COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility: re-assessment of classical theories about fit between CSR actions and corporate activities

Abstract

The literature on effective communication of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) paints a complex and occasionally contradictory picture of the role of alignment between corporate activities and CSR actions, classically termed "corporate fit". Some authors highlight the importance of such alignment for effective communication of CSR, whereas other authors suggest that such fit can engender skepticism and public behaviors that harm the company. In addition, more recent work suggests the importance of "personal fit", which refers to alignment between CSR actions and what receivers of the CSR communication consider to be personally relevant. In order to clarify this complex picture, we randomly assigned 86 young people to three groups: one was exposed to CSR communication showing corporate fit, another to CSR communication showing personal fit, and the third to control (non-CSR) communication. In contrast to what the literature might predict, we found that the CSR message with corporate fit was as persuasive as the control message for convincing subjects to rate the company as sincere and honest and to be willing to sign a declaration in favor of the company. The message with personal fit led to higher ratings of sincerity and honesty, as well as greater willingness to sign the declaration. These results suggest the need to re-assess the role of classical corporate fit in the communication of CSR actions, and they raise the possibility that other types of fit exist and may even be stronger determinants of the effectiveness of CSR communication.

Keywords
Corporate social responsibility, corporate communication, fit, personal fit communication effectiveness, persuasion

1. Introduction

The importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and its influence on positive public perceptions of an organization (Zyglidopoulos, 2002) have transformed corporate management in

recent decades (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Kotler & Lee, 2008). Companies now include in their communications information related to ethical values and responsible behavior, in the hope of improving brand reputation and public recognition. On the other hand, as several researchers point out (e.g., Elving, Golob, Podnar, Ellerup-Nielsen & Thomson, 2015; Jahdi &Acikdilli, 2009; Morsing, Schultz & Nielsen, 2008; Seele & Lock, 2015), communicating CSR actions does not always translate into positive public perception but can occasionally engender rejection or skepticism. This highlights the need to analyze and understand what and how CSR actions should be communicated in order to promote corporate image.

The present experimental study analyzed the role of so-called "fit" in influencing the effectiveness of communicating CSR actions. It examined whether the coherence or alignment between corporate activities and publicly communicated CSR actions, known as "corporate fit", is a key determinant of the effectiveness of CSR communication. The bulk of the relevant literature indicates that greater corporate fit leads to more effective CSR communication (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Elving, 2010, 2013; Nan & Heo, 2007). For example, it would be more effective for an oil company to publicize its research and development into non-contaminating gasolines, which aligns well with the company's normal activities, than to publicize its efforts to promote and develop primary schooling, which is unrelated to the company's normal activities.

Optimizing the effectiveness of CSR communication does not always mean optimizing corporate fit, however. Studies suggest that corporate fit can increase public skepticism and thereby reduce the effectiveness of the communication (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli & Schwarz, 2006). In addition, more recent work has suggested the importance of "personal fit" (Schmeltz, 2012), referring to alignment between CSR actions and what receivers of the CSR communication consider to be personally relevant.

The present study, then, examines whether corporate and/or personal fit influences the effectiveness of CSR communication. This is, to our knowledge, the first study to directly compare these types of fit. Our *independent variable* was whether individuals received CSR messages in a context of corporate fit, personal fit or control conditions. We analyzed the effect of type of fit on two *dependent variables:* perceived sincerity of a company's CSR communication and intent to sign a declaration favorable to the company.

2. CSR communication and positive impact on corporate image and reputation

The term CSR originated in a text published more than 60 years ago (Bowen, 1953), and since then it has grown in relevance and served as the focus of numerous studies (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). While the term still lacks a consensus definition (Barlett & Devin, 2011; Carroll, 1999; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007), it is usually defined to reflect the necessity of reconciling corporate development with ethical, social, and environmental aspects. CSR is generally implemented as initiatives that companies voluntarily organize (Rodríguez & LeMaster, 2007) in order to improve public relations and contribute to social good.

These initiatives can take many shapes, such as policies with providers, policies to reduce environmental impact, social programs, sponsorships, corporate volunteering, and cause-related marketing. For such initiatives to transcend mere social programs and amount to real CSR, they must be integrated into corporate strategy (Porter & Kramer, 2006) and strengthen the company's business strategy. Companies that effectively implement CSR do not measure their success based on a purely financial bottom-line; instead, they hold themselves accountable to the triple bottom-line of finances, social impact, and environmental impact (Elkington, 1999). In this way, CSR can improve corporate behavior not only in the short term but also in the long term through shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

Villagra, N., Cárdaba M.A.M. & Ruiz San Román, J.A.
**Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility: re-assessment of classical theories
about fit between CSR actions and corporate activities**

A key aspect of managing CSR is communicating it to stakeholders. Analogously to the traditional importance given to communicating products, services and financial results, organizations are assigning increasing importance to communicating aspects of ethics and social responsibility. This change in organizational communication strategy serves various goals. Stakeholders are demanding greater transparency and wish to receive information not only about products and services but also about the values and social commitments of the company behind them (Du et al., 2010; Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009). They evaluate corporations based not only on the quality of their products and on their financial performance, but also on moral criteria, such as how they came to be successful, what values guide their actions and how they are contributing to social progress. Communicating CSR actions can benefit a company's brand and reputation by highlighting its social engagement.

Numerous studies have examined how CSR actions and their communication can influence consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Ellen, Webb & Mohr, 2006; Grohmann & Bodur, 2015; Lii & Lee, 2012; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), particularly from the perspectives of marketing and brand management. Nevertheless, more studies are needed to examine the relationships among corporate brand, CSR communication and effects on society. This work is particularly important because if CSR reflects a strategic focus cutting across business units in a corporation, CSR actions should affect not only the (client-focused) product brand but also the corporate brand. The corporate brand manifests itself in all corporate activities towards all audiences (Fan, 2005). Therefore cultivating a corporate brand implies cross-cutting management driven by a company's values and responsible commitments. In other words, CSR and corporate brand should be aligned.

The literature makes clear that corporate brands traditionally have communicated values directly associated with company performance, such as quality, innovation, customer focus, and safety. More recently, in a trend reflecting consolidation around the concept of CSR, corporate brands have come to include ethical values linked to socially responsible behaviors. A company will enjoy a positive reputation and strong trust among its stakeholders if it succeeds in defining for itself what it means to be socially responsible, how to implement this definition in day-to-day actions and how to satisfy public expectations. Reputation is defined by Fombrun as "a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describe the firm's appeal to all of its key constituents" (1998: 165). In other words, reputation constitutes what all relevant stakeholders believe a corporation represents, together with associations that they make with the company (Chun, 2005).

The associations that stakeholders make with a company when evaluating its reputation arise from diverse types of contact and involve assessment of ethics, good governance, and socially responsible management. Other important factors include financial performance, product or service quality, and treatment of employees. Reputation management implies not only that corporations behave well along each of these dimensions, but also that they communicate these positive actions to stakeholders, who can then identify the actions with the company.

3. Controversy in CSR communication: undesired impacts

Just as communicating CSR can benefit corporate image and reputation, it can also have undesirable consequences, as in other types of communication campaigns (e.g., Brändle, Cárdaba & Ruiz, 2011). Indeed, communicating CSR actions can have complex (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009; Elving, 2013) or even paradoxical effects (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Numerous authors indicate that CSR communication can generate skepticism and criticism among stakeholders (Du et al., 2010; Golob, Podnar, Elving, Nielsen,

Thomsen & Schultz, 2013; Illia, Zyglidopoulos, Romenti, Rodríguez-Canovas & González del Valle, 2013; Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009; Morsing et al., 2008; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; Waddock & Goggins, 2011).

To ensure positive effects, CSR communication must be credible. Effective CSR must rest on values that have truly been integrated into the company and that are expressed in all corporate interactions with the public (Middlemiss, 2003; Villagra & López, 2013; Waddock, Bodwell & Graves, 2002). For this reason, a company that insists it is the best in everything is unlikely to enjoy much credibility. Instead, a company should select aspects that differentiate it from the competition and that are positively perceived by stakeholders (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005).

CSR communications generally enjoy greater credibility when they come from sources not controlled by the company (Arthur W. Page Society, 2012; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Skard & Thorbjørnsen, 2014; Swaen & Vanhamme, 2005), rather than from the company itself. Most members of the public distrust messages broadcast by corporate brands (Van de Ven, 2008), leading frequently to the paradox that people are more critical of companies that communicate their ethical values and good deeds than of companies that do not (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009).

The opposing effects of CSR communication have led to divergent and sometimes contradictory results among studies in the literature. While in some cases CSR messages about ethical aspects can cause positive reactions (Swaen & Vanhamme, 2004), it appears that such messages normally cause indifference, skepticism (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Du et al., 2010; Elving, 2013), rejection or even a "boomerang" effect (Du et al., 2010; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005), in which the image of the organization is damaged. This makes analyzing and understanding the effects of CSR communication challenging and highlights the need for further empirical research in this area.

Such work is important because merely behaving well is necessary but insufficient to ensure that a company's CSR communication is credible. To avoid skepticism and distrust in the public, companies should recognize aspects of their communication that may weaken their credibility.

Previous work has identified several aspects of CSR communication that can strengthen or weaken credibility. Some of the most important are as follows.

a) The sender of the message

Company size is important, since larger corporations are usually subject to greater public scrutiny than smaller ones (Arvidsson, 2010; Branco & Rodrigues, 2006). Business sector or type of activity is also important: public expectations about CSR are sometimes unpredictable and are constantly changing, affecting all business sectors (Morsing & Schultz 2006). In addition, corporations operating in so-called "*sin industries*" are the object of particular distrust (Du et al., 2010; Lewis 2001). Another important factor is whether the company engages in continuous CSR initiatives, which enjoy greater credibility than one-off activities (Du et al., 2010; Schmeltz, 2012; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). Corporate reputation is also key, since better reputation translates into greater credibility (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Du et al., 2010). Fortunately companies with a neutral or even negative ethical reputation can improve their standing and benefit from CSR communication (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005).

b) Channels and formats

CSR actions can be communicated via diverse channels and formats. These range from corporate documents, such as CSR reports, corporate reports and press releases, to conventional media, informal channels such as WOM (word of mouth) and even product packaging (e.g., containing cause-related marketing information). The effectiveness of a particular communication channel is determined largely by whether the public perceives it to be more or less controlled by the corporation in question. A channel perceived as more

independent from corporate interests will enjoy greater credibility than one perceived as controlled by the company. Thus, CSR communication is generally less credible when it forms part of corporate advertising (Jahdi & Acikdili, 2009) than when it is broadcast by third-party news outlets, on the company website (Pollach, 2005) or via personal communication (WOM). At the same time, CSR communication seems to be most effective when it is broadcast via multiple channels (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005), resulting in synergy among the contents of the different messages.

c) The receiver of the message

CSR communication may be rejected by members of the public who espouse an anti-corporation or anti-system ideology in general, who hold a negative opinion about the particular corporation in question, or who have had negative prior experience with that corporation. Effects of these three groups should be minimized in order to ensure that CSR communication has positive overall effects for the corporation. In addition, the company should carefully select what CSR aspects and actions it broadcasts to ensure alignment with what receivers of the CSR communication consider to be personally relevant and important.

d) The message

Corporations must carefully manage various aspects of CSR messages to avoid triggering skepticism or rejection. Messages that deal primarily with social topics instead of with the company or its products can trigger suspicion in consumers about the motives behind the messages (Du et al., 2010). CSR messages tightly linked to the sale of a specific product can be considered by the public as an attempt to make money off social actions, generating negative reactions (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Elving, 2013). CSR messages based on concrete facts and data appear to be more effective than messages based on emotion (Du et al., 2010; Jahdi & Acikdili, 2009; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; Villagra & López, 2013). Messages also enjoy greater credibility and generate less skepticism when they mention not only advances and accomplishments but also failures (Arvidsson, 2010).

Empirical studies about what makes CSR communication effective align well with studies on persuasion. In their review, Briñol, Corte and Becerra (2008: 88 ff.) point to studies such as that of Hale, Mongeau and Thomas (1991) suggesting that messages containing both favorable and unfavorable arguments are evaluated by the receiver more positively, and lead to greater attitude change, than messages containing only favorable arguments such as conventional advertising. At the same time, one-sided communication can be more persuasive when the audience (a) is already predisposed to believing the message, (b) knows little or nothing about the topic, or (c) has hit a point of information saturation, when careful weighing of arguments is no longer possible (cf. Briñol et al., 2008: 92).

Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) and Morsing and Schultz (2006) also highlight that the intensity and insistence of CSR communication can influence its effectiveness; those authors have suggested that consumers distrust messages the more they are repeated. However, the literature on persuasion suggests that message insistence can strengthen its persuasiveness when "the receiver superficially processes the message" (Briñol et al., 2008:156).

Another aspect of the CSR message that can strongly influence its effectiveness is corporate fit, or the alignment between the CSR actions being communicated and the company's business operations. This factor lies at the heart of the present study.

4. Importance of coherence or *fit* for effective CSR communication

Despite the existence of several studies on CSR communication, the literature provides few clear strategies on how to ensure that it is effective within an overall corporate communication strategy (Schmeltz, 2012). While it is clear that corporate fit is important

(Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Elving, 2010, 2013; Nan & Heo, 2007; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), just how important it is and how precisely it influences the impact of CSR communication remain unclear.

Corporate fit can be defined as coherence or logical linkage perceived to exist between normal corporate activities and specific CSR actions being communicated. For example, when a food production or sales company distributes food to underprivileged people and communicates that action to stakeholders, the latter perceives a fit between this action and the company's principal operations. In contrast, if the same company focuses its CSR actions on creating scholarships for aerospace research, stakeholders will perceive an absence of fit with the company's principal operations.

Studies on CSR communication indicate that fit enhances the credibility and effectiveness of CSR messages (Du et al., 2010; Elving, 2013; Van de Ven, 2008). Indeed, Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill (2006) point out that good fit between the public's expectations and associations of a company on one hand and the company's CSR actions on the other makes the public perceive the CSR initiative as congruent and consistent with the company's fundamental operations. The result is less skepticism toward the message.

On the other hand, some studies (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Yoon et al., 2006) indicate that corporate fit can actually engender skepticism: when CSR actions are tightly linked to a company's primary operations, the risk is greater that the public will perceive the company as instrumentalizing CSR to benefit its business. This risk is particularly high if the company has a poor reputation (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli & Schwarz, 2006). This risk may be age-dependent: Schmeltz (2012) showed that younger consumers generally regard CSR communications with less skepticism than older ones; young people expect the company to communicate sincerely and therefore do not tend to respond negatively to corporate fit or other firms of explicit communication. This contrasts with traditional recommendations that CSR communication should be subtle.

Schmeltz has further nuanced our understanding of how fit influences the effectiveness of CSR communication. She posits the construct of "personal fit" as another critical factor to reduce skepticism and influence positive perception of messages. She defines personal fit as "the degree to which the company's choice of CSR initiative is personally relevant for the receiver" (Schmeltz, 2012: 36). This personal fit contrasts with, and perhaps complements, the corporate fit that has traditionally been studied in the literature, opening up a new field of research.

In summary, the literature indicates that effective CSR communication depends on alignment between a company's activities and its CSR actions (corporate fit), and more recent work suggests that it can also depend on the communication's personal relevance (personal fit) for the public. This highlights the need for studies that clarify how important each type of fit is for influencing the effectiveness of CSR communication, and under what conditions.

5. Objective and methodology

5.1. *Objective*

In order to clarify inconsistencies and gaps in the literature on CSR communication, the present work compares the persuasiveness of CSR messages depending on whether they display corporate fit or personal fit. To our knowledge, this is the first study to directly compare the effects of each type of fit on receiver-perceived credibility and sincerity, as well as on receiver intent to support the company in question.

Villagra, N., Cárdaba M.A.M. & Ruiz San Román, J.A.
**Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility: re-assessment of classical theories
about fit between CSR actions and corporate activities**

5.2. *Methodology*

5.2.1. *Participants and procedure*

University students (n = 86, 28 men and 58 women; mean age = 19.98, SD = 1.61) participated voluntarily in this unifactorial inter-subject study involving three levels: a CSR message showing corporate fit, a CSR message showing personal fit, and a control non-CSR message. To minimize bias, subjects were assigned to the three groups by systematic random sampling. Subjects viewed the study instructions and the CSR message on a computer screen. After viewing the message, subjects expressed their opinions about the company and the credibility of the message by filling out a computer questionnaire. Results were analyzed and compared among the three groups using ANOVA.

5.2.2. *Independent variable*

Participants were randomized to receive one of the following messages:

Message with corporate fit: subjects in this group viewed a newspaper article about the social responsibility actions of an oil company. The article mentioned that the company had spent 11 million EUR on research into non-contaminating fuels capable of reducing pollution by 50-60%. This message showed corporate fit because it described a CSR action aligned with operations typical of an oil company.

Message with personal fit: subjects in this group viewed a newspaper article announcing that a large oil company (the same as in the corporate fit group) had spent 11 million EUR to improve education of young children in developing countries, with a goal of increasing literacy by 50-60%. This message showed personal fit because education and literacy of young children is socially relevant for the public, although it is not closely linked to the core operations of an oil company.

Control message: subjects in this group viewed a newspaper article that was similar in structure and length to the articles seen by the other two groups, but that covered a topic unrelated to CSR.

5.2.3. *Dependent variables*

The literature suggests that skepticism and lack of credibility are the principal obstacles to effective CSR communication. Therefore we focused on the effects of the three types of message on the following dependent variables:

Behavioral intent towards the oil company: subjects indicated their level of agreement, using a 9-point scale, with the statement, "Would you be willing to sign a declaration in favor of the company?"

Perceived sincerity: subjects indicated their level of agreement, using a 9-point scale, with the following statements: "I believe that *<name of the oil company>* is sincere when it declares that social responsibility is an important part of its strategy" and "I believe that *<name of the oil company>* communicates with sincerity and honesty".

6. Results

6.1. *Manipulation check*

We tested our experimental manipulation in a pilot study involving 137 university students (20 men and 117 women; mean age = 22.61, SD = 3.98), of whom half viewed the newspaper article about CSR investment in non-contaminating fuels, and the other half viewed the article about education. Then subjects indicated the degree to which the CSR action seemed

Villagra, N., Cárdaba M.A.M. & Ruiz San Román, J.A.
**Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility: re-assessment of classical theories
about fit between CSR actions and corporate activities**

aligned with the company's activities (corporate fit), as well as the degree to which the CSR action was relevant or important to them (personal fit).

Corporate fit: As expected, scores for CSR alignment with an oil company's operations were significantly higher among subjects who received the article on eco-fuels (M = 7.45; SD = 1.79) than among subjects who received the article on education [M = 6.07; SD = 2.14; F(135) = 16.44, p < .001].

Personal fit: Conversely with the results for corporate fit, the CSR education initiative was viewed as personally more relevant (M = 7.45; SD = 1.44) than the development of eco-fuels [M = 6.96; SD = 1.43; F(135) = 3.99, p = .04].

6.2. *Behavioral intent*

ANOVA of the results from the main study showed a significant effect of the independent variable *CSR message* on subjects' intent to sign a declaration in favor of the oil company [F(84) = 3.69, p = .029] (Figure 1). Post-hoc multiple-comparison analysis using DMS revealed similar intent to sign among subjects viewing the CSR message with corporate fit (M = 3.91; SD = 1.97) or the control message (M = 3.31; SD = 2.15; p = .26), but significantly greater intent to sign among subjects viewing the CSR message with personal fit (M = 4.87; SD = 2.05) than among those viewing the control message (p = .008). Finally, intent was marginally higher among those viewing the message with personal fit than among those viewing the message with corporate fit (p = .09).

**Figure 1.** Intent to sign a declaration in favor of the oil company depending on the type of CSR message received
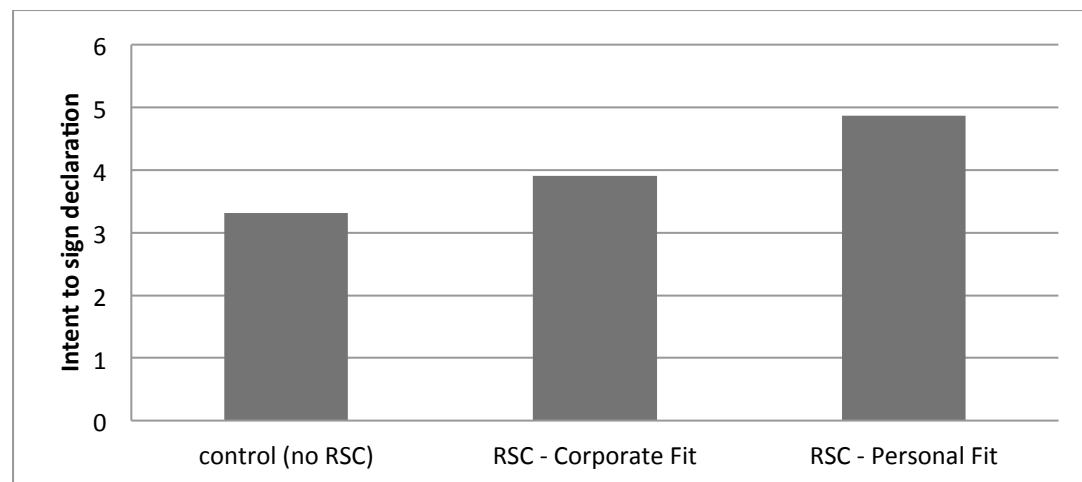
Source: own elaboration

6. 3. *Perceived sincerity*

The variable *CSR message* showed a marginally significant effect on the degree to which subjects perceived the company as sincere in saying that its CSR actions are an important part of its strategy [F(84) = 2.80, p = .06; Figure 2]. Post-hoc multiple-comparison analysis using DMS indicated slightly higher perceived sincerity for the message with corporate fit (M = 5.10; SD = 2.03) than for the control message (M = 4.77; SD = 2.06), though this difference was not significant (p = .55). In contrast, perceived sincerity was significantly higher for the message with personal fit (M = 6.04; SD = 1.78) than for the control message (p = .02), and marginally higher in the case of personal fit than in the case of corporate fit (p = .07).

Villagra, N., Cárdaba M.A.M. & Ruiz San Román, J.A.
**Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility: re-assessment of classical theories
about fit between CSR actions and corporate activities**

Figure 2. Perceived sincerity of the company's interest in conducting CSR actions,
depending on the type of CSR message received
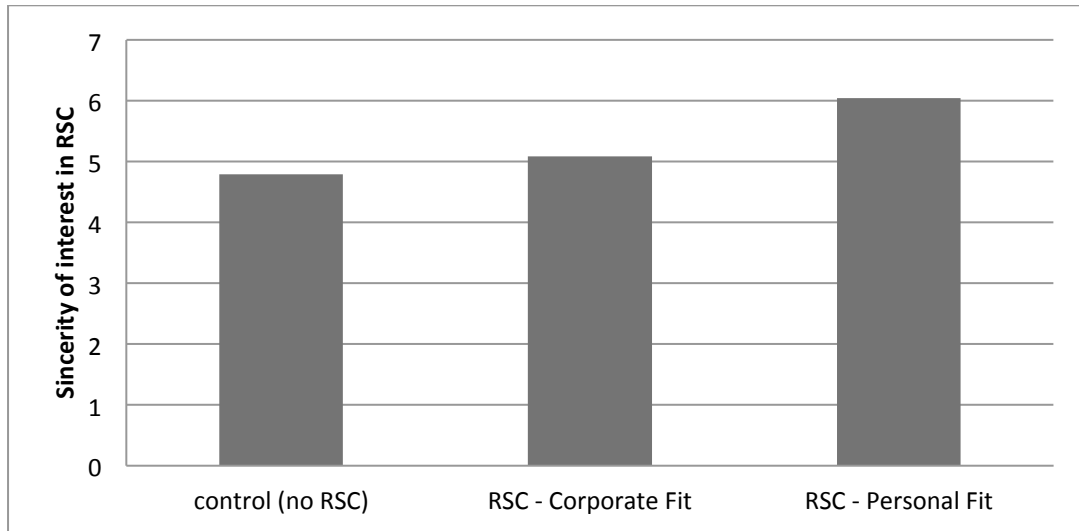
Source: own elaboration

Similar results were obtained from post-hoc multiple-comparison analysis of the degree to which subjects perceived the company as communicating sincerely and honestly (Figure 3). This perception of sincerity was not significantly different for the message with corporate fit (M = 4.88; SD = 1.83) or the control message (M = 4.28; SD = 2.03; p = .23). It was marginally higher for the message with personal fit (M = 5.29; SD = 1.99) than for the control message (M = 4.28; SD = 2.03; p =.06), and it was similar for the messages with personal or corporate fit (p = .43).

Figure 3. Perceived sincerity of the oil company's CSR communication,
depending on the type of CSR message received
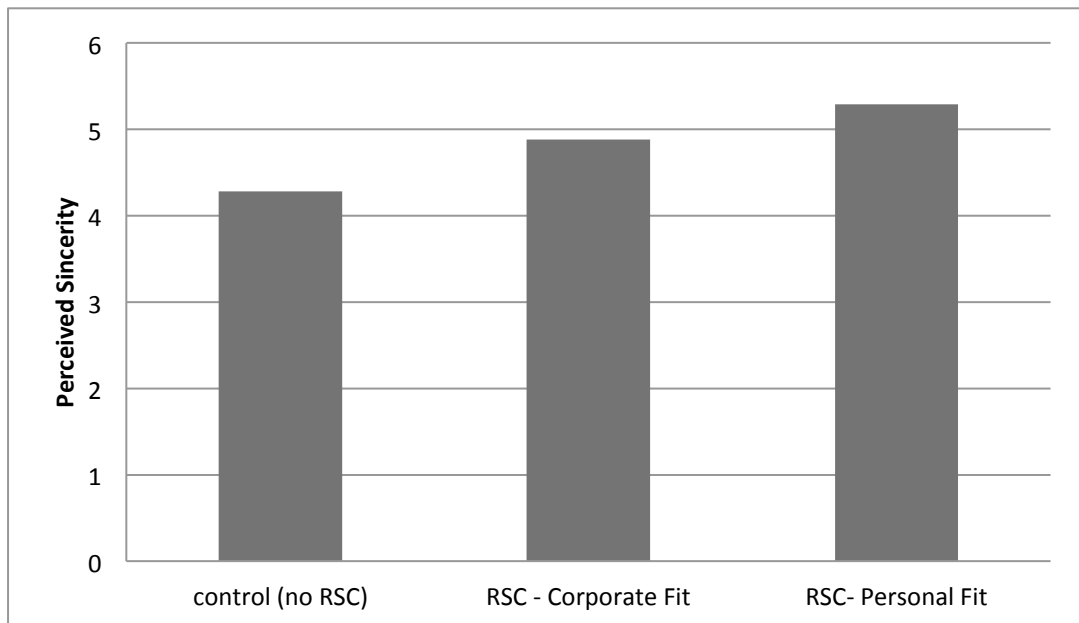
Source: own elaboration

7. Conclusions, discussion and limitations

The bulk of the literature on CSR communication indicates that messages perceived as being aligned with the normal operations of the company (corporate fit) enjoy greater credibility and are therefore more effective than messages perceived as not aligned (Du et al., 2010; Van de Ven, 2008). This straightforward relationship has been challenged by recent work suggesting that personal fit is also critical for positive perception of CSR messages (Schmeltz, 2012). Therefore the present study aimed to clarify the relative importance of the two types of fit in influencing the persuasiveness of CSR messages, which to our knowledge has yet to be examined in the literature.

Our findings relativize the importance of corporate fit: in our experimental conditions, corporate fit was not associated with greater persuasive effectiveness than a control message unrelated to CSR. As a result, although the scores were slightly higher in the presence of corporate fit there were no significant differences between those two conditions. That is, subjects in the corporate fit and control groups rated the oil company as sincere and honest to similar extents, and they showed a similar willingness to sign a declaration in favor of the company. In contrast, both of these indices of persuasive effectiveness were significantly higher among subjects who viewed the CSR message with personal fit than among those who viewed the control message. In addition, these indices were marginally higher among those who viewed the message with personal fit than among those who viewed the message with corporate fit. This provides direct evidence that personal fit can be even more important than the classical construct of corporate fit, at least under some conditions.

Our findings may reflect previous observations (Yoon et al., 2006) that corporate fit can give the public the impression that a company is engaging in CSR actions primarily in order to develop and promote its business, which reduces their perception of sincerity (Schmeltz, 2012). In other words, the presence of corporate fit in a CSR message can simultaneously provoke positive and negative effects in the receiver of the message, leading to no net effect. Thus, our results suggest that under conditions similar to those in our experiments, ensuring corporate fit in a CSR message does not, by itself, guarantee that the CSR message will significantly affect the likelihood that the public will behave in ways that support the company. Instead, personal fit is key: the public must perceive the CSR message as relevant to them. Ensuring personal fit in CSR communication significantly increases the likelihood that audiences will behave favorably towards the company, even if the message is not obviously aligned with the normal operations of the company.

Why personal fit was more important than corporate fit under our experimental conditions is unclear. Our results suggest one possible explanation: the presence of personal fit in a CSR message may lead the audience to perceive that CSR as more sincere. Research (e.g., Briñol et al., 2008) has shown that credibility depends on how much the public perceives the corporation as sincere and competent to perform the activities announced. Our results suggest that under certain conditions, perceived sincerity outweighs perceived competence: in our study, the message aligned with the oil company's core competencies was no more persuasive than the control message.

This result may depend on the size of the company. Larger companies, such as the one in our study, may be perceived by the public as having sufficient resources to carry out any kind of CSR action reasonably well, even if it does not align with normal business operations. Future work should examine size and other company variables as possible mediators and moderators of the influence of corporate and personal fit on the effectiveness of CSR communication.

Indeed, future studies are critical for validating our results and for exploring to what extent they apply to other industries and communication channels. The CSR messages in

Villagra, N., Cárdaba M.A.M. & Ruiz San Román, J.A.
**Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility: re-assessment of classical theories
about fit between CSR actions and corporate activities**

our study involved an oil company, and this industry generally enjoys a less positive reputation than other industries. Therefore studies should compare corporate and personal fit in business sectors that are more positively perceived. It may be that the relative importance of each type of fit depends on the reputation of the sector in general as well as of the specific company in question. In addition, the CSR message in our study was delivered as a newspaper article. Studies should examine relative importance of corporate and personal fit for the effectiveness of CSR communication in other formats, such as advertisements, which are generally viewed by audiences as less credible than newspaper articles. Such studies could examine the hypothesis, yet to be supported empirically, that advertising focusing on a company's CSR actions can generate greater distrust or skepticism than advertising focusing on the company itself or on the company's products and services (Du et al., 2010).

Depending on the extent to which our results can be extended to other types of industries and CSR messages, it may be time to revise our understanding of the importance and role of corporate fit in determining the effectiveness of CSR communication. The classical idea of corporate fit as the most important type of alignment between message and receiver no longer seems valid. Personal fit is also important and, in some circumstances, it can even outweigh corporate fit. This has substantial practical implications. CSR and communications managers should strive to develop messages that maximize both personal and corporate fit. When conditions require a compromise between the two types of fit, prioritizing personal fit may be advisable.

Our results also have implications for developing and implementing CSR strategies. Companies should ensure that CSR actions are sufficiently aligned with normal business operations that the public will perceive them as competent in their social engagement. At the same time—and potentially to an even greater extent—companies should ensure that CSR actions resonate personally with stakeholders.

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**Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility: re-assessment of classical theories
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