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Engaging Consumers with Corporate Social Responsibility Campaigns: The Roles of Interactivity, Psychological Empowerment, and Identification

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Abstract

This study explores the mechanisms through which corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns that solicit consumer participation benefit companies more than do non-participatory campaigns. In Study 1, we demonstrated that consumers who were asked to actively participate in CSR campaigns were more likely to consider the company's motives public-serving rather than self-serving, evaluated the company more favorably, and had higher purchase intentions regarding the company's products, mediated by perceived consumer–company interactivity. In Study 2, we showed that psychological empowerment and consumer–company identification can explain the positive effects of perceived interactivity. Unlike non-participatory campaigns, participatory campaigns empower consumers and strengthen consumer–company identification through perceived consumer–company interactivity, which, in turn, positively affects perceived CSR motives, attitudes toward the company, and purchase intentions. Our studies highlight the value of consumer engagement with participatory CSR campaigns and explain why it works. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

Keywords

Corporate social responsibility, Consumer participation, Perceived interactivity, Psychological empowerment, Consumer–company identification

1. Introduction

Companies often donate time and financial resources to meet various stakeholders' expectations regarding social and ethical responsibilities that go beyond fulfilling their economic and legal responsibilities (Carroll, 1979). In so doing, they expect to reap both short- and long-term benefits. Empirical studies have shown that CSR activities result in favorable company and product evaluations (Brown and Dacin, 1997, Ruiz de Maya et al., 2016); improved stock price-based measures of company value (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006), market share (Rahman et al., 2017), brand value (Wang et al., 2015); and more trusting and committed customer relationships (Lacey and Kennett-Hensel, 2010, Lichtenstein et al., 2004).

Over the past two decades, however, technology and the Internet have fundamentally transformed how marketers and advertisers implement CSR and communicate with their customers. The primary role of marketing communication has evolved from disseminating information about products and services to fostering customer-centered relationships through interactive marketing (e.g., Keller, 2009, Kumar and Gupta, 2016, Liu and Gal, 2011, McAlexander et al., 2002). This is a natural progression, as practitioners have realized that they are no longer in the driver's seat. The rapid penetration of social media has provided consumers opportunities not only to respond to but also to initiate conversations with companies. Likewise, CSR practices are trending toward increased interactivity and engagement, with companies inviting consumer participation (Peloza and Shang, 2011, Ruiz de Maya et al., 2016). For example, companies have sought to engage consumers by asking them to support companies' CSR initiatives through online petitions or pledges, voting for which non-profits companies should donate money to, or sharing, liking, or commenting on social media. We refer to CSR initiatives that invite consumer participation as *participatory CSR campaigns*.

Previous studies have suggested that participatory CSR campaigns have advantages over non-participatory CSR campaigns. Two-way symmetrical communication theory (Grunig et al., 2002) and the dialogic theory of public relations (Taylor & Kent, 2014) emphasize that employing stakeholder engagement strategies helps companies achieve their intended CSR-related organizational goals. Empirical studies have verified this proposition (Calder et al., 2009, Cha et al., 2016, Ruiz de Maya et al., 2016). However, why participatory CSR campaigns benefit companies remains largely unknown; understanding this is vital to explaining the value of engaging consumers with CSR and understanding why the strategy works.

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to explore the mechanisms through which participatory CSR campaigns positively affect consumers' perceptions of a company's motives for undertaking such CSR initiatives, attitudes toward the company, and purchase intentions regarding the company's products or services. Specifically, we focus on the sequential mediating effects of perceived consumer-company interactivity, psychological empowerment, and consumer-company identification.

2. Participatory CSR campaigns and perceived interactivity

As a stakeholder engagement strategy, participatory CSR campaigns exhibit several characteristics that non-participatory CSR campaigns lack. First, participatory CSR campaigns are premised on reciprocal efforts, as the requested consumer participation is a prerequisite for the implementation of CSR activities and the creation of social value or contributions to the public good. For example, to promote its breast cancer awareness campaign in 2019, Estée Lauder asked consumers to share on Instagram pictures of a pink ribbon drawn on their hands using pink lipstick with the hashtags #TimeToEndBreastCancer and #ELCdonates. For every person who did so, the company pledged to donate \$25 (up to \$250,000) to fund breast cancer research. In short, consumers' sharing pictures was a prerequisite for the company's donations.

Second, how consumers participate can vary—consumers may be asked to recycle used products (Shrum et al., 1994), participate in an event (Ruiz de Maya et al., 2016), or like, comment on, or share messages with others (de Vries et al., 2012). Regardless of the form, all participation is voluntary (e.g., Lim et al., 2015, von Weltzien Høivik and Shankar, 2011). Consumers can choose whether and to what degree they will participate.

Third, companies typically urge consumers to participate in such programs online, via social media, email, and/or websites—channels that are commonly used to communicate directly with consumers regarding CSR (Lee, 2016, Saxton et al., 2019). Communication through online platforms allows consumers to provide feedback and react to company initiatives; it also allows companies to track consumer actions, which leads them to take further action in response to consumer participation, allowing for two-way communication or exchange. In contrast, non-participatory CSR campaigns do not involve consumers in the process, which means communication is limited to the presentation of companies' philanthropic activities, such as donating to causes or fulfilling transparency expectations.

Accordingly, we postulate that *interactivity* is a defining characteristic of participatory CSR campaigns. Scholars have agreed that the concept of interactivity is multidimensional, and the three dimensions they have consistently mentioned are two-way communication, active control, and synchronicity (Liu and Shrum, 2002, McMillan and Hwang, 2002, Voorveld et al., 2011). *Two-way communication* refers to reciprocal communication and information exchange between consumers and companies and

among consumers (Liu and Shrum, 2002, Nikou and Economides, 2017). *Active control* means that consumers can act voluntarily based on their needs and desires (Liu & Shrum, 2002). *Synchronicity* refers to “the degree to which users’ input into a communication and the response they receive from the communication are simultaneous” (Liu & Shrum, 2002, p. 55). The first two dimensions directly relate to the characteristics of participatory CSR campaigns.

In explicating the concept of interactivity, scholars have distinguished perceived interactivity from actual interactivity. *Actual interactivity* refers to interactive features or the potential for interaction, which can be measured objectively by taxonomizing and counting the specific structural characteristics of websites (Coyle & Thorson, 2001); *perceived interactivity*, on the other hand, refers to how individuals subjectively judge and experience the dimensions of interactivity (McMillan and Hwang, 2002, Wu, 2005). The mere presence on webpages or social media applications of actual functional features that allow users to behaviorally respond online, such as “like” or “comment” functions, can enhance perceived interactivity (Coyle & Thorson, 2001). However, scholars have found that perceptions of interactivity can vary even when the interactive features are the same, highlighting the gap between actual and perceived interactivity (Lee et al., 2004, Song and Zinkhan, 2008, Voorveld et al., 2011).

Unlike the mechanical view of interactivity, which focuses on testing for the absence or presence of structural features (*feature-based interactivity*), this study focuses on interactive communication, which it views as *content-based interactivity*, where “content” refers to messages that lead to two-way communication, including calls-to-action (Abitbol & Lee, 2017). Interactive content that invites consumer participation can increase perceived consumer–company interactivity. Indeed, dialogic communication scholars have examined user-to-user interactive messages by focusing on organizations that invite public engagement (Abitbol and Lee, 2017, Cho et al., 2017, Kim et al., 2014). However, compared to the effects of feature-based interactivity, research examining the effects of content-based interactivity on perceived consumer–company interactivity remains scarce (Eberle et al., 2013, Moran et al., 2020).

We postulate that consumers will perceive companies that run participatory CSR campaigns as more interactive than companies that run non-participatory CSR campaigns, leading to the following hypothesis:

H1 A participatory CSR campaign generates higher perceived interactivity with the company leading the campaign than a non-participatory CSR campaign.

3. The effects of perceived interactivity

In the present study, we focus on the three interrelated outcomes known to be the most representative indicators of CSR campaigns’ effectiveness in achieving companies’ goals (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004): CSR motives, attitudes toward companies, and purchase intentions. Although companies continue to invest in CSR by committing to act prosocially and communicating their efforts, consumer skepticism remains a key challenge (Alhouthi et al., 2016, do Paço & Reis, 2012, Du et al., 2010, Forehand and Grier, 2003). When consumers respond to corporate messages, persuasion knowledge—knowledge of “how, when, and why marketers try to influence them” (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 1)—

is activated to help them cope with persuasion attempts. This generates cognitive elaboration in their evaluations of companies' motives.

The literature describes two types of perceived motives for companies' CSR activities: *public-serving* and *self-serving* (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006, Forehand and Grier, 2003); other common terms in the literature include *altruistic vs. egoistic*, *exogenous vs. endogenous*, *other- vs. self-centered*, and *sincere vs. image-promotional* (Bigné et al., 2012, Ellen et al., 2006, Kim, 2011). A person who perceives a company's motives as public-serving believes that it performs its CSR activities for the greater good, whereas someone who views a company's motives as self-serving believes that the company's bottom line drives its engagement in such activities and that it is simply capitalizing on the cause (Alhouti et al., 2016). While consumers do not regard self-serving motives as inherently problematic, such motives can have negative effects when companies' efforts to disguise them raise suspicion among consumers (Forehand & Grier, 2003).

Attribution theory suggests that individuals try to make causal inferences about behavior (Heider, 1958). If consumers attribute a company's CSR activities to a sincere and genuine desire to improve society or the environment, they will have more favorable attitudes toward the company and higher levels of related behavioral intentions, such as purchase intentions, patronage intentions, and word-of-mouth intentions toward the company (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006, Lichtenstein et al., 2004). However, CSR campaigns can backfire if consumers believe the companies are engaging in the activities to benefit themselves above all else (Yoon et al., 2006).

Companies can address this concern by using interactive strategies to increase the effectiveness of CSR campaigns. From a functional perspective (Sundar et al., 2003), features that ask for social interaction—feedback forms, polls, or chat functions—have a strong psychological appeal (Liu and Gal, 2011, Sundar, 2008) and prompt users to engage with the content (Calder et al., 2009). Research has also shown that interactivity generally leads to more favorable attitudes toward companies (Song & Zinkhan, 2008), greater elaboration of messages in high-involvement situations (Liu & Shrum, 2009), and higher perceived relatedness with others (Nikou & Economides, 2017). Similarly, in the CSR context, research has shown that consumers who have histories of interacting with companies through CSR activities evaluate those companies more favorably (Kim, 2019).

Nevertheless, previous studies have suggested that the functional aspects of interactivity, such as interactive features or messages or the nature of the strategies themselves, will not be sufficient to generate such positive effects. These aspects become effective only when individuals recognize them, emphasizing the crucial function of perceived interactivity, which is determined by individuals' perceptions (Eberle et al., 2013, Kim and Lee, 2019, McMillan and Hwang, 2002, Wu, 2005). For example, Eberle et al. (2013) found that having interactive features did not directly affect the perceived credibility of CSR messages and identification; instead, perceived interactivity mediated these relationships.

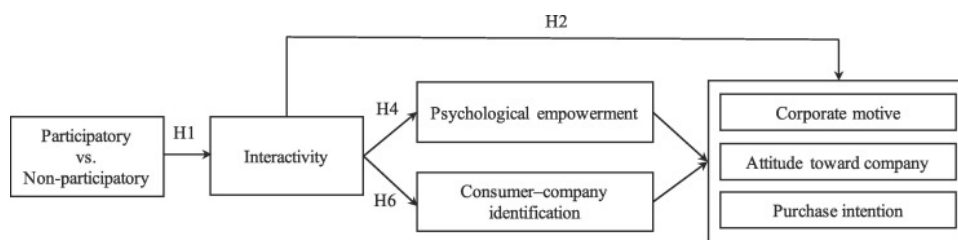
Involving consumers as co-creators of social value can ultimately enhance brand value (Korschun and Du, 2013, Okazaki et al., 2020). Therefore, in line with the notion that interactive strategies positively impact companies, we postulate that participatory CSR campaigns generate more favorable outcomes for companies than non-participatory CSR campaigns. When consumers engage with a CSR campaign,

they may perceive themselves as having more ownership of it because they are actively participating in the process of creating social value rather than passively receiving CSR messages. The success of such campaigns also depends on the level of consumer engagement and, indeed, is attributable to the consumers themselves. Thus, the fact that companies have less control and consumers have more control can make consumers feel that such campaigns are more authentic and genuine.

A study using the ELM framework in the CSR communication context found that heightened motivated processing of CSR information positively influenced attitudes toward sharing that information or commenting on it on social media (Mar García-de los Salmones et al., 2020). In addition, because campaigns that employ interactive messages give consumers opportunities to elaborate on those campaigns, the positive effects of perceived interactivity may extend to attitudes toward the companies and behavioral intentions (Liu and Shrum, 2009, Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). Accordingly, we posit that perceived interactivity with companies generates positive effects for companies and mediates the effects of participatory vs. non-participatory CSR campaigns on perceived CSR motives, attitudes toward companies, and purchase intentions (see Fig. 1). Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2 Perceived interactivity with a company leads to (a) increased consumer perceptions that the company has public-serving motives, (b) more favorable attitudes toward the company, and (c) higher purchase intentions regarding the company's products or services.

H3 Through perceived interactivity with a company, participatory CSR activities lead to (a) increased perceptions that the company has public-serving CSR motives, (b) more favorable attitudes toward the company, and (c) higher purchase intentions regarding the company's products or services as compared to non-participatory campaigns.



H3: Mediation effects of interactivity on relationships between type of CSR activities and perceived CSR motive, attitude toward the company, and purchase intention.

H5: Mediation effects of interactivity and psychological empowerment on relationships between type of CSR activities and perceived CSR motive, attitude toward the company, and purchase intention.

H7: Mediation effects of interactivity and consumer-company identification on relationships between type of CSR activities and perceived CSR motive, attitude toward the company, and purchase intention.

Fig. 1. Overall Model of the Study and the Hypotheses.

4. Study 1

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Stimuli

We created a fictional environmental campaign combating species extinction led by an apparel company named Kolon Sport.¹ As we focused on participatory CSR campaigns' consumer engagement,

we aimed to create a campaign that addressed an issue that consumers cared about in an industry familiar to general consumers. Research has shown that high perceived fit between a CSR initiative and the sponsoring company generally leads to positive consumer responses (e.g., Becker-Olsen et al., 2006, Kuo and Rice, 2015). Therefore, we chose an environmental issue and an apparel company because environmental issues are popular topics of CSR campaigns (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011) and the fashion industry is one of the major industries most frequently tied to environmental impacts (e.g., greenhouse gas emissions, air/water pollution, soil contamination, loss of biodiversity) (Subic et al., 2013). Indeed, research has shown that widespread consumer awareness of the environmental sustainability issues involved in the fashion industry is driving a shift toward sustainable business models, including communicating related CSR practices (Todeschini et al., 2017).

4.1.2. Design and respondents

We conducted a between-subjects online experiment with four fictional CSR campaign messages on social media: one non-participatory CSR campaign and three different types of participatory CSR campaign conditions. The three participatory conditions invited consumers to engage in different activities. One participatory condition asked respondents to download a mobile application (app) on their phones and use it to record the mileage they walked. The second participatory condition asked respondents to share a photo on Facebook using a hashtag, and the third participatory condition asked respondents to follow the company's Facebook page. All three conditions directly tied the respondents' participation to the amount that the company pledged to donate to nonprofit organizations combating species extinction. We selected these three conditions because mobile applications and social media are among the most common ways that consumers engage with companies (Afshar, 2020). In particular, because consumers prefer to engage with companies via social media, we featured two different types of social media-based CSR engagement (i.e., following a page and sharing a photo using a hashtag) (Chu & Chen, 2019). The non-participatory condition, in contrast, did not require any form of consumer engagement; the company simply stated that it would donate a specific amount to nonprofit organizations relevant to the cause. The messages were designed in a Facebook message format, as Facebook is the most popular social media platform (Statista, 2021; see Appendix for the stimuli). We recruited the respondents using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk).

4.1.3. Procedure

After reviewing a summary of the study and agreeing to participate, respondents answered questions regarding their existing involvement with environmental issues and their familiarity with Kolon Sport. They were then randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Once they read a simulated Facebook post, respondents were asked about their perceptions of the company's motives for initiating the environmental campaign, their attitudes toward the company, and their purchase intentions regarding its products, followed by questions about their demographic information. Unless otherwise noted, all measures were on seven-point scales.

4.1.4. Measures

4.1.4.1. Perceived interactivity

We defined perceived interactivity as an individual's subjective experience and evaluation of the campaigns in terms of the two-way communication and active control dimensions of interactivity (McMillan & Hwang, 2002). We measured the perceived interactivity of the campaigns using four

items: “The campaign will facilitate my interaction with the company”; “The campaign will give me the opportunity to interact with the company”; “The campaign will facilitate a dialogue with the company”; and “The campaign will allow an exchange of information with the company” (Nikou & Economides, 2017) ($\alpha = 0.95$).

4.1.4.2. Perceived CSR motives

We conceptualized perceived CSR motives as individuals’ perceptions of the company’s motives for being involved in the issue addressed in the CSR campaign. Following Bigné et al. (2012), we measured it using three items: *motivated by self-interest/motivated by interest in society*; *profit motivated/socially motivated*; and *egoistically motivated/altruistically motivated* ($\alpha = 0.94$).

4.1.4.3. Attitudes toward the company

Attitudes toward the company were defined as individuals’ predispositions or tendencies to respond to the company leading the CSR campaign, and we measured attitudes toward Kolon Sport using a scale with the following anchors: *bad/good*; *unpleasant/pleasant*; *unfavorable/favorable*; and *negative/positive* (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989) ($\alpha = 0.96$).

4.1.4.4. Purchase intentions

We defined purchase intentions as the likelihood that individuals would buy products from the company. Adapting Singh and Cole (1993), we measured the likelihood of individuals making purchases from Kolon Sport on a scale with the following anchors: *very unlikely/very likely*; *definitely would not consider it/definitely would consider it*; and *not very probable/very probable* ($\alpha = 0.96$).

4.1.4.5. Issue involvement

Issue involvement refers to the degree of interest in or concern about the issues addressed in CSR campaigns. As issue involvement has been found to be an important factor in processing CSR messages (Hajjat, 2003), we controlled for issue involvement in the analyses. Following Bower and Landreth (2001), to measure issue involvement, we used three items on a scale with the following anchors: *not important/very important*; *of no concern/of great concern*; *doesn’t matter to me/matters a lot to me* ($\alpha = 0.94$).

4.1.4.6. Familiarity

We defined familiarity as individuals’ perceptions of their knowledge of the company. To ensure that Kolon Sport was unfamiliar to respondents, we measured familiarity using following item: *not at all familiar/very familiar*.

4.2. Results

Of the 105 respondents, 61 (58.1%) were male and 44 (41.9%) were female, and their ages ranged from 19 to 68 ($M = 38$). The majority were full-time employees ($n = 77$, 73. 3%) with a median income of \$40,000 to under \$50,000. Ethnically, the majority were White ($n = 83$, 79%). The results also confirmed that the respondents were not familiar with the company ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 1.34$).

4.2.1. Manipulation check

To confirm the participatory nature of the CSR campaigns, we developed two manipulation-check questions: (1) how much public involvement does the campaign require? (2) how important is your participation for the success of the campaign? (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We designed these questions to capture two distinct characteristics of participatory CSR campaigns relative to non-

participatory ones. First, participatory CSR campaigns offer consumers opportunities to participate. Therefore, the first question measured consumers' perceptions of the extent of required involvement. Second, consumer participation is a prerequisite for the implementation of participatory CSR campaigns, meaning the success of these campaigns depends on consumer participation. Therefore, the second question measured consumers' perceptions of how important their participation was to the success of the campaigns.

Regarding perceived public involvement, a one-way ANOVA showed significant differences, $F(3, 101) = 31.06, p < .001, \omega^2 = 0.46$. A pairwise group comparison using Tukey post-hoc analysis showed significant differences between the non-participatory condition ($M = 2.15, SD = 1.79$) and the app download condition ($M = 5.44, SD = 1.58, t = 7.59, p < .001$), the share a photo condition ($M = 5.76, SD = 1.59, t = 8.16, p < .001$), and the follow a Facebook page condition ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.39, t = 7.73, p < .001$).

Regarding the perceived importance of respondents' participation in the CSR campaigns, a one-way ANOVA also showed significant differences between the participatory and non-participatory campaigns, $F(3, 101) = 34.93, p < .001, \omega^2 = 0.31$. A pairwise group comparison using Tukey post-hoc analysis showed significant differences between the non-participatory condition ($M = 2.63, SD = 2.15$) and the app download condition ($M = 5.15, SD = 1.61, t = 5.42, p < .001$), the share a photo condition ($M = 5.24, SD = 1.54, t = 5.51, p < .001$), and the follow a Facebook page condition ($M = 5.58, SD = 1.42, t = 6.28, p < .001$). The results for both questions confirmed that the stimuli were designed as we intended.

4.2.2. Hypothesis testing

To examine the effects of the type of CSR campaign on perceived interactivity (H1), we performed a one-way ANOVA. The results showed significant differences in perceived interactivity across the four groups, $F(3, 101) = 5.39, p = .002, \omega^2 = 0.11$. The results of a pairwise group comparison using Tukey post-hoc analysis showed significant differences between the non-participatory condition ($n = 27, M = 3.06, SD = 1.96$) and the app download condition ($n = 27, M = 4.57, SD = 1.30, t = 3.36, p = .006$), the share a photo condition ($n = 25, M = 4.43, SD = 1.54, t = 2.98, p = .018$), and the follow a Facebook page condition ($n = 26, M = 4.61, SD = 1.72, t = 3.40, p = .005$), respectively. Each participatory CSR condition generated higher perceived interactivity than did the non-participatory CSR condition. Therefore, H1 was supported.

We conducted regression analyses to test H2 while controlling for existing issue involvement. As predicted, the results showed significant positive associations between perceived interactivity and public-serving CSR motives ($b = 0.27, SE = 0.09, p = .004$), attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.23, SE = 0.06, p < .001$), and purchase intentions ($b = 0.25, SE = 0.08, p = .003$). Therefore, H2 was supported.

H3 proposed that perceived interactivity would have a mediating effect on the relationship between the type of CSR campaign and perceived CSR motives, attitudes toward the company, and purchase intentions. We performed mediation analyses using the statistical software package MPlus. We first constructed three variables using control group coding where the non-participatory CSR condition was compared to each of the participatory CSR condition groups (Hayes & Preacher, 2014) and then used bias-corrected bootstrapping based on 5000 samples.

Compared to the non-participatory condition, the app download condition had a significantly more positive influence on perceived CSR motives ($b = 0.45$, $SE = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.124, 0.974]), attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.157, 0.812]), and purchase intentions ($b = 0.46$, $SE = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.139, 1.009]) through perceived interactivity. Likewise, relative to the non-participatory condition, the share a photo condition had a significantly more positive influence on perceived CSR motives ($b = 0.40$, $SE = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.111, 0.923]), attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.38$, $SE = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.112, 0.782]), and purchase intentions ($b = 0.41$, $SE = 0.20$, 95% CI [0.125, 0.955]) through perceived interactivity. Lastly, compared to the non-participatory CSR condition, the follow a Facebook page condition had significantly more positive effects on perceived CSR motives ($b = 0.46$, $SE = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.124, 1.047]), attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.43$, $SE = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.151, 0.843]), and purchase intentions ($b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.135, 1.051]) through perceived interactivity. Thus, H3 was supported.

4.3. Discussion

In Study 1, we compared different types of social media-based CSR campaigns and demonstrated that respondents perceived the participatory campaigns as more interactive than the non-participatory CSR campaign. When a campaign involved consumer participation, respondents regarded the company's motive for all three types of participatory campaigns as more public-serving than self-serving compared to the non-participatory condition, and the participatory campaigns resulted in more favorable attitudes toward the company and higher purchase intentions, mediated by perceived interactivity. A relevant follow-up question is, how does perceived interactivity affect perceptions of the company's CSR motives as public-serving (vs. self-serving), and what impact does it have on other subsequent outcomes? We propose that psychological empowerment and consumer-company identification can explain this relationship.

5. Psychological empowerment

Psychological empowerment refers to individuals' subjective feeling of being able to influence their environments (Dahl et al., 2014, Hartmann et al., 2018). In participatory campaigns, people can choose whether to participate and, sometimes, decide how to implement the campaigns, whereas in non-participatory campaigns, they have no means of providing input. In the former, consumers gain control over their experiences and feel empowered (Boyd et al., 2016, Pires et al., 2006). Perceived empowerment can lead consumers to perceive CSR campaigns as less self-serving and more authentic, credible, and public-serving. The literature suggests that consumers perceive company-controlled communication, including paid advertisements and company-owned websites, as less credible than information from third-party platforms (Lee & Youn, 2009). This is because companies have control over the former but not the latter, and consumers perceive information uncontrolled by companies as more authentic (Walther & Parks, 2002). In the same vein, companies that surrender control in participatory CSR campaigns by making their success contingent on consumer participation (which is not guaranteed) can acquire higher credibility (Eberle et al., 2013). Meanwhile, consumers' perceived abilities to influence their environments in participatory campaigns might give them a sense of ownership over campaign processes, making them feel that the campaigns belong to them rather than the companies. Such increases in perceived power can strengthen individuals' perceived self-efficacy

(Bandura, 1977), and contemporary consumers are not shy about exercising power by voicing their views about and reacting to companies.

Accordingly, consumers are likely to perceive participatory CSR campaigns, whose success depends on them, as credible and evaluate such campaigns as serving them rather than being profit-driven. Therefore, we predict that when companies solicit consumer participation and consumers perceive campaigns as interactive, consumers' psychological empowerment will increase, making them less skeptical about the motives behind the CSR campaigns, which will bolster both their favorable attitudes toward the companies and their purchase intentions (see Fig. 1).

H4 Perceived interactivity is positively related to psychological empowerment.

H5 Through perceived interactivity and psychological empowerment, participatory CSR campaigns boost consumers' (a) perceptions of the company's public-serving CSR motives, (b) favorable attitudes toward the company, and (c) purchase intentions regarding the company's products or services, relative to non-participatory campaigns.

6. Consumer–company identification

In the present study, we propose that enhanced perceived interactivity through participatory CSR campaigns can generate higher consumer–company identification. Palmatier et al. (2006) classified the relationships between consumers and companies as *customer-focused*, *seller-focused*, or *dyadic*. They identified communication and interaction frequency as dyadic antecedents to consumer–company relationships. From a marketing communication perspective, communication—defined as information shared between consumers and companies—and interaction frequency are relevant to relationship building (Palmatier et al., 2006). For example, research has shown that consumers with weak connections to a brand experience can develop more positive relationships with the product, the brand, and the company after participating in a “brandfest” (McAlexander et al., 2002). This suggests that identification can be developed through consumer–company interaction (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, Cha et al., 2016, Eberle et al., 2013, Korschun and Du, 2013, So et al., 2016).

When applying social identification theory to examine consumer–organization relationships, a consumer's identification with an organization, company, or brand is typically defined as the consumer's perceived degree of “oneness” with the entity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Consumers' reasons for developing consumer–company identification are well documented—for example, research has shown that consumers' perceived knowledge about a company's identity, perceptions of brand personality as warm, memorable brand experiences (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), perceived brand attractiveness (So et al., 2017), and CSR images (Pérez & Del Bosque, 2015) predict consumer–company identification. This *identification* is indicative of future behavior and tends to lead consumers to support organizations' values and actions to maintain their self-conceptions (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, Escalas and Bettman, 2005). For example, studies have found that consumer–company identification positively affects willingness to pay (Haumann et al., 2014), brand commitment and word of mouth (Woisetschläger et al., 2008), brand advocacy (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), repeat purchase (Pérez & Rodríguez Del Bosque, 2013), brand loyalty (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), and resistance to negative brand information (Cheng et al., 2012).

Employees, brands, and communication can increase consumers' identification with a company, and CSR activities can be a channel through which consumers interact with a company and answer the question, "Who am I?" (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, Deng and Xu, 2017). Therefore, we postulate that consumer–company identification is another underlying mechanism that explains the relationship between participatory CSR campaigns and consumers' affinity for socially responsible companies. Consumers who identify with a company through heightened perceived interactivity in a participatory CSR campaign will be more supportive of the company's CSR campaigns because such engagement will lower their skepticism regarding the company's motive for CSR activities, which will positively influence ensuing effects (see Fig. 1).

H6 Perceived interactivity is positively related to consumer–company identification.

H7 Through perceived interactivity and consumer–company identification, participatory CSR campaigns boost consumers' (a) perceptions of the company's public-serving CSR motives, (b) favorable attitudes toward the company, and (c) purchase intentions regarding the company's products or services, relative to non-participatory CSR campaigns.

7. Study 2

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Design

Study 2 extended Study 1, elaborating on the mechanisms that produce the differing effects of participatory and non-participatory CSR campaigns. To validate the results of Study 1 in a different context and to enhance the study's ecological validity, we used a real company (the Hyundai Motor Company) and tested two environmental issues (air pollution and species extinction). We selected an automobile company because pollution from cars is considered a major cause of global warming, and the automobile industry is currently seeking to reduce pollution by using renewable energy sources and innovating its products and its manufacturing processes. Similar to Study 1, we conducted a between-subjects online experiment with four CSR campaign conditions (one non-participatory and the same three participatory conditions) regarding two environmental issues (species extinction and air pollution). We again recruited respondents from MTurk.

7.1.2. Measures

We used the same items as in Study 1 to measure perceived interactivity ($\alpha = 0.93$), issue involvement ($\alpha = 0.91$), familiarity, perceived CSR motive ($\alpha = 0.91$), attitudes toward the company ($\alpha = 0.96$ for prior attitude; $\alpha = 0.96$ for post-attitude), and purchase intentions ($\alpha = 0.95$). Because Hyundai is a well-known company, we measured attitudes toward the company twice, once before the respondents were exposed to the campaign and once afterward.

7.1.2.1. Psychological empowerment

We conceptualized psychological empowerment as individuals' perceived abilities to influence their environments. Adapting the approaches taken in Dahl et al., 2014, Hartmann et al., 2018, we asked respondents to rate the degree to which the campaigns made them feel "I can make a difference"; "I have been empowered"; "I can have an impact on what happens"; and "I have the power to change things" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = 0.98$).

7.1.2.2. Consumer–company identification

Consumer–company identification refers to individuals' perceptions of “oneness” with the company leading a CSR campaign (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Adapting the approach used in Pérez and Rodríguez Del Bosque (2013), we measured consumer–company identification using the following four items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*): “I strongly identify with the company”; “The company fits my personality”; “I feel closely linked to the company”; and “I have a strong feeling of attachment to the company” ($\alpha = 0.97$).

7.2. Results

Of the 101 respondents, 55 (54.46%) were male and 46 (45.54%) were female. Their average age was 36 and ranged from 19 to 68. The majority were employed full-time ($n = 71$, 70.30%) with a median income of \$40,000 to under \$50,000. Ethnically, the majority were White ($n = 78$, 77.22%). Additionally, the respondents showed high levels of familiarity with the company ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.27$).

7.2.1. Manipulation check

As in Study 1, we performed a manipulation check using the same two questions and took the same approach to the data analyses. First, we performed a one-way ANOVA, which revealed significant differences across the four groups ($F(3, 97) = 39.27$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = 0.53$) in levels of public involvement in the campaign. Specifically, compared to the non-participatory CSR condition ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 2.05$), all three participatory conditions showed a significantly higher level of campaign involvement—the app download condition ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.21$, $t = 8.14$, $p < .001$), the share a photo condition ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 0.82$, $t = 9.50$, $p < .001$), and the follow a Facebook page condition ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 1.10$, $t = 8.94$, $p < .001$).

To test the perceived importance of respondents' participation in the campaign, we again performed a one-way ANOVA, which revealed significant differences across the four groups, $F(3, 97) = 15.90$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = 0.31$. A pairwise group comparison showed significant differences between the non-participatory condition ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 2.19$) and the app download condition ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.39$, $t = 5.54$, $p < .001$), the share a photo condition ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.47$, $t = 5.28$, $p < .001$), and the follow a Facebook page condition ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.56$, $t = 6.11$, $p < .001$). Therefore, the results confirmed that the manipulation for the stimuli was designed as intended.

7.2.2. Hypothesis testing

In the analyses, we pooled the data regarding the two issues, as there were no differences in the perceived importance of the issues and the fit between the company and each of the issues, which could have affected the outcome variables. Specifically, respondents considered air pollution and species extinction equally important, both personally (air pollution: $M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.25$; species extinction: $M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.29$; $t(99) = 0.11$, $p = .915$) and for the whole country (air pollution: $M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.19$; species extinction: $M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.29$; $t(99) = 0.57$, $p = .573$). Respondents viewed the level of fit between the company and both issues as high, and these views did not differ significantly by issue (air pollution: $M = 5.98$, $SD = 0.98$; species extinction: $M = 5.63$, $SD = 1.33$; $t(99) = 1.52$, $p = .131$).

To test H4, we conducted a simple regression analysis. The results showed significant positive relationships ($b = 0.85$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$): the more respondents perceived the CSR campaign as

increasing their interaction with the company, the more empowered they felt. Thus, H4 was supported.

H5 proposed that perceived interactivity and psychological empowerment have sequential mediating effects on the relationship between CSR strategy type and (a) perceived CSR motives, (b) attitudes toward the company, and (c) purchase intentions, while controlling for both issue involvement ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.00$) and existing attitudes toward the company ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.17$). The app download condition had a significantly more positive influence than the non-participatory CSR condition on perceived CSR motives ($b = 0.60$, $SE = 0.24$, 95% CI [0.247, 1.214]), attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.031, 0.479]), and purchase intentions ($b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [-0.367, 0.037]) through perceived interactivity and psychological empowerment. Likewise, compared to the non-participatory campaign condition, the share a photo condition generated significantly higher perceived public-serving CSR motives ($b = 0.56$, $SE = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.232, 1.120]), more favorable attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.032, 0.437]), and higher purchase intentions ($b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [-0.363, 0.036]). Lastly, the follow a Facebook page condition also had significantly more positive effects on perceived CSR motives ($b = 0.58$, $SE = 0.24$, 95% CI [0.212, 1.201]), attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.029, 0.493]), and purchase intentions ($b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [-0.375, 0.037]) than the non-participatory condition. Thus, H5 was supported.

We used the same approach to test H6 and H7. A simple regression analysis showed that the more respondents perceived the CSR campaigns as increasing their interactions with the company, the more they identified with the company, when we controlled for issue involvement and existing company attitudes ($b = 0.59$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$); thus, H6 was supported.

H7 proposed that perceived interactivity and consumer–company identification have sequential mediating effects on the relationship between CSR strategy type and the same three outcome variables, while controlling for issue involvement and existing attitudes toward the company. The app download condition had a significantly more positive influence than the non-participatory CSR condition on perceived CSR motives ($b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.048, 0.522]) and attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.030, 0.290]), but not on purchase intentions ($b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.174, 0.700]). Likewise, the share a photo condition had a significantly more positive influence than the non-participatory CSR condition on perceived CSR motives ($b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.20$, 95% CI [0.041, 0.524]) and attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.031, 0.284]), but not on purchase intentions ($b = 0.35$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.155, 0.677]). Lastly, the follow a Facebook page condition had significantly more positive effects on perceived CSR motives ($b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.053, 0.499]) and attitudes toward the company ($b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.034, 0.284]), but, again, not on purchase intentions ($b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.153, 0.713]). Thus, H7a and H7b were supported, but H7c was not supported.

7.3. Discussion

In Study 2, we extended the results of Study 1 to elucidate the psychological mechanisms by which the interactive nature of participatory CSR campaigns leads to more favorable views of company CSR motives and positively influences both attitudes toward companies and purchase intentions. Specifically, we explored psychological empowerment and consumer–company identification. The

results supported all our hypotheses except the one regarding the effects of perceived interactivity on purchase intentions through consumer–company identification. In the next section, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of these findings.

8. General discussion

Despite the growing popularity of participatory CSR initiatives, *why* participatory campaigns generate value for companies has not been well explicated. Consumer engagement has become a mantra for advertisers, marketers, and other communication professionals, but the effect of involving consumers in CSR campaigns and why such participatory behavior is effective has remained underexplored. The present study sought to fill this gap by conducting two online experiments.

In Study 1, we focused on the effect of perceived interactivity, assuming that it is the most distinctive attribute distinguishing consumers' perceptions of participatory CSR campaigns from their perceptions of non-participatory campaigns. Thus, we hypothesized that participatory CSR campaigns are more effective than non-participatory CSR campaigns when consumers perceive the former as interactive. As predicted, our analysis showed that participatory campaigns had higher perceived interactivity, and perceived interactivity was associated with higher perceived public-serving CSR motives, more positive attitudes toward the company, and higher purchase intentions regarding the company's products. Furthermore, mediation analyses showed that perceived interactivity determined the effectiveness of participatory CSR campaigns. The findings of Study 1 revealed that companies can boost their value by engaging consumers in their CSR activities and that the increased perceived interactivity fostered by asking consumers to participate in CSR campaigns explains this positive relationship.

In Study 2, we further explored how perceived interactivity affects perceived CSR motives, attitudes toward the company, and purchase intentions. Based on psychological empowerment and social identification theory literature, we predicted that participatory CSR campaigns would lead consumers to psychological empowerment and make them identify more with the companies initiating the CSR campaigns. Both proposed mechanisms were supported, except for the prediction regarding purchase intentions through consumer–company identification. Overall, the results highlight the importance of interactive strategies that evoke feelings of empowerment and consumer–company identification.

8.1. Theoretical implications

The findings of this study have several theoretical implications that contribute to the CSR literature. First, the findings shed light on rather underexplored areas of consumer engagement in CSR initiatives. Although the literature emphasizes two-way communication strategies and dialogue (Grunig et al., 2002, Taylor and Kent, 2014) as well as stakeholder engagement in CSR (Calder et al., 2009, Cha et al., 2016, Ruiz de Maya et al., 2016), researchers have not previously examined how these strategies can generate company value in the context of CSR campaigns. This study adds to the growing body of research on participatory CSR campaigns by demonstrating that perceived interactivity is the mechanism through which the participatory nature of campaigns generates positive outcomes for companies.

Second, this study further enhances our understanding of participatory CSR campaigns by demonstrating that the perceived interactivity of participatory campaigns leads to favorable outcomes for companies through psychological empowerment and consumer–company identification. Although

previous studies have identified both psychological empowerment and consumer–company identification as important consumer CSR-related motivations, researchers have not examined how they function as underlying mechanisms that enable interactive campaigns involving consumer participation to outperform non-participatory and less interactive campaigns. The literature shows the positive effect of involving consumers as co-creators (Korschun and Du, 2013, Okazaki et al., 2020), and consumer–company identification has often been studied as an important antecedent of creating brand communities, building long-term relationships (e.g., Cova and Pace, 2006, McAlexander et al., 2002, Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), and creating a positive corporate reputation (Eberle et al., 2013). The present study extends these lines of work by applying empowerment and identification to the CSR communication context and revealing the important roles of the perceived interactivity, psychological empowerment, and consumer–company identification as mediators between participatory CSR campaigns and favorable perceptions of companies.

Third, this study distinguished between feature- and content-based interactivity and examined participatory CSR campaigns with the view that soliciting consumer involvement in some way through campaign messages enhances perceived interactivity. Thus far, the scholarship on interactive CSR campaigns has mostly focused on interactive features such as the presence or absence of comments sections (e.g., Eberle et al., 2013). However, in the current digital environment, emphasis on interactive features themselves is not as important as in early work because most interactive features are available in various platforms and consumers expect to see those interactive features. In addition, the features themselves lack the novelty effect they once had. Instead, increasing perceived interactivity requires a focus on the content of the messages. Exploring the effects of content-based interactivity and the mechanisms through which it generates positive results advances our understanding of interactive communication strategies.

8.2. Managerial implications

The present findings have several practical implications. First, the study clearly showed that participatory CSR activities are superior to non-participatory CSR activities, both for familiar and for unfamiliar brands. These results imply that companies will benefit more from engaging consumers in their CSR activities and involving them in the campaigns than from merely announcing their philanthropic activities to stakeholders. In terms of the design of participatory CSR activities, it seems that practitioners can use a variety of forms, and consumer participation does not necessarily have to be complicated. Simply asking for a click can lead consumers to feel that the company is interactive, and the company can benefit from the positive effects of perceived interactivity. We intentionally tested examples often used in practice, and all the examples in our study (i.e., following the company’s Facebook page, sharing a photo on Facebook using a hashtag, and downloading a mobile application) led the participants to believe that the company was interactive in comparison to a non-participatory CSR announcement. Furthermore, although each participatory CSR announcement solicited different actions from the participants, we did not see any difference in the level of perceived interactivity.

Second, the results clearly show that when considering interactivity, practitioners need to focus on designing campaigns and creating message strategies that allow consumers to feel they are empowered. Previous research has shown that merely seeing that other consumers have taken part in new product design allows consumers to feel vicariously involved, gives them a sense of psychological

empowerment, and leads them to develop favorable attitudes toward companies (Dahl et al., 2014). Similarly, communicating about CSR activities with peers plays an important role in intentions to engage in further CSR communication on social media (Chu et al., 2020). Therefore, if a company wishes to initiate a participatory CSR campaign, the campaign message should acknowledge the importance of participation and ensure that consumers perceive their participation or the participation of others they identify with as crucial to achieving the campaign goal. In addition, providing incentives for them to share their experiences with peers may help the campaign spread further.

Third, in line with the literature, this study showed that consumer–company identification is another key mechanism in explaining why participatory CSR campaigns lead consumers to perceive companies' motives as public serving and boost their attitudes toward companies. The participatory nature of the campaign examined in this study was interactive enough to increase perceived interactivity with the company, which led to company identification. To strengthen identification, practitioners could utilize additional cues tested in the literature, such as self-referencing words or names in their messages (e.g., Wise et al., 2006).

8.3. Limitations and future research

The present study has limitations that future research should address. First, given our definition of participatory CSR, we tested multiple participatory conditions to increase the study's generalizability. Although we used the most common forms of participatory CSR campaigns on social media and created campaigns akin to those consumers are most familiar with, there are other types of participatory activities, such as pledging, donating, volunteering, voting, and even purchasing products. These other forms could produce different consumer responses.

Second, there could be factors within the three participatory conditions for which we did not control. For example, the three participatory conditions tested in the study required different amounts of effort from respondents. Initially, for instance, we thought that downloading an app to a phone would be considered more arduous than liking a social media page. Although we saw no differences in perceived interactivity or other psychological effects, future research could investigate the potential psychological differences between various kinds of participatory CSR campaigns.

Third, we examined the value of participatory CSR campaigns to the company as measured by perceived CSR motives, attitudes toward the company, and product purchase intentions. However, other outcomes, such as consumers' CSR campaign participation intentions or actual participation (Woisetschläger et al., 2008) or the value of different kinds of CSR campaigns to society warrant consideration. Future research could explore the additional benefits that participatory CSR activities may yield.

Despite these limitations, the present study has opened up a rarely explored area of research and confirmed the value of engaging consumers with CSR activities. We believe it is time to shift CSR strategies toward the co-creation of social value, which will ultimately benefit both companies and consumers.

Appendix A.

Examples of Stimuli in Study 1 Addressing the Issue of Species Extinction

(a) Non-participatory CSR condition



Kolon Sport will donate \$500,000 to nonprofits to help fight species extinction. In this campaign, Kolon Sport is not asking you to do anything—Kolon Sport will donate directly to the appropriate organizations.

(b) Participatory CSR Condition 1: Downloading an app



Kolon Sport is asking for your participation. Download a smartphone app to record the number of miles you walk, and for every mile recorded, Kolon Sport will donate \$1 to nonprofits to help fight species extinction, up to \$500,000.

(c) Participatory CSR Condition 2: Sharing a hashtag



Kolon sport is asking for your participation. Take a photo relating to the issue of species extinction and share the photo on Facebook using the hashtag #GreenKolon. Whenever an image is shared using the hashtag, Kolon Sport will donate \$1 to nonprofits to help fight species extinction, up to \$500,000.

(d) Participatory CSR Condition 3: Following a Facebook page



Kolon Sport is asking you to follow Kolon Sport's Facebook page. For every new follower, Kolon Sport will donate \$1 to nonprofits to help fight air pollution, up to \$500,000.

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