

Less can be more. How the communication of minor CSR activities undermines the effectiveness of a major CSR initiative

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ABSTRACT

Organizations often adopt a ‘more is better’ approach to CSR communication, frequently sharing a wide array of initiatives – including relatively minor activities – with stakeholders. However, it remains unclear whether combining major CSR initiatives with minor efforts improves or weakens stakeholders’ overall evaluations of the company’s reputation. Drawing on impression formation mechanisms, this study examines whether stakeholders mentally aggregate CSR activities or average their perceived impact. We conducted two online experiments using scenarios that combined one major CSR initiative with additional minor or moderate activities. The results suggest that combining major and moderate CSR activities can lead to a more positive overall perception. However, the principle of ‘less is more’ also applies: communicating minor activities can dilute the impact of a major initiative and lead to a less favorable impression. Additionally, the study finds that stakeholders often interpret minor CSR activities as attempts to persuade, triggering reactance, and as extrinsically motivated, profit-driven actions, leading to CSR skepticism. This research highlights the importance of selective and strategic CSR messaging to strengthen reputational outcomes while minimizing potential backlash. It suggests that organizations should communicate major and moderate CSR initiatives to enhance their reputation but exercise caution when promoting minor activities.

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To meet the growing expectations of stakeholders regarding social responsibility, organizations are increasingly investing in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Awa, Etim, and Ogbonda 2024; Lin 2024). Being perceived as socially responsible brings numerous benefits, such as enhanced reputation, increased trust, improved purchase intentions, and positive word-of-mouth (e.g., Bianchi, Bruno, and Sarabia-Sanchez 2019; Busch and Friede 2018; Gangadharbatla, Vardeman, and Quichocho 2020; Latif, Pérez, and Sahibzada 2020; Parray, Iqbal, and Mushtaq 2024; Santini et al. 2021). However, organizations face challenges in selecting which CSR activities to prioritize, as stakeholders often perceive some initiatives as more impactful than others. For example, stakeholders may

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view large-scale commitments like achieving carbon neutrality by 2030 as highly significant, while smaller actions like planting a few trees may seem less impactful.

Organizations often communicate a mix of major and minor CSR activities. For example, a hotel chain may highlight its shift to renewable energy sources alongside smaller actions like lighting candles for Earth Hour (Oetker Collection 2024). Similarly, a company may emphasize its commitment to renewable energy while commemorating the planting of an orange tree (LUX Connect 2024). In these cases, it is evident that major and minor initiatives differ significantly in perceived impact, raising the question: How does communicating these varied initiatives together affect stakeholder perceptions of the organization?

To address this gap, we draw on two impression formation mechanisms – adding and averaging – that explain how people integrate information of differing strength when forming evaluations (Anderson 1965; Obermaier and Koch 2024; Rosnow 1970; Weaver, Hock, and Garcia 2016). According to the adding mechanism, each piece of information adds positively to an overall evaluation. In contrast, the averaging mechanism suggests that weaker information can dilute stronger cues, thereby lowering overall impressions. While these models have been well-established in psychology and communication science, they have not yet been systematically applied to the evaluation of multi-initiative CSR communication. This lack of theoretical application leaves open how stakeholders process mixed-strength CSR messages and what cognitive mechanisms underlie these evaluations. In this context, we examine how different combinations of CSR initiatives influence key stakeholder responses: perceived persuasive intent, psychological reactance, perceived extrinsic (profit-driven) motives, CSR skepticism, and ultimately corporate reputation.

This leads to our central research question: How does the joint communication of major and minor CSR initiatives affect stakeholder evaluations of a company's reputation? To answer this, we explore whether stakeholders integrate CSR signals via an adding or averaging mechanism and test a mediation model that sheds light on the underlying psychological processes. To this end, we conducted two online experiments. Study 1 takes an exploratory approach, examining how the presence of moderate or minor CSR activities affects stakeholder perceptions when paired with a major initiative. The finding that minor activities dilute rather than enhance reputation prompted a deeper theoretical investigation. Study 2 builds on these initial results, introducing an additional theoretical framework to explain the underlying mechanisms.

Therefore, our study contributes to CSR communication research by clarifying the effects of multi-initiative messaging and uncovering two distinct yet simultaneous cognitive mechanisms driving stakeholder responses. Practically, the findings inform how organizations can more strategically communicate CSR activities to enhance reputational benefits while avoiding the unintended consequence of undermining strong initiatives through ill-considered bundling.

CSR activities of different strength

Despite research on CSR since the 1950s, a universally accepted definition of the concept remains elusive (Ihlen, Bartlett, and May 2011; Sheehy 2015). However, Sarkar and Searcy (2016) demonstrate through a quantitative analysis of 110 different CSR definitions

spanning from 1953 to 2014 that many authors emphasize similar dimensions. They propose a comprehensive definition of the concept as follows: 'CSR implies that firms must primarily assume their core economic responsibility and voluntarily surpass legal minimums to ensure ethical conduct in all activities. Additionally, firms should consider the impact of their actions on stakeholders in society while contributing to global sustainability' (1433). When organizations engage in CSR, they often voluntarily communicate their involvement, aiming to bolster their reputation, foster trust, and increase purchase intentions (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004; Bianchi, Bruno, and Sarabia-Sanchez 2019; Busch and Friede 2018; Latif, Pérez, and Sahibzada 2020; Parray, Iqbal, and Mushtaq 2024; Santini et al. 2021). However, this communication poses a complex challenge Coombs and Holladay (2011); Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010); Kim and Ferguson (2018). Organizations grapple with what Coombs and Holladay (2011, 110) term the 'CSR promotional communication dilemma', wherein stakeholders demand CSR information but view excessive communication with skepticism.

This dilemma is particularly acute when organizations have multiple CSR activities and must decide whether to communicate them all. The classification of an activity as minor or major depends on the subjective perception of stakeholders and on the context. Similar to arguments, the perception of minor and major activities varies in terms of their extent and the desirability of positive consequences (Hoeken, Hornikx, and Linders 2020; Petty, Wegener, and Wyer 1991). This nuanced categorization is inherently context dependent. For example, a financial contribution of \$200 might be seen as negligible if it comes from a large corporation, but the same amount donated by a school class might be considered as a significant commitment (see discussions by Blombäck, Wigren, and Ketola 2009; Tarabashkina, Tarabashkina, and Quester 2020). In light of these considerations, major CSR activities are defined as substantial efforts that require significant resources relative to the company size and are perceived to have a strong impact on communities or the environment. Conversely, minor initiatives are characterized by smaller-scale CSR actions that require fewer resources relative to the size of the company, resulting in a perceived lesser impact on communities or the environment. Meanwhile, moderate activities fall between major and minor initiatives in terms of their scope and impact.

Effects of the mutual presentation of minor, moderate, and major CSR activities

To understand how stakeholders respond to CSR communication, it is essential to examine how they interpret and evaluate both the organization and its efforts. Two particularly relevant constructs in this context are the perception of the organization as socially engaged and its reputation, as these serve as key precursors to behavioral outcomes such as positive word-of-mouth, brand engagement, loyalty, and purchase intentions (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004; Bianchi, Bruno, and Sarabia-Sanchez 2019; Busch and Friede 2018; Latif, Pérez, and Sahibzada 2020; Parray, Iqbal, and Mushtaq 2024; Santini et al. 2021). Focusing on these variables allows us to capture both the immediate cognitive evaluation of CSR messages and their broader reputational effects.

We define the perception of social engagement as stakeholders' beliefs about the organization's meaningful contributions to social and environmental causes (Viererbl and Koch 2022). This construct reflects whether a company is seen as genuinely

committed to its CSR efforts. In contrast, corporate reputation is conceptualized more broadly in this study, following the multidimensional framework developed by Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever (2000). This approach defines reputation as the collective perception stakeholders have of a company based on its past actions and anticipated future behavior (Fombrun 1996; Pires and Trez 2018). It reflects the overall impression the company makes – particularly in comparison to competitors – and captures how appealing, trustworthy, and responsible it appears to different stakeholder groups.

When individuals perceive CSR activities of different strengths, two distinct interpretations emerge: they could mentally add them up (the more the better), or they could mentally average them (in which case less would be more, as weaker activities would dilute the effects of the stronger ones). The averaging mechanism has been observed in studies on the evaluation of product bundles (Troutman and Shanteau 1976; Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz 2012; Yadav 1994). For instance, Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz (2012) examined gift evaluations when receiving either a valuable gift alone or the valuable gift along with a low-cost additional item. The results showed that participants rated the valuable product without the low-cost extra item more favorably than the same product with the additional low-cost item. Individuals formed a mental average by considering the collective impact of the activities. But it has also been shown in impression formation (Anderson 1965; Rosnow 1970) and persuasive communication (Weaver, Hock, and Garcia 2016).

While these mechanisms originate in general cognitive and consumer psychology, they are highly relevant to CSR communication, which functions as a form of impression management (Hamza, Mezgani, and Jarboui 2023; Tata and Prasad 2015). Stakeholders form judgments about an organization's social character by integrating various pieces of CSR information – much like they form impressions of individuals (Anderson 1965). Prior CSR research has shown that stakeholders may become skeptical when organizations over-communicate or include activities perceived as less credible (Connors, Anderson-MacDonald, and Thomson 2017; Dalal 2020; Rim and Kim 2016; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013; Teah, Sung, and Phau 2022).

This suggests that stakeholders do not evaluate CSR efforts in isolation but rather in relation to the organization's context and the other activities being communicated (Blombäck, Wigren, and Ketola 2009; Tarabashkina, Tarabashkina, and Quester 2020). When multiple initiatives are presented together, the relative strength of each can shape the overall evaluation. Minor CSR activities, in particular, may dilute the perceived sincerity or impact of stronger efforts, thereby triggering an averaging effect (Obermaier and Koch 2024). Thus, the logic of averaging from impression formation and consumer research is not only applicable but also highly meaningful in the CSR domain, where stakeholders integrate multiple cues to assess an organization's overall social engagement.

Based on this reasoning, we propose that the combined presentation of a major CSR activity with minor activities will result in a dilution effect, mirroring findings from the evaluation of product bundles and impression formation (Anderson 1965; Rosnow 1970; Rosnow and Arms 1968; Troutman and Shanteau 1976; Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz 2012; Yadav 1994). Accordingly, we hypothesize: The combined presentation of a major CSR activity with minor CSR activities will result in a decrease in the perception of an

organization as socially engaged (H1a) and a decrease in the organization's reputation (H1b).

In contrast to the dilution effect hypothesized for minor CSR activities, we propose that moderate CSR activities – when presented alongside major initiatives – may actually enhance stakeholder evaluations. This assumption is grounded in the 'more is better' heuristic and supported by impression formation research showing that moderately positive information can strengthen overall impressions when combined with strongly positive cues (Anderson 1965; Rosnow 1970; Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz 2012). In CSR communication, moderate activities may be seen as credible and sufficiently substantial to meaningfully complement major efforts, leading to an adding mechanism that differs conceptually from the averaging process.

The adding mechanism has been observed in various contexts, including forming impressions of individuals (Anderson 1965; Rosnow 1970), evaluating product bundles presented by salespeople (Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz 2012), and evaluating different pieces of evidence (Nori et al. 2012). It is based on the premise that people tend to mentally weigh and combine different aspects to form an overall attitude (Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz 2012). The basic idea is that individuals focus on each aspect separately and evaluate them independently. This approach is known as 'piecemeal' or 'analytic' processing (Mantel and Kardes 1999; Nisbett et al. 2001). Studies have shown that the more positive characteristics are presented, the more likely people are to form a favorable opinion of the subject (Anderson 1965; Weaver, Garcia, and Schwarz 2012). This phenomenon, referred to as the 'adding pattern', suggests that people incorporate each positive aspect into their overall judgment, leading to a more positive attitude (Troutman and Shanteau 1976). Previous research on the effects of one-sided argumentation has often relied on the assumption of this adding mechanism, following a 'the more the better' heuristic. This suggests that the more arguments presented, regardless of their strength, the more persuasive the message becomes, and that people are more convinced after being exposed to both weak and strong arguments simultaneously (Weaver, Hock, and Garcia 2016). Nori et al. (2012) examined the relationship between the probability of guilt and the value of the evidence and information presented. They found that participants linearly added up the value of the evidence when making guilt judgements. Applying these insights to CSR communication, we expect that presenting moderate CSR activities alongside major ones will result in a more positive overall impression. Therefore, we hypothesize: The combined presentation of a major CSR activity with moderate CSR activities will result in an increase in the perception of an organization as socially engaged (H2a) and in an increase in the organization's reputation (H2b).

Experiment 1: effects of the mutual presentation of minor, moderate, and major CSR activities

Method

Participants

Using G*Power (F -test, $\alpha = .05$, $f = .25$, $1 - \beta = .80$), we determined the initial sample size for the study to be 158 participants. To account for potential exclusions, we recruited a total of 261 individuals through social media. We conducted tests to measure the time required

to read the stimulus and then excluded participants who spent less than 7 seconds (for one activity) or 16 seconds (for five activities) looking at the stimuli. The final sample included 201 participants, 59% of whom identified as female. The mean age of the participants was 26.59 years ($SD = 6.76$).

Design and Stimulus

We used a 3×1 between-subjects design for this study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: (I) a single major CSR initiative, (II) a combination of a major CSR initiative and four minor CSR initiatives, or (III) a combination of a major CSR initiative and four moderate CSR initiatives.

Participants were first presented with a brief description of the fictional organization, FLASKA. We explained that FLASKA is a multinational furniture company with multiple locations in Europe, offering home furnishings such as furniture, kitchens, and decorative items. We then presented a LinkedIn post from the organization that communicated various CSR initiatives (depending on the specific condition).

A pre-test was conducted to identify major, minor, and moderate CSR activities. We recruited 33 individuals (64% female, mean age 26.67, $SD = 6.30$) through social media and asked them to imagine that a large organization would undertake some of the initiatives listed below to contribute to social engagement. We deliberately chose a large organization because stakeholders have higher expectations of CSR from such organizations (Green and Pelozo 2014; Tarabashkina, Tarabashkina, and Quester 2020). We presented the participants with 17 CSR activities of varying strength and asked them to indicate the perceived effectiveness of each activity for social issues such as education, support for local sports clubs, and improving working conditions for employees as typical areas of CSR engagement (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). Based on the average scores, we selected four minor activities with scores ranging from 1.61 to 1.94, four moderate activities with scores ranging from 3.39 to 3.64, and one major activity with a score of 4.79 (Table 1). Our criterion was that there should be a minimum difference of one point on the scale between the minor, moderate, and major activities.

The major CSR activity was as follows: 'Since 2018, in collaboration with the organization EDUCATE, we have provided access to education for 840,000 children (MAJOR).' The moderate CSR initiatives included the following descriptions: "We offer a 25% discount on product purchases for charitable organizations (MOD1)," "Every year, we take on another sponsorship for a child in need (MOD2)," "We provide our employees with ethically produced company mobile phones (MOD3)," and "We conduct annual training sessions on diversity and inclusion for our employees (MOD4)." The minor CSR activities were outlined as follows: "We have installed a basketball hoop on the office premises (MIN1)," "We donated a soccer ball to a local sports club (MIN2)," "We provide our employees with complimentary bananas (MIN3)," and "We donated a desk to the teachers' lounge of a local school (MIN4)."

Measures. For the treatment check we measured the perceived importance of the CSR activities. Participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of each (perceived) CSR activity on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong).

To measure perceived environmental engagement, we used the scale developed by Viererbl and Koch (2022). Perceived environmental engagement was assessed using a five-point semantic differential scale with three pairs of adjectives in

Table 1. Pretest: the perceived strength of social CSR activities.

Activities	Strength	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
A company donates 10% of its annual profits to various social initiatives.	4.55	0.67
<i>Since 2018, in collaboration with the organization EDUCATE, a company has provided access to education for 840,000 children.</i>	4.79	0.49
A company is working with the SaveChildren organization to provide children with vaccination against polio (infantile paralysis). Since the collaboration, 940,000 children under the age of 5 have been fully vaccinated.	4.61	0.66
A company donates 1 million euros annually to the organization Kinderdorf e.V. to give children a new home.	4.45	0.71
<i>A company provides employees with ethically produced company mobile phones.</i>	3.45	1.03
A company gives its employees four days off a year to work on charitable projects (social days).	3.76	0.97
<i>Every year, a company takes on another sponsorship for a child in need.</i>	3.48	1.09
<i>A company offers a 25% discount on product purchases for charitable organizations.</i>	3.64	0.86
A company has wheelchair accessible offices.	3.88	0.96
One company offers employees the opportunity to work in a home office for up to 40% of the time in order to facilitate a better work-life balance.	3.76	1.94
<i>A company conducts annual training sessions on diversity and inclusion for their employees.</i>	3.39	1.03
<i>A company has installed a basketball hoop on the office premises.</i>	1.85	0.83
<i>A company has donated a soccer ball to a local sports club.</i>	1.61	0.97
A company has placed a small donation box for social causes in one of its offices.	2.36	1.19
<i>A company provides their employees with complimentary bananas.</i>	1.94	1.06
A company offers its employees ergonomic PC mice.	2.24	1.09
<i>A company has donated a desk to the teachers' lounge of a local school.</i>	1.73	0.91
A company hosts a team event every four years for a sense of community.	1.94	1.03

N = 33. Response scale from 1 (*weak*) to 5 (*strong*). Italics were selected for the main study.

response to the item: 'I believe FLASKA is...'. The adjective pairs were: 'not committed to environmental protection – committed to environmental protection', 'not engaged in environmental protection – engaged in environmental protection', 'not environmentally responsible – environmentally responsible' ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.04$, $\alpha = .94$).

We measured reputation using three dimensions of the Reputation Quotient (RQ) scale developed by Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever (2000): emotional appeal, vision and leadership, and social and environmental responsibility. Participants rated their agreement with each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The items related to emotional appeal were: 'I have a positive feeling about this company', 'I admire and respect the company', and 'I trust this company'. The dimension of vision and leadership was measured using the items: 'The company has excellent leadership', 'The company has a clear vision for its future', and 'The company identifies market opportunities and exploits them'. The dimension of social and environmental responsibility was measured using the following items: 'The company supports good causes', 'It is an environmentally conscious company', and 'The company maintains high standards in its treatment of people' ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.75$, $\alpha = .91$).

Treatment check. The results of the treatment check indicated that participants perceived the major CSR initiative as more substantial ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.77$) than both the moderate (MOD1: $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.13$; MOD2: $M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.17$; MOD3: $M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.09$; MOD4: $M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.20$) and minor activities (MIN1: $M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.12$, MIN2: $M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.09$, MIN3: $M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.08$, MIN4: $M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.08$), $F(8, 748) = 76.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .45$.

Results

A univariate ANOVA revealed significant differences in the perceived level of environmental engagement across the conditions, $F(2, 198) = 21.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$. Post hoc comparisons indicated significant differences among all three conditions, with $p < .001$ for all comparisons. When minor CSR activities were included alongside a major CSR initiative, there was a decrease in the perception of the company as socially engaged, $M = 2.91, SD = 1.14$, compared to when only the major activity was presented, $M = 3.33, SD = 0.79$, supporting H1a. Additionally, the inclusion of moderate CSR activities alongside the major CSR activity resulted in an increase in the perception of the company as socially engaged, $M = 3.95, SD = 0.84$, supporting H2a.

A second univariate ANOVA showed significant differences in the company's reputation across the conditions, $F(2, 198) = 29.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$. Post hoc comparisons indicated significant differences among all three conditions, with all p -values $< .001$. Consistent with our hypotheses, when minor CSR activities were included alongside a major CSR initiative, there was a decrease in the company's reputation, $M = 2.65, SD = 0.80$, compared to when only the major activity was presented, $M = 3.20, SD = 0.55$, providing support for H1b. Additionally, the inclusion of moderate CSR activities alongside the major CSR activity resulted in an increase in the perception of the company's reputation, $M = 3.51, SD = 0.61$, supporting H2b.

Discussion

The findings of Study 1 provide insight into the impact of communicating minor and moderate CSR activities alongside a major CSR initiative. Including moderate CSR activities alongside a major initiative led to a significant improvement in stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's social engagement and reputation compared to when only the major activity was presented. The findings provide support for the belief that 'the more the better' when it comes to CSR activities. If an organization is actively engaged in many significant CSR initiatives, it will benefit from communicating these activities. Such communication not only increases the positive perception of the organization's engagement but also contributes to a more favorable overall reputation.

However, the findings also indicate that when minor CSR activities were presented alongside a major CSR initiative, it led to a decrease in the perception of the organization as socially engaged, as well as a decrease in the organization's reputation, compared to when only the major activity was presented. Thus, the communication of minor CSR activities dilutes the positive effects of the major CSR initiative, as stakeholders form a less favorable overall perception of the organization's social engagement and reputation. Interestingly, this effect occurs despite the fact that these minor CSR activities are themselves positive. Objectively, one would expect the perception of an organization to be even more positive when it engages in additional activities alongside a major CSR initiative. In our study, if an organization not only provides access to education for 840,000 children, but also includes other initiatives such as donating soccer balls to local sports clubs or desks to local schools, these additional activities would further increase its social impact. These additional activities complement the main initiative, effectively adding value to the organization's overall CSR efforts. At the very least, incorporating these

additional activities should not have a detrimental impact. However, the study showed that people do not perceive it that way. Both the social engagement and reputation are perceived more negatively when the organization is involved in minor activities. So, it seems that 'less is more' in this context. But what causes this dilution effect? The reasons for this phenomenon are explored in the following study.

Why do minor CSR activities diminish the effects of a major CSR initiative?

Before presenting the second experiment, we introduce this theoretical section as a conceptual bridge between the two studies. Rather than serving as a post hoc interpretation of Study 1, it builds on the initial findings to deepen the theoretical framework and motivate the next set of hypotheses. We propose that two mechanisms could potentially contribute to this averaging effect: the recognition of persuasive intent and reactance, as well as the perception of extrinsic motives and subsequent CSR skepticism. In this section we provide a comprehensive discussion of these mechanisms, outline our assumptions, and propose corresponding hypotheses.

Persuasive intent and reactance

The 'Persuasion Knowledge Model' suggests that individuals acquire the ability to recognize and cope with persuasive attempts throughout their socialization process (Friestad and Wright 1994). Friestad and Wright (1994, 1) describe this persuasion knowledge as 'personal knowledge about persuasion agents' goals and tactics, and about how to skillfully cope with these'. This persuasion knowledge could be activated by the presentation of minor CSR activities as recipients might get suspicious. Tarabashkina, Tarabashkina, and Quester (2020) demonstrate that the percentage of an organization's profit invested in CSR purposes affects the perceived persuasive intent by recipients: smaller investments, compared to larger ones, amplify the perception of persuasive intent. Recipients infer that the organization aims to maximize benefits without making significant investments. This can be applied to the communication of small CSR initiatives, where recipients may infer that the organization aims to make profit out of the communication without making significant investments (Campbell 1995; Lunardo and Roux 2015; Tarabashkina, Tarabashkina, and Quester 2020). In other words, if stakeholders perceive an organization's CSR investment in relation to its potential gains (e.g., reputation, trust, etc.) as inappropriate, they may assume a persuasive intent on the part of the organization (Campbell 1995; Tarabashkina, Tarabashkina, and Quester 2020).

When a persuasive attempt is recognized, individuals have learned coping strategies to deal with it, typically characterized as defensive reactions (Campbell 1995; Friestad and Wright 1994). When individuals perceive persuasive intent, they perceive it as a threat to their own freedom (J. W. Brehm 1966). In response to this perceived restriction of personal freedom, individuals react aversively and seek to restore it (Wicklund 1974). This motivation is known as reactance, a 'motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination' (S. S. Brehm and Brehm 1981, 37). Several studies have already established a link between perceived persuasive intent and the emergence of reactance (Bachmann and Ingenhoff 2016; Koch and Zerback 2013; Viererbl and Koch 2022).

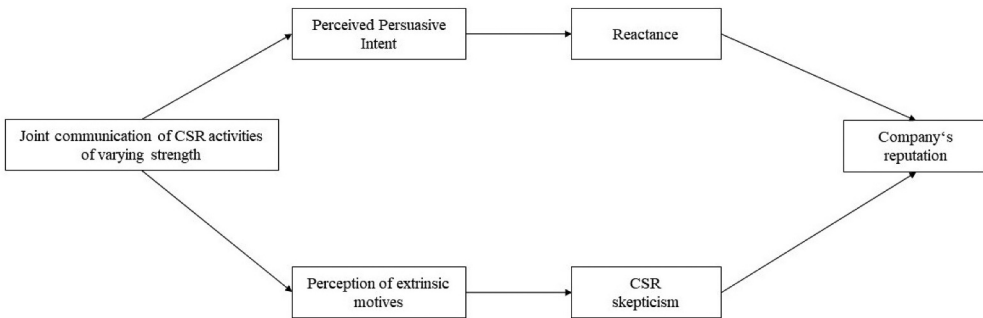


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Reactance, in turn, can give rise to behavioral and/or subjective effects (S. S. Brehm and Brehm 1981). Individuals may attempt to restore the threatened freedom through direct engagement in the threatened activity (S. S. Brehm and Brehm 1981). If direct restoration of freedom is not possible, individuals have the option to subjectively decrease the attractiveness of the imposed alternative. In the context of persuasive communication, these subjective effects manifest as negative perceptions of the communicated content or source (Meirick and Nisbett 2011). In the case of CSR communication, reactance can therefore have a negative impact on recipients' perceptions of an organization's social commitment (Viererbl and Koch 2022). Hence, we propose the following hypothesis (H3, Figure 1): The combined presentation of a major CSR activity with minor CSR activities will lead to a decrease in the perception of an organization as socially engaged mediated by the perception of persuasive intent, which in turn triggers reactance.

Attribution of extrinsic CSR motives and CSR skepticism

In addition to this mechanism, perceived extrinsic motives and the resulting CSR skepticism could also explain these effects. Individuals seek reasons for the behavior of others and attribute observed behavior to specific causes (Kelley and Michela 1980). They also use such motive attributions to explain the behavior of organizations (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006; Forehand and Grier 2003; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). When an organization engages in CSR, it can be attributed two types of motives: extrinsic or intrinsic (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Kim and Choi 2018; Romani, Grappi, and Bagozzi 2016). In the attribution of extrinsic motives, stakeholders assume that an organization is trying to increase its profits through CSR, while the attribution of intrinsic motives ascribes genuine concern for society to the organization (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Romani, Grappi, and Bagozzi 2016). As the actual CSR motives of organizations are often difficult to discern, individuals attempt to derive them from observable cues such as words or actions (Gilbert and Malone 1995). Minor CSR initiatives, which are perceived to have relatively low positive societal impact, could thus reinforce the impression of extrinsic motives (Tarabashkina, Tarabashkina, and Quester 2020).

The attribution of CSR motives is closely linked to stakeholders' skepticism towards an organization's CSR (Dalal 2020; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Rim and Kim 2016; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013; Teah, Sung, and Phau 2022). Skepticism, in general, refers

to a person's doubting attitude characterized by questioning and seeking evidence before accepting claims (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994; Forehand and Grier 2003). The emergence of CSR skepticism is related to the motives that stakeholders attribute to an organization regarding its CSR efforts (Ham and Kim 2020; Rim and Kim 2016; Rim, Park, and Song 2018; Teah, Sung, and Phau 2022). If they assume intrinsic motives behind the CSR activities, they would not question them (Romani, Grappi, and Bagozzi 2016; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). However, if they attribute extrinsic motives, they conclude that the organization has no genuine interest in taking social responsibility but is exploiting the popularity of CSR to capitalize on it (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006; Vlachos et al. 2009). In this case, stakeholders question and doubt the organization's CSR efforts (Romani, Grappi, and Bagozzi 2016; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013).

Finally, when stakeholders are skeptical of an organization's CSR communication, it can impair the effectiveness of communication campaigns (Dunn and Harness 2019; Kwon and Ahn 2021; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). It has also been shown that CSR skepticism has a negative impact on stakeholders' attitudes towards the organization (Connors, Anderson-MacDonald, and Thomson 2017; Kwon and Ahn 2021; Rim and Kim 2016). In this context, it is reasonable to assume that when stakeholders question and doubt an organization's CSR efforts, it has a negative effect on the perception of the organization as socially engaged. Hence, we assume (H4): The combined presentation of a major CSR activity with minor CSR activities will lead to a decrease in the perception of an organization as socially engaged mediated by the attribution of extrinsic motives, which in turn trigger CSR skepticism. Figure 1 shows our conceptual model for H3 and H4.

Experiment 2: exploring the mechanisms

Method

Participants

The sample size was initially determined as 158 participants using G*Power (F-test, $\alpha = .05$, $f = .25$, $1 - \beta = .80$). To accommodate possible exclusions, we recruited 239 individuals through social media. 38 participants who viewed the stimuli for a duration shorter than 7 or 16 seconds (for one and five activities, respectively) were excluded. The final sample consisted of 201 participants, with 60% being female and 1% identifying as 'diverse'. On average, participants were 26.95 years old ($SD = 6.59$).

Design and stimulus

In line with Study 1, a 3×1 between-subjects design was employed, with the participants randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: (I) receiving only one major CSR initiative, (II) receiving the combination of one major CSR initiative and four minor CSR initiatives, or (III) receiving the combination of one major CSR initiative and four moderate CSR initiatives.

The participants were initially presented with a brief description of the fictional organization, LOKI. We explained that it was a company with over 10,000 employees, offering outdoor equipment such as outdoor jackets, backpacks, and hiking shoes through its online store. Subsequently, we displayed a website of the company that

Table 2. Pretest: the perceived strength of environmental CSR activities.

Activities	Strength	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
A company donates 10% of its annual profits to various environmental initiatives.	4.48	0.71
A company has planted 2.5 million trees in Europe since 2018 in collaboration with the PLANT organization to actively contribute to climate conservation.	4.48	0.57
<i>A company has become carbon neutral. This means that they have reduced their emissions through energy-efficient measures and offset unavoidable emissions.</i>	4.67	0.60
A company donates 1 million euros annually to the organization OurEarth for the protection of endangered ecosystems.	4.24	0.71
A company has switched to 50% green power.	3.76	1.00
<i>A company uses sustainable packaging for 50% of their products.</i>	3.39	0.79
A company offers its customers the option of climate-neutral shipping.	3.70	0.92
<i>A company provides their employees with four days off each year for environmentally friendly work.</i>	3.39	1.14
<i>A company has equipped their offices with sustainable desks.</i>	3.12	0.99
A company provides its employees with free bicycles as needed.	3.97	1.02
A company uses only recycled paper.	3.64	0.90
<i>A company exclusively uses energy-saving light bulbs.</i>	3.58	0.94
<i>A company has installed a small insect house.</i>	2.12	1.08
A company added plants to the roof terrace of one of its offices.	2.67	0.99
<i>During a company event, a company has planted a sapling.</i>	1.88	0.96
A company did away with disposable cutlery at a corporate event.	2.82	1.13
A company replaced an old kettle in an office with a new, more energy-efficient one.	2.24	1.23
<i>A company purchases organic bananas for their offices.</i>	2.12	0.89
<i>A company has given each of their employees a seed packet to plant themselves.</i>	2.03	1.08

Note. $N = 33$. Response scale from 1 (*weak*) to 5 (*strong*). Italics were selected for the main study.

communicated varying levels of CSR initiatives related to environmental conservation, depending on the condition.

For this study, we utilized the same pretest as in Study 1 to identify major, minor, and moderate CSR activities (33 individuals recruited via social media, 64% female, average age 26.67, $SD = 6.30$). However, this time we conducted the pretest with CSR activities, focusing on environmental conservation (Table 2). We presented participants with a set of 19 CSR activities, each varying in strength, and asked them to rate the perceived effectiveness of each activity for their green engagement. Based on the mean ratings, we selected four minor activities ranging from 1.88 to 2.12, four moderate activities (mean ratings between 3.12 and 3.58), and one major activity (rated at 4.67).

The major CSR activity was as follows: 'We have become carbon neutral. This means that we have reduced our emissions through energy-efficient measures and offset unavoidable emissions (MAJOR)'. The moderate CSR initiatives included the following: 'We use sustainable packaging for 50% of our products (MOD1)', 'We provide our employees with four days off each year for environmentally friendly work (MOD2)', 'We exclusively use energy-saving light bulbs (MOD3)', and 'We have equipped our offices with sustainable desks (MOD4)'. The minor CSR activities were as follows: 'We have given each of our employees a seed packet to plant themselves (MIN1)', 'We purchase organic bananas for our offices (MIN2)', 'We have installed a small insect house (MIN3)', and 'During a company event, we planted a sapling (MIN4)'.

Measures

For the *treatment check* we measured how minor vs. major the CSR activities were perceived. Participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of each (perceived) CSR activity on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*weak*) to 5 (*strong*).

Consistent with the methodology used in Study 1, we used the scale developed by Viererbl and Koch (2022) to assess perceived *environmental engagement* ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.07$, $\alpha = .95$). A detailed description of the items used can be found in the Measures section of Study 1.

Also, in line with Study 1, we employed the reputation scale developed by Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever (2000) to assess participants' perception of *reputation*. Please refer to Study 1 for a detailed description of the items used ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.75$, $\alpha = .92$). To measure *perceived persuasive intent*, we used a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') with three items similar to those developed by Tutaj and van Reijmersdal (2012) as well as Viererbl and Koch (2022). The items were as follows: 'The aim of the post was to influence my opinion regarding the social engagement of Loki', 'The aim of the post was to persuade me of the social engagement of Loki', and 'The aim of this post was to make me believe that Loki is highly committed to social responsibility' ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.97$, $\alpha = .89$).

Reactance can be conceptualized as a construct comprising two dimensions: anger and negative cognitions (S. S. Brehm and Brehm 1981; Dillard and Shen 2005). Our measurement approach on a five-point Likert scale was similar to that used by van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) and Beckert et al. (2021). To measure anger, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements: 'The presentation of the post made me angry', 'I was annoyed by the way the post was presented', and 'I was upset by the way the post was written'. Negative cognitions were assessed using the following three items: 'I immediately wanted to contradict the core statements of the post', 'I questioned the statements of the post after reading it', and 'I had doubts about the message of the post'. These items were combined to create an index ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.95$, $\alpha = .89$).

Perceived extrinsic motives were also measured using a five-point Likert scale using the following items from Vlachos, Panagopoulos, and Rapp (2013): 'Loki engages in socially responsible initiatives to attract more customers', 'Loki only engages in socially responsible initiatives because it is pressured by competition', and 'Loki hopes to increase its profits through socially responsible initiatives' ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.85$, $\alpha = .74$).

To measure situational *CSR skepticism*, we also utilized a five-point Likert scale with four items from Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013): 'It is doubtful that Loki is a socially responsible company', 'It is uncertain whether Loki genuinely cares about improving societal well-being', 'It is questionable whether Loki adheres to high ethical standards', and 'It is dubious whether Loki truly acts in a socially responsible manner' ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.00$, $\alpha = .92$).

Treatment check

The treatment check confirmed that the major CSR initiative was perceived as stronger ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.01$) in comparison to both all moderate (MOD1: $M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.99$; MOD2: $M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.23$; MOD3: $M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.17$; MOD4: $M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.14$) and all minor activities (MIN1: $M = 1.83$, $SD = 1.12$, MIN2: $M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.23$, MIN3: $M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.31$, MIN4: $M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(8, 253.75) = 52.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .36$.

Results

A univariate ANOVA reveals significant differences in the perceived level of environmental engagement across the conditions, $F(2, 198) = 33.93, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26$. Post hoc tests indicate significant differences among all three conditions, all $p < .001$. As hypothesized, the inclusion of minor CSR activities alongside a major CSR activity led to a decrease in the perception of the company as socially engaged, $M = 2.72, SD = 1.10$, compared to when only the major activity was presented, $M = 3.63, SD = 0.82$, again providing support for H1a. Moreover, the inclusion of moderate CSR activities alongside the major CSR activity caused an increase in the perception of the company as socially engaged, $M = 4.03, SD = 0.87$, compared to when only the major activity was presented, $M = 3.63, SD = 0.82$, again providing support for H2a.

A subsequent univariate ANOVA demonstrates that the company's reputation also varies significantly across the conditions, $F(2, 198) = 54.60, p < .001, \eta^2 = .36$. Post hoc tests indicate significant differences among all three conditions, with all p-values $< .001$. Consistent with our assumptions, the inclusion of minor CSR activities alongside a major CSR activity resulted in a decrease in the company's reputation, $M = 2.61, SD = 0.73$, compared to when only the major activity was presented, $M = 3.32, SD = 0.48$, again providing support for H1b. Additionally, the inclusion of moderate CSR activities alongside the major CSR activity led to an increase in the perception of the company's reputation, $M = 3.70, SD = 0.61$, compared to when only the major activity was presented, $M = 3.32, SD = 0.48$, again supporting H2b.

To test hypotheses H3 and H4, we conducted a serial mediation analysis using 5,000 bootstrap samples (Figure 2). Reputation served as dependent variable. The independent variable was the experimental group. We used dummy coding and compared the averaging mechanism (consisting of one major CSR initiative and four minor CSR initiatives) against the adding mechanism (consisting of one major CSR initiative and four moderate CSR initiatives) to examine the differences between these two mechanisms.

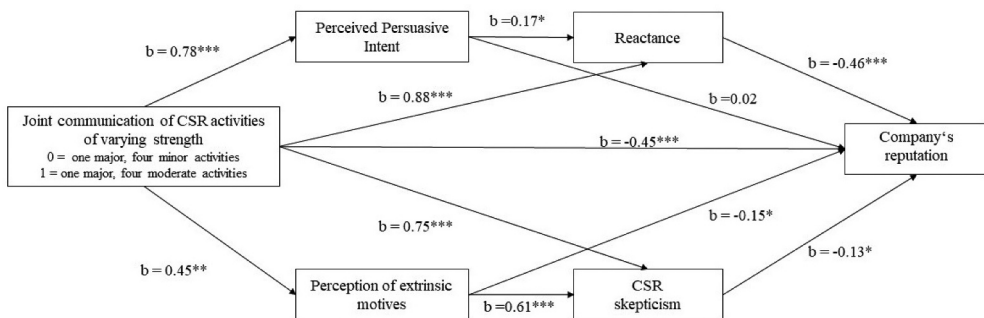


Figure 2. Mediation model. $N = 133$. PROCESS (Model 82), 5,000 Bootstrap-Samples. Scores show unstandardized path coefficients. Indirect Effect (Perceived Persuasive Intent): $b = 0.02$, BootSE = .04, 95% BCBCI [-.07, .10]; Indirect Effect (Reactance): $b = -0.41$, BootSE = .09, 95% BCBCI [-.58, -.24]; Indirect Effect (Perceived Persuasive Intent and Reactance): $b = -0.06$, BootSE = 0.03, 95% BCBCI [-.12, -.02]; Indirect Effect (Perception of extrinsic motives): $b = -0.07$, BootSE = .04, 95% BCBCI [-.15, -.01]; Indirect Effect (CSR skepticism): $b = -0.90$, BootSE = .05, 95% BCBCI [-.20, -.02]; Indirect Effect (Perception of extrinsic motives and CSR skepticism): $b = -0.03$, BootSE = 0.02, 95% BCBCI [-.08, -.005]; $p < .001$. $^*p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$

In the analysis, we included perceived persuasive intent and reactance as serial mediators (H3), along with perceptions of extrinsic motives and CSR skepticism (H4). The results showed that there was a significant increase in perceived persuasive intent when minor CSR activities were reported alongside a major activity, $b = .78, p < .001$. This increase in perceived persuasive intent subsequently led to an increase in reactance, $b = .17, p < .05$. Reactance, in turn, had a negative effect on reputation, $b = -.46, p < .001$. Taken together, the mediation analysis revealed a significant negative indirect effect of reporting minor CSR activities alongside a major activity on reputation, mediated by perceived persuasive intent and reactance, $b = -.06, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.12, -.02]$. These results support hypothesis H3.

In addition, the analysis showed that reporting minor CSR activities alongside a major activity also significantly increased the perception that the company was engaged in these activities for extrinsic motives, $b = .45, p < .01$. This perception of extrinsic motives, in turn, heightened CSR skepticism, $b = .61, p < .001$. Finally, CSR skepticism had a negative impact on reputation, $b = -.13, p < .05$. Taken together, the mediation analysis revealed a significant negative indirect effect of reporting minor CSR activities alongside a major activity on reputation, mediated by perceptions of extrinsic motives and CSR skepticism, $b = -.04, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.08, -.01]$. These results provide support for hypothesis H4.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 provide further support for the findings of Study 1. Similar to Study 1, we observed that the inclusion of moderate CSR activities alongside a major initiative significantly increased stakeholders' perception of the organization's social engagement and reputation compared to presenting only the major activity. Conversely, the inclusion of minor CSR activities alongside a major CSR initiative led to a decrease in the perception of the organization's social engagement and reputation, compared to presenting only the major activity. This again suggests that communicating minor CSR activities dilutes the positive effects of a major CSR initiative, resulting in a less favorable perception of an organization.

To explore the underlying mechanisms of this averaging effect, the study examined the role of perceived persuasive intent and reactance as well as perceptions of extrinsic motives and CSR skepticism. The results indicate that these factors contribute to the observed effects. Stakeholders question the motive behind communicating minor activities, perceive the organization's intent as persuasive, and believe that the organization uses CSR as a means to increase profits rather than out of a genuine concern for society. These perceptions backfire and undermine the organization's reputation.

General discussion

The findings of both studies highlight the complexity of stakeholders' perceptions of CSR activities and emphasize the need for careful consideration in communication strategies (see also Crane and Glozer 2016; Moreno and Capriotti 2009; Viererbl and Koch 2022). It is important to note that there is nothing inherently negative about communicating a variety of CSR activities. In fact, the adage 'the more the better' applies when communicating significant or moderate activities. Communicating multiple significant activities

increases the perception that the organization is actively engaged in CSR and positively impacts its reputation ('adding'; Anderson 1965; Weaver, Hock, and Garcia 2016).

However, this principle does not apply when it comes to minor CSR activities. In the case of minor activities, the motto 'less is more' seems to apply. The inclusion of minor activities alongside a major activity dilutes the positive effects, resulting in a more negative impression than when only the major activity is communicated ('averaging'; Anderson 1965; Troutman and Shanteau 1976). This effect is somewhat counterintuitive, since the organization is not only performing the same level of positive actions, but is actually doing more (albeit smaller) positive things. Nevertheless, these smaller activities are perceived differently.

Experiment 2 demonstrates that individuals tend to question the meaning of these minor activities. On the one hand, they feel that the organization is trying to persuade them, which triggers a sense of reactance (J. W. Brehm 1966; Friestad and Wright 1994). On the other hand, they believe that the organization's involvement in minor activities is due to extrinsic motives aimed at increasing profits, which leads to CSR skepticism (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Teah, Sung, and Phau 2022). Individuals may perceive minor green activities as mere attempts to persuade the public, rather than as a genuine concern for the environment. Therefore, this study also contributes to the understanding of various forms of 'washing', such as greenwashing (Romani, Grappi, and Bagozzi 2016).

The findings of this study have several practical implications for organizations engaged in CSR activities and their communication strategies. First, organizations should carefully consider their CSR communication strategies, taking into account the nature and extent of the CSR activities being communicated. While large and moderate activities can be effectively communicated to enhance reputation and stakeholder perceptions, caution should be exercised when communicating smaller activities to avoid diluting the positive effects. Second, given the potential skepticism and reactance associated with minor CSR activities, organizations should prioritize authenticity and transparency in their CSR communications. It is crucial to clearly communicate the true motivations behind CSR initiatives and provide evidence of meaningful impact to build trust and credibility with stakeholders. Third, recognizing the diversity of stakeholder groups, organizations should consider tailoring their CSR communications to address the specific values, beliefs, and concerns of different stakeholder segments. Organizations must recognize that not all activities are inherently perceived as positive or important by stakeholders. It is essential for them to proactively consider how different stakeholder groups may react to various activities. This requires understanding the values, beliefs, and preferences of stakeholders and tailoring CSR communication accordingly.

The findings of this research are subject to several limitations. First, both studies relied on non-representative samples predominantly composed of young university students. It is possible that this demographic evaluates CSR activities differently than older or more diverse stakeholder groups. Additionally, the studies were conducted online, which allowed for a realistic reception context but limited control over environmental variables. Although attention checks and time-based exclusions were used to ensure data quality, distractions or multitasking during participation cannot be entirely ruled out. Second, the stimulus materials in both studies included one clearly strong CSR initiative combined with four additional activities of either minor or moderate strength. While this design enabled clear contrasts, it restricts generalizability. Future research should examine

a broader variety and mix of CSR activity strengths and explore effects across organizations of different sizes and industries. Furthermore, the present study did not compare the joint communication of CSR activities to the communication of a single strong or single minor CSR activity. Including these conditions in future studies would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how stakeholders evaluate CSR combinations. As our design involved only one-time exposure, future work should also investigate cumulative effects over time (Koch and Arendt 2017).

Third, we used fictitious large companies and specific communication formats (a website excerpt in Study 1 and a LinkedIn post in Study 2) to avoid bias from preexisting brand attitudes. However, this limits the external validity of our findings. Future research should replicate the effects in real-world settings, using actual organizations and a broader range of CSR communication channels, such as CSR reports or press releases. Finally, although our mediation model draws on established theoretical relationships, it cannot definitively test the causality between all variables – except for the direct effects of the experimental manipulation. We referred to prior research to support the directionality of the mediating relationships, but alternative causal pathways cannot be fully excluded.

Future studies in this area should aim to further explore and extend upon the findings presented in this paper. They should investigate the perception of minor activities in isolation, as this aspect was not specifically examined in the current study, where minor activities were combined with major activities. Future studies should also aim to replicate the findings of the current research in different contexts. This replication can be done by examining other types of CSR activities, using different samples, employing different stimuli or communication materials, and studying different organizations across industries. This research can assess the robustness and generalizability of our findings by ensuring that they hold true in different settings and conditions.

Our counterintuitive finding that ‘less is more’ underscores the importance of carefully curating CSR communication strategies to focus remains on impactful initiatives rather than overwhelming stakeholders with a plethora of minor activities. By strategically highlighting substantive CSR efforts, organizations can cultivate a stronger, more positive reputation and effectively engage stakeholders in their commitment to social responsibility.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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