Examining the impact of advertising vs. public relations in consumer engagement with social responsibility

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Abstract

Both advertising and public relations play important roles in the organisational communication matrix, though a clear advantage of one over the other has been elusive. Public relations professionals often view their activities with media relations as being more credible; however, multiple studies have found very little difference in how audiences perceive organisational messaging. To date, no scholarly research has examined differences in consumer perceptions with regard to how consumers receive information about organisations' socially responsible practices, specifically. This study sought to examine how consumers might engage with organisations differently based on which communication vehicle is used to share information about socially responsible activities. Further, this research examines how controversy, with respect to the emergent concept of corporate social advocacy, impacts organisational outcomes. It finds that ethical perceptions of organisations may be related to their involvement with controversial messaging, though the study did not find a significant difference based on communication vehicle.

Introduction

Both advertising and public relations play important roles in the organisational communication matrix, and though each has been explored both separately and together as part of an organisation's outreach efforts (Nowak & Phelps, 1994; Swain, 2004), there has been little reconciliation of the impact of each medium on audience perceptions. Public relations professionals often view their activities with media relations as being more credible (Jo, 2004); however, multiple studies (Hallahan, 1999; Michaelson & Stacks, 2007)

have found very little difference in how audiences perceive organisational messaging, whether it be advertising or editorial content. To date, however, no scholarly research has examined differences in consumer perceptions with regard to how they receive information about organisations' socially responsible practices, specifically.

Socially responsible activities and practices often create a perception of an organisation in the mind of consumers, particularly for consumers who are actively seeking organisations that share similar values as themselves, known as homophily (McCroskey, Richmond & Daly, 1975). Furthermore, organisations are often expected to showcase their activities, including forays into the realm of the social conscience (DiStaso & Messner, 2010). Therefore, this study seeks to understand how organisations can best communicate their socially responsible business practices with consumers, to have the largest impact not only on the consumers' perceptions, but on the organisational bottom line as well.

This study also addresses an element of socially responsible business practices that, thus far, remains relatively unexplored in the literature. As more organisations engage in what Dodd & Supa (2014) refer to as corporate social advocacy, there is a greater likelihood of participating in societal conversations surrounding controversial topics. This study seeks to determine the impact controversy (with regard to communication surrounding controversial topics) has on consumers' perceptions of an organisation. The first goal of this study is to advance the literature by exploring the impact of communication vehicle (advertising or editorial placement), its relation to controversial topics, and the resulting impact on consumer perceptions. The second goal of this study is to determine how organisations can best communicate their organisational positions

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surrounding both controversial and non-controversial socially responsible practices, so that they are perceived as ethical and to increase engagement with their audiences.

Literature review

This study seeks to build on previous research that has examined the comparative effectiveness of communication using either advertising or public relations (editorial). The basic assumption taken in both this study and previous research on this topic is that public relations can have an impact on content produced by mass media outlets. This has been found to be the case in multiple studies that have examined the media relations' function of public relations (Gandy, 1982; Zoch & Molleda, 2006).

Differences between advertising and public relations

Differences between advertising and public relations have been explored with regard to consumer involvement (Jo, 2004), multiplier effects of cognitive processing and retention (Michaelson & Stacks, 2007), value equivalency (Jeffries-Fox, 2003), and the use of integrated marketing (Perkins, Algren & Eichorn, 2009; Smith, 2007). Much anecdotal information seems to point to public relations messaging, or editorial placements, as having a significant advantage over advertisements. However, as Jo (2004) points out, multiple studies have failed to confirm this. Hallahan (1999) argued against the 'implied third party-endorsement' effect, indicating that consumers were no more likely to 'believe' editorial versus advertising, though he did indicate more consumers held an innate bias against advertising as compared to editorial. Vercic, Vercic & Laco (2008) confirmed Hallahan's findings, but also found that behavioural intention and attitudes were not impacted, only credibility. The authors hypothesised that because credibility is communication-based, it can be more easily influenced by not only the message, but potentially the medium as well.

Jo (2004) found that advertising actually had a greater impact on consumers in weaker arguments, though both advertising and editorial had similar effects with strong arguments, thus leading to the conclusion that the message (argument quality) was more impactful than the medium. This study also looked at the impact from a variety of factors, including believability, attitude toward message, attitude toward brand, purchase intention and brand recall, leading the researchers to determine that editorial messages often carry more weight with consumers if there is a strong argument presented, though advertising is more impactful when a weak argument is presented.

Michaelson and Stacks (2007) examined, through a meta-analysis, various issues that have existed in the literature when comparing the relative strengths of advertising and public relations. They found that methodological, experimental and theoretical issues have caused problems in research that has attempted to show either advertising or public relations as having a distinct advantage over the other. Their own study found no significant differences between the communication vehicles, and in fact, both advertising and editorial placements performed similarly across the elements of awareness, information, purchase intention and credibility.

Taken as a whole, the extant literature surrounding public relations and advertising has failed to show a significant advantage of one over the other. However, no research was found that addressed how an organisation's presentation of social responsibility was perceived by consumers as it related to messages being presented either in advertising or editorial. In other words, the literature shows few differences between advertising and public relations with regard to purely promotional messaging, but has yet to examine messaging that is not product-related.

Communicating social responsibility

In the realm of organisations communicating about socially responsible activities, three main tracts emerge as prevalent in the literature: strategic issues management, corporate social responsibility, and corporate social advocacy. Heath and Palenchar (2009) explain that *strategic issues management* is of particular interest, as it is driven by organisational legitimacy expressed through the eyes of stakeholders. The researchers point out that different stakeholder groups hold the power to

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legitimise different organisational behaviours, thus, differing stakeholder groups have the ability to impact multiple goals within the organisation. For the current study, this idea is of paramount importance, particularly with regard to how diverse stakeholder groups may hold varying opinions on the level of controversy associated with a particular topic.

Corporate social responsibility is defined as "incurring responsibilities to society beyond profit maximization" (Pava & Krausz, 1995, p. 1). It has been a topic of great interest to public relations scholars for more than 30 years, and has been examined from the perspective of consumer choice (Robinson, Irmak & Jayachandran, 2012), purchase intention (Dodd & Supa, 2011; Cornwell & Coote, 2005), economic responsibilities (Carrol, 1991), and management (Duhe, 2009). Overall, the literature has yet to find a definitive link between CSR and financial performance, though many organisations' CEOs have indicated that CSR is a "requirement to provide shareholders with a return on investment" (Beauchamp & O'Connor, 2012, p. 495).

Financial indicators aside, CSR can be viewed as an organisation's desire to do what is right, and often uses such activities to engage stakeholder groups, either through event sponsorships, participation in fair labour practices, or making monetary commitments to causes of interest and relevance to the organisation.

The latest tract of research that has gained attention in both academic and trade literature is *corporate social advocacy*, defined as the taking of a public stance on an issue by an organisation. Dodd and Supa (2014) identified CSA as being related, but separate from strategic issues management and corporate social responsibility in three ways: (1) the social issue addressed by the organisation is not directly tied-in to the organisation; (2) there is a potential to both engage and alienate organisational stakeholders, in other words, the social issue contains a level of controversy; and (3) there is a necessary emphasis on financial implications and organisational goal achievement as a result of the taking of a stance.

The literature clearly indicates much scholarly interest in how organisations communicate about socially responsible actions. The topics of *why* organisations participate in and communicate about socially responsible practices, as well as *how* they use varying message strategies to do so has been explored (Kitchen, Kim, & Schultz, 2008). Further, the financial outcomes of that communication have been explored at length (Roman, Hayibor, & Agle, 1999; Schuler & Cording, 2006). Yet, little research has examined the medium in which those messages are disseminated and the potential impact of the medium on consumer perceptions of socially responsible practices.

Communicating controversy

Disseminating information to the public that will knowingly be met with radically opposing publics often elicits images of an organisation in crisis. In this area, much research has explored the impact of a crisis on organisations, as well as how organisations can best communicate during such instances (Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2001). However, communicating controversial messages is not necessarily tied to crisis, and in the case of this study, more accurately falls into the category of advocacy communication, save that the advocacy may have an equal number of detractors.

There are limited studies that have addressed organisations that choose to purposely partake in communicating controversy. Those studies that have addressed controversial communication often are found to include controversial practices, such as fracking (Boudet et al., 2014), controversial legislation (Fahy, Trench, & Clancy, 2012) or a combination of practices and policy (Eklof & Mager, 2013). Dodd & Supa (2014) first analysed corporate social advocacy by examining how consumers felt about organisational statements regarding same-sex marriage, emergency contraception, and health care reform. They found consumers were more likely to purchase from organisations that held similar stances to their own on controversial topics.

A search of the literature found no studies that addressed controversial communication as

a part of organisational strategic planning; though risk management, reputation management and cost-benefit analysis are all recurring themes, and are important elements of controversial communication. Therefore, we argue that controversial communication, as a part of an organisation's overall communication goals, is an important avenue of research.

Assessing consumer perception

While there is no single scale that has been created to comprehensively examine consumers' perceptions about an organisation, and specifically about how an organisation communicates with its audiences, multiple scholars have developed methods of examining particular dimensions of consumer sentiment. Reidenbach and Robin (1990) sought a three-dimension approach to ethics, using *broad-based moral equity, relativism*, and *a contractual* dimension to examine how consumers felt about an organisation's ethical qualities, with the assumption that the greater the perceived ethics of an organisation, the more likely it would be that consumers would choose to engage with that organisation. Yang and Kang (2009) sought to investigate consumer engagement with organisational communication via five dimensions, those being: *Believability, attitude toward message, attitude toward brand, attitude toward company*, and *word-of-mouth* [intent to] *communicate*. Jo (2004) had used similar dimensions, but added *brand recall* and *purchase intention* as dimensions. Michaelson and Stacks (2007) similarly used *purchase intention*, but also added *homophily* and its two dimensions, *attitudinal homophily* (where people seek others like them) and *behavioural homophily* (where people expect people to act as they do).

Taken as a whole, the literature clearly indicates there are multiple dimensions toward understanding consumer attitudes toward organisations, particularly with regard to how those organisations structure their communication and manage their messages. In particular, examining the impact of messaging crosses multiple dimensions, particularly with regard to ethics and engagement, which may be heightened more so if the organisation is engaging in controversial messaging.

Thus, the following research questions are posed with regard to the communication vehicle and corporate engagement in controversial issues.

RQ1: Is there a difference in how American consumers perceive corporate ethics per (a) the communication vehicle (advertising or editorial placement) and (b) the level of controversy?

RQ2: Is there a difference in how American consumers perceive homophily with a company dependent upon (a) the communication vehicle (advertising or editorial placement) and (b) the level of controversy?

RQ3: Is there a difference in how American consumers perceive messages about a company's socially responsible initiatives dependent upon (a) the communication vehicle (advertising or editorial placement) and (b) the level of controversy?

RQ4: Is there a difference in American consumers' positive word-of-mouth intentions per (a) the communication vehicle (advertising or editorial placement) and (b) the level of controversy?

RQ5: Is there a difference in American consumers' positive purchase intentions per (a) the communication vehicle (advertising or editorial placement) and (b) the level of controversy?

Methodology

To address these questions, this study employed a 2 (advertising or editorial) x 2 (controversial or non-controversial) between subjects experimental design among a probability U.S. sample of consumers. Participants were randomly exposed to one of two potential stimuli (advertisement or editorial) depicting one of two possible organisations (Absolut or Valle Air Flow, the latter of which was a fictional company). This resulted in a total of four potential conditions where participants were exposed to organisational messaging surrounding CSR.

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Context has been cited as an important consideration for the discussion surrounding the impacts of advertising versus editorial content. Michaelson and Stacks (2007, p.3) conceptualised that "situation", which refers to "the type of public relations being practiced – marketing to corporate" – and "communication nature", which refers to "whether the promotional materials are controlled or uncontrolled by the practitioner", should impact third-party endorsement. Results of the researchers' work found that advertising and editorial placements were equally impactful regarding awareness, intention to purchase, and perceived credibility for a fictitious consumer company. They concluded, however, that context remained an important consideration for future research.

Our research sought to provide a specific context (corporate social responsibility), communication vehicle (advertisement or editorial), and message approach (traditional or controversial). Using experimental survey research, this research sought to determine if significant effects existed between advertising and editorial placement in the context of traditional and controversial messaging for corporate social responsibility. Communication vehicle categories include: advertising and editorial content. The controversy of messaging refers to traditional CSR messaging (e.g., environmental sustainability) as opposed to controversial stances on social-political issues, termed *corporate social advocacy*, (e.g., for the issue of same-sex marriage).

This research used both a fictitious company (Valle Air Flow) akin to Michaelson and Stacks' (2007) experiment, as well as an actual company (Absolut Vodka). In our research, the condition using the real company – Absolut – represented an edgier product with more controversial CSA messaging, whereas the fictitious company, Valle Air Flow, represented an unexciting company, with more traditional CSR messaging. We controlled for perceptions of the company and product in all analyses in order to rule out the potential confounding impacts of these variables on dependent variables. Scales were adapted from Yang and Kang (2009) and realised acceptable Cronbach's alpha reliabilities: perceptions of the company (alpha > .91) and perceptions of the product (alpha > .96).

For Absolut Vodka, the stimulus used was a print advertisement produced in 2011, entitled 'Absolut Outrageous', and showing support for same-sex relationships (marriage). The editorial was taken from a *CBS News* article, though the appearance was changed to give it the look of a traditional newspaper article. The article discussed Absolut's commitment to the gay community over the past 30 years. For Valle Air Flow, a public relations writing and graphic consultant with 11 years of experience in both advertising design and promotional writing created an advertisement of similar size and characteristic (both were big-picture format with minimal text) and also a 'news' article written to similar length and style to the Absolut editorial. The Valle Air Flow advertisement and editorial showcased the organisation's commitment to helping the environment and to giving back to the community.

Sampling

The online survey link was distributed to a random national sample of U.S. consumers, ages 21 and older, who are panel participants of a private research firm. The issue of sampling has been particularly salient in this stream of research that has focused largely on student samples, which has confounded results (Grunig, 2000; Lindenmann, 1997; Michaelson & Stacks, 2007). Participants received an honorarium from the research firm for completing the survey. The data collection period lasted 48 hours (June 15-17, 2014), resulting in a total of 555 completed surveys.

Our research obtained a diverse sample. Participants were evenly split with regard to gender: female (49.9%, n=277) and male (49.2%, n=273) and evenly distributed with regard to age: 21-25 (14.6%, n=81); 26-35 (20.5%, n=114); 36-45 (21.3%, n=118); 46-55 (19.3%, n=107); 56 or older (24.1%, n=134). Participants indicated that they were white (66.7%, n=370), black (13.5%, n=75), Hispanic (11.5%, n=64), Asian (5.9%, n=33), and 'other' (2.2%, n=12). Participants also indicted the following annual incomes: $25,000 or less (24.1%, n=134); $25,001-50,000 (25.4%,

n=141); \$50,001-75,000 (18.9%, n=105); \$75,000 or more (23.6%, n=131).

Procedure

After being randomly exposed to one of four potential prompts, participants were asked to respond using 5-point semantic differential and Likert-type questions regarding perceived ethics (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990); perceived engagement in CSR (adapted from Yang & Kang, 2009); homophily (Michaelson & Stacks, 2007); word of mouth intentions (Yang & Kang, 2009); and purchase intentions (Michaelson & Stacks, 2007). Last, participants were asked to self-identify demographic information to include: age, gender, marital status, children, education, race/ethnicity, income, and political affiliation.

Responses were entered into SPSS for Windows, and preliminary analyses revealed acceptable Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for all measures used in this research: perceived ethics (alpha > .94); perceived engagement in CSR (alpha >.94); homophily (alpha >.93): word-of-mouth intentions (alpha >.96); and purchase intentions (alpha >.87) For each research question, a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to determine if statistically significant differences existed between communication vehicle conditions (advertising or editorial) and controversial messaging conditions (traditional or controversial) while controlling for perceptions of the company and the product.

Manipulation checks

As a check for the believability of our experimental conditions, participants responded to three items. A manipulation check found that for both companies across the advertisement and editorial conditions, participants generally agreed that the content was accurate (M=3.76, SD=1.03; the content was believable (M=3.77, SD = 1.09), and that the companies had been presented honestly (M=3.64, SD=.95).

Results

Research question one sought to determine if significant effects existed for advertising-editorial content and controversy conditions regarding perceptions of corporate ethics. Results found that once means had been adjusted for covariates, there was a significant effect for advertising-editorial content on perceptions of corporate ethics, F (1, 548) = 6.33, p<.05, partial η^2 = .01. When controlling for covariates participants evaluated the advertisements (M=3.93, SD=.03) significantly higher with regard to perceptions of corporate ethics by companies than the editorial content (M=3.81, SD=.03).

Similarly, there was a significant effect for the controversy conditions, F (1, 548) = 35.78, p<.01, partial η^2 = .06. When controlling for covariates participants evaluated traditional messaging (M=4.02, SD=.04) significantly higher with regard to perceptions of corporate ethics than controversial messaging (M=3.72, SD=.03).

A significant interaction effect was also found between the content and controversy conditions for perceptions of corporate ethics F (1, 548) = 15.54, p<.01, partial η^2 = .03. Participants that were exposed to traditional messaging via advertisement evaluated corporate ethics most highly overall (M=4.18, SD=.05), and those participants who were exposed to controversial messaging via advertisement evaluated corporate ethics least highly overall (M=3.68, SD=.05). Similarly, the traditional messaging editorial (M=3.86, SD=.05). was evaluated more highly than the controversial messaging editorial (M=3.75, SD=.05).

Because the ethics measure contained three dimensions and realised significant main and interaction effects across both the content and controversy categories, a post-hoc multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed in order to determine if significant effects existed with regard to the three ethics dimensions: broad-based moral equity, relativism, and contractualism (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990).

Results found that once means had been adjusted for covariates, there was a significant effect for advertising-editorial content on relativistic, F (1, 548) = 31.40, p<.001, partial η^2 = .05, and contractual dimensions F (1, 548) = 4.61, p<.05, partial η^2 = .01. There was no significant effect for advertising-editorial content on the equity dimension. When controlling for covariates participants evaluated

the advertisements (M=3.93, SD=.05) significantly higher with regard to the relativistic dimension of ethics than they did the editorial content (M=3.55, SD=.05). Likewise, participants evaluated the contractual dimension of ethics significantly higher for the advertisements (M=3.99, SD=.05) than they did the editorial content (M=3.85, SD=.05).

Similarly, for the post-hoc measures, there was a significant effect for the controversy conditions across all three dimensions: equity, F (1, 548) = 32.05, p<.01, partial η^2 = .06; relativism F (1, 548) = 40.38, p<.01, partial η^2 = .07; and contractualism F (1, 548) = 6.40, p<.05, partial η^2 = .01. When controlling for covariates participants evaluated each of the three ethical dimensions more highly for the traditional messaging condition than for the controversial messaging condition: equity dimension, traditional (M=4.05, SD=.04) and controversial (M=3.76, SD=.04); relativistic dimension, traditional (M=3.95, SD=.05) and controversial (M=3.52, SD=.05); and contractual dimension, traditional (M=4.00, SD=.05) and controversial (M=3.83, SD=.05).

A significant interaction effect was also found between the content and controversy conditions for the equity dimension, F (1, 548) = 23.40, p<.01, partial η^2 = .04, and contractual dimension, F (1, 548) = 6.61, p<.05, partial η^2 = .01, of ethics. Regarding the equity dimension, participants who were exposed to the traditional messaging via advertisement evaluated equity most highly overall (M=4.17, SD=.05), and those participants who were exposed to the controversial messaging advertisement evaluated equity least highly overall (M=3.63, SD=.05). Similarly, the traditional messaging editorial (M=3.94, SD=.05). was evaluated more highly than the controversial messaging editorial (M=3.89, SD=.05) for the equity dimension of ethics.

Regarding the contractual dimension, participants who were exposed to traditional messaging via advertisement evaluated the contractual dimension of ethics most highly overall (M=4.16, SD=.07), and those participants who were exposed to controversial messaging via advertisement evaluated the contractual dimension least highly overall (M=3.82, SD=.07). The traditional messaging

editorial (M=3.85, SD=.07) was evaluated equivalently to the controversial messaging editorial (M=3.85, SD=.07) for the contractual dimension of ethics.

Research question two sought to determine if significant effects existed for advertising-editorial content and controversy conditions regarding perceptions of homophily. Results found that once means had been adjusted for covariates, there was *not* a significant effect for advertising-editorial content for participants' perceptions of homophily (p>.05). However, there was a significant effect for the controversy condition regarding perceptions of homophily F (1, 548) = 4.10, p<.05, partial η^2 = .01.

When controlling for covariates, participants in the traditional message content condition evaluated their perceptions of homophily more highly (M=3.45, SD=.03) than those in the controversial message condition (M=3.36, SD=.03).

There was also a significant interaction effect between the advertising-editorial content and controversy conditions for perceptions of homophily, F (1, 548) = 6.45, p<.05, partial η^2 = .01. Participants who were exposed to the traditional editorial evaluated homophily most highly overall (M=3.52, SD=.05), and those participants who were exposed to the controversial editorial evaluated homophily the least highly overall (M=3.32, SD=.05). The controversial messaging advertisement, however, was evaluated more highly (M=3.41, SD=.04) than the traditional messaging advertisement (M=3.39, SD=.04) regarding homophily.

Because the homophily measure contained two dimensions and realised a significant main effect (controversy condition) and content-controversy interaction effect, a post-hoc MANOVA was performed in order to determine if significant effects existed within the homophily dimensions specified by Michaelson and Stacks (2007): credibility (ethos related to authoritativeness and character from McCroskey & McCain, 1974) and homophily (attitudinal and behavioural).

Results found that once means had been adjusted for covariates, there was a significant effect for advertising-editorial content on the

credibility dimension $F (1, 548) = 5.14$, $p<.05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Participants evaluated the editorials significantly higher ($M=3.57$, $SD=.03$) with regard to homophily as credibility than the advertisements ($M=3.47$, $SD=.03$).

Interestingly, results also found a significant effect for the controversy condition for the homophily (attitudinal and behavioural) dimension $F (1, 548) = 8.96$, $p<.01$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Participants evaluated traditional messaging significantly higher ($M=3.35$, $SD=.04$) with regard to homophily than the controversial messaging ($M=3.16$, $SD=.04$).

A significant interaction effect was also found between the content and controversy conditions for both homophily dimensions: credibility, $F (1, 548) = 4.13$, $p<.05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$., and attitudinal and behavioural homophily, $F (1, 548) = 5.56$, $p<.05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Regarding the credibility dimension, participants who were exposed to the traditional messaging via editorial content evaluated this dimension of homophily most highly overall ($M=3.62$, $SD=.04$), and those participants who were exposed to the traditional advertisement evaluated credibility the least highly overall ($M=3.44$, $SD=.04$). By contrast, the controversial editorial ($M=3.52$, $SD=.04$) was evaluated more highly than the controversial advertisement ($M=3.51$, $SD=.04$) with regard to credibility as homophily.

Likewise, with regard to the attitudinal-behavioural homophily dimension, participants who were exposed to traditional messaging via editorial content evaluated this dimension most highly overall ($M=3.38$, $SD=.06$), and those participants who were exposed to the controversial editorial evaluated the dimension least highly overall ($M=3.05$, $SD=.07$). Similarly, the traditional messaging advertisement ($M=3.31$, $SD=.06$) was evaluated more highly than the controversial messaging advertisement ($M=3.27$, $SD=.06$) for the attitudinal-behavioural dimension of homophily.

Research question three sought to determine if significant effects existed for advertising-editorial content and controversy conditions regarding positive perceptions toward the company's CSR messages. Results found that once means had been adjusted for covariates,

there was a significant effect for advertising-editorial content on message perceptions, $F (1, 548) = 4.67$, $p<.05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. When controlling for covariates participants evaluated the advertisements ($M=3.79$, $SD=.03$) significantly higher with regard to positive perceptions toward the company's CSR message than the editorial content ($M=3.69$, $SD=.03$).

Similarly, there was a significant effect for the controversy conditions, $F (1, 548) = 8.47$, $p<.05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. When controlling for covariates participants evaluated the controversial messages ($M=3.81$, $SD=.03$) significantly higher with regard to positive perceptions toward the company's CSR message than the traditional messages ($M=3.67$, $SD=.03$).

A significant interaction effect was also found between the content and controversy conditions for positive perceptions toward the company's CSR message, $F (1, 548) = 6.67$, $p<.05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Participants that were exposed to controversial messaging via advertisement evaluated positive perceptions of the CSR message the most highly overall ($M=3.92$, $SD=.05$), and those participants who were exposed to traditional messaging via advertisement evaluated positive perceptions toward the CSR message least highly overall ($M=3.66$, $SD=.05$). Similarly, the controversial message editorial ($M=3.70$, $SD=.05$). was evaluated more highly than the traditional message editorial ($M=3.68$, $SD=.05$).

Research question four sought to determine if significant effects existed for advertising-editorial content and controversy conditions regarding positive word-of-mouth intentions. Results found that once means had been adjusted for covariates, there was a significant effect for advertising-editorial content on intentions to spread the word, $F (1, 548) = 7.45$, $p<.05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, but no significant effects for the controversy conditions ($p >.05$). There were also no interaction effects between the content and controversy conditions ($p >.05$).

When controlling for covariates, participants in the editorial content condition evaluated their intentions to engage in positive word-of-mouth behaviours more highly ($M=3.54$, $SD=.03$) than

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those in the advertisement condition (*M*=3.44, *SD*=.03).

Research question five sought to determine if significant effects existed for advertising-editorial content and controversy conditions regarding positive purchase intentions. Results found that once means had been adjusted for covariates, there was not a significant effect for advertising-editorial content or controversial messaging conditions for participants' intention to purchase (*p* >.05).

Discussion

Taken together, this study presents many worthwhile avenues for discussion. Based on the overall patterns of effects that emerged from the communication vehicle and controversy of messages (and interactions between the two), in the context of CSR, the controversy of messaging appears to demonstrate more consistent results than did communication vehicle. For example, participants perceived ethics – across dimensions – more highly when messages were traditional, as well as with regard to attitudinal homophily.

Unpacking this, ethics is broadly understood as morally appropriate behaviours or perceptions of what 'should' be done given a specific situation. Our research focused on a multidimensional measure of ethics. According to Reidenbach and Robin (1990), "individuals use more than one rationale in making ethical judgments" (p. 639). The researchers validated a three-dimensional scale for behavioural predictive ethics: broad-based moral equity, relativistic, and contractual. They state, "This approach for measuring the ethical judgment construct also allows the researcher to go beyond a simplistic understanding of 'what' the respondent believes and begin the process of understanding 'why' he/she believes it. It thus fosters a scientific understanding of the process" (p. 640).

First, the broad-based moral equity dimension is cited as the most complex and impactful. It refers to a broad and normative individual understanding of morality, concerned with "many forms of belief about right and wrong human conduct" (Beauchamp,

1982, p. 5). The relativistic dimension refers to "guidelines, requirements, and parameters inherent in the social/cultural system than with individual considerations" (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990, p. 646). And, the third dimension – contractualism – is "a purely deontological dimension wherein notions of implied obligation, contracts, duties and rules are present" (p. 646).

Across all three dimensions of ethics, traditional CSR messaging was evaluated as demonstrative of higher levels of overall corporate ethics than the controversial messages. There was also a significant interaction between the channel and controversy categories for two dimensions: equity and contractualism. Traditional messaging was preferred to controversial messages for both advertisements and editorials across these dimensions.

The fact that participants evaluated traditional messaging more ethically than controversial messaging suggests that in the context of CSR communication, American consumers are more comfortable with traditional messaging, regardless of the communication vehicle. Specifically, looking at the equity and contractualism dimensions, it is interesting to note that participants' individual beliefs skewed toward more conservative CSR messaging (equity), but also that they seemed to believe that there was a violation of an 'unspoken promise' or 'unwritten contract' with regard to controversial messaging (contractualism). This has interesting implications for the emergent concept of *corporate social advocacy,* wherein by engaging in social-political issues, companies may violate the 'rules' prescribed to them by stakeholders.

Perceptions of homophily related to the attitudinal-behavioural dimension indicated a similar relationship with controversy of messaging. According to Michaelson and Stacks (2007), the attitudinal-behavioural dimension of homophily refers to "the similarity between a source and an individual as a second measure of third-party endorsement" (p. 5), with the first measure referring to the credibility dimension of the researchers' homophily measure. Moreover, attitudinal

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homophily refers to "how people think about others as similar to themselves" and behavioural homophily refers to "how people expect to behave as similar to themselves" (p. 5).

With regard to attitudinal-behavioural homophily, traditional CSR messaging was evaluated more highly across the communication vehicle. On the other hand, perceptions of homophily related to credibility indicated a more consistent relationship with the communication vehicle. Editorial content was evaluated more highly with regard to the authoritative and character dimensions of homophily. Michaelson and Stacks (2007) explain that authoritativeness refers to "respect, intelligence, and information", and character refers to "honesty, reputation, pleasantness, and goodness" (p. 5).

This is a particularly interesting finding in that we are able to break apart the dimensions used by Michaelson and Stacks (2007) to extrapolate additional implications both for the communication vehicle, as they have, but also as related to the messaging and context surrounding American consumers' perceptions of homophily. Results of this research find that editorials are more credible than advertisements, and Americans prefer traditional messaging to controversial messaging in a CSR context. These factors impact attitudes and behaviours related to perceived similarity with the company.

Despite the emphasis of results on traditional messaging, research question three found that Americans evaluated CSR messaging more highly when the message was controversial, regardless of the communication vehicle. We believe that this is related to the entertainment value of the controversial messaging conditions. Using Jo's (2004) measure of attitudes toward the message, participants responded to the following six items on a semantic differential scale: "interesting/boring; attention-getting/not attention getting; good/bad; liked it/didn't like it; and fun/not fun" (p. 507). Traditional CSR messages do tend to be a bit unexciting and lack the attention-getting value that controversial messaging strategies are more likely to employ. Our belief is that if companies that engage in

traditional CSR messages attempt to 'liven things up', they would receive a more positive reception of their messaging strategy. Looking at innovative nonprofit campaigns, where organisations often have limited budgets to attract attention to their causes, would be a good starting point.

Research questions four and five explored behavioural intentions with regard to the content (advertising or editorial) and controversy of messaging (traditional or controversial). Results indicated that Americans are more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth behaviours when the communication vehicle is an editorial. And this holds true regardless of the controversy of messaging.

Coupling this result with prior results of the credibility dimension of homophily, it seems there is a potential for real third-party endorsement related to public relations. This has been a point of contention in the literature for some time. Yet, in the context of CSR, not only do Americans find editorial content more credible, but also they indicated a greater intention to engage in positive word-of-mouth behaviours surrounding editorial content. Not only does this finding speak to decades-old controversy surrounding the 'multiplier effect' (Michaelson & Stacks, 2007), but also it speaks to the importance of the public relations function in promoting CSR activities, as opposed to CSR as a marketing or advertising strategy (i.e., as cause-related marketing).

However, despite an increased intention to perform positive word-of-mouth behaviours, there were no significant effects for purchase intentions found in our study. Regardless of the communication vehicle or controversy of messaging, purchase intentions were not significantly impacted. This parallels the results of Michaelson and Stacks (2007) and Jo (2004) regarding advertising and editorial content.

And, likely, this is good news for public relations professionals. Ultimately, the cost of advertising CSR initiatives can be expensive when seeking to reach the right audiences. Savvy public relations professionals, however, are able to reach the media with editorials regarding CSR initiatives for no additional costs. It is also worth considering here and for future research that engagement in

controversial issues (e.g., same-sex marriage) may lead to greater interest from the media.

Dodd and Supa's (2014) study regarding corporate social advocacy determined that alignment with corporate stances on social-political issues increased purchase intentions and vice versa. CSA remains an emerging area, and more research specific to messaging strategies and differences in levels of controversy are important for forwarding this agenda. Specifically, measuring stakeholder alignment with varying degrees of controversial messaging should play an increasingly important role in future research surrounding corporate social advocacy.

Limitations and indications for future study

This study found that controversy (or the perceived level of controversial communication) may be an important factor in determining how audiences perceive organisational messages. However, this study did not seek to examine the latent content of the message, only the effect of the communication vehicle (whether advertising or editorial) on the consumers' perceptions for controversial topics. Future experimental research might include testing messages as controversial or non-controversial within a controversial or non-controversial topic to more deeply explore the impact controversy has on message acceptance, homophily, ethics, and behaviours. However, as an initial step in examining the potential link between controversy and communicating socially responsible activities, this study found promising results.

Results of this research found several valuable and statistically significant findings. Yet, the extent to which effects may be practically meaningful is of particular importance. Of the dependent variables explored in this study, only in the perceptions of ethics conditions were effect sizes practically meaningful, reaching a magnitude of $\eta^2 > .06$ or 'medium' levels. Further, when each of three ethics dimensions were explored via post-hoc analyses, it became clear again that the controversy of messaging demonstrated more consistent and practically relevant results than did the communication vehicle. Advertisements did realise significantly higher evaluations on the relativistic dimension. Perhaps this may be

attributed to social and cultural guidelines and norms that allow advertisements to be edgier and push boundaries, whereas editorials are viewed more as research-based with unbiased foundations in journalism. Traditional CSR messages were viewed as both morally (equity dimension) and traditionally/culturally (relativistic dimension) more appropriate than were controversial messages. The researchers concluded that Americans were more comfortable with traditional CSR versus controversial issues engagement (regardless of communication vehicle). In other words, from a practically meaningful perspective, results of this research found that traditional CSR messaging was more ethically acceptable than controversial messaging.

Findings supported the lack of differences found in scholarship surrounding advertising versus public relations efforts, specific to a CSR context. Findings also forwarded knowledge in the emergent area of corporate social advocacy from a messages-based approach.

Conclusion

The results confirmed what previous studies examining the difference between advertising and public relations had found, that while there are some differences between advertising and editorial as far as consumer perceptions are concerned, the message vehicle may not be as important as the message itself. Furthermore, the inclusion of controversial versus non-controversial messaging seems to be an important element in helping to identify how organisations are best able to share their perspective on social issues, and to communicate their socially responsible activities. We suggest that while organisations may choose to participate in controversial topics in the public sphere, they do so with risk, and should weigh carefully how they approach the topic.

Acknowledgment

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