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Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility to involve Stakeholders: the Case of Employer Branding for University Students

Comunicare la responsabilità sociale d'impresa per coinvolgere gli stakeholder: il caso dell'employer branding per studenti universitari

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ARTICLE INFO

Submitted: 05 August 2017

Accepted: 03 October 2017

DOI: 10.4458/9453-02

ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an effective marketing lever, and its effectiveness is mediated by the strategies companies use to communicate their CSR activities to stakeholders. The present research aims at assessing the effect of five CSR communicative strategies, ranked according to an increasing involvement level of stakeholders, on a fictional company's Employer Branding (EB). The company was presented to two samples of university students ($n=167$; $n=112$) via the administration of five different versions of a brochure, corresponding to five different communicative scenarios of CSR. A self-report questionnaire was administered, with scales measuring the company's attractiveness, perceived prestige, intention to contact the company, and prospective engagement, as well as the company's perceived brand personality and CSR communication. Analyses report high levels of the EB dimensions in all five communicative scenarios, which however produce different perceptions of the company's brand personality.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; employer branding; brand personality; dialogue; stakeholders.

RIASSUNTO

La responsabilità sociale d'impresa (o Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR) è uno strumento efficace di marketing e la sua efficacia è mediata dalla modalità con cui le aziende comunicano le proprie attività di CSR agli stakeholder. La ricerca si propone di valutare l'effetto di cinque strategie di comunicazione della CSR, ordinate secondo un livello crescente di coinvolgimento degli stakeholder, sull'Employer Branding (EB) di un'azienda ipotetica. Attraverso la distribuzione di cinque varianti di un opuscolo, l'azienda è stata presentata a due campioni di studenti universitari ($n=167$; $n=112$) in cinque diversi scenari comunicativi della CSR. È stato somministrato un questionario con scale che misurano l'attrattività dell'azienda, il prestigio percepito dell'azienda, la disponibilità dei soggetti a entrare in contatto con l'azienda e l'impegno prospettico sul lavoro. È stata anche indagata la percezione della *brand personality* e della comunicazione della CSR. Le analisi confermano che tutti e cinque gli scenari sono caratterizzati da alti livelli delle dimensioni dell'EB, però lo specifico dialogo di CSR adottato può generare differenti percezioni della *brand personality* dell'azienda.

Parole chiave: responsabilità sociale d'impresa; employer branding; brand personality; dialogo; stakeholder.

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RdP

Introduction

In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), described as a company's engagement in actions that further some social good, going beyond the interests of the company itself and that which is required by law (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001), has been devoted greater attention by companies (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010), public institutions (Lee, 2008), non-governmental organizations (Hess, 2008), researchers, consulting firms (Pedersen, 2006), and investors providing funding for CSR-engaged companies (Scheepers, 2007). Several studies have showed that CSR can increase companies' competitiveness, strengthen their brand value and their corporate reputation (Amendola, 2008; Avallone, 2011; Eisenegger & Schranz, 2011; Padula, 2007; Perrini & Vurro, 2010), and their productiveness (Morelli, 2003), improve the company's performances affecting its consumer brand and consumers' purchase intentions (Schuler & Cording, 2006), and improve the relationships with financial institutions (Gazzola, 2006). CSR can therefore guarantee a very strong cohesion with stakeholders, improve work places, produce costumers' satisfaction increasing their fidelity and loyalty to the company (Gazzola, 2006; Perrini & Tencati, 2008), affect the company's capacity to attract employees and improve the employee engagement (Bhattacharya, Sen & Korschun, 2008; Turban & Greening, 1997). In other terms, CSR can represent an investment and a long-term profit's maximization (Carroll, 1999) for the positive impact on the companies' activities and performances (Bartlett & Devin, 2011).

In order to ensure that CSR engagement is not only perceived as an instrument to improve the company's performances, it is crucial for a company to find the right way of involving its stakeholders in CSR activities, as the company's activities are based on the satisfaction of the demands of stakeholders (suppliers, consumers, employees, shareholders etc.) which are in a sense essential for the company's survival (Freeman, 1984; Lee, 2008; Pedersen, 2006; Sachs, Post & Preston, 2002). However, most employees are normally not informed about their company's CSR activities, and they often find it difficult to acquire information on this topic (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). This fact is a particularly serious one in a stakeholder management perspective, as by actively participating in CSR activities employees feel self-fulfilled, they show higher levels of identification with their organization (De Gilder, Schuyt & Breedijk, 2005; Walker & Dharmalingam, 2008), and they have a chance to improve the relationships with their colleagues, developing a stronger sense of belonging (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Another critical topic is that companies generally ask employees to engage in CSR activities in which they have no decision-making power, and which they therefore may not support. Companies should on the contrary seek to involve their employees in the planning, design and implementation of CSR programs, thus ensuring the development of projects which are really significant to their members (Bhattacharya et al., 2008).

The modality used by a company to communicate its CSR to stakeholders – and employees in particular – plays therefore a crucial role, as employees are generally considered by the public as a reliable source of information on a company, and they often have an exchange of views with other stakeholders on CSR (Du et al., 2010). Many researchers argue that when companies want to communicate with stakeholders about their CSR initiatives they need to use a dialogic model, i.e., a two-way communication process, defined as an ongoing iterative sense-giving and sense-making process (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), involving all actors in the company (Perret, 2003; Viviani, 2006; Golob & Podnar, 2014) thus ensuring organizational transparency (García-Marzà, 2005). On the contrary, managers using one-way communication models consider it to be sufficient to inform the public of their CSR activities, so that CSR is merely perceived as a message to be revealed in a mechanical and stereotyped way (Illia, Zyglidopoulos, Romenti, Rodríguez-Cánovas & Gonzales del Brena, 2013), often drawing the public's critics and suspicion (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Therefore, managers need to move from informing and responding to involving stakeholders, by using dialogic models of CSR communication, in order to improve their efforts to build legitimacy, a positive reputation and lasting stakeholder relationships (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Johansen & Ellerup Nielsen, 2011; Eisenegger & Schranz, 2011, Etter, Morsing & Castello, 2011).

Romenti and colleagues (2011) have investigated how dialogic models of communication can

encourage companies' efforts toward change and improvement, by involving stakeholders. Four types of dialogue with stakeholders were individuated: (1) *knowledge exchange*: a dynamic process of constant exchange, generating interaction at various levels in the organization and encouraging critical reflection; (2) *development and change*: a type of dialogue which promotes organizational change-oriented initiatives, and allows to confront and combine the individuals' different ways of thinking and acting; (3) *cooperation and consensus-building*: an optimal tool to get to know and to adapt to stakeholders' demands, thus gaining their trust; (4) *strategy development and decision-making*: a type of dialogue facilitating interactions during decision-making processes. Illia and colleagues (2015) refer to the above-mentioned framework specifically for CSR dialogues, indicating that the challenge for companies willing to initiate a dialogue about CSR is not only to find spaces where to co-learn, co-decide, co-innovate with stakeholders, but also to facilitate different dialogue processes which assure openness. Open dialogue (Illia, Romenti, Rodríguez-Cánovas, Murtarelli & Carroll, 2015; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008) occurs when the company listens to stakeholder's concerns, and shows to be responsive. From a process point of view, however, this does not mean only to establish channels to listen and to become totally co-oriented to individuals' needs and cognitions; it means to share their views, positions, and values in order to develop a common ground of consensus and agreement – or, conversely, to express disagreement, differences, and antagonism. Stakeholders feel to be part of an open and authentic dialogue, and therefore engage in it only when there is a balance between agreement and disagreement, moderating and crowdsourcing conversations (Illia et al., 2015).

Many authors agree on the fact that CSR is a relevant, persuasive and legitimate way of attracting and of winning high-potential persons' loyalty (Battacharya, Sen & Korschun, 2008; Bonaiuto, Giacomantonio & Pugliese, 2008; Bonaiuto, Giacomantonio, Pugliese & Lizzani 2010; Bonaiuto, De Dominicis, Illia, Rodríguez-Cánovas & Lizzani 2013; Turban & Greening, 1997) and that an effective CSR communication can be an instrument of Employer Branding (EB), which is defined as a marketing strategy focusing on the identification and communication of the functional, economic, and psychological benefits and values provided by an employer to current and future employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). In particular, the EB strategy relates to the company's creation of a corporate brand, consistent with the company's identity (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Mosley, 2007; Moroko & Uncles, 2009), including the concept of brand personality, which concerns the attribution of personality traits to companies and to their products, considering the company as a human being (Aaker, 1997). The EB's strategy has two main aims: attracting new candidates and retaining valid employees, motivating them to job engagement (Lizzani, Mussino & Bonaiuto, 2008).

Berthon and colleagues (2005) found five factors which represent employer attractiveness, i.e. the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific company: (1) *interest value* assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides an exciting work environment, innovative work practices and that uses its employee's creativity to produce high-quality, innovative products and services; (2) *social value* assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides a working environment with good collegial relationships and a team atmosphere; (3) *economic value* assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides above-average salary, compensation package, job security and promotional opportunities; (4) *development value* assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides recognition, self-worth and confidence, coupled with a career-enhancing experience and a springboard to future employment; (5) *application value* assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides an opportunity for employees to apply what they have learned and to teach others, in an environment that is both customer-oriented and humanitarian. Other factors affecting a company's attractiveness in terms of EB have been investigated by Bonaiuto and colleagues (2008, 2010, 2013), such as the well-being of the employees, reputation, prestige and CSR. These factors have been found to be crucial features of the ideal employer in the eyes of students looking for employment.

As regards the retention of current employees, another relevant EB aim is to make sure that employees are satisfied with their job and organization, and so be able to do their best in

accomplishing their specific tasks. Scientific literature has referred to this concept as employee engagement, which includes innovative behaviours, demonstrations of initiative, and going beyond what is typically expected or required (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Employees of a CSR-engaged company seem to be more likely to have higher levels of engagement and involvement in their job (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). The EB strategy may also address persons not yet employed in the company, and university students are a particularly valid target as possible future employees with a specific training. In this case their prospective engagement is to be considered, i.e., the extent to which an individual believes he/she will be engaged in a hypothetical job situation (Bonaiuto et al., 2008, 2010, 2013).

On the basis of the outlined literature, the present research is developed with the goal of deepening the role of CSR as an instrument for internal marketing, as well as investigating to which extent an effective CSR communication can be considered a valid instrument for a company's EB (Bonaiuto et al., 2013; Bhattacharya et al., 2008). As observed, the effectiveness of a company's CSR activities is mediated by its communication with stakeholders. However, many companies result to be weak as for this factor (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). The central question of the research is to measure the effects of a company's engagement in CSR on EB, investigating whether CSR communication is effective in making the company attractive on a sample of university students, which constitute a valid target for EB strategy, as they can be considered potential internal stakeholders (Bonaiuto et al., 2008, 2010, 2013). The effects of CSR communication were also measured on three other EB dimensions – company's perceived prestige, intentions to contact the company and company's prospective engagement – by using different communicative strategies ranked according to an increasing involvement level of stakeholders (Romenti, Murtaelli & Valentini, 2011; Illia et al., 2013). Two studies were designed to test this general aim. The first study was performed to measure the effect of five different CSR's communicative strategies on a fictional company's EB and on the company's perceived features on a sample of students from an Italian university. The second study was conducted to measure the effect of the same CSR's communicative strategies on the same company's EB, on a sample of two Italian universities, and to assess the company's brand personality by using a standard tool (Aaker, 1997).

Study 1

Aim and hypotheses

The principal aim of Study 1 is to measure the effects of a company's engagement in communicating CSR on its EB perception. This main aim is operationalized in the following three specific aims:

- 1) To measure the effects of five different communicative strategies of CSR on the following EB dependent variables: company's attractiveness; company's perceived prestige; intention to contact the company; company's prospective engagement. The five communicative strategies, ranked on a growing level of stakeholders' involvement, (Romenti et al., 2011), correspond to five different scenarios: *One-way communication* (Scenario 0); *Knowledge-oriented dialogue* (Scenario 1); *Innovation-oriented dialogue* (Scenario 2); *Cooperation-oriented dialogue* (Scenario 3); *Decision-oriented dialogue* (Scenario 4). The operational hypotheses for this aim are:
 - H1a) The five scenarios will all be found to have a high level of attractiveness, and there will be no significant differences among the scenarios as far as the attractiveness level is concerned.
 - H1b) The five scenarios will all be found to have a high level of perceived prestige, and there will be no significant differences among the scenarios as far as the level of perceived prestige is concerned.

- H1c) The five scenarios will all be found to have a high level of intention to contact the company, and there will be no significant differences among the scenarios as far as the level of intention to contact the company is concerned.
 - H1d) Subjects assigned to the five scenarios will all be found to have a high level of prospective engagement (job engagement and organization engagement) and there will be no significant differences among the scenarios as far as the level of these two dimensions of prospective engagement are concerned.
- 2) To investigate whether a correlation exists between the specific communicative strategy of CSR and the type of dialogue the students prefer. The operational hypothesis for this aim is:
- H2) The type of dialogue preferred by the students will be found to have a positive and statistically significant correlation with the type of scenario they were assigned.
- 3) To verify whether the differences among the scenarios influence the way students see the company. The operational hypothesis for this aim is:
- H3) Different perceived characteristics will be attributed to the company by the students, depending on the different scenarios they have been assigned.

Method

Participants and procedure

The survey was conducted from September to November 2013 on a sample of 167 students at Sapienza Università di Roma: 54 from the Economy Faculty, 65 from the Civil and Industrial Engineering Faculty, 48 from the Medicine and Psychology Faculty. The sample was balanced by gender (M=82; F=85); mean age was 23 years. Participants were asked to read an *ad hoc* created brochure presenting the fictional company “Wihkler” as a really existing one. Each participant randomly received only one of the different versions of the brochure, without knowing about the existence of the other versions. A self-report questionnaire was then administrated to the subjects. An additional section containing some open questions was also administrated, only to the Medicine and Psychology students (n=48).

Materials and measures

The brochure

The *ad hoc* created brochure presenting the fictional company Wihkler consists in four paragraphs: a first paragraph describing the company; a second paragraph presenting the company’s engagement in CSR; a third paragraph describing the company’s approach to CSR communication; a fourth paragraph informing about some open job positions. Five different versions of the brochure were created, appearing identical for length and layout. In order to manipulate the independent variable (the company’s approach to CSR communication), each version of the brochure presents different contents in the third paragraph. The different versions correspond to different scenarios, presenting increasing levels of involvement in the company’s CSR activities:

- *Scenario 0 (One-way communication)*: the company declares to engage in advertising its CSR activities, but in absence of dialogue with its employees and with the public.
- *Scenario 1 (Knowledge-oriented dialogue)*: the company declares to promote a dialogue which is oriented to acquire and exchange information and knowledge on CSR with its employees and with the public.
- *Scenario 2 (Innovation-oriented dialogue)*: the company declares to promote a dialogue which is oriented to develop new ideas and to innovate CSR with its employees and with the public.

- *Scenario 3 (Cooperation-oriented dialogue)*: the company declares to promote a dialogue which is oriented to consensus building and to promote cooperation on CSR with its employees and with the public.
- *Scenario 4 (Decision-oriented dialogue)*: the company declares to promote a dialogue which is oriented to strategy development and decision making on CSR with its employees and with the public.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire includes several scales and a final section concerning socio-demographic data (nationality, gender, age, place of birth, faculty, language skills, actual job position, exams' grade mean, year of academic course, desired job position).

Two types of manipulation check (Sigall & Mills, 1998) were used to measure the subjects' capability to differentiate among the five different scenarios. In the first, participants were asked to which extent they considered some concepts to be relevant in Wihkler's approach to CSR. Each of the four concepts to be assessed mapped the characteristics of one of the four scenarios where some type of dialogue on CSR was present (scenarios 1-4). In the second manipulation check, subjects were asked to which extent they considered Wihkler to be willing to hold a dialogue with its employees about its CSR activities. Answers to both items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (from "completely disagree" to "completely agree").

In order to measure EB dependent variables, 29 items on 7-point Likert-type scale (from "completely disagree" to "completely agree") were used. Eight items measured the company's attractiveness (five items adapted from Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar, 2003; three items taken from a scale created by Bonaiuto et al., 2010). A typical item is: "This company is an attractive job place for me". The company's perceived prestige was measured by five items adapted from Highhouse and colleagues (2003). An example is the item: "This is a respectable company to work for". In order to measure the intentions to contact the company a 5-item scale, adapted from Highhouse and colleagues (2003) was used. An example of item is: "I would accept a job offer by this company". In order to measure prospective engagement, subjects were asked to imagine to be hired by Wihkler. They were then asked to answer eleven items adapted from Saks (2006), of which five measured job engagement (e.g., "I would feel strongly involved in this job") and six measured organization engagement (e.g., "Being a member of this company would make me feel 'alive'"). Some of these items were phrased negatively so they were reverse-scored. In order to investigate the company's perceived characteristics, one open question was asked: "Which adjectives would you use to describe Wihkler?"

An additional measurement tool has been administrated only to Psychology students (n=48), in order to investigate a possible correspondence between the assigned scenario and the preference for that specific type of dialogue. One open question asked subjects to imagine to hold a dialogue on CSR with Wihkler and to indicate which among the four types of dialogue developed in the research they would prefer (scenarios 1-4).

All quantitative analyses were released using the SPSS version 21 software.

Preliminary analyses and results

In order to verify the structure of the constructs, Principal Component Analyses (PCAs) were run. Cronbach's α was calculated to test factor reliability. Pearson's correlation coefficient was then calculated for each couple of the individuated dimensions. Analyses have confirmed the reliability of the unidimensional constructs: attractiveness ($\alpha=0,91$); perceived prestige ($\alpha=0,86$); intentions to contact the company ($\alpha=0,83$). All items showed saturation over 0,63. These constructs have been found to positively correlate to each other as follows: attractiveness and perceived prestige ($r=0,65$; $p=0,01$), perceived prestige and intentions to contact the company ($r=0,55$; $p=0,01$), attractiveness and intentions to contact the company ($r=0,75$; $p=0,01$). A higher correlation has been found

between attractiveness and intentions to contact the company, confirming attractiveness as the main predictor of the subject's intention to contact the company (Highhouse et al., 2003), as expected. PCAs showed that prospective engagement ($\alpha=0,90$) is a unidimensional construct, contrary to the expectation of a possible distinction between job and organization engagement (Saks, 2006).

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run five times for the manipulation check: the dependent variable was the answer to one of the five items created to verify the reliability of the manipulation on the independent variable (CSR's communicative strategy). As for the first manipulation check, the group variable was the type of scenario the subjects were assigned; the dependent variable was the answer to the item: "To which extent do you think Wihkler is willing to hold a dialogue with its employees about its CSR activities?" ANOVA reports differences among the various groups' means, significant for $p<0,05$ ($F=3,52$, with $gdl=4$ and 52). In order to verify whether the subjects assigned to *Scenario 0 (One-way communication)* would present lower scores than the subjects assigned to the other four scenarios (corresponding to the four types of dialogue), the mean of the subjects belonging to the One-way communication group – the lowest among the five – was compared with the mean of the other four groups, which were combined. The result is significant for $p<0,05$, as expected. The manipulation check thus highlights that subjects are able to differentiate between a scenario with some type of dialogue from a scenario with no dialogue between company and employees. In the second ANOVA the dependent variable is the answer to the item asking whether "information and knowledge exchange" is a central concept in Wihkler's approach to CSR. The result is significant for $p<0,05$ ($F=5,55$, with $gdl=4$ and 166). The planned comparison between the mean of subjects assigned to *Scenario 1 (Knowledge-oriented dialogue)* and the means of the other three groups of subjects assigned to scenarios with other types of dialogue is significant, and the first group presents a higher mean. The analysis therefore shows that participants are able to differentiate between the knowledge-oriented dialogue and the other three types of dialogue. As for the three last variance analyses, the dependent variable are the answers to the items about "information and knowledge exchange", "innovation and development of new ideas", "consensus-building and cooperation", and "strategy development and decision making", as central concepts in Wihkler's approach to CSR.

The results of ANOVAs and of the correspondent planned comparisons are all significant for $p<0,05$, and they confirm that subjects are able to differentiate between the four types of dialogue, highlighting that each scenario, by using a specific communicative strategy, increases the subjects' perception of the relevance the company gives to that specific type of dialogue.

Main analyses and results

To test H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d, a series of ANOVAs was run. The group variable is the assigned scenario, and the dependent variable is each time one of the EB dimension. ANOVA reports the following effects for each EB dimension:

- H1a) Attractiveness: the difference among groups is not significant ($p<0,40$ with $F=1,02$ and $gdl=4$ and 165); group means are respectively (from Scenario 0 to Scenario 4) of 4,8; 4,3; 4,3; 4,4 and 4,3.
- H1b) Perceived prestige: the difference among groups is not significant ($p<0,36$ with $F=1,10$ and $gdl=4$ and 164); group means are respectively of 5,0; 4,7; 4,6; 4,8 and 4,4.
- H1c) Intentions to contact the company: the difference among groups is not significant ($p<0,41$ with $F=0,10$ and $gdl=4$ and 163); group means are respectively of 4,6; 4,8; 4,5; 4,3 and 4,3.
- H1d) Prospective engagement: the difference among groups is not significant ($p<0,33$ with $F=1,16$ and $gdl=4$ and 164); group means are respectively of 4,8; 4,4; 4,3; 5,0 and 4,4.

To test H2, the correlation was measured between the type of scenario and the type of dialogue preferred by students, with the rank correlation coefficient Spearman's *Rbo* of 0,33 ($p<0,05$)

if Scenario 0 is excluded from calculation. The coefficient indicates a moderate, positive and statistically significant correlation between the two dimensions. If Scenario 0 is included in calculation, the correlation is significant ($R_{ho}=0,25$ with $p<0,05$). If scenarios 0 and 1 are considered as belonging to the same level, the correlation's intensity is still significant ($R_{ho}=0,30$ with $p<0,05$). To measure the effect of the scenarios on the company's perceived characteristics, the adjectives participants used to describe the company were grouped in the following five representative semantic categories (via content analysis), in order to simplify analyses:

- *Innovative* (innovative, advanced, new, up-to-date, future-oriented, modern, progressive, dynamic, proactive);
- *Strong* (strong, strong identity, well structured, safe, reliable, confident, interesting, challenging, serious, respectable, determined, launched, ambitious);
- *Engaging* (engaging, cooperative, employee-oriented, dialogue with employees, constant confrontation, possibility to speak, horizontal hierarchy, open, open to new perspectives);
- *Transparent* (transparent, limpid, clear, linear, communicative, skilled in communicating);
- *Responsible* (responsible, attentive, caring, provident, sensitive to social issues, respectful toward employees, correct, committed, environment-friendly, ecologic, alternative consume development, green).

In order to verify whether adjectives would vary according to the scenario subjects were assigned, occurrences of each adjective category were then calculated in the answers given by subjects assigned to each scenario. Chi-squared tests and adjusted residuals were performed.

To reach a sufficiently high number of frequencies in the different groups, scenarios 0 and 1 were merged, as they can be considered equivalent in this context. The residuals presenting an absolute value equal or higher than 2 have been interpreted as significant differences (see Table 1).

Tabella 1. Table of contingency Adjective x Scenario

		Scenario				Total		
		<i>0+1 One-way communication + Knowledge- oriented dialogue</i>	<i>2 Innovation- oriented dialogue</i>	<i>3 Cooperation- oriented dialogue</i>	<i>4 Decision- oriented dialogue</i>			
Adjective	<i>Innovative</i>	Counting	18	9	5	7	39	
		Adjusted residuals	2,3	0,9	-0,8	-2,4		
	<i>Strong</i>	Counting	8	2	0	3	16	
		Adjusted residuals	1,7	-0,6	0,2	-1,3		
	<i>Engaging</i>	Counting	2	5	6	18	31	
		Adjusted residuals	-3,5	-0,3	-0,5	3,3		
	<i>Transparent</i>	Counting	9	4	1	1	15	
		Adjusted residuals	2,5	0,9	-1,1	-2,3		
	<i>Responsible</i>	Counting	5	4	7	15	31	
		Adjusted residuals	-2,1	-0,9	1	2		
	Total		Counting	42	24	22	44	132

The Chi-squared test appears significant for $p<0,01$, indicating that the scenario presented to the subjects influences the type of adjectives they use to describe the company. According to analyses, residuals with the highest absolute values are those crossing the categories *engaging* and Scenarios 0+1 (*One-way communication + Knowledge-oriented*) and 4 (*Decision-oriented dialogue*), highlighting

that subjects consider Scenarios 0 (*One-way communication*) and 1 (*Knowledge-oriented dialogue*) as significantly less engaging compared to the other ones, and in particular to Scenario 4 (*Decision-oriented dialogue*), which is instead considered highly engaging. The same trend is observed for the category *responsible*, although with a lower intensity: Scenarios 3 (*Cooperation-oriented dialogue*) and 4 (*Decision-oriented dialogue*), and 4 (*Decision-oriented dialogue*) in particular, make the company appear responsible. Other categories show a contrary trend, which appears stronger for the categories *innovative* and *transparent*: Scenarios 0 (*One-way communication*) and 1 (*Knowledge-oriented dialogue*) are considered more innovative and transparent compared to the scenarios with a higher rank.

It is worth highlighting that 44% of the Medicine and Psychology students (n=48), which participated to the phase of the research on the preferred dialogue have expressed a preference for the decision-oriented dialogue and only 6% for the knowledge-oriented dialogue. The remaining 50% of preferences is equally distributed among the other two types of dialogue. To verify that this distribution of frequencies was not random, observed frequencies have been compared to expected frequencies. The Chi-squared is significant for $p < 0,05$ ($\chi^2 = 7,855$ with $gdl = 3$), indicating that observed frequencies significantly differ from random distribution.

Discussion

This study allowed to investigate the impact of five communicative strategies of CSR on a company's EB. Results were entirely consistent with the hypotheses. All five scenarios present high levels of attractiveness (H1a), perceived prestige (H1b), and intentions to contact the company (H1c); in all five scenarios students also indicate that they would have a high level of job engagement if they would have a chance to be hired by the company (H1d). This result confirms the expectation that CSR communication can be considered a valid instrument of EB, irrespective of the way it is performed, reinforcing the findings of Bonaiuto et al. (2008, 2010, 2013), who claim that CSR is a relevant, persuasive and legitimate way of attracting and of winning high-potential persons' loyalty (Bonaiuto et al., 2008, 2010, 2013; Bhattacharya et al., 2008).

The positive correlation between the CSR communicative strategy and the type of dialogue preferred by students (H2) points out that the company's CSR communicative strategy affects the students' expectations and demands, highlighting that participants prefer a dialogic type of communication to one-way communication (Illia et al., 2015; Garcia-Marzà, 2005; Golob & Podnar, 2014; Morsing & Schults, 2006; Perret, 2003; Viviani, 2006). The last series of analyses indicate that the type of scenario assigned to subjects affects the type of adjectives they use to describe the company (H3).

The analysis of the adjectives used to describe the company shows that in low-involvement level scenarios the company is defined as innovative, transparent and strong; in high-involvement level scenarios it is considered engaging and responsible; the association of these two adjectives and their connection to the respective scenarios has a special scientific relevance, as it indicates that what makes a company really responsible in the eyes of the public is the stakeholders' involvement and equal confrontation. However, the methodology has not included a standard tool in order to assess the company's brand personality. This limit of the present study will be addressed by Study 2.

Study 2

Aims and hypotheses

The principal aim of Study 2 is to confirm and enlarge the findings emerged in Study 1, that is to measure the effects of a company's engagement in CSR communication on EB and on the company's perceived features, assessing them by Aaker's Brand Personality scale (1997). The study was conducted on a different sample, including students from two Italian Universities situated in two different cities, and therefore enlarging the perspective of Study 1 which considered students from a university in Rome only. This main aim is operationalized in the following two specific aims:

- 1) To measure the effects of a company's communicative strategies of CSR on its EB variables. As for Study 1 these hypotheses were confirmed, they were repeated here:
 - H4a) The five scenarios where some type of communication of CSR is present will all be found to have a high level of attractiveness, and there will be no significant differences among the scenarios as far as the attractiveness level is concerned.
 - H4b) The five scenarios where some type of communication of CSR is present will all be found to have a high level of perceived prestige, and there will be no significant differences among the scenarios as far as the level of perceived prestige is concerned.
 - H4c) The five scenarios where some type of communication of CSR is present will all be found to have a high level of intention to contact the company, and there will be no significant differences among the scenarios as far as the level of intention to contact the company is concerned.
 - H4d) Subjects assigned to the five scenarios will all be found to have a high level of prospective engagement (job engagement and organization engagement) and there will be no significant differences among the scenarios as far as the level of these two dimensions of prospective engagement is concerned.
- 2) To verify whether the different scenarios correspond to significant differences in the Brand Personality dimensions and in the attribution of the company's characteristics perceived by participants. It is thus expected that:
 - H5a) The scenarios where CSR communication is present will report different attributions of the company's characteristics, identified *via* open questions.
 - H5b) The five scenarios where CSR communication is present will report differences in some of the five Brand Personality factors, in facets and/or single traits described by the Aaker scale.

Method

Participants and procedure

The survey was conducted during April-May 2014 on a sample of 112 students from two universities in the Center-South of Italy: 56 from the Psychology Faculty of Università Europea di Roma; 56 from the Social Sciences Faculty of Università per Stranieri Dante Alighieri di Reggio Calabria. The sample was mainly composed of female participants (M=19; F=92); mean age was 28 years. As in Study 1, the 112 students were asked to read a brochure and then to fill in a questionnaire. However, data gathering was performed both paper-and-pencil (n=56) and online (n=56), with no significant differences between the two version.

Materials and measures

Materials and measures are similar to those used in Study 1. The same five versions of the brochure used for Study 1 (scenarios 0-4) were administrated, together with a self-report questionnaire, which used the same 7-point Likert scales, in order to measure attractiveness, perceived prestige, intentions to contact the company, and prospective engagement. In order to assess the perceived characteristics, the same open question of Study 1 was asked; brand personality was measured by the item "If Wihkler was a person, to which extent would each of the following adjectives describe it?" Subjects were asked to indicate a score on a 7-point Likert-type scale (from "not at all descriptive" to "very descriptive") for each of the 42 traits of Jennifer Aaker's Brand Personality scale (1997), translated in Italian (Fida, Sapere, Barbaranelli & Natali, 2010)

To measure to which extent the company appeared to be engaged in CSR in the eyes of participants, one item with a 7-point Likert-type scale (from "little" to "very") was used: "According to what you read on the brochure, how much do you think Wihkler is engaged in CSR?"

Data analysis and results

To measure the effects of the type of scenario on the EB dependent variables (H4a; H4b; H4c; H4d) the same analyses and software as in Study 1 were used. For each EB dimension the ANOVA shows that the difference among groups is not significant, as follows: attractiveness ($p < 0,816$ with $F = 0,389$ and $gdl = 4$ and 86) and group means respectively (scenarios 0 to 4): 4,3; 4,5; 4,8; 4,4; 4,7; prestige ($p < 0,761$ with $F = 0,465$ and $gdl = 4$ and 86) and group means (scenarios 0 to 4): 5,0; 4,8; 5,3; 5,0; 5,1; intentions ($p < 0,982$ with $F = 0,102$ and $gdl = 4$ and 86) and group means (scenarios 0 to 4): 4,5; 4,5; 4,7; 4,7; 4,6; perspective engagement (prob. $< 0,702$ con $F = 0,546$ and $gdl = 4$ and 86) and group means (scenarios 0 to 4): 4,7; 4,5; 4,7; 4,6; 5,0.

Similarly to Study 1, in order to test H5a, adjectives were grouped in the same five semantic categories (content analysis):

- *Innovative* (innovative, up-to-date, advanced, open to innovation, future-oriented, contemporary, creative, inventive, modern, modernized, new, original, progression, progressive, forward-thinking, -experimental, technological, improvement-oriented).
- *Strong* (competitive, consolidated, determined, motivated, organized, rough, rugged).
- *Engaging* (engaging, welcoming, fascinating, attentive, attractive, cooperative, communicative, collaborative, cooperative, to be better known, democratic, available, extroverted, young, ideal, interactive, interesting, international, inviting, excellent, pleasant, positive, proactive, relaxing, satisfying, challenging, united).
- *Transparent* (transparent, open, open to dialogue, open to confrontation, authentic, limpid, clear, honest).
- *Responsible* (responsible, reliable, environment-friendly, attentive, ecological, trust, enlightened, committed, socially committed, interested, laborious, socially-oriented, clean, healthy, sensitive, serious, sincere, solidary, socially useful, willing).

Occurrences of each category were then calculated in the answers given by subjects assigned to each scenario. Chi-squared tests and adjusted residuals were then performed.

The Chi-squared test appears not significant for $p = 0,503$, and none of the adjusted residuals presents an absolute value equal or higher than 2; therefore, observed frequencies do not significantly differ from expected frequencies (see Table 2).

Tabella 2. Table of contingency Adjective x Scenario

			Scenario					Total
			<i>0</i> <i>One-way communication</i>	<i>1</i> <i>Knowledge-oriented dialogue</i>	<i>2</i> <i>Innovation-oriented dialogue</i>	<i>3</i> <i>Cooperation-oriented dialogue</i>	<i>4</i> <i>Decision-oriented dialogue</i>	
Adjective	<i>Innovative</i>	Counting	9	7	8	5	8	37
		Adjusted residuals	0,2	0,1	-0,4	0	0,3	
	<i>Strong</i>	Counting	1	2	3	0	0	6
		Adjusted residuals	-0,4	1	1,5	-1	-1,3	
	<i>Engaging</i>	Counting	7	8	7	3	9	34
		Adjusted residuals	-0,5	0,9	-0,6	-1	1,1	
	<i>Transparent</i>	Counting	3	0	4	3	0	10
		Adjusted residuals	0,5	-1,6	1,2	1,6	-1,7	
	<i>Responsible</i>	Counting	6	5	2	4	5	22
		Adjusted residuals	0,5	0,6	-1,8	0,7	0,3	
Total		Counting	26	22	24	15	22	124

To measure the effect of the type of scenario on brand personality factors (H5b), the 42 traits were grouped in 15 facets and in the 5 factors identified by Aaker. A series of ANOVAs was run, where the scenario was the group variable and the five factors were each time the dependent variable. As regards factors, no significant differences are present in the means computed for the different scenarios, as reported in Table 3. However, tendencies seem to appear in factors *Excitement* and *Competence* (post-hoc pairwise comparisons: $p < 0,09$), so that Scenario 2 (*Innovation-oriented dialogue*) seems to lead to higher means compared to those of Scenario 3 (*Cooperation-oriented dialogue*).

Table 3. Effects on the 5 Brand Personality factors

Factor	p	F	Gdl	Scenario				
				0 <i>One-way communication</i>	1 <i>Knowledge-oriented dialogue</i>	2 <i>Innovation-oriented dialogue</i>	3 <i>Cooperation-oriented dialogue</i>	4 <i>Decision-oriented dialogue</i>
<i>Sincerity</i>	<0,262	F=1,340	4 and 86	4,6	4,4	4,7	4,3	5,0
<i>Excitement</i>	<0,064	F=2,309	4 and 86	4,8	4,6	5,3	4,5	5,2
<i>Competence</i>	<0,063	F=2,325	4 and 86	5,4	5,0	5,7	4,9	5,6
<i>Sophistication</i>	<0,117	F=1,904	4 and 86	4,0	3,6	4,1	3,7	4,4
<i>Ruggedness</i>	<0,910	F=0,248	4 and 86	4,3	4,1	4,1	4,0	4,1

As regards facets, the company is perceived significantly more *Imaginative* using Scenario 2 (*Innovation-oriented dialogue*) than Scenario 3 (*Cooperation-oriented dialogue*), as reported by Table 4. It is worth noticing that this facet is included in the framework of the factor *Excitement*, for which a relevant tendency had emerged.

Table 4. Effects on the Brand Personality facets

<i>The company is perceived mainly as ...</i>	<i>... if it uses scenario...</i>	<i>... compared to scenario...</i>	p	F	gdl
Imaginative	<i>Innovation-oriented dialogue</i> (M=5,1)	<i>Cooperation-oriented dialogue</i> (M=3,4)	0,016	3,216	4 and 86

As regards traits, Table 5 reports the following results: the company is perceived significantly more *Imaginative* using Scenario 2 (*Innovation-oriented dialogue*) than Scenario 3 (*Cooperation-oriented dialogue*). It is instead perceived more *Young* using Scenario 2 than Scenario 0 (*One-way communication*). It is worth noticing that, in Aaker's framework, these traits are included in factors which showed interesting tendencies: *Young* and *Imaginative* are included in factor *Excitement*; *Leader* is included in factor *Competence*.

Table 5. Effects on the Brand Personality traits

<i>The company is perceived mainly as...</i>	<i>... if it uses scenario...</i>	<i>... compared to scenario...</i>	p	F	gdl
Imaginative	<i>Innovation-oriented dialogue</i> (M=5,1)	<i>Cooperation-oriented dialogue</i> (M=3,3)	0,022	3,030	4 and 86
Young	<i>Innovation-oriented dialogue</i> (M=6)	<i>One-way communication</i> (M=4,4)	0,039	2,638	4 and 86
Leader	<i>Innovation-oriented dialogue</i> (M=5,7)	<i>Cooperation-oriented dialogue</i> (M=4,4)	0,037	2,679	4 and 86

Discussion

The principal aim of Study 2 is to enlarge the findings of Study 1, investigating the effects of five different CSR communicative strategies on a company's EB as well as assessing its brand personality, on a different sample of university students.

Analyses report a high level of attractiveness (H4a), perceived prestige (H4b), intention to contact the company (H4c) and prospective engagement (H4d) in all scenarios, confirming the same hypotheses as those of Study 1. Results are thus consistent with expectations and with the literature, as they show that a company's engagement in CSR affects EB variables (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Bonaiuto et al., 2008, 2010, 2013). As expected, results report differences for some of the Brand Personality factors, facets and traits, highlighting that some of the considered scenarios find a correspondence in the adjective categories assigned by the participants to the company, affecting their perception and opinion toward the company (H5a).

As for Brand Personality traits, significant differences seem to emerge: the company is perceived as more imaginative, young and leader if it communicates CSR using a type of dialogue which is oriented to innovation and to the development of new ideas (H5b).

Conclusion

Engaging in CSR activities seems to be an effective instrument in a company's EB strategy (Bonaiuto et al., 2008, 2010, 2013; Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Empirical studies indicate that CSR's effectiveness as a company's strategic and competitive approach is mediated by the company's communication of CSR activities to stakeholders (Du et al., 2010). All hypotheses presented in both studies of the present research have been confirmed, pointing out, consistently with the literature, that the five communication strategies of CSR, ranking according to an increasing level of involvement of stakeholders in the company's CSR, produce significant effects on some of the EB dimensions, thus confirming that communicating CSR is an effective way to attract, to arouse specific expectations, intentions and prospective engagement and to make the company look prestigious to a public of potential future employees (Bonaiuto et al., 2008; 2010; 2013; Du et al., 2010). Companies interested in attracting and motivating talent people should therefore consider the opportunity of communicating their CSR activities in an exhaustive and effective way, employing different communicative strategies depending on the public's specific demands and on the company's features and resources. Results also point out that students prefer types of dialogue implying a strong involvement of employees in CSR policies and strategies, confirming dialogic types of communication as the most effective ways of communicating CSR (Illia et al., 2015; Garcia-Marzà, 2005; Golob & Podnar, 2014; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Perret, 2003; Viviani, 2006). Hence, a company willing to involve its employees in CSR activities should most importantly communicate its CSR in an engaging and dialogic way. This involvement of employees can grant relevant benefits to the company: an increased productivity and effectiveness (Perrini & Vurro, 2010), the legitimacy of its activities (Schoeneborn, Trittin & Scherer, 2011), the certainty of being engaged in campaigns which are significant to stakeholders, and an increased employees' sense of belonging to the organization (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Results also indicate that different communicative strategies of CSR affect the way students of different universities see the company, thus determining the company's perceived brand personality. As observed, knowing the personality traits stakeholders assign to the company is particularly relevant, as these attributions constitute the basis for building a consistent and distinctive brand identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

This research however presents some limits. The methodology has not considered a scenario where the CSR communication was completely absent; it was thus not possible to isolate the effect of CSR communication from other features in the brochure. Moreover, the research was based on a fictive company's CSR communication, and not on really existing companies employing different levels of engagement in CSR policies. The *ad hoc* created brochure was thus the only source of information about the company: the visual and descriptive features presenting the company are

identical in the different versions of the brochure, and they are differentiated only by the contents about CSR. This difference might not be sufficient in significantly affecting the brand personality perception, which might be influenced by other marketing variables, such as images, packaging etc. (Batra, Lehmann & Singh, 1993; Plummer, 1995). It would be therefore useful to develop the research conducting a study within an actual context and by adding a scenario without references to CSR, in order to actually isolate CSR's contribution *per se*, and to assess possible results of a comparison between the EB of companies engaged in CSR communication and that of companies not engaged in this direction. Moreover, further investigations may concern the possible role of CSR communication on different types of stakeholders – e.g., employed persons – as students are only one of the possible communication and marketing targets (Illia et al., 2013), although particularly relevant as possible future internal stakeholders (Padula, 2007). Another promising venue for future studies is investigating the possibility for companies to hold a dialogue on CSR simultaneously with different stakeholders, playing a crucial mediator role among different social institutions in creating opportunities for a sustainable development (Wang, 2011).

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Acknowledgements

Authors wish to thank Dario Toffoli who gathered data for Study 1 when he was a student at Sapienza Università di Roma, supervised by the last Author. Authors wish to thank Sister Angiola De Maio for her English language revision and Sister Mariarosaria Condello for her graphic and textual formatting.