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Exploring Effects of Message Framing on Supportive Behaviors Toward Environmental Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to shed light on how effective environmental corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication can be achieved through persuasive communication strategies using message framing.

Design/methodology/approach

This study conducted an online experimental study with a 2 (narrative: narrative or non-narrative) × 2 (framing: gain or loss) between-subjects design.

Findings

The findings showed that environmental CSR communication using narrative framing messages is most effective in creating strong CSR associations between a company and the environmental CSR domain and sharing the company's CSR information on supportive communication and advocating for the environmental campaign.

Originality/value

This study highlights the importance of a company's environmental CSR communication efforts using the right message format (narrative style) to increase its persuasive sequence from CSR evaluation to supportive behaviors, contributing to theoretical development in the research of environmental CSR communication. This study suggests that environmental CSR campaign managers should first formalize the company's environmental responsiveness by clearly establishing policies and practicing CSR performance that could result in a strong CSR association before asking their target publics to engage in pro-environmental activities.

Keywords

Environmental CSR communication, Narrative message, Gain-loss framing, Supportive CSR behaviors

The environmental component of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become important because consumers expect companies to actively participate in green issues (Han *et al.*, 2020). Focusing on environmental CSR policies, many companies such as IKEA, DHL, and UPS have emphasized their efforts to reduce carbon dioxide for the impact on climate change by raising public awareness (Dans, 2018). Given this background, in recent years, companies have increasingly recognized the importance of environmental sustainability and acted on its issues by initiating effective pro-environmental activities and encouraging others to join these activities (Chang *et al.*, 2017). Thus, the efforts of the environmental sustainability practices have played a critical role in demonstrating how the companies contribute to society as responsible corporate citizens by proving their CSR credentials (Birkey *et al.*, 2016).

In this sense, scholars have substantiated that environmental CSR communication can positively affect organizational effectiveness among customers, including corporate reputation (e.g. Kim, 2019) and loyalty intentions to follow a specific brand (e.g. Han *et al.*, 2019). Environmental CSR researchers have emphasized effective CSR communication strategies that require appropriate public awareness of the interpretation of CSR activities, leading to increasing corporate reputation and obtaining supportive behaviors (Bayoud and Kavanagh, 2012). Specifically, persuasive strategies using message framing (e.g. narrative vs. non-narrative and gain vs. loss) have been increasingly suggested to enhance the effectiveness of environmental CSR communication (Baek and Yoon, 2017).

Nonetheless, there has been a dearth of research elucidating how a company that engages in its environmental CSR activity implements effective CSR communication. Underexplored is how

environmental CSR message framing motivates publics to positively evaluate the company and engage in positive behavioral outcomes such as supporting the company's CSR activity and advocating for activities related to environmental issues. Accordingly, it is imperative for communication managers to explore effective CSR messages that lead to positive outcomes.

To fill the gap, the purpose of this study is to apply persuasive message strategies—narrative and gain-loss framing—to environmental CSR communication. This study will examine how narrative and gain-loss message framing affect public behaviors regarding an environmental issue. The results of this study will provide theoretical and practical implications by indicating how environmental CSR communication professionals design effective communication strategies to elicit consumers' positive behavioral responses, especially supportive behaviors toward the corporation's sustainable activities and advocating for pro-environmental behaviors. Furthermore, this study will contribute to triggering more studies for the theoretical development of environmental CSR communication based on persuasive communication strategy.

Literature Review

Effective CSR communication with narrative framing strategy

Since the term CSR was first mentioned in Sheldon's (1923) work, there has been no consensus on its definition (Castro-González *et al.*, 2019). As a common definition widely accepted in the literature, CSR refers to a firm's commitment not only to improve community well-being but also to maximize long-term economic, societal, and environmental well-being through discretionary business practices and policies and corporate resources (Ajayi and Mmutle, 2021). In the same vein, *environmental CSR* can be defined as firms' "extra effort integrating environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders" in terms of environmental philanthropy, environmental community involvement, and environmental customer well-being (Williamson *et al.*, 2006, p. 317).

Companies actively engage in effective communication strategies that appropriately reflect their CSR activities through CSR messages that help consumers understand (Moreno and Kang, 2020). CSR communication is "communication that is designed and distributed by the company itself about its CSR efforts" (Morsing, 2006, p. 171). Organizations can benefit from effective CSR communication that properly communicates actual CSR practices to obtain positive returns (Castro-González *et al.*, 2019). Some scholars have argued that firms implement CSR communication effectively to cultivate beneficial relationships with their publics and increase the public's supportive behaviors toward the firms (Crane and Glozer, 2016). Also, other scholars have contended that CSR communication is imperative to legitimize an organization's behavior, thereby enhancing a credible corporate or brand image (Du *et al.*, 2010).

Furthermore, as the ultimate goal, researchers have explored empirical evidence for how CSR communication can have an impact on various attitudinal and behavioral outcomes such as positive word of mouth (e.g. Anuradha and Bagali, 2015), customer loyalty, relationship building, referrals (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2017), purchase behaviors (e.g. Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), and CSR participation intentions (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2017). However, CSR scholars have faced challenges regarding how CSR communication can be implemented effectively to better inform stakeholders with desirable outcomes for the companies (Garcia-Jiménez *et al.*, 2017; Moreno and Kang, 2020). Specifically, Kim and Ferguson

(2018) pointed out the missing link between what should be communicated in CSR messages and how messages should be communicated with publics to improve the positive impact of CSR communication in the process of CSR.

For effective CSR communication, previous researchers have highlighted that CSR messages should be in the form of persuasive communication that enhances the positive impact of the message as a desirable outcome (Liang *et al.*, 2018). Previous research in media psychology has also found that narrative messages are more persuasive than non-narrative messages (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Strategic storytelling using narratively rich CSR messages leads to positive attitudes and behaviors (e.g. purchase intention, positive word-of-mouth, and interest in working for the company) to support an organization (Boukes and LaMarre, 2021). In this regard, a narrative framing message (or storytelling) is suggested as the most persuasive communication in the CSR context because it makes the CSR communication more believable to customers and can influence their attitudes or beliefs (Fisher, 1984; Kim and Ferguson, 2018). *Narrative* is “an umbrella term for personal stories, exemplars, testimonials, and entertainment-education contents” (Shen *et al.*, 2015, p. 105). Kreuter *et al.* (2007) defined *narratives* as “a representation of connected events and characters that has an identifiable structure, is bounded in space and time, and contains implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed” (p. 222). The narrative format has been applied to the message framing research to test empirical evidence of its persuasive effect (Oschatz and Marker, 2020).

Message framing affects how people understand and evaluate a certain issue by including a problem definition, causal interpretation, and/or treatment recommendation through specific words, phrases, and presentation styles (Entman, 1993). The persuasive effect of narrative message framing has been explained by two different theories: *narrative transportation theory* and *exemplification theory* (Bakker *et al.*, 2019). According to the narrative transportation theory, people tend to mentally enter a story described by the narrative message and become absorbed; this leads to changes in attitudes, beliefs, and intentions (Green and Brock, 2000; Slater and Rouner, 2002). Also, people's perceptions can be more influenced by the specific narratives because beliefs and behavioral intentions can be formed and changed by the specific cases as examples (i.e. exemplification theory) (Kahneman, 2001; Zillmann, 2006).

Applying these theories, a considerable amount of literature has demonstrated the powerful, persuasive effect of narrative framing messages over non-narrative framing messages on attitudinal and behavioral changes (e.g. De Wit *et al.*, 2008; Shen *et al.*, 2015). Particularly, scholars have found empirical evidence that the narratives can influence the policymaking process because the story settings or plots used in the narrative messages (i.e. the narrative framing) help people make sense of complex policy problems and engage with policy solutions (Gupta *et al.*, 2018). More recently, Bakker *et al.* (2019) confirmed the strong effect of narrative framing messages on medical decision-making behavior (e.g. contact one of the victims and call the emergency service) in a car collision accident situation. Heley *et al.* (2020) also indicated narrative framing messages as a potentially powerful strategy for advocates working on social issues (e.g. prescription opioid addiction, obesity, cigarette smoking) because narrative messages are effective for persuasive communication that influences the shift of public attitudes and support for health issues. However, there has been a lack of scholarly attention to effective environmental CSR communication using narrative message framing strategy, although researchers have been captivated by the effect of persuasive messages in CSR outcomes such as environmental attitudes, evaluations, and behaviors (Kim, 2017; Liang *et al.*, 2018).

Narrative Environmental CSR Communication for CSR Associations

Corporate associations describe “all the information about a company that a person holds” (Brown and Dacin, 1997, p. 69) and can be used to evaluate a company's activity. When it comes to *CSR associations*, a company's CSR is evaluated by how well its CSR initiatives and outcomes meet the social and environmental values and expectations of its publics (Ellen *et al.*, 2006). For this reason, CSR communication has been emphasized in companies that want to obtain attitudinal, relational, and behavioral benefits through CSR associations (CSR perception or belief) (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Castro-González *et al.*, 2019). Crane and Glozer's (2016) 15-year (1998–2013) thematic analysis of the CSR communication literature found that CSR associations based on consumers' evaluations (e.g. environmental legitimacy and accountability for the company) are one of the main purposes of CSR communication. Thus, CSR communication is *a major driver* for CSR associations because the CSR activities can help distinguish an organization from other organizations (Ajayi and Mmutle, 2021).

In terms of the environmental context of CSR communication, scholars have suggested that environment-focused CSR communications (e.g. pollution prevention and recycling) can improve consumers' evaluations about the quality of the brand, brand trust, and purchase intentions (Olsen *et al.*, 2014). Some scholars have argued that environmental CSR communication about the corporation's environmental policies and practices may be less influential than the communication about other social issues (e.g. health and education initiatives) because the benefits of environmental practices are not easily discovered or experienced by consumers (Crane *et al.*, 2013). However, previous research has constantly demonstrated the positive effects of environmental CSR communication on corporate evaluations for CSR activities. Specifically, Rashid *et al.* (2015) found environmental CSR, especially environmental customer well-being through eco-friendly products, was the strongest influence among other environmental CSR dimensions on customers' evaluations of the corporate image. Kim (2017) also demonstrated that proactive environmental CSR communication improves consumers' CSR knowledge and, in turn, has a positive effect on CSR associations.

Nonetheless, some questions remain unanswered about how specific CSR messages should be communicated with the public to increase the positive effects of environmental CSR communication. Following the positive effect of narrative framing messages, it would be reasonable that a company's environmental CSR communication using framing messages could result in the public's positive CSR evaluations of the company because the effect of corporate associations related to the public's memories (Einwiller, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, we suggest the following hypothesis:

H1. Environmental CSR messages using narrative framing will have a positive effect on environmental CSR associations.

Narrative Environmental CSR Communication and Behavioral Outcomes

CSR is recognized as a desired business action that brings positive behavioral outcomes such as supportive behaviors and advocacy communication toward CSR organizations (e.g. Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Davis (1995) demonstrated that environmental CSR messages have positive effects on publics' intentions to participate in environmentally responsible behaviors such as conservation, recycling, and green shopping. Mohr and Webb (2005) also indicated that customers are more likely to buy products from a company that communicates the messages reflecting its high level of support instead of its low level of support for company responsibilities to the environment. Choi and Ng

(2011) provided further empirical evidence that the low level of environmental sustainability resulted in negative effects on CSR evaluations and purchase intention toward the company.

Recently, scholars have increasingly maintained that consumers' behavioral responses to CSR are not restricted to purchase intention (Sen *et al.*, 2016). Rather, they are also applied to advocacy behaviors such as positive word-of-mouth (Oh and Ki, 2019), resistance to negative information (Xie *et al.*, 2019), and specific engagement in supportive behaviors related to social issues (e.g. attending rallies and signing online petitions) (McKeever *et al.*, 2019). Kim (2017) also found that publics are likely to engage in supportive communication intentions, including discussion about pro-environmental activities, and purchase intentions toward the company's products if the company commits to proactive environmental CSR activities.

Hence, it is plausible that publics are more likely to support a company through positive behaviors, including engaging in supportive communication and advocating for environmental CSR, when the publics are engaged in environmental CSR messages. The framing literature has indicated that a narrative framing can lead to more positive persuasive outcomes through behavioral changes such as decreasing risky behavior (e.g. Greene and Brinn, 2003), decision-making behavior (e.g. Bakker *et al.*, 2019), sharing the message interpersonally and via social media, and performing recommended behavior than a non-narrative framing message (e.g. Kim and Nan, 2019). Therefore, we present the following hypothesis:

H2. Environmental CSR messages using narrative framing will have a positive effect on supportive behavioral intentions toward the company's environmental CSR activities.

Moderating Role of Gain-Loss Framing for the Effect of Narrative Framing

Scholars from multiple disciplines have documented such framing effects on people's attitudes and behaviors (Dorison and Heller, 2022). Kahneman and his colleagues (e.g. Kahneman, 2001; Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) have demonstrated how gain-loss framing affects one's decision-making through the factors of reference point and loss aversion (i.e. *prospect theory*) [1]. Since then, gain-loss framing has become one of the most applied theories in social science scholarship. Researchers in a wide range of communication contexts have paid particular attention to gain-loss framing as an effective persuasive strategy (Robbins and Niederdeppe, 2019). Cervellon and Carey (2011) investigated how messages as a gain or loss affect consumers' responses to change pro-environmental behaviors. Lu (2016) examined the effects of loss-framed messages on information-seeking and policy support in the context of the environmental crisis (i.e. sea star wasting disease event).

Previous research has demonstrated that gain-loss framing is the act of phrasing a message that manifests a specific outcome based on positive or negative attributes (Cervellon and Carey, 2011; Lu, 2016). While gain-framed messages focus on what people gain (i.e. positive benefits) if they follow recommendations in a message, loss-framed messages highlight what people can lose (i.e. negative consequences) if they do not follow the recommendations (Baek *et al.*, 2013). According to prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), with conditions of uncertainty, a loss-framed message is more effective than a gain-framed message, because people are more risk-averse when information is framed in terms of losses. Ling *et al.* (2018) indicated that a message strategy with loss framing—highlighting what the participants will lose—would negatively affect consumers' attitudes.

Although gain-loss framing is a widely studied concept in CSR research, the effectiveness of gain-loss framing for behavioral changes has not yet been clearly discovered in environmental CSR communication research (Bosone and Martinez, 2017). Empirical studies applying gain versus loss message framing have produced mixed findings (e.g. White *et al.*, 2011). Davis (1995) found that a loss-framed message results in positive responses to the communication and behavioral intentions in environmentally responsible behaviors. Syme *et al.* (2000) also maintained that loss-framed messages are more successful than gain-framed messages in increasing water-saving behaviors. Olsen *et al.* (2014) found that the proportion of positively framed environmental CSR messages (gain framing) negatively influenced the consumers' behavioral evaluations. Baek and Yoon (2017) found that participants had greater intentions to conserve water as a result of viewing a loss-framed message rather than a gain-framed message when primed with shame. However, Liang *et al.* (2018) did not find clear evidence of the effectiveness of loss-framing messages and suggested “the effects of combinatorial messages in affecting attitude” (p. 554). Recently, Oh and Ki (2019) found that gain-framed messages more positively affect word-of-mouth (WOM) intention than loss-framed messages.

Accordingly, it is important to conduct additional studies using other message frames because environmental communication practitioners need to identify which frame is more effective in their persuasive strategy. Kim and Nan (2019) recently suggested exploring the potential interactions between narrative versus non-narrative message and gain-loss framing to illuminate the persuasive effects of narrative messages. Clune and O'Dwyer (2020) also emphasized the specific role of strategic framing in the construction of CSR messages to mobilize support for collaborative CSR change initiatives. Consequently, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1. How will gain-loss framing moderate the effects of environmental CSR message using narrative framing on environmental CSR associations?

RQ2. How will gain-loss framing moderate the effects of environmental CSR message using narrative framing on supportive behavioral intentions toward the company's environmental CSR activities?

Mediating Role of CSR Associations

Scholars have highlighted the important mediating role of the company's associations for the effect of CSR communication on consumer behaviors (Han *et al.*, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2017). Lee *et al.* (2017) found a mediation effect of CSR association between CSR communication and consumers' intention to participate in CSR activities. Vanger and Pomirleanu (2018) also demonstrated an important mediating role of perceived CSR (CSR associations) between the company's environmental CSR communication and consumers' positive advocacy for the company's CSR activity. Han *et al.* (2019) recently found that assessing a corporation's environmental CSR activities can increase customers' loyalty intentions.

More importantly, the literature on CSR communication has indicated the strong effects of CSR associations on the positive behaviors of publics (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Liu *et al.* (2018) found that the positive CSR image of the company through its public welfare activities can enhance consumers' willingness to buy the company's products. Kim and Austin (2019) demonstrated that the CSR association consumers form with a company through CSR communication can increase their supportive

behaviors toward the company (e.g. positive WOM and purchase intention). Thus, we ask the following research question:

RQ3. To what extent do environmental CSR associations mediate the effects of environmental CSR messages using narrative framing and gain-loss framing on supportive behavioral intentions toward the company's environmental CSR activities?

Method

Participants

The participants living in the United States were recruited through an online survey firm, Qualtrics, which allows researchers to conduct their research with a targeted population of respondents, based on the research purpose. The total sample was 472 ($N = 472$). The sample was comprised of 234 female (49.58%) and 232 (49.15%) male participants. Six participants (1.27%) preferred not to answer for their genders. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 85 years ($M = 44.94$, $SD = 15.65$). The dominant ethnic group was White (75.64%, $n = 357$), followed by Black (10.81%, $n = 51$), Hispanic or Latino (5.72%, $n = 27$), Asian (5.08%, $n = 24$), and other races (e.g. Native American) (2.75%, $n = 13$). More than one-third of the participants had a two-year associate degree or some college with no degree (37.92%, $n = 178$), followed by those with a high school degree or less as the final education degree (23.27%, $n = 112$). Nearly 40% of the participants had a bachelor's degree (22.25%, $n = 105$) and a post-graduate degree (16.74%, $n = 79$).

Study design and stimulus Development

We conducted an online experimental study with a 2 (narrative: *narrative* or *non-narrative*) x 2 (framing: *gain* or *loss*) between-subjects design. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at a large university in the Southeastern United States. The Qualtrics panels were paid five dollars as compensation in the form of online points that can be used for online gift cards.

All independent variables were manipulated, and the participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups. The messages were presented in a Facebook message format because Facebook is one of the most utilized CSR communication channels (Oh and Ki, 2019). To control for any previous experience or attitude, a mock Facebook page was created with a fictitious company name—*The Smith & Young Food*. A freelance graphic designer who had more than a decade of professional experience was hired to create a realistic setting for the Facebook messages on the main page. To enhance ecological validity, a real environmental issue was incorporated into four different fictitious Facebook messages. The anti-straw movement or plastic-free campaigns initiated by a video of a sea turtle with a straw stuck in its nose were adopted in the four different Facebook messages in terms of different framing strategies such as narrative or non-narrative and gain or loss. Since statistical information can impact different perceptions of framing messages as well as message comprehension (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2020), we provided the same statistical evidence (e.g. A massive 8 million tons of plastic) across the messages (See Appendix).

Following framing theory literature and previous research instructions, we created *the narrative message* with a specific story format, especially the CEO's personal experience watching a video of a turtle with a plastic straw stuck in its nose and decision in an anti-straw campaign. *The non-narrative message* was developed with a corporate announcement about the campaign (offering paper straws) to

reduce plastic pollution without any specific story format. Each message was also manipulated by highlighting the positive outcomes (e.g. a cleaner environment and saving 2 million marine animals) from participation in the anti-straw campaign (*gain framing*) and the negative outcomes (e.g. polluted environment and failing to save 2 million marine animals) of not participating in the campaign (*loss framing*).

Procedure

A pretest ($N = 65$) was conducted to check the instrument for clarity and understandability, the relevancy of the instructions and questions, and the survey length. No issue or problem was raised for the pretest. Accuracy and believability of the fictitious scenarios were also checked, and respondents reported that the scenarios were accurate ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.52$) and believable ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.77$) based on a seven-point semantic differential scale, ranging from inaccurate or unbelievable (1) to accurate or believable (7).

The main survey ($N = 472$) [2] was then conducted. To ensure the data quality, the participants who failed to spend sufficient time (minimum time: 8 min) or spent an extremely too long time (more than 60 min) were automatically excluded by the Qualtrics system. The participants' attention was also checked by a question in the questionnaire, and all participants chose the correct answer (100%) in both pre- and main tests. The participants were given a consent form and agreed to voluntarily participate in the study. They were then randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. After the random assignment, the participants provided answers for main variables (CSR associations and supportive behavioral intentions) and demographic information. Participants were debriefed that the company name, stories, and the Facebook page used in the study were fictitious and had been created only for the purposes of the study.

Measures

To measure the main variables, we adopted existing measurement items from previous research. All items except demographics-related items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). CSR associations was measured with five items ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.27$, $\alpha = 0.92$, e.g. This is a socially responsible company) adopted from Brown and Dacin (1997). Supportive behavioral intentions were measured by two different behavioral intentions such as supportive communication behaviors and advocacy behavioral intentions. Since this study was designed with a Facebook message, supportive communication behaviors were measured in the context of social media (Facebook) with four items ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.93$, $\alpha = 0.94$, e.g. I would like to post a positive comment on the message in Facebook) adopted from Chon and Park (2020). Advocacy behavioral intentions were measured with five items ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.89$, $\alpha = 0.92$, e.g. I'd like to attend a March or rally related to the plastics pollution campaign) adopted from McKeever *et al.* (2019).

Results

Manipulation Checks

The manipulations were successful. We conducted independent samples *t*-tests to check the manipulations for both narrative or non-narrative and gain or loss framing through experimental conditions. Regarding the narrative message, participants who read a narrative message were more likely to perceive the message as the CEO's personal experience and motivation were stressed to make a

decision regarding the anti-straw campaign than as a corporate announcement about the campaign, $t(470) = 3.61, p < 0.001$ ($M_{\text{narrative}} = 6.00, SD_{\text{narrative}} = 1.34, M_{\text{non-narrative}} = 5.50, SD_{\text{non-narrative}} = 1.63$). For the manipulation of gain or loss framing, the t -test result showed that participants who read a loss-framing message were more likely to perceive the message as negative outcomes (e.g. polluted environment and failing to save 2 million marine animals) of not participating in the campaign than as positive outcomes (e.g. a cleaner environment and saving 2 million marine animals) highlighted by the anti-straw campaign, $t(470) = -4.22, p < 0.001$ ($M_{\text{gain}} = 5.10, SD_{\text{gain}} = 1.83, M_{\text{loss}} = 5.75, SD_{\text{loss}} = 1.52$).

Hypothesis Testing

For H1 (effect of narrative framing on the CSR associations) and RQ1 (moderating effect of gain-loss framing on the CSR associations), we conducted a two-way ANOVA, which revealed a significant main effect of narrative framing on CSR associations, $F(1, 468) = 6.39, p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.08$. Participants who read the narrative message ($M = 5.68, SD = 1.25$) were more likely to positively evaluate the company with CSR activity than those who read the non-narrative message (corporate message) ($M = 5.45, SD = 1.28$). Thus, H1 was supported. However, there were no main effects of gain-loss framing, $F(1, 468) = 0.45, p = 0.50$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$, or interaction effect of narrative and gain-loss framing $F(1, 468) = 0.84, p = 0.36$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$, on the CSR associations. Thus, there was no moderating effect of the gain-loss framing for the effect of narrative framing on the CSR association.

To test H2 (effect of narrative framing on supportive behaviors) and RQ2 (moderating effect of gain-loss framing on supportive behaviors), we ran a MANOVA with two dependent variables (supportive communication behaviors and advocacy behavioral intentions). For multiple dependent variables, a MANOVA has an advantage of the protection against inflated Type 1 errors caused by conducting multiple ANOVAs independently (Hair *et al.*, 2010). A MANOVA analysis revealed that there was a significant effect on the combined levels of supportive behavioral intentions for the narrative framing, Wilk's $\lambda = 0.980, F(2, 467) = 4.81, p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$, and the gain-loss framing, Wilk's $\lambda = 0.980, F(2, 467) = 5.11, p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$. However, there was no significant multivariate effect of the interaction factor, Wilk's $\lambda = 0.999, F(2, 467) = 0.13, p = 0.88$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$.

Regarding the univariate effect, there was the main effect of narrative framing only. The result showed that participants who read the narrative framing were more likely to support the company's social media post, $M = 4.87, SD = 1.91$, and advocate for its CSR activity, $M = 4.45, SD = 1.81$, than those who read the non-narrative message, $M = 4.45, SD = 1.93$ (supportive communication behaviors online) and $M = 3.91, SD = 1.93$ (advocacy behavior). The effects of the narrative framing were statistically significant for supportive communication behaviors, $F(1, 468) = 4.95, p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$, and advocacy behavioral intentions, $F(1, 468) = 9.62, p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$. Thus, H2 was supported. Regarding RQ2, however, gain-loss framing did not have a main effect for supportive communication behaviors, $F(1, 468) = 3.61, p = 0.06$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$, and advocacy behavioral intention, $F(1, 468) = 0.11, p = 0.74$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$. In addition, there was no significant result of the interaction factor (narrative*loss framing) for supportive communication behaviors, $F(1, 468) = 0.26, p = 0.61$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$, and advocacy behavioral intentions, $F(1, 468) = 0.12, p = 0.73$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$.

To answer RQ3 (the mediation of CSR associations), we conducted a path analysis using AMOS 25 program. We ran a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure ($N = 2,000$) with 95% confidence intervals in

the path analysis to robustly validate the mediation effect of CSR association between CSR communication factors and supportive behavioral intentions. Prior to the path analysis, two categorical variables from experimental conditions, narrative framing (narrative = 1, non-narrative = 0) and gain-loss framing (loss = 1, gain = 0), were recoded as dichotomous variables in the path model. The path model achieved an acceptable model fit, $\chi^2 = 2.46$, $df = 1$, $\chi^2/df = 2.46$, $p = 0.12$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.06, 90% CI [0.00, 0.15], PCLOSE = 0.32, and SRMR = 0.02. These model fit indices met all of the joint criteria established by Hair *et al.* (2010).

In the path model, the CSR associations mediated the effect of narrative framing, not gain-loss framing, on supportive behavioral intentions only. Regarding the direct effects, narrative framing had positive and direct effects on the CSR association, $\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$, 95% [0.00, 0.18], as well as advocacy behavioral intention, $\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$, 95% [0.01, 0.17]. Loss framing had negative and direct effect on supportive communication behaviors, $\beta = -0.11$, $p < 0.01$, 95% [-0.18, -0.04]. The CSR association was positively and directly related to both supportive behavioral intentions—supportive communication behaviors, $\beta = 0.60$, $p < 0.01$, 95% [0.53, 0.67], and advocacy behavioral intention, $\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$, 95% [0.49, 0.62]. However, the narrative framing was not directly associated with supportive communication behaviors, $\beta = 0.05$, $p = 0.21$, 95% [-0.02, 0.12]. The loss framing factor did not have any significant effect on the CSR association, $\beta = 0.03$, $p = 0.51$, 95% [-0.06, 0.12], or advocacy behavioral intention, $\beta = -0.00$, $p = 0.94$, 95% [-0.08, 0.07].

Through the CSR association, there were the significant indirect effects of narrative framing on supportive communication behaviors, $\beta = 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, 95% [0.00, 0.11], and advocacy behavioral intention, $\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$, 95% [0.00, 0.10]. Therefore, the CSR association fully mediated the effect of narrative framing on supportive communication behaviors and partially mediated the effect of narrative framing on behavioral intention toward advocacy. However, the CSR association did not mediate the effect of gain-loss framing on any supportive behavioral intentions (See Figure 1).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to shed light on how effective environmental CSR communication can be achieved through persuasive communication strategies using message framing. This study examined how narrative and gain-loss message framing can elicit the public's CSR association of a company involved in environmental CSR activity and, in turn, lead to their positive behavioral outcomes regarding the company and the environmental issue. The findings showed that environmental CSR communication using narrative framing messages is most effective in creating strong CSR associations between a company and the environmental CSR domain and sharing the company's CSR information on supportive communication and advocating for the environmental campaign. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that the effects of narrative framing would not be influenced by the other framing (gain-loss) factor, as this study did not find any moderating effects of gain-loss framing on the CSR associations and supportive behavioral intentions. This study also found a negative effect of loss framing of environmental CSR messages on supportive communication behaviors.

The direct effects of narrative framing messages on the CSR associations and advocating behavioral intentions corroborate empirical findings of previous research in different CSR contexts. Previous studies have demonstrated that narratives, compared to non-narratives, are more persuasive because of the enhancement of message engagement. In other words, narrative information is easier to retrieve and/or

code in memory than non-narrative type information (e.g. Kim and Nan, 2019). The corporate associations are “the link between the company and attributes stored in a person's memory” (Einwiller, 2013, p. 293). In this regard, the finding in this study indicates that using narrative framing messages in the environmental CSR communication is likely to induce strong links between a company and the environmental CSR activity in the public's memories, resulting in evaluating the company as more environmentally responsible. The direct effect of narrative framing on advocating behavioral intentions shows how publics who receive narrative messages are more likely than those who read non-narrative messages to engage in pro-environmental behaviors by participating in the relevant campaigns and influencing others, including legislators, toward the pro-environmental policy.

These results can be explained by the exemplification theory that leads narratives to evoke specific heuristics, including *the representativeness heuristic* and *the availability heuristic*, leading to enhancing cognitive involvement in the message (Bakker *et al.*, 2019; Kahneman, 2001). Both heuristics account for how publics evaluate the frequency and magnitude of events described by the narrative message. Specifically, publics estimate a frequency or probability of a situation based on similarity with a schema or other preexisting knowledge (*representativeness heuristic*) as well as instances or associations that come to mind (*availability heuristic*) (Zillmann, 2006). In other words, participants who read the narrative message were likely to perceive the environmental issue (plastic pollution) as more relevant and important in terms of frequency and magnitude than actual situations, leading to increasing the CSR associations of the company involved with the CSR activity related to the environmental issue.

Furthermore, transportation theory could be a plausible explanation for the direct effect of narrative framing on supportive behavioral intentions. According to transportation theory, *transportation* refers to a state in which “the narrative readers leave their reality behind and immerse into the narrative world to experience the storyline through the character's perspective” (Liu and Yang, 2020, p. 1679). For this reason, publics who were transported by narrative messages are likely to change their behaviors as described in the narratives because the transported readers are more likely to feel a strong connection with the story characters and tolerate the persuasive content but less likely to disbelieve or counterargue the narrative messages (Green and Brock, 2000; Slater and Rouner, 2002). The result for the direct effect of narrative framing on advocacy behavioral intentions, not supportive communication behaviors by information-sharing and disseminating through social media, could be because the participants may have been transported by the CEO's narrative message specifically asking for participation in the anti-straw campaign and increased attention to the plastic pollution issue.

More importantly, this study demonstrated that the CSR association strongly mediated the effects of narrative framing on both supportive communication and advocating behaviors. This study found a full mediation effect of the CSR association between the narrative message framing on supportive communication behaviors and a partial mediation effect of the CSR association for advocating for the environmental issue (plastic pollution). The findings imply the importance of the CSR association to maximize the behavioral outcomes of narrative framing messages by obtaining the public's supportive behaviors for the company's environmental CSR activity. Also, the different mediation effects of the CSR association show that direct effects of narrative framing could be different in terms of different types of behavioral outcomes. As the narrative message directly asked about advocating behavioral intentions in the experimental conditions, the narrative framing effects could be stronger in generating behavioral outcomes closely related to the information described in the narratives. Thus, the mediation effects of

the CSR association elucidate why the relative persuasiveness of narrative and non-narrative messages have been found to be inconclusive in previous research.

Of note, while there was no direct or moderating effect of gain-loss framing for the CSR association and supportive behavioral intentions in this study, there was a direct and negative effect of loss framing on supportive communication behaviors in the path model. This finding indicates that focusing on positive outcomes (gain framing) rather than negative results (loss framing) may increase public support online in the environmental CSR communication context when other factors, including message format and public evaluations of the company's CSR, are controlled. In addition, the finding about the limited effect of gain-loss framed message on supportive communication behaviors indicates that the presentation only of gains or losses cannot account effectively for advocacy behavioral decisions. This study illuminates how the influence of a particular frame on supportive behaviors for a socially responsible company and an environmental issue can be varied by the different types of the supportive behaviors (i.e. communicative support and advocating behaviors). However, more research should be conducted to clarify the effect of gain-loss framing messages in environmental CSR communication by applying other environmental issues (e.g. deforestation and energy conservation).

Implications

This study adds to the existing body of knowledge on persuasive communication theories, especially narrative transportation theory and exemplification theory, in terms of the environmental CSR context. The majority of studies on transportation theory and exemplification theory have been applied in the design of effective health messages for attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Bigsby *et al.*, 2019; Boukes and LaMarre, 2021). Moreover, scholars have suggested extending the transportation and exemplification theories by combining them with other theoretical approaches and message features (e.g. gain- and loss-framing from prospect theory) (Bigsby *et al.*, 2019). By extending persuasive communication theories to the environmental CSR context, this study illuminates how and why these framing strategies, especially narrative framing messages, spawn positive outcomes such as evaluating companies positively and as socially responsible and supporting the companies' environmental CSR activity and the environmental issue.

More importantly, by demonstrating the mediation effect of CSR associations in relation to the direct and indirect effectiveness of CSR communication on positive behavioral outcomes, this study provides empirical evidence delineating the underlying mechanisms of the effects of transportation and exemplification theories in narrative framing messages. When a company's environmental CSR narrative messages include specific environmental cases that are vivid, relatable, and transformative experiences, the publics who read them are likely to develop consistent beliefs with the message they read (by evaluating the company in terms of the CSR work) and, furthermore, engage in supportive behaviors for a socially responsible company and an environmental issue. Thus, this study highlights the importance of a company's environmental CSR communication efforts using the right message format (narrative style of corporate CSR message) to increase its persuasive sequence from CSR evaluation to supportive behaviors, contributing to theoretical development in the research of environmental CSR communication.

In addition, this study provides a theoretical foundation for how environmental CSR messages should be used effectively in a company's communication channels (e.g. social media). Previous research has suggested that the companies greatly utilize social media as an effective way to directly communicate

such CSR strategy focusing on their sustainability activities in order to obtain public support (e.g. Liu *et al.*, 2018; Oh and Ki, 2019). However, there has been scant scholarly attention to how different environmental CSR messages not only influence public support in the context of the company's communication channel (social media) but also generate public advocacy for the company's sustainable activities.

This study suggests that the development of message contents which describe desirable behaviors would be more important than the mere presence of narrative style of corporate CSR message to influence publics' behaviors that are critical to supporting the company's CSR activity and advocacy efforts for the environmental issue. To draw the publics into the corporate CSR message, for instance, the campaign manager may want to deliver a narrative message that describes a specific representation of larger environmental issues resembling real-life experiences and that contains statistics and factual information, as recommended by previous studies. However, it would be a better strategy to design a campaign message that emphasizes how the publics' sustainable efforts can positively change environmental issues and generate specific outcomes, rather than focusing on statistics and factual information about the environmental issue.

Practically, this study can assist communication managers in developing a more effective environmental CSR communication strategy, disclosing the company's voluntary environmental performance that increases publics' attention and positive perception as well as support for the company's CSR activity and their engagement in the environmental issues. Companies have been challenged by consideration and implementation of their environmental CSR work that causes their publics to heed the importance, increase concern for the environment and sustainability, and engage in the environmental issues (Shah *et al.*, 2021). Companies can build an environmentally responsible image and obtain positive behavioral outcomes from their publics, including consumers' loyalty and purchase intention, if they implement environmentally friendly business practices. However, what and how companies communicate their environmental CSR remains obscure. Moreover, publics could perceive some voluntary environmental performance disclosure as *greenwash*—intention to deflect attention from a company's environmentally unfriendly activities—rather than meaningful actions (Kim and Lyon, 2011). Therefore, disclosing environmental CSR performance through narrative messages could be an option to reduce negative outcomes as the narrative framing resulted in the enhanced CSR associations in this study.

The strong effects of CSR association on supportive behavioral intentions indicate that communication managers should pay more attention to how they can create strong associations between their companies and the CSR domain first if they want to increase the support of different types of publics through communication behaviors as well as advocacy behaviors for their pro-environmental CSR campaign. This study substantiates “how consumers indeed respond strongly to information about firms' sustainability orientations and strategies” (Choi and Ng, 2011, p. 280). Thus, this study suggests that the importance of environmental sustainability information has a significant impact on the evaluation of the company and its publics' behaviors toward the company.

Moreover, this study suggests that publics' supportive behaviors for a company's environmental CSR activity and the environmental issue depends on the CSR association. In this regard, communication managers should understand their target publics' evaluation or perception of the company's CSR performance as a crucial factor for effective environmental CSR communication. More importantly,

environmental CSR campaign managers should first formalize the company's environmental responsiveness by clearly establishing policies and practicing CSR performance that could result in a strong CSR association before asking their target publics to engage in pro-environmental activities.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has its limitations. First, this study focused on one environmental issue (plastic pollution) that has been prevalent in organizations' campaign activities. It is possible that participants' prior awareness or attitudes toward this environmental issue might have affected the findings. Previous studies have indicated that awareness of the CSR initiative can help consumers easily understand and readily accept the CSR communication message as well as influence their proactive support (Moreno and Kang, 2020). Future research should include different environmental CSR initiatives with different levels of awareness or control for the awareness of CSR initiatives to provide more accurate outcomes of persuasive messages.

A qualitative approach to the effectiveness of environmental CSR communication could lead this study to find more meaningful results. Using a qualitative research method may help researchers understand in more detail why messages are more or less effective in the context of environmental CSR. For instance, qualitative research could provide an opportunity to study the complexities underlying the specific process of why narrative messages have a persuasive effect (Clune and O'Dwyer, 2020). Liu and Yang (2020) suggested that the length of narrative messages evokes transportation effects differently for health-risky behavioral intentions, as lengthier narratives could be more effectively transported to consumers than shorter narratives. Future research should consider including findings of qualitative research such as contextual analysis and focus group interviews to shed light on how different framing messages should be designed and tested in terms of different environmental CSR issues.

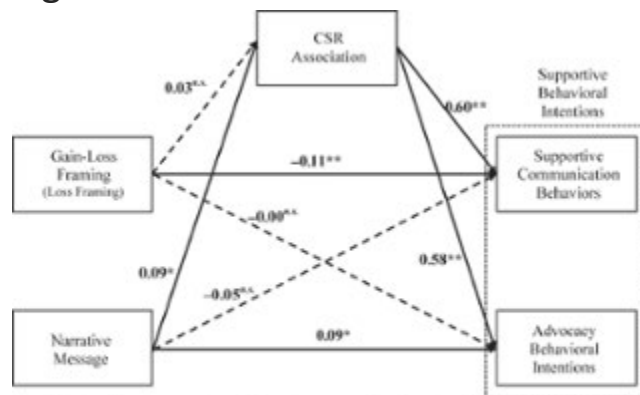
Lastly, this study did not consider other factors that could influence the framing effects and message persuasiveness. Nabi *et al.* (2020) emphasized examining the affective dimension of framing and its impact on persuasion by mediating the effects of gain-loss framing on persuasion. Also, Kim and Nan (2019) suggested considering temporal factors that could moderate the effectiveness of narrative messages. Future research is suggested to explore how these factors can moderate and mediate the framing effects in the environmental CSR context.

Conclusion

This study explored the effects of persuasive message strategies— i.e. narrative and gain-loss framing—on publics' CSR association with a company involved in environmental CSR activity and on their positive behavioral outcomes with regard to the company and the environmental issue. The findings indicate that the publics who receive a corporate environmental CSR communication using narrative framing messages are likely to not only develop strong CSR associations between the company and the environmental domain but also to share the company's CSR information in supportive communication and advocate for the environmental campaign. The findings also reveal that environmental messages focusing on what will be lost are less likely to obtain supportive communication behaviors from publics. These results contribute to the theoretical development of environmental CSR communication by extending and testing the persuasive communication theories (i.e. narrative transportation theory and exemplification theory) in the environmental context of CSR communication. The results also contribute to enhancing the environmental CSR communication practices that highlight the narrative message of a

company by entailing specific environmental cases and the positive impacts of publics' engagement in the environmental issue. Furthermore, the results of this study can be applied so as to promote companies' proactive environmentally-friendly policies or regulations and to obtain their publics' support for the policies or regulations.

Figures



Note(s): Narrative message (narrative: 1, non-narrative: 0) and gain-loss framing (loss = 1, gain = 0) were dummy coded. Model fit indices: $\chi^2(1, N = 472) = 2.46, p = 0.12, \chi^2/df = 2.46, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.02, RMSEA = 0.06$ 90% CI [0.00, 0.15], PCLOSE = 0.32. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, n.s.: nonsignificant

Figure 1 Path diagram of mediation analysis through bootstrapping ($N = 2,000$)

Notes

1. Kahneman (2001) specifically explained that the properties of alternative options are evaluated as advantages (gain) or disadvantages (loss) relative to the current situation and that the disadvantages (loss) of the alternatives loom larger than their advantages (gain) “because the reference point is usually the status quo” (p. 705). Thus, prospect theory provides a predictive account describing how people respond to gain- and loss-framed information.
2. The sample size was estimated based on an *a priori* power analysis using G-power software. The power analysis suggested 400 participants as the minimum total sample size to achieve effect size (f) = 0.30, type I error rate = 0.05, and statistical power = 0.80.

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