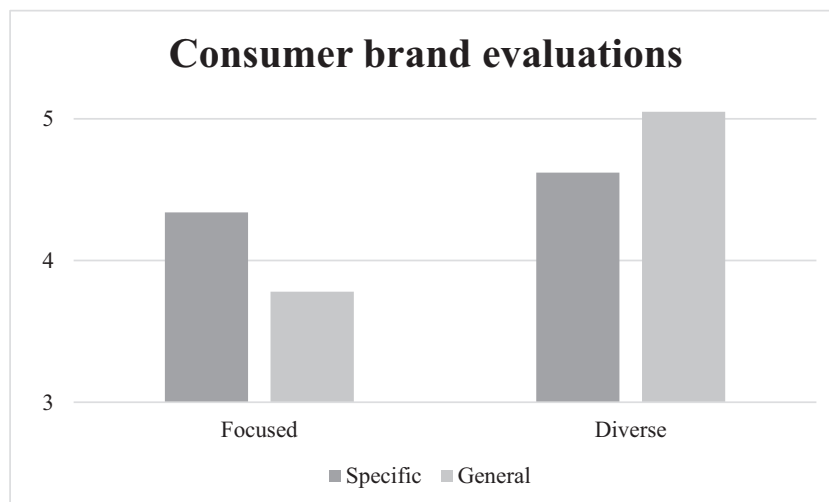


Fig. 3. Study 3: Impact of a diverse cause portfolio on consumer brand evaluations.

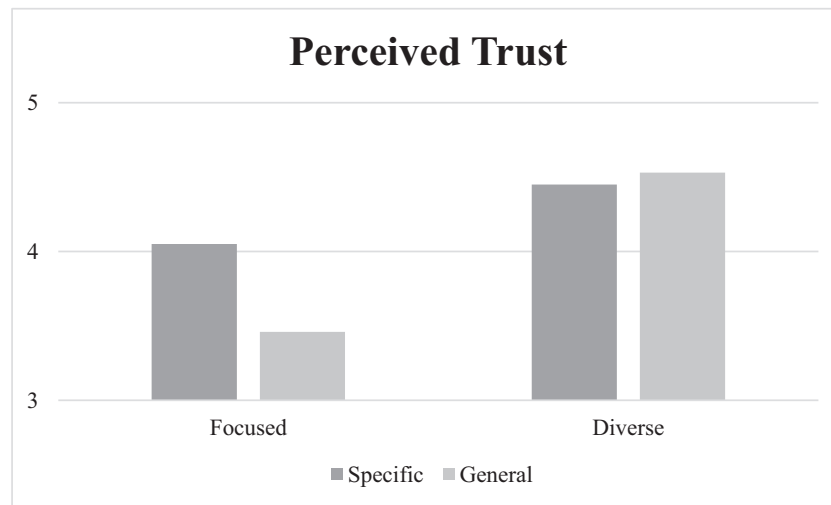


Fig. 4. Study 3: Impact of a diverse cause portfolio on perceived trust.

brand evaluations with CSR message, portfolio, their respective interaction, trust, value-driven attributions, and impact on society as independent variables showed a significant effect of perceived trust ( $t(143) = 5.02$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and impact on society ( $t(143) = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ); however, neither value-driven attributions ( $t(143) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .11$ ) nor the interaction between message and portfolio ( $t(143) = 1.46$ ,  $p = .15$ ) was significant.

The conditional direct effect of CSR message strategy on consumer brand evaluations was not significant in the focused or diverse condition (both  $ps > .20$ ). The conditional indirect effect of CSR message strategy on consumer brand evaluations was mediated by trust in the focused portfolio condition (95% CI  $[-0.2600, -0.0315]$ ) but not in the diverse portfolio condition (95% CI  $[-0.0887, 0.0093]$ , bias corrected, based on 1000 bootstrap samples). Moreover, the conditional indirect effect of CSR message strategy on consumer brand evaluations was not mediated by perceived impact on society in either the focused portfolio condition (95% CI  $[-0.0987, 0.0107]$ ) or the diverse portfolio condition (95% CI  $[-0.0191, 0.1221]$ , bias corrected, based on 1000 bootstrap samples). Last, the conditional indirect effect of CSR message strategy on consumer brand evaluations also was not mediated by value-driven attributions in either the focused portfolio condition (95% CI  $[-0.0887, 0.0093]$ ) or the diverse portfolio condition (95% CI  $[-0.0123, 0.1057]$ , bias corrected, based on 1000 bootstrap samples). We therefore conclude that when trust, impact on society, and value-driven attributions are accounted for, the effect of the latter two variables disappears, leaving trust as the sole significant focal mediator, consistent with Study 2 and in support of H3.

#### 5.2.5. Alternative explanations

We also address whether differences in consumer evaluations are indeed due to our manipulations or whether they can be explained by differences in how consumers perceive the causes themselves. For this purpose, we conducted three separate analyses of covariance, with consumer evaluations as the dependent variable; message, portfolio, and their interaction as the independent variables; and affinity to the cause, identification with the company, and perceived company–cause fit as the covariates. The results show that while each covariate has a significant main effect (all  $ps < .01$ ), the overall interaction effect of message and portfolio on consumer evaluations remains significant (all  $ps < .05$ ), suggesting that our results are robust to controlling for differences in perceptions of the causes.

### 5.3. Discussion

Study 3 provides further evidence that message strategies are

important for focused portfolios because consumers respond differently to cause portfolio information when it is communicated in a general or a specific way. However, we find that there is a boundary condition to the ineffectiveness of general message strategies. Specifically, we show that compared with a focused portfolio, for a diverse portfolio, a general message strategy is as effective as, if not more effective than, a specific strategy.

## 6. General discussion

The objective of this research is to understand the effectiveness of different message strategies—general or specific—in improving consumer brand evaluations of a company. Across three studies, we investigate whether and when these strategies improve brand evaluations across different cause portfolio configurations. In Study 1, we find evidence that consumers prefer more specific (vs. general) information about the causes when the company donates to a single issue. Furthermore, we find this regardless of the number of or familiarity with the causes supported. In Study 2, we replicate these results and find that perceived trust in a company mediates the aforementioned relationship. That is, consumers perceive a company as more trustworthy when it communicates more details about its cause portfolio. Prior research in branding shows that consumers differentially respond to portfolios depending on their diversification level (Dacin & Smith, 1994). Therefore, in Study 3, we focus on how consumers respond to different cause portfolio diversification strategies based on how these are communicated. We find that with a diverse portfolio, a general message strategy is equally effective as, if not more so than, a specific strategy in garnering positive consumer brand evaluations. Thus, we find evidence for when a general message strategy works, thus allowing companies to maintain a flexible commitment in their charitable activities.

### 6.1. Implications

Our findings have important implications for both theory and practice. First, we extend research on CSR (Barone et al., 2007; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Irmak, Sen, & Bhattacharya, 2015)—specifically, CSR message tactics (Perks, Farache, Shukla, & Berry, 2013; Vanhamme, Swaen, Berens, & Janssen, 2015; White & Pelozo, 2009)—by showing that the type of message strategy (specific vs. general) influences whether consumers perceive a company as trustworthy. This research can help managers develop CSR message strategies to improve their companies' CSR reputation. Communicating CSR activities is imperative, as consumers are often not aware of the activities in which

companies engage (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). Therefore, if companies want consumers to consider their charitable endeavors when making purchase decisions, they need to inform them of such activities (Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Gruber, 2011) through different types of message tactics.

Second, we show that managers need to pay more attention to the message strategy of certain types of charitable support but have more leeway in others. Using a specific CSR message strategy is particularly important in the context of supporting one issue. While this type of support strategy gives the company a specific positioning as it creates an internally consistent cause portfolio (Drumwright, 1996), we find that consumers are sensitive to the way this information is presented to them. We demonstrate that consumers respond less favorably to such a portfolio when it is communicated in a general manner, an effect that stems from lower trust in the company. Furthermore, a specific message is so important that, regardless of the number of causes supported (i.e., one cause or five causes) or familiarity with the cause, consumers prefer a specific message to a general one. This finding suggests that as long as managers use a specific message in their communication, consumers will respond favorably, regardless of whether the firm supports one or multiple causes.

However, our research also shows that companies have more options in communicating their support of multiple issues. With a diverse portfolio, we find evidence that consumers slightly prefer a general message strategy to a specific strategy. This finding is important because companies often support multiple issues and may want some flexibility in their activities by not listing all the specific causes they support. This strategy has many benefits for a company. For example, consumers may respond negatively to companies that specifically commit to a cause but fail to follow through or end the commitment at a later point in time. Prior research on branding indicates that companies are influenced by brands with which they choose to partner (Simonin & Ruth, 1998) and that a company may choose to partner with a cause that some consumers do not hold in high regard or find controversial. Finally, if a general strategy is the best tactic for a company, managers should consider having a more diverse versus focused cause portfolio,

as post hoc results from Study 3 show that with a general strategy, a diverse cause portfolio outperforms a focused cause portfolio ( $M_{diverse} = 5.05$ ,  $M_{focused} = 3.78$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Overall, managers need to consider flexibility in their firms' stated support when considering a message strategy.

### 6.2. Future research

This research is an initial investigation into the types and effectiveness of CSR message strategy, with many potential avenues for future research. First, while we investigate specificity of the message, future research could extend the notion of specificity to other aspects of the CSR campaign, such as the extent of helping (e.g., “we support” vs. “we provide money and resources”). Second, in this research, we examine whether listing specific causes influences consumer evaluations, whereas further research could examine the depth of information provided, such as a brief description of each charity or information about the charity's impact. Third, future research might investigate individual preferences for different CSR message strategies. Studies reveal individual preferences for the level at which information is construed (abstract or concrete) and the importance of matching message strategies to those preferences (Connors et al., 2017; Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011). Research on this topic would therefore increase the effectiveness of different CSR message strategies. Fourth, research could investigate whether a product itself and the type of CSR message strategy employed should match. Factors that influence such a preference could be, for example, the stage of the product search process (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2013) or the degree of product involvement (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014). Our studies use low-involvement products, for which consumers are likely to prefer a specific message strategy (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014). Future research could extend our findings to categories in which preferences are more general, but also categories in which products tend to be pricier or more prestigious. Taken together, our research shows the importance of using the most effective CSR message strategy.

### Appendix A. Robustness checks and potential alternative explanations (Study 3)

Construct	Measure	Scale points
Impact on Society (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$ )	Company X is more beneficial to society's welfare than other companies of its kind.	1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree
	I think Company X helps solve social problems.	1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree
	Company X contributes something to society.	1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree
Size of the donation ( $r = 0.63$ )	Please rate how you would describe Company X's donation to the causes:	Small/big Inadequate/adequate
Affinity to cause	Overall, how much do you like the cause(s) that Company X supports?	1 = not at all, 7 = very much
Identification with company ( $r = 0.85$ )	I can easily identify with at least one of the causes presented in this campaign.	1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely
	In my opinion, other stakeholders of the company, such as customers and employees, can easily identify with at least one of the causes presented in this campaign.	1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely
Company–cause fit	We would like to determine how well the causes fit with Company X. The fit between a company and a cause means how well the two organizations connect, or appear to make sense together. How well do you think the causes fit with Company X?	1 = extremely good fit, 7 = extremely poor fit

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