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A brand new day: How commitment impacts trust and perceived motivation of a firm's corporate social responsibility and brand activism efforts

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A brand new day: How commitment impacts trust and perceived motivation of a firm's corporate
social responsibility and brand activism efforts

Dissertation

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Abstract

As consumers' expectations for brands to "do good" continue to grow, companies are simultaneously increasing their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts and communication. Communicating on the "good" a company is doing may seem like it would yield a positive outcome; however, such is not always the case. Companies face the challenge of wanting to engage in CSR activities that address topical issues while simultaneously avoiding the perception of engaging in CSR efforts for self-serving reasons, a phenomenon referred to as "virtue signaling," where the company's prosocial efforts are perceived as primarily self-motivated. Furthermore, as companies engage in greater brand activism, taking a more vocal position on social matters, the tension of prosocial engagement and the perceived motivation behind a company's efforts is increasingly apparent. The purpose of this study was to understand how the level of commitment to a cause signaled that these efforts were intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (i.e., virtue signaling). Through experiments, this work explored how perceived commitment influences perceptions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as a function of trust and transparency, or the degree to which stakeholders perceive CSR or brand activism practices and outcomes as open and publicly accessible. The current work extends the relevant literature by exploring traditional CSR and brand activist communication, commitment, transparency, consumer trust, and virtue signaling and provides evidenced-based guidance on how companies can participate in brand activism without fearing negative consequences, such as accusations of virtue signaling, when doing so. The results showed the importance of commitment to garnering trust and indicated that while similar, CSR and brand activism produce different outcomes.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility (CSR), brand activism, virtue signaling, commitment transparency, benevolence trust, competence trust, integrity trust, content analysis

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2017, U.S.-based food manufacturing company PepsiCo took a prosocial position on social rights in support of diversity with its advertising campaign featuring pop culture star Kendall Jenner. Released during a heightened period of sociopolitical issues related to racial equity, the spot portrayed a peaceful protest with a law enforcement presence. In the advertisement, Jenner handed a can of Pepsi to the officers as a peace offering, with the march subsequently turning from a protest to a block party. PepsiCo faced much backlash, as consumers criticized and questioned the company's motive. Specifically, consumers wondered if the efforts were a self-serving attempt by appearing to be "good" and joining the bandwagon of issues plaguing society around diversity, inclusion, and equal treatment or if the brand indeed sought to make a statement about its position on the topic.

In another example, U.S. apparel manufacturer Nike took an outspoken social stance with its 2018 "Dream Crazy" campaign featuring NFL player Colin Kaepernick, who had received significant backlash for public acts protesting racial injustice. Despite some public backlash, the brand's efforts largely elicited praise from consumers, leading to a \$6 billion increase in market value, sizeable stock value increases (Gibson, 2018), and an Emmy (Guardian Sport, 2019). These contrasting reactions to the two companies' campaigns raise the question of why Nike received praise and Pepsi garnered criticism. More broadly, it is unclear why some acts of brand activism are perceived as selfish, and others are seen as having selfless, prosocial motivations.

Virtue signaling occurs when actors communicate about the good they are doing, but others perceive their motivation as an attempt to gain moral credit. This phenomenon is often related to individuals openly communicating their positions on social matters, particularly on social media, but has application to companies and industries engaging in brand activism. The

concept of virtue signaling originated with a British journalist who took issue with Whole Foods' \$20 million advertising campaign, "Values Matter," intended to differentiate the grocery retailer from others as having quality food (Bartholomew, 2015; Greenspan, 2020). Although an organization communicating the good it does is not necessarily bad, virtue signaling has a negative connotation. The term virtue signaling is now routinely used to describe taking a stance for purposes deemed selfish or self-serving.

Over time, consumers' expectations of organizations to do good and even to take a stance on social topics have grown. This shift could be due to (a) unethical behaviors by firms and industries across the globe, contributing to discontentment, distrust, and new and changing demands on firms; (b) growing engagement in corporate social responsibility (CSR) across firms; and (c) increased visibility of CSR as a result of greater promotion of efforts, thus opening firms to the scrutiny of their behavior (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). When companies communicate their positions and actions on social matters (i.e., brand activism), as PepsiCo and Nike did, mainstream topics are not limited only to racial diversity. They include other domains of CSR, such as manufacturing practices, employee working conditions, and impact on the environment. Whether companies communicate CSR in less vocally charged or prosocial manners, postmodern consumers expect organizations to act as transactional enablers and use their scale for social good via operating practices in ways that are fair and responsible. Given the backlash companies have faced for engaging in brand activism, it was worth examining the extent to which reactions to CSR in general, and brand activism specifically, operate in the same or different manners.

When companies share information about their social responsibility, having a history of concrete actions toward a cause helps companies build trust and show they genuinely mean well.

Benjamin (2020) proclaimed that “‘corporate virtue signaling’ is fine, but actions matter more.” As more companies communicate their efforts to do good, not all will have shown years of action to demonstrate their long-term commitment. The expectation behind the current research was that when a company’s commitment to a cause seems low (e.g., taking strong action in brand activism without long-term engagement), consumers will question the company’s intentions and may interpret them as virtue signaling.

One way a well-meaning company could avoid misinterpretation of its efforts is transparency. Researchers have shown the importance of perceptions of authenticity when communicating CSR (Chernev & Blair, 2015; Joo et al., 2019). A closer look at authenticity showed both commitment and transparency to be important; however, amid increasing expectations for brands to communicate CSR efforts in general and as timely responses to current events, an organization’s commitment could appear fleeting. Of course, this modern challenge does not mean companies should avoid taking CSR actions or communicating them; instead, it raises the question of whether transparency can overcome or compensate for any adverse effects of low perceived commitment. Thus, as a contribution to the body of related research, one goal of this study was to view CSR through the lenses of traditional strategic CSR communications and brand activism to understand how transparency and commitment interact to impact consumer trust and perceived company intent. Although CSR is a highly researched domain, brand activism research, considered a subset of CSR, is in its infancy. Additionally, understanding CSR and its relationship with virtue signaling is limited. For example, Google Scholar searches of the combination of terms *CSR*, *virtue signaling*, *commitment*, *trust*, and *transparency* yielded fewer than 100 articles combined, all published within the past five years.

The purpose of this study was to understand what leads consumers to perceive a company's CSR or brand activism efforts as truly benevolent or as virtue signaling. Two experiments were means to examine the impacts of transparency and commitment in the context of CSR and brand activism on consumer trust and assumed company motivation. An assumption was that the extent to which consumers perceive a company's efforts as extrinsically motivated (i.e., virtue signaling) or intrinsically motivated (i.e., genuinely prosocial) is a function of how committed it seems to the cause and the transparency with which it shares information regarding these efforts. The present study was a means to understand if greater transparency could compensate for lower perceived commitment toward a particular cause. The expectation was that trust in the company would be the process underlying the proposed effects. It was believed that a committed company should foster more trust regardless of transparency; in contrast, a less-committed company should elicit less trust unless engaging in more transparent communication of its CSR or brand activism efforts. The practical implications are that the current research could help companies navigate the increasingly speculative efforts of CSR and brand activism, especially as consumers expect more from companies but are quick to criticize if not executed to their liking.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A review of academic literature took place to understand the CSR landscape related to relevant factors integral to CSR execution and communications. There was also an exploration of the literature on the topic of virtue signaling. This chapter presents research related to CSR, brand activism, virtue signaling, commitment, transparency, and trust.

Corporate Social Responsibility Overview

CSR originated in the 1960s with the general idea proposed by McGuire (1963) that companies have not only economic obligations but also responsibilities related to society (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008). Historically, early definitions of CSR were seemingly obligatory. For example, besides the general expectation of companies to act responsibly and improve societal welfare alongside its own interests, early definitions referenced CSR efforts as a strategic means of managers to appropriate funds to social causes (Friedman, 1970), with activities extending beyond shareholders (Jones, 1980) and imposed by various stakeholders (Maignan et al., 1999). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, CSR concepts transitioned to companies taking more ownership of, or making commitments based on, societal expectations. Kotler and Lee (2005) defined CSR as “the commitment by a company to improve the welfare of its community by implementing certain discretionary practices and increasing the availability of its resources” (p. 3). This definition shows how in the early 2000s, the concept transitioned from companies enacting CSR out of obligation or self-interest to taking more ownership or making commitments to do good for society. Around this time, Bhattacharya and Sen explored how consumers engaged with CSR, including antecedents and outcomes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Across a series of studies exploring the impact of doing good on company reputation, the authors uncovered a foundation for modern scientific grounding of

CSR's impact. The studies took place as modern buyer-seller relationships were becoming more relationship-oriented (White, 2010). This relationship focus was evidenced by simultaneous foundational modern marketing and branding research, such as Fournier's (1998) work on consumer-brand relationships and Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) research on brand communities. In this way, individuals began to view CSR as a moral expectation or contract a company had with its consumers, including responsibility for their needs and values.

Over time, researchers have conceptualized and studied CSR in various ways. The concept has many terms, including corporate social performance (Pivato et al., 2007), corporate citizenship (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012), customer-perceived ethicality (Brunk, 2010; Iglesias et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2012; Wiese et al., 2015), and environmental, social, and corporate governance. Some researchers have correlated CSR with sustainability (Lavorata, 2014; Orlitzky et al., 2011), which Brundtland (1987) defined as the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (p. 41). In addition to its variety of nomenclature and tangential concepts, CSR is variously apparent in activities, including support for local food producers, fair trade, healthy living and eating, commitment to organic products, waste management and recycling, food manufacturing, employee welfare, and eco-friendly practices (Jones et al., 2007). In this study, CSR pertained to the various descriptions of the concept with specific reference as "a firm's commitment to improve or maximize long-term economic, societal, and environmental well-being through business practices, policies, and resources" (Du et al., 2010, 2011, as cited in Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 3).

Empirical evidence shows that engaging in CSR positively impacts consumer perceptions of a company. A company can be vocal in its communication of CSR to the extent that it

becomes integral to its company and brand. U.S. shoe manufacturer TOMS embodies CSR with its commitment to match dollars generated from consumer shoe purchases with shoes for children in need, with donations now in the millions (TOMS, 2020). With a foundation of social responsibility, TOMS is intentional in its communication. For example, product packaging presents how the company is doing social good. TOMS is a company whose CSR efforts yield customer affinity, loyalty, and sales, as well as one consumers perceive as genuinely committed to a cause.

Companies often leverage CSR efforts in direct communication to consumers (e.g., labeling, advertisements, etc.). These efforts are influential because, as Iglesias (2017) noted,

Consumers tend to perceive a subject (i.e., brand, company, product or service) as ethical if this subject is a good market actor that respects moral norms, abides the law, is socially responsible, avoids causing harm, weighs up positive and negative consequences of its behavior, and applies consequentialist and non-consequentialist evaluation principles in its actions. (p. 443)

Such conjectures may be one reason products that feature CSR claims have grown in presence at retail with year-over-year retail sales growth (Kronthal-Sacco & Levin, 2021).

CSR communication affects consumer perceptions in many ways. Wei et al. (2018) sought to assess CSR's halo effect in a study leveraging CSR product claims spanning three CSR domains (i.e., food manufacturing, sustainable packaging, and employee welfare). The findings showed that CSR claims had a significant positive effect on attitudes toward the company. However, employee welfare claims were more impactful than food manufacturing CSR claims, indicating the nuanced nature of CSR. Brands also communicate CSR efforts through product claims.

A commonly assumed causal mechanism of CSR is the halo effect (sometimes called the halo error). Chernev and Blair (2015) linked the halo effect to historic literature dating back to

Wells (1907), Thorndike (1920), and Nisbett and Wilson (1977) as “the tendency of overall evaluations of a person/object to influence evaluations of the specific properties of that person/object in a way that is consistent with the overall evaluation” (p. 1414). The halo effect likely provides a rationale for CSR communication efforts’ impact extending beyond CSR and company perceptions. Despite presenting the halo effect as a key mechanism related to CSR’s beneficial consequences, the current work was an exploration of a different assumed causal mechanism for the effects of CSR: trust.

To understand how a company’s CSR efforts can influence trust, it is necessary to review signaling theory and the literature on trust. According to Connelly et al. (2011),

Signaling theory is helpful in describing behavior when two parties (individuals or organizations) have access to different information. Typically, one party, the sender, must choose whether and how to communicate (or signal) that information, and the other party, the receiver, must choose how to interpret the signal. (p. 39)

CSR efforts can serve as such a signal. Signaling theory helps connect CSR perceptions with trust, as CSR activities give rise to positive perceptions through positive signals sent to recipients regarding a company’s ethics and values (Tangngisalu et al., 2020). There is also a risk, however, that if a company engages in CSR but is thought to lack commitment, consumer trust in the company may suffer. The current work extended the prior research by showing how trust affects whether consumers perceive a firm’s CSR or brand activism efforts as genuinely prosocial or self-serving (i.e., virtue signaling) and to what extent these effects differ as a function of commitment and transparency.

While CSR can positively impact consumers’ perceptions, it is complex in its various domains, benefactors, and outcomes. Researchers often explore CSR to understand how its presence or perceived intent impact product or company perceptions; however, there has been limited inquiry to understand how various CSR factors, such as commitment, impact trust and

perceived organization motivation. The current work focused on these variables. As company engagement in CSR is seemingly becoming table stakes and consumers' expectations for companies to engage in topical social movements grow (Edelman, 2020, 2021), companies communicating their efforts risk perceptions of being self-serving or extrinsically motivated (i.e., virtue signaling) in doing so. This perception of self-interest conflicts with the prior literature that largely emphasized CSR's positive impact on perceptions and business outcomes. One way to address this conflict could be through the lenses of commitment and transparency.

Brand Activism

CSR comprises several categories, one of which is brand activism. Manfredi (2019) defined brand activism as:

A strategy that seeks to influence citizen-consumers by means of campaigns created and sustained by political values. It involves a transformation in corporate communication management and social responsibility practices, which borrows from those of social movements to contribute to the social production of identity of citizen-consumers. (p. 348)

What has made brand activism unique as related to CSR is its origins in different societal demands, shifting the evolution of CSR. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2020, 2021) shows that there was a +13 point increase in agreement in the brand democracy measure from 2017 to 2018. This measure includes statements such as, "I believe brands can be positive force for change," "I expect them to represent me and solve problems," and "my dollar is my vote (Edelman, 2020)." Further, there is increased urgency for brands to address topical problems, such as climate change and the economic and social divide (Edelman, 2021). Comparing the broader construct of CSR to the more specific brand activism, the latter has a greater sense of urgency, recency, and "topical" status that puts it at direct odds with the notion of commitment often expected of CSR in general.

Sarkar and Kotler described brand activism as “an evolution of CSR” (p. 24), implying that brand activism is a different, albeit related, concept. According to Sarkar and Kotler, comparing CSR-related efforts, cause promotion is attributed to being marketing-driven and corporate philanthropy efforts are attributed to being company/corporate-driven, while brand activism is values-driven.

Other recent research identifies similarities and differences among specific types of CSR approaches, including cause-related marketing (e.g., Pampers donates a portion of its profits to UNICEF), corporate social marketing (e.g., Heineken’s “Drink Responsibly” campaign), advocacy advertising (e.g., R.J. Reynolds disputes the harmful effects of smoking), and brand activism (e.g., Gillette’s viral ad that explores toxic masculinity; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Vredenburg et al. (2020) identified four defining characteristics of brand activism: (a) the company or brand is values-driven, (b) the social matter at hand can be progressive or conservative, (c) the topic is a controversial sociopolitical issue, and (d) the company takes a stance toward the issue through messaging and practice. The researchers developed a typology of brand activism that maps activist marketing messaging versus practice. While message and action can reflect commitment (i.e., “long-term and embedded commitments may thus yield greater social impacts” and “setting and articulating specific benchmarks will encourage consumer trust”; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 448, 455), the authors were more theoretical and did not measure commitment. Thus, the current work was an opportunity to be more explicit about the role of commitment through causal measurement and introduce the notion of transparency into understanding how consumers perceive a company’s CSR or prosocial brand activist efforts.

Virtue Signaling

The literature on virtue signaling related to CSR is scant. A Google Scholar search of *virtue* signaling yielded 238,000 results, but when put in quotes (i.e., “virtue signaling”), there were 1,330 results. Adding *CSR* or *corporate social responsibility* to the term yielded fewer than 100 results, indicating an area of low academic exploration.

Although most virtue signaling research is at the individual level (e.g., Wallace et al., 2018), the idea is not isolated to individuals, with corporate virtue signaling also becoming a phenomenon. Greenwashing, or providing misleading evidence of a company’s CSR (Parguel et al., 2009), is intentionally negative and distrustful. Alternately, despite perceptions of virtue signaling as a positive intent on taking a stance, there could be perceptions of it as superficial in substance. Ellen et al. (2006) noted, “Consumers respond[ed] most positively to CSR efforts they judged as values-driven and strategic while responding negatively to efforts perceived as stakeholder-driven or egoistic” (p. 147). This idea of values-driven CSR aligns with the core principles identified in the brand activism typology (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Related to virtue signaling, however, there is a lesser impact with the intent perceived to be egoistic and stakeholder-driven (Ellen et al., 2006).

In scholarly research, authors have positioned virtue signaling similarly to conspicuous donation behavior, specifically referring to two dimensions: (a) self-oriented behaviors (“motivated by the desire to seek intrinsic benefits”; Grace & Griffin, 2009, p. 22), which allows individuals to enhance their public profile on social media and makes them feel good, and (b) other-oriented behavior (“motivated by the desire to *display* the behavior to others”; Grace & Griffin, 2009, p. 22). Seeking to assess the impact of sustainability ratings to deter greenwashing, Parguel et al. (2009) noted that “consumers may infer a genuine societal consciousness by the

company (intrinsic motive) and/or an attempt to take opportunistic advantage of sustainable development trends (extrinsic motive)” (p. 6). The focus of this research was perceived motive.

Dare (2016) evaluated three types of motivation: moral, instrumental, and relational. Similarly, in a follow-up study to their exploration of how moral punishment signals trustworthiness, Jordan and Rand (2020) compared virtue signaling to interpersonal dynamics, for which Greenspan (2020) proposed three scenarios to explain actors expressing themselves on a topic: (a) the actor is not necessarily seeking to appear virtuous but instead may have a personal tie to the matter; (b) the actor is influenced by the reflection that will be cast—in other words, they want to look good but still genuinely have positive intent, and (c) the actor is influenced by the reflection that will be cast but only sharing their virtues to look good. Whether an existing brand aims to communicate its commitment to social justice or share its sustainability positioning, businesses are increasingly explicit in communicating their CSR and brand activism efforts to consumers. Promoting these efforts often signals real or implied action and intent. Thus, the current project examined whether commitment had a similar impact on CSR generally and brand activism specifically.

Perceived Commitment

CSR commitment is a company’s consistent CSR engagements, long-term CSR pledge (Godfrey, 2005), adherence to a specific CSR program (Beckman et al., 2009), and the degree to which a “firm values the needs of both its shareholders and stakeholders and attempts to fill those needs” (Dare, 2016, p. 91). Joo et al. (2019) defined CSR commitment as “the degree to which stakeholders perceive an organization as dedicated or steadfast in the CSR initiatives as opposed to adjusting initiatives to meet current trends” (p. 239). Asking participants about the

NFL's commitment to supporting breast cancer awareness by wearing pink during October elicited sentiments, such as,

October is known for it—for breast cancer awareness, and I feel like everyone knows about it, and they are just wearing pink because they're told to, not really...like they do donate a lot and stuff, but it's just one month instead it could be a full year thing if they really wanted to make it that. (Female, age 20–25; Joo et al., 2019, p. 239)

This participant's comment indicates the factors critical for CSR commitment. In the current research, the definition of CSR commitment aligned with Joo et al.'s (2019) definition, where the scale measures included items such as “The company seems to be highly committed to this program,” shown in the amount of time a company has supported a cause and related activities.

The level of commitment an organization exhibits toward CSR also impacts its general perceived authenticity (Joo et al., 2019). The results of a study of 252 French consumers who frequented three major hypermarkets suggested that retailers' commitment to sustainability had a positive influence on consumers' perceptions of overall retailer image (Lavorata, 2014). Some retailers, such as Walmart (2021), publish an annual report on social and environmental commitments, exhibiting commitment and transparency.

Ellen et al. (2006) sought to understand the relationship between cause fit and commitment on purchase intent, with motive as the assumed mediating variable. In a 3x2 experimental design, the researchers dimensionalized company-cause fit (high, no relationship, low) and commitment (high, low). The vignettes featured fictitious advertisements for cause-related marketing offers of varying lengths of time, with high commitment indicated by support for the past seven years and low commitment lasting for one month. Ellen et al. held the contribution to the cause steady at 1% across the conditions. The results showed that commitment had a significant influence on stakeholder attributions (e.g., “they feel society in general expects it”) but not values-driven attribution (e.g., “they feel morally obligated to help”),

egoistic motive (e.g., “they are taking advantage of the cause to help the business”), or strategic intent (e.g., “they will get more customers by making this offer”). In the low commitment scenario, participants believed the company was less genuine and motivated only by meeting others’ needs versus being driven by principle; however, it was unknown whether commitment manipulations were strong enough to impact other attributions of perceived intent. Other dimensions of commitment, including the amount and consistency of input, remained constant, perhaps impacting results.

To detect the difference between CSR used for “window dressing” versus genuine commitment, Dare (2016) leveraged archival data, using proxies for determining commitment. The researcher operationalized commitment by gathering firms’ charitable donations (investment) and the number of CSR-related press releases, suggesting that more CSR promotion was likely to increase legitimacy. The independent variables were motivation types, and commitment was the dependent variable. Dare found that CSR commitment was higher with the firms driven by moral action versus self-serving action. Although these results are in line with the current research, it is unknown if intentions affect commitment or if commitment signals a company’s core motivation for CSR efforts and/or communication. The absence of causal data in Dare’s study indicates gaps in the literature.

CSR commitment is an important factor when communicating CSR efforts. Because many companies are increasing their CSR efforts yet lack history or depth of action, the perceived motivation is unclear. It is necessary to examine how commitment and transparency interact to signal an organization’s motive. Specific to brand activism, researchers have qualitatively referenced consumers’ mounting distrust of companies (Manfredi, 2019). Still, they

have yet to understand how perceived commitment to a prosocial stance and the transparency of the company's efforts impact consumer perceptions as a function of trust.

Transparency

In a study on building trust, Kang and Hustvedt (2014) noted, "Transparency is one of the basic conditions in establishing positive relationships between consumers and corporations, which is built by the communication of CSR efforts" (p. 254). In the present research, transparency is "the degree to which stakeholders perceive CSR decisions, practices, and outcomes, to be open and available to public evaluation" (Joo et al., 2019, p. 239). Frank Yiannas (2018), former Walmart Vice President of Food Safety, discussed the role of transparency, defining it simply as providing visibility to "how was food produced" or "was it sustainably grown?" (p. 48). Yiannas noted outcomes and benefits of transparency included increased food safety, reduced food waste, and greater responsibility and accountability across the food supply chain, from farm to table. Among a sample of 1,000 general population participants, PSB (2020) found that nearly three of four consumers believed that the COVID-19 pandemic had revealed fundamental flaws in the food supply chain, perhaps indicating a link to transparency issues. Demands for transparency not only provide a foundation for brands to communicate CSR but also intensify the circumstances in which communication of CSR is effective.

TOMS' CSR shows commitment and transparency, with long-established and easily accessed CSR efforts. In contrast, companies can and often make references to CSR efforts but with limited visibility of the details or impact. An example would be a restaurant company referencing a commitment to CSR on its website without any context of its nature or extent. A lack of details could harm consumers' trust and attitude toward the company.

Balkin (1999) identified three types of transparency: accountability (holding actors accountable when they act in ways adverse to people's interest), informational (public statements of the reasons for action or disclosure of information), and participatory (the ability to engage through representation or direct involvement). Shafieizadeh and Tao (2020) sought to understand the impact of restaurant menu transparency on restaurant selection. Their topic was closely tied to Balkin's (1999) informational transparency, reflecting Rawlins' (2008) notion that the type of information a company provides influences perceived transparency.

Strathern (2000) asserted that transparency "makes the invisible visible" (p. 309). Transparency provides insight into what is happening within an organization, helping to build trust (Beckman et al., 2009; Godfrey, 2005), and facilitates embedding CSR endeavors into a firm instead of imposing them under external pressures (Basu & Palazzo, 2008). Michener and Bersch (2013) divided transparency into two constituent parameters: visible (i.e., "the degree to which information is complete and findable") and inferable (i.e., "the degree to which information is disaggregated, verified, and simplified"; p. 238). In the current research, there was a focus on the former to understand how visibility or access to information enables transparency.

Even in crises or heightened times, organizations with demonstrated transparency achieved double the trust and positive behavioral intent than nontransparent organizations (Auger, 2014). Circumstances such as CSR communication during times of crisis could contribute to the questioning of CSR efforts for their role in diverting customer attention from a negative topic to a positive one; however, the empirical evidence indicates the importance of transparency in garnering trust. Kim and Lee (2018) sought to assess strategic CSR communications. While it was not the study objective, the researchers discovered that even when brand-cause fit is low, transparency in CSR communication was necessary to enhance trust.

Transparency can affect trust; thus, this study addressed whether a company with low perceived commitment and reduced trust can overcome negative perceptions with stronger transparency efforts.

Trust

Mayer and Davis (1995) defined trust as:

The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control another party. Trust is not taking a risk. But it is a willingness to take a risk. (p. 712)

In their seminal research on the impact of trust related to consumers and business, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) described trust as “the disposition of the average consumer to count on a brand’s ability to fulfill its expected promise” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, as cited in Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008, p. 13). The definition used for the current research was “the expectation that a company is willing to keep its promises and fulfill its obligations” (Pivato et al., 2007, p. 6).

Trust is an important factor in CSR, as evidenced by trust as a key variable across several studies. Hur et al. (2014) leveraged extensive research to understand outcomes of CSR initiatives and strategy undertaken by a brand; however, few scholars had sought to understand the role of trust in credibility (trustworthiness and expertise) and the reputation of brands pursuing CSR activities. Keh and Xie (2009) suggested that company reputation impacts trust, where scale items for corporate reputation were (a) “The focal company is highly-regarded.”; (b) “The focal company is a successful company”; and (c) “The focal company is a well-established company” (p. 737). Although a reputable company may be trustworthy, it bears examining whether trust stems from the company’s reputation or its history, efforts, and commitment. Singh et al. (2012) sought to assess the relationship between corporate brands, consumer-perceived ethicality, and impact on product perceptions and intent. Innovation, ethical stance, and brands’ social behavior

heavily influence consumer choice. The researchers mentioned that these efforts come to life by brands in a variety of ways, including ethical supply chain practices, environmentally friendly products/portfolios, and investment in social causes. Using fast-moving consumer goods as a focal product, Singh et al. found that corporate brand-level consumer-perceived ethicality was positively related to product brand trust. Additionally, brand trust was a mediating variable in the relationship between brand equity and brand loyalty.

Although some researchers have explored how trust mediates the relationship between CSR and outcomes, few have sought to understand how CSR inputs affect perceived motive and the role that trust plays in mediating said relationship; the current study was a means to fill this gap. Vlachos et al. (2009) examined how a firm's motives impacted repeat patronage and a consumers' likelihood to recommend. The results showed that trust fully mediated the relationship between stakeholder-driven attribution and recommendations but only partially mediated the relationship in other instances. Vlachos et al. made an important contribution to CSR literature, identifying an additional pathway linking trust to CSR perceptions; however, they tested perceived motive as an independent variable as opposed to a dependent variable resulting from a company's efforts, which the current study did.

As shown in Vlachos et al.'s (2009) study and as typical when testing trust, researchers typically view trust through a unidimensional construct instead of a multidimensional lens. Pivato et al. (2008) presented a typology of trust based on its content and antecedents. They identified three types of trust that can help to inform strategies: (a) rational or deterrence-based, which is trust due to fear of the economic impact of not carrying out a behavior; (b) cognitive, which is trust that is due to perceived expertise; and (c) goodwill or values-based trust, which develops over time due to experience or familiarity. Although Pivato et al. distinguished between

the different types of trust, they used only a 3-item scale: “I trust [the company],” “You can always count on [the company],” and “The company is reliable.” This simplified view of trust, while parsimonious, is limited.

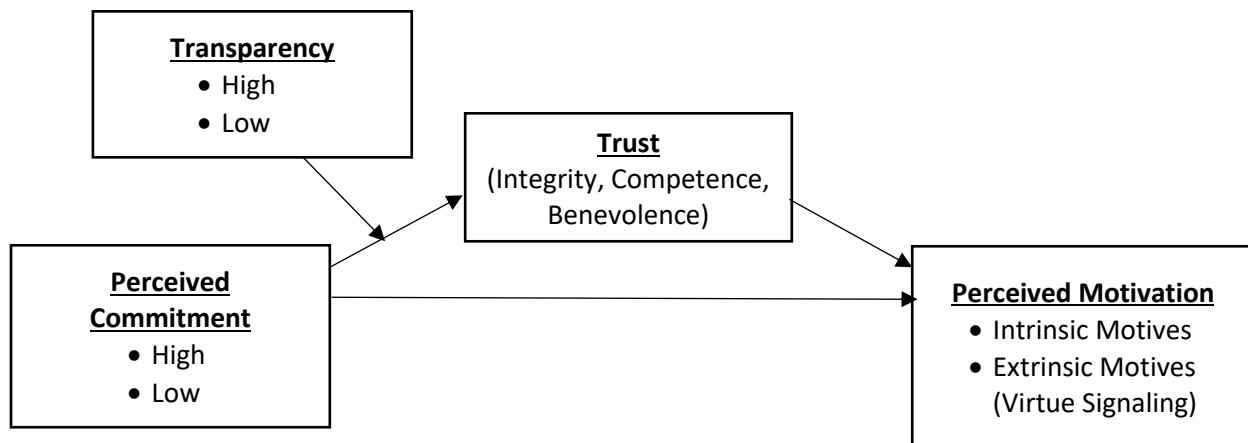
The dimensions of trust explored in the current research were competence trust, which “refers to customer’s confidence in a company to realize its promise” (either CSR or the firm/brand’s core service delivery); benevolence trust, which “refers to customer’s confidence that a corporation has a sincere concern about consumers’ interests and motivations to do good to its customers” (Xie & Peng, 2011, p. 445); and integrity trust, which is “When a customer believes that the other party is fair and just” (Auger, 2014, as cited in Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 5). It is worth noting that in prior research of multidimensions of trust, “Empirical researchers have raised questions about the high observed correlation between benevolence and integrity and have questioned the independence of these variables” (Schoorman et al., 2007, p. 346). Ganesan and Hess (1997) found a similar dynamic of significant and strong intercorrelation when they explored different types of trust and their impact on commitment in buyer-seller relationships. The authors found that trust was a predictor of commitment in buyer-seller relationships. However, the current research suggested that when firms communicated their CSR commitment to socially responsible efforts, commitment positively impacted trust.

One of the current study’s hypotheses about CSR and brand activism was that more committed and transparent companies benefit from increased trust in the company. This trust likely impacts whether consumers perceive the organization as acting out of pure intentions or virtue signaling. Exploring a multidimensional construct of trust has implications beneficial to scholarship and practice.

Chapter 3: Hypotheses

One hypothesis proposed in the current research was that a firm's CSR and brand activism commitment impacted consumers' perceptions of virtue signaling—specifically, high commitment was more likely perceived as intrinsically motivated and low commitment more as extrinsically motivated (virtue signaling). Another assumption was that even in instances of low-perceived commitment, high levels of transparency positively affected trust and perceived intent. Figure 1 is a visual display of the proposed model.

Figure 1
Conceptual Model



How Perceived Commitment Signals Motive

CSR is broad in domains and highly nuanced. Despite generally having a positive impact on attitude toward a company and, in some instances, intent, CSR is more well-received when companies show benevolence in their intent. CSR researchers tend to explore how perceived commitment strengthens the likelihood of positive outcomes but rarely seek to understand commitment related to perceived motivation as a focal outcome. Additionally, the brand activism typology has only received qualitative gestures about the importance of company commitment on virtue signaling. Thus, with respect to CSR and brand activism, this study's hypotheses were:

H1: Perceived commitment affects perceived motivation such that:

H1a: When a company's perceived commitment is low, it signals that the company is more extrinsically motivated to benefit the company (virtue signaling).

H1b: When a company's perceived commitment is high, it signals that the company is more intrinsically motivated to benefit society or others.

Trust as a Mediator for Perceived Commitment and Perceived Motive

Although it can mediate the relationship between CSR and positive consumer attitudes toward companies, trust is complex. The present research extends the academic literature by assessing the impact of high and low levels of social responsibility commitment. When a company exhibits a higher level of commitment, there was an expectation of yielding more trust in the organization. When a company exhibits a lower level of commitment, there was an expectation of less trust in the organization. Further, despite the assumption that earned or absent trust impacts the perceptions of perceived motivation, it is important to understand the various components of trust, including benevolence, integrity, and competence. A multidimensional trust scale leveraged in this study was exploratory rather than confirmatory. Thus, with respect to CSR and brand activism efforts, further hypotheses were:

H2: A company's perceived commitment generates trust in the company.

H3: When perceived commitment is low, trust would be negatively impacted.

H4: When perceived commitment is high, trust would be positively impacted.

H5a: The relationship between perceived commitment and perceived motivation is mediated by trust, such that:

H5b: When trust is low, the perceived motive would be extrinsic (virtue signaling).

H5c: When trust is high, the perceived motive would be intrinsic.

Transparency as a Moderator for Perceived Commitment and Trust

Transparency fosters greater trust in times of crisis, even when there is low company-cause fit (Auger, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2018). Efforts to be more transparent also impact a firm's reputation regarding integrity, respect, and openness (Rawlins, 2008). This impact is likely because when people perceive they have access to information, they feel the company has nothing to hide; as a result, they may have increased trust in the organization because the company would suffer the impact of not carrying out a behavior. Thus, a sixth hypothesis is that:

H6: Transparency moderates the relationship between perceived commitment and trust, such that:

H6a: When perceived commitment is low and transparency is low, trust would be negatively impacted.

H6b: When perceived commitment is low and transparency is high, trust would be more positively impacted than when commitment is low and transparency is low.

H6c: When perceived commitment is high and transparency is low, trust would be more negatively impacted than when commitment is high and transparency is high.

H6d: When perceived commitment is high and transparency is high, trust would be positively impacted.

Exploratory Research

As brand activism and CSR are related concepts, one of the goals of this research was to understand if the two act similarly related to the variables in this experiment. Consumers may seemingly support brand activism or hold it to the same standard as CSR regarding commitment. However, because of the former's topical nature, companies that take a vocal, proactive stance could be under more scrutiny. This research was an examination of the difference between brand

activism and CSR rather than a confirmation of any specific hypotheses on the topics. In addition, despite a proposed multidimensional construct of trust for the sake of robustness, testing related hypotheses occurred using a composite trust score. Relationships with benevolence, integrity, and competence trust underwent analysis to explore differences that, if found, could inspire further research.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The goal of this study was to understand how consumers perceive commitment to be a signal of a company's core motivation for its CSR or brand activism, moderated by transparency and mediated by trust. A mixed methods approach was appropriate to test the hypotheses and ideas proposed for empirical exploration. The study included (a) a pilot to preliminarily test experimental manipulations in a survey and garner qualitative feedback on perceptions and drivers of trust related to a company's social good efforts and (b) two experiments to test the model that exposed participants to the same scenarios tested in the pilot involving either high or low commitment and high or low transparency in the context of either traditional CSR communication or brand activism.

Study Design

As shown in Figure 2, a 2x2 between-subjects full factorial design manipulated commitment (high/low) and transparency (high/low). A basic control condition (not shown in Figure 2) was also one of the experimental contexts (CSR and brand activism) and differed from test conditions to exclude commitment and transparency references. There were ten cells in the pilot (eight experimental and two control). Each experiment had five conditions (four experimental and one control). Through an online survey, randomly assigned participants read a vignette about a fictitious fast-food company engaging in either CSR (Experiment 1) or brand activism (Experiment 2).

Figure 2*Experimental Test Conditions (excludes control conditions)*

Transparency	C1:	C2:
	Low Commitment	High Transparency
	High Transparency	High Transparency
	C4:	C3:
	Low Commitment	High Commitment
	Low Transparency	Low Transparency
	Commitment	

Sample Plan

The sample for this study was U.S. adults aged 18 to 65 years from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Individuals who worked or had immediate family members who worked in the focal product industry (i.e., restaurant industry), marketing research, or advertising were ineligible to participate to reduce potential bias. In the pilot study and each experiment, participants received a small incentive (\$2.50) to complete the surveys. There was random participant assignment to an experimental condition or a control condition. Each test cell in the pilot (discussed in the next section) included 25 participants, for a population of $N = 250$. Each test cell in the experiments, also presented in subsequent sections, included 50 participants, for a population of $N = 500$ ($n = 250$ in the CSR scenario, $n = 250$ in the brand activism scenario). There were parameters applied to exclude individuals who had participated in other waves of the study. Ensuring data quality by recruiting reputable participants entailed restricting participation to MTurk, with a minimum Human Intelligence Task (HIT) rate of 90%. According to Peer et al. (2014), a HIT approval rate serves as a respondent quality rating that indicates the number of

times researchers approve a panelist's task. There were 745 participants in the final sample for analysis across all three phases of this study.

Experimental Variables

To test the various conditions, participants learned of the manipulated factors through a low-fidelity vignette in an online survey. The vignette portrayed a fast-food company making an effort to do its part in its green practices. Verbiage leveraged for the high and low scenario conditions appear in Table 1, where commitment was a function of time and effort, and transparency reflected information accessibility. In the control condition(s), there were no references to commitment or transparency, only information on the company's CSR or brand activism initiative in vague terms.

Table 1
Disaggregated Commitment and Transparency Manipulations

Commitment: Effort and time ^a		Transparency: Accuracy of information ^b	
High commitment	Low commitment	High transparency	Low transparency
Ramping up efforts on its continued commitment	Considering	Company has made many efforts to ensure its accomplishments/plans/intentions are available	Not much information exists that provides visibility to what the company plans/hopes to accomplish
Goals released several years ago	Potential goals released a couple days ago	Company website provides visibility to goals/detailed plans and extensive sustainability report	Company website provides limited visibility of what they have considered exploring
Already put parameters in place	Just started thinking about putting new parameters in place	Donating 5% of profits to the Environmental Protection Agency	Donating 1-5%, not yet determined, of profits to some nonprofit environmental group (low commitment)
Suppliers being held accountable	In discussions about suppliers being potentially held accountable	Direct quote from company representative	Indirect reference to quote provided by company representative
The company will roll out	The company is thinking about rolling out	CSO joined five years ago (high commitment); CSO joined just four weeks ago (low commitment)	CSR joined years ago (high commitment); CSO just a few weeks ago (low commitment)

Commitment: Effort and time ^a		Transparency: Accuracy of information ^b	
High commitment	Low commitment	High transparency	Low transparency
Sustainability officer joined five years ago	Sustainability officer joined just a few weeks ago	Rolling out changes by 2025	Rolling out changes in the next couple of years
Company website provides visibility to goals and detailed plans	Company website provides visibility to what they hope to accomplish		
The company lives the values and principles each and every day (brand activism)	The company has a handful of anecdotes of how they aspire to live the values and principles (brand activism)		
100,000 sign-ups (brand activism)	100 sign-ups (brand activism)		
Ongoing campaign (brand activism)	1-month campaign (brand activism)		
Reducing the use of plastic in every possible way	Reducing plastic if it is possible		
Encouraging employees and suppliers to recycle more everyday through new practices and incentive programs	Encouraging employees and suppliers to try to recycle more if they can from time to time		

^aThe extent to which stakeholders perceive an organization to be dedicated in their CSR efforts as opposed to modifying efforts to adjust to current trends.

^bThe extent to which stakeholders perceive CSR efforts, decisions, practices, and outcomes to be open and accessible to the public/for public evaluation.

To operationalize the conditions of CSR and brand activism, stimuli for both conditions (CSR and brand activism) leveraged the same situation of green efforts by a restaurant. However, the brand activism scenario and conditions had additional language aligned with Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) characteristics of brand activism: (a) the company or brand was values-driven, (b) the social matter at hand was progressive or conservative, (c) the topic was a controversial sociopolitical issue, and (d) the company took a stance toward the issue through messaging and practice. For example, in the traditional CSR context, the vignette began, "In an effort to do its part, a fast-food company is ramping up its efforts on its continued commitment to adopt a green

mindset.” Meanwhile, in the brand activism condition, the company was “ramping up efforts on its commitment to take an active stance in the fight against climate change and has made it a part of their vision and purpose to lead the charge on doing better.” The following chapters present the specific methodology, analysis, and results for the pilot, Experiment 1 (CSR condition) and Experiment 2 (brand activism condition).

Chapter 5: Pilot

A pilot study was the means to preliminarily test the manipulations and experimental stimuli. The goal of the pilot study was to confirm perceivable differences in stimuli and garner qualitative open-ended reactions to the stimuli along with perceptions of social good communications in general. Achieving these goals entailed administering an online survey to 250 participants.

Pilot Methodology

After reviewing an information sheet and agreeing to continue, participants responded to a series of screening questions, including age and industry affiliation, followed by demographic questions. Next, participants viewed a screen with an example image to ensure they could view the visual. The purpose of this exercise was to ensure that only participants who were able to see the stimuli continued through the survey. Following the screening questions and exposure check, survey respondents underwent randomization into one of 10 conditions, where the scenario of the company description was in the context of either traditional CSR or brand activism with the manipulation conditions of (a) high commitment, low transparency; (b) high commitment, high transparency; (c) low commitment, low transparency; or (d) low commitment, high transparency. There were also traditional CSR and brand activism control cells, which excluded the commitment and transparency manipulations.

Once participants viewed the stimuli, there was additional randomization of the sequencing of questions. Half the participants answered company association questions and closed-ended questions to assess the strength of the transparency and commitment manipulations, followed by general questions about their perceptions when companies and brands communicate about the corporate or social good that they are doing. The other half of the

respondents answered general questions about corporate and social good communications, followed by specific questions about the company presented in the stimuli. Specifically, regarding the associations, respondents answered a series of questions, including open-ended reactions and sentiments. The open-ended questions and analysis receive discussion in the content analysis section later in this chapter. The last step was ascertaining the CSR values orientation.

Pilot Measures

Developed in Qualtrics, the survey used for the pilot had scales from prior research (see Table 2). Operationalizing the independent variables of commitment and transparency was done through manipulations in the company description in the vignettes. Confirming these values was done via commitment and transparency measures that participants answered through a 7-point agreement scale. Sample measures are in Table 2.

Table 2
Independent Variables: 7-Point Agreement Scales

Construct	Description	Example items
Commitment (manipulation check)	The extent to which stakeholders perceive an organization to be dedicated in their CSR efforts as opposed to modifying efforts to adjust to current trends (Joo et al., 2019)	The company provides a great deal of support for sustainability. The company seems to be highly committed to sustainability. The company seems to be highly involved with its suppliers and partnership agencies on sustainability.
Transparency (manipulation check)	The extent to which stakeholders perceive CSR efforts, decisions, practices, and outcomes to be open and accessible to the public/for public evaluation (Joo et al., 2019)	This company enables me to know what it is doing. All aspects of the company's sustainability efforts are open to public evaluation. This company wants me to understand what it is doing.

The open-ended questions included in the pilot were the means to discovering resulting sentiments and associations when companies communicate CSR or brand activism. The use of

qualitative analysis was a way to connect meaning rather than predict behavior. In this portion of the study, each participant had exposure to one condition. Beyond the quantitative measures that served as manipulation checks on the conditions, participants answered the following questions:

- What words would you use to describe this company?
- When a company makes an effort to communicate the corporate and social good that they are doing, how does it impact the way to feel about the company?
- What makes you trust when a company communicates the corporate and social good that they are doing?
- What makes you skeptical when a company communicates the corporate and social good that they are doing?
- Which companies do a good job of communicating the corporate and social good that they are doing? Why?
- Which companies could stand to improve when they are communicating the corporate and social good that they are doing? Why?

Although there was no expectation that CSR would be top-of-mind for participants, the anticipation was that respondents would indicate some expectations for organizations to do social good. Also anticipated was that when asked about attributions of the test company, participants would most likely respond more favorably to the highly committed scenarios using statements associated with being other-centered or prosocial versus self-centered. It was likely that participants would report trusting brands or companies that exhibited a commitment to doing good and being skeptical of brands that seem to be doing social good for self-serving, financial, or strategic intent only. Further, the expectation was that conditions having high commitment and high transparency would have more positive word associations; in contrast, conditions with

low transparency and low commitment would lead some participants to question the purpose or motive while still giving credit to the company for attempting to do social good.

Pilot Sample

The pilot study sample consisted of MTurk panel members. To qualify, participants had to be adults, aged 18 to 65 years, who did not work or live in a household with anyone who worked in particular industries, such as marketing, marketing research, media, or the restaurant business, as the focal product for the study was an unbranded restaurant. Two hundred and ninety-two subjects completed the survey, with 38 removed due to industry affiliation. Three subjects could not see the stimuli, three began the survey but did not complete it, and one failed an attention check. This data cleansing process yielded a final sample size of 248 respondents, with an even split of men and women and representation across age groups, races, and ethnicities. (See Appendix A for additional details regarding the demographic profile of participants.) Participants who completed the study received an incentive of \$2.50. The average response time was 16 minutes.

Pilot Analysis and Results

Reliability and Validity

SPSS version 27 was the software used to analyze quantitative pilot survey data. The primary objective of the pilot was to test and confirm the reliability and validity of the study components. Performing Cronbach's alpha and composite alpha calculations were means to ensure that values exceeded 0.70, indicating internal reliability and consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). A comparison of means and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were statistics used to check the validity of measurements. Content analysis of the open-ended questions leveraged qualitative techniques described as follows in the section ahead.

Analyses were ways to assess the item and construct reliability and validity. As shown in Table 3, the Cronbach's alpha of each independent variable construct ranged between 0.89 to 0.94. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = 0.89$ for transparency and $\alpha = 0.94$ for commitment. The composite reliability of variables measured was between 0.93 and 0.96, which exceeded 0.70 and was within an acceptable range.

In addition to alpha reliability, validity was another component evaluated. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), an acceptable convergent validity exceeds 0.50. In this test, and as indicated in Table 3, the measurement model had good convergent validity, noted by the average variance extracted (AVE) for each factor ranging between 0.82 and 0.90. Regarding discriminant validity, assessing the dimensions tested, the squared correlation coefficients were all greater than the AVE, which confirms the discriminant validity of the model.

Lastly, prior to testing the model, there was a CFA conducted to test relationships among variables. (The results of the CFA appear in Table 3.) A dimension reduction analysis confirmed that each measure yielded only a single factor, indicating that further rotation of variables was not necessary.

In addition to commitment and transparency, there was a scale developed to gauge the extent to which the context described was brand activism. The presumption was that brand activism is a subset of CSR that is more prosocial. The scale leveraged concepts from research by Vredenburg et al. (2020), who identified the following characteristics: (a) the company or brand is values-driven, (b) the social matter at hand can be progressive or conservative, (c) the topic is a controversial sociopolitical issue, and (d) the company takes a stance toward said issue through not only messaging but also practice. Leveraging all scale items, the Cronbach's alpha was not greater than 0.70. Assessing the "scale when items were deleted" function in SPSS

showed that deleting items from the set improved reliabilities but still did not meet the criteria. Taken together, Item 1 (“The company is purpose and values-driven”), Item 3 (“The issue that the company is addressing is progressive”), and Item 6 (“The company is making contribution(s) toward this issue through messaging and action”) showed improvements in the alpha reliability. Further assessing for replicability entailed progressing the full set of items into the experiments.

Manipulation Checks

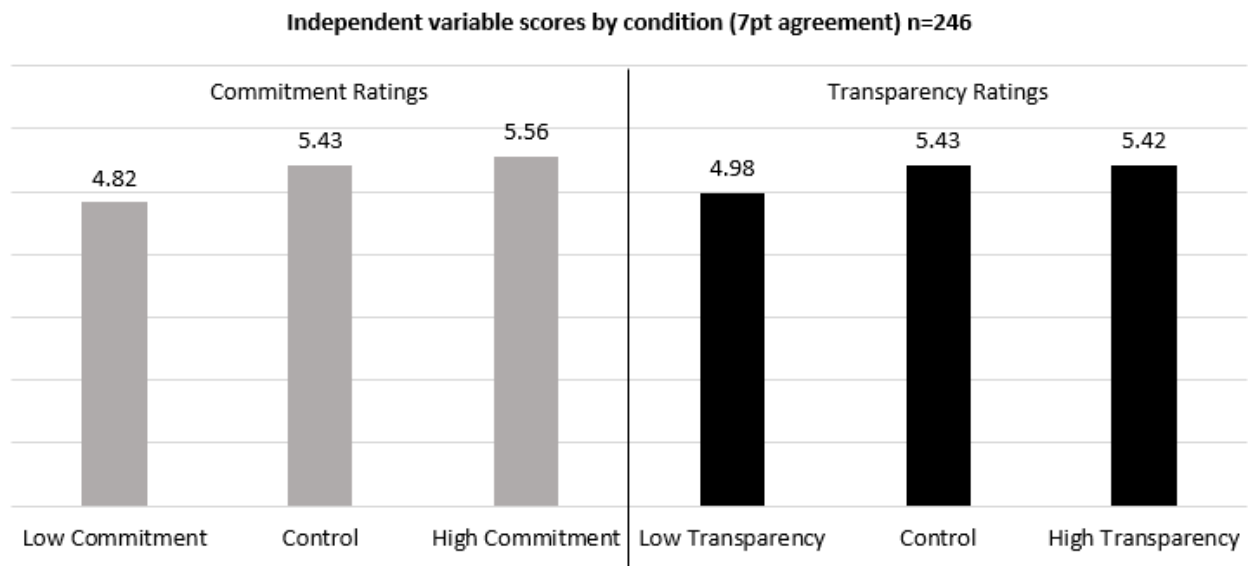
Beyond assessing the instrument measures, one of the primary purposes of the pilot study was to ensure commitment and transparency manipulations were detectable by subjects and that the scales developed to test the independent variables commitment and transparency moved in an intuitive direction. The expectation was that a change in the independent variable manipulation of commitment should yield a difference in the commitment score between conditions. Similarly, a change in the independent variable manipulation of transparency should yield a difference in the transparency score between conditions. Evaluating the effectiveness of the manipulations entailed comparing the commitment and transparency mean estimates. Figure 3 shows that means moved in the expected directions for each of the manipulations.

This analysis required reverse-coding the scales as presented in the questionnaire to be more intuitive. As such, because the preliminary analysis yielded sufficient results, the only change made prior to the next phase of research was to ensure the scales’ coding, such that 1 was the negative end and 7 was the positive end.

Table 3*Pilot: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Construct Validity, and Reliability*

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	AVE	Composite reliability	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha
Commitment (COMM)	The company provides a great deal of support for sustainability.	5.24	1.52	0.90	0.96	0.946	0.94
	The company seems to be highly committed to sustainability.					0.965	
	The company seems to be highly involved with its suppliers and partnership agencies on sustainability.					0.931	
Transparency (TRA)	The company enables me to know what it is doing.	5.22	1.39	0.82	0.93	0.942	0.89
	All aspects of the company's sustainability efforts are open to public evaluation.					0.884	
	This company wants me to understand what it is doing.					0.891	
Company CSR (CSR)	This is a socially responsible company.	5.34	1.36	0.90	0.96	0.949	0.94
	The company is concerned about improving the well-being of society.					0.946	
	The company follows high ethical standards.					0.943	
Brand activism (BA)	The company is purpose- and values-driven.	-	-	-	-	-	0.61
	The company is addressing a controversial, contested, or polarizing sociopolitical issue(s).					-	
	The issue that the company is addressing is progressive.					-	
	The issue that the company is addressing is conservative.					-	
	The issue that the company is addressing is political.					-	
	The company is making contribution(s) toward this issue through messaging and action.						

N = 248

Figure 3*Pilot: Comparison of Means by Manipulation Condition*

Content Analysis

As noted, a content analysis entailed assessing the open-ended questions included in the pilot study through evaluations of sentiment and frequency of phrases. The goal was to leverage inductive qualitative techniques to discover resulting sentiments and associations when companies communicate CSR or brand activism and in conditions of varying levels of transparency and commitment. This qualitative analysis was a way to connect meaning rather than predict behavior. Each participant answered five open-ended questions in this portion of the study (see Table 4), yielding nearly 1,500 statements amounting to nearly 33,000 words.

Table 4*Open-Ended Questions Assessed in the Pilot*

Company associations	What words would you use to describe the company?
Impact to perceptions	Closed-ended: When a company makes an effort to communicate the corporate and social good that they are doing, how does it impact the way to feel about the company? (Better, worse, no change) Open-ended: Why?
Trust drivers	What makes you trust when a company communicates the corporate and social good that they are doing? What makes you skeptical when a company communicates the corporate and social good that they are doing?
Unaided awareness	Which companies do a good job of communicating the corporate and social good that they are doing? Why? Which companies could stand to improve when they are communicating the corporate and social good that they are doing? Why?

Following response collection was data analysis using qualitative analysis techniques. Content analyses were means to identify global themes and nonredundant attributes through descriptive analyses. These analyses conducted for purposes of context provided qualitative perspective to the potential causal relationships measured in subsequent experiments.

Company Associations

To assess company associations, each respondent responded to the prompt “Based on the information that you just viewed, what words would you use to describe the company?” Response analysis entailed coding all comments into positive, negative, and neutral. The researcher avoided viewing the respondents’ cell conditions until coding all sentiments.

An initial review of the data indicated three additional groups of sentiments: “giving credit” (e.g., “The company seems to be on the right track and is making effort to produce a more sustainable org”), “mixed” (e.g., “I see the company as starting off well but needs to do more than just release statements and goals. They need to release their plans on how they will achieve their goals so others can keep the company accountable”), and “skeptical” (e.g., “Riding the environmental trend”). The researcher reiterated on the analysis in a second review. For

coding purposes, company associations were “positive” (e.g., “socially responsible, caring, trustworthy”) if the responses were complimentary of the company’s efforts; “neutral” (e.g., “fast food company going green”) if participants simply restated information noted in the stimuli, or “negative” (e.g., “flaky, undecided, uncommitted”) if responses were critical of the company’s efforts. If word associations included both positive and negative statements about the company’s efforts, they received the designation of “mixed,” with any statements that seemed to question the company’s efforts coded as “skeptical.” Finally, commentary that acknowledged the company’s efforts or future intent received the code of “giving credit” (e.g., “trying, just starting, great ideas”).

As a next step to reduce potential bias, the researcher commissioned four MTurk workers to code open-ended responses in a similar fashion, providing an incentive of \$25 upon completion. This step eliminated the possibility of coder bias by the researcher. Coders received the following task instructions through a Qualtrics survey:

As previously mentioned, recently, research was conducted to understand consumer reactions to companies communicating on the social good that they are doing. In the study, after reading a short description about a fictitious company, participants were asked what words they would use to describe the company. On the following pages, you will see a series of statements. Your assignment is to categorize each statement into one of the following:

- Positive: Positive statement about the company’s efforts or intent
- Giving credit: Statement acknowledges the company’s ambition and/or what they are trying to accomplish
- Mixed: Includes both positive and negative statements about the company’s efforts or intent
- Skeptical: Statement doubts the company’s efforts or intent
- Negative: Negative statement about the company’s efforts or intent

You will evaluate four sets of statements, for up to 250 statements in total.

Removing the originally identified “neutral” or “NA” categories was a way to limit subjectivity. Otherwise, once each of the four coders completed the task, the results underwent

examination with interrater reliability calculated. One coder's responses were eliminated due to too many outliers from other coders. The final results were in consideration of the coding from the researcher and the three remaining commissioned coders.

When considered as individual categories ("positive," "giving credit," "mixed," "skeptical," and "negative"), the interrater reliability was 63%; when considered as aggregated categories, with statements assigned to "positive" or "giving credit" and "negative" or "skeptical" grouped, the interrater reliability was 87%. For instances (13%) where the coders did not align unanimously, there was a code of "mixed" assigned.

As shown in Tables 5 and 6, the final analysis included ten conditions and four sentiment types ("positive/giving credit," "mixed," "skeptical/negative," and "neutral/NA"). The table also presents examples of participants' comments related to each of these scenarios. Overall, associations tended to be positive across the conditions; however, low commitment scenarios garnered more mixed or negative sentiments than high commitment scenarios. Similarly, brand activism showed a directional difference in negative sentiments in the low commitment conditions compared to the CSR scenarios (e.g., negative sentiments in the low commitment/low transparency at 21% vs. 4% of total sentiments in the condition, respectively for brand activism and CSR).

Table 5*CSR Coded Company Associations by Cell Condition*

Condition/ sentiment		Positive/giving credit	Mixed	Negative/skeptical	Neutral	Total
High commitment, low transparency	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	22 / 88%	2 / 8%	1 / 4%	0 / –	25
	Verbatim examples	The company I read about is a very modern and conscious company about the way they do business and takes pride in being sustainable.	They sound good, they talk the talk; let's see if they walk the walk. Green-oriented, concerned about their images, making changes, fast food	Fake, pandering, shilling	–	
High commitment, high transparency	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	21 / 88%	2 / 8%	1 / 4%	0 / –	24
	Verbatim examples	Socially responsible. Listens well. Compassionate. Caring. Believes in making a difference.	Donating, trying to be socially responsible, vague commitment to environment but with specific deadline. Agenda- and politically driven. By 2025, companies will be fined heavily for not reducing their waste. This is compliance passed off as charity.	Liars	–	
Low commitment, high transparency	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	16 / 67%	1 / 4%	3 / 13%	4 / 17%	24

Condition/ sentiment		Positive/giving credit	Mixed	Negative/skeptical	Neutral	Total
	Verbatim examples	They are working on becoming more environmentally friendly and giving back to help the cause.	A company that says that they intend to be socially responsible.	Riding the environmental trend Small, minor, trivial, negligible, small-time, inconsequential	It is a fast-food company that is considering adopting green policies	
Low commitment, low transparency	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	14 / 58%	7 / 29%	1 / 4%	2 / 8%	24
	Verbatim examples	The company seems to be on the right track and is making effort to produce a more sustainable org.	Open, curious, inauthentic	Boring, predictable, cloudy, unrealistic, manipulative	How the company is taking steps to help the environment by recycling	
Control	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	15 / 68%	3 / 14%	1 / 5%	3 / 14%	22
	Verbatim examples	Environmental, charitable, aware, green	Trying, skeptical, unsure	Money-driven, manipulative, fake	A fast-food company going green	
Total / % of total		88 / 74%	15 / 13%	7 / 6%	9 / 8%	119

Table 6*Brand Activism Coded Company Associations by Cell Condition*

Condition/ sentiment		Positive/giving credit	Mixed	Negative/skeptical	Neutral	Total
High commitment, low transparency	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	19 / 70%	6 / 22%	1 / 4%	1 / 4%	27
	Verbatim examples	That they really care about the planet and are taking measures in order to keep it healthy.	I see the company as starting off well but needs to do more than just release statements and goals. They need to release their plans on how they will achieve their goals so others can keep the company accountable. Socially responsible, liberal, profit-driven Sustainable, opaque	Shrewd marketing and public relations	The fast-food company reduces the plastic covers	
High commitment, high transparency	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	19 / 79%	2 / 8%	2 / 8%	1 / 4%	24
	Verbatim examples	I view this company in a positive light. When I read about them publishing extensive sustainability reports on their website, I knew it was more than a pitch, sale, or persuasion attempt. Overall, I like their stance and the efforts they are taking towards the matter.	Trying, inspiring some optimism, more good than bad (seemingly)	They are making a token response to an issue for PR purposes Insincere, artificial, fake, liars, manipulative	Fast food environmental/ climate change company activist	

Condition/ sentiment		Positive/giving credit	Mixed	Negative/skeptical	Neutral	Total
Low commitment, high transparency	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	19 / 76%	2 / 8%	4 / 16%	0 / –	25
	Verbatim examples	Expressive, forward thinking They are progressive It's a company that has made worthy and attainable sustainability goals. By continued contact with the news media/outside world, their sustainability policies will be more transparent, and more easily verifiable.	Aware, conscious, reactionary Multinational corporation, trend follower, nongenuine	They want to tell customers they are environmentally friendly, but they are not making a real commitment to get there. They have soft goals that are future oriented, not here and now, and they may or may not even end up doing them. I think they're going to see how consumers response before they actually take action. They are not in this for the environment; rather, they have selfish motives.	–	
Low commitment, low transparency	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	13 / 54%	3 / 13%	5 / 21%	3 / 13%	24
	Verbatim examples	Ambitious, results-oriented, conscientious, optimistic	Socially responsible, caring, naïve, new, not experienced enough, skeptical Virtue signalers	The company is doing the bare minimum for climate change, and it is just doing it to make themselves look good. Flaky, undecided, uncommitted	Fast food environmental/ climate change company activists	
Control	<i>n</i> / % of responses by condition	22 / 85%	1 / 4%	1 / 4%	2 / 8%	26

Condition/ sentiment		Positive/giving credit	Mixed	Negative/skeptical	Neutral	Total
	Verbatim examples	Environmentally conscious and sustainable, cares about its actions on the environment	Well-meaning, naïve, proactive, ambitious	Same as every other money-grubbing, life- sucking corporation	Fast food company	
Total / % of total		92 / 77%	14 / 12%	13 / 10%	7 / 6%	126

Impact of Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility

Prior research has shown that a company communicating about the social good it is doing appears to have a positive impact on perceptions toward the company. In the current work, as shown in Table 7, when asked, “When a company makes an effort to communicate the corporate and social good that they are doing, how does it make you feel?” --77% of respondents noted that it made them feel either much better or somewhat better about the company. Of 247 responses, 5% indicated that when a company communicates the CSR it is doing, they feel worse about the company.

Table 7

Impact to Company Perception by Communicating Corporate and Social Good Frequency Table

Impact of Communicating	Frequency of response	% of total responses
Much better	70	28.3%
Somewhat better	120	48.6%
Does not change	44	17.8%
Somewhat worse	12	4.9%
Much worse	1	<1%

Among participants who felt better about a company that communicated the corporate and social good they are doing, responses included the following:

I feel it's important that company[ies] are actively engaged in social causes. I feel we all have a responsibility to do good, and corporations especially with all their resources, should play an active role in society's issues. *(Feels somewhat better about a company communicating CSR)*

I want to know what the companies are doing and why. I want the companies to feel the pressure of not just keeping up with what they are doing as a social good, but to improve upon their actions. *(Feels much better about a company communicating CSR)*

I feel better about the company because I know where they stand and if I agree with their stance. It also tells me and gives me a chance to review what the company is planning to do socially. It gives me the opportunity to see if I should continue to support the company or not. *(Feels much better about a company communicating CSR)*

These comments show consumer inferences dealing with consumer expectations of companies, transparency, and affiliation.

Among the participants who felt worse about a company that communicated the corporate and social good it was doing, the themes centered around perceptions that the company was only communicating to look good, that it was pandering, and/or that the communication was a marketing ploy. Others noted that companies should be more covert when they are doing good. The following are verbatim quotes from participants.

When companies announce the social good they are doing, they do not do so for altruistic reasons. They are attempting to manipulate the empathy and concerns of the public in order to generate revenue by appearing caring and interested. (*Feels much worse about a company communicating CSR*)

I don't want to see the words, I want to see the actions. So, I guess I should say it depends on what they're saying. If they're backing it up with numbers and real impact, I'm fine with them communicating. But too many just say they are doing things but not really demonstrating specific, measurable actions. (*Feels somewhat worse about a company communicating CSR*)

Among respondents who felt no different when companies communicated, the comments tended to reflect indifference to the topic or question company motives.

I think being "green" is a choice. I think it's good but it's not always easy to be completely environmentally friendly. (*Not impacted when companies communicate about corporate/social good*)

I don't need companies virtue signaling.

I am rather suspicious of any company that puts out a release or announces in some way that it's doing something for social good. I rarely believe that it's for the right reason, even if I am happy to see them becoming more responsible. I often think, especially when they announce what they're doing, that they're simply jumping on the bandwagon to sell more product and make more money.

Participants' feedback in the company association exercise revealed a range of consumer reactions to communicating about the corporate or social good that a company is doing. An

exploration of what might cause an individual to trust or doubt a company's efforts appears in the following section.

Drivers: Trust and Skepticism

A word cloud was generated and provided a visualization of data analysis of what makes an individual trusting or skeptical of companies communicating the corporate or social good that they are doing. The researcher entered all text gathered from the applicable questions in the survey and used the data visualization tools *MonkeyLearn* and *DisplayR*. These tools work by taking the frequency in which words are stated and applying a relative size to indicate the number of times the word is stated compared to all words. Words that are larger in the graphic appeared in responses more frequently relative to all words. Words that are smaller in the word cloud received less frequent mentions relative to all words.

Figure 4

Word Cloud: Trust Drivers



As shown in Figure 4, action (32 mentions), effort (16 mentions), proof (13 mentions), and transparency (6 mentions) were words often used to discuss what garnered trust when companies are communicating the corporate and social good they are doing. The idea of proof appeared through various terms, including “definitive results,” “real results,” and “tangible evidence.”

Figure 5
Word Cloud: Skepticism Drivers



Next, participants provided examples of companies that had done a good job or could stand to improve their CSR or brand activist efforts. This question was open-ended, with no suggested list of responses. Instead, participants gave input based on top-of-mind recall. Analysis of the responses entailed tallying the frequency of mentions for each company mentioned. The results appear in Tables 8 and 9.

When it came to companies that could be doing better (see Table 9), of all coded responses, the most consistent was that several, most, or all companies could stand to do better. Amazon, which also was on the list of doing good, received the most mentions for opportunities

to improve, followed by Nike and Walmart. Among the companies with an opportunity to improve, labor was a consistent theme.

Table 8

Companies Doing a Good Job of Communicating Their Social and Corporate Good Efforts^a

Company mentioned	Frequency	Example comments
None	23	<p>"I do not know of any companies that do a good job of communicating the corporate and social good that they are doing."</p> <p>"None. I'm not impressed by any of it. It is severely restricted by the nature of capitalism and consumerism."</p>
Starbucks	21	<p>"I think Starbucks has done a good job. Since coming under fire a couple of years ago they have made efforts to get more involved in social justice issues"</p> <p>"Starbucks communicates things they are doing, such as doing away with straws and disposable cups so that less trash ends up going to landfills"</p>
Amazon	15	<p>"Amazon because they donate a large amount of their profits to various charities and even allow you to order goods in a way in which you can direct which charities are getting a donation thanks to my purchase."</p> <p>"I believe Amazon introduced an electric fleet of delivery vans that would cut down on emissions."</p>
Apple	14	<p>"I feel Apple does a good job of communicating their actions in regard to social causes. I feel Apple is transparent in how they are an environmental and socially conscious company. We can see Apple's efforts in the reviewing their annual reports and other such documents."</p>
No specific company mentioned	14	<p>"Any company that is generous with their profits."</p>
Ben & Jerry's	12	<p>"Ben and Jerry's does a great job of communicating social good. They take firm stances on social justice awareness."</p>
McDonald's	10	<p>"McDonald's does a great job with its Ronald McDonald House, which raises money for children's educations. They have had this program for many years and placed donation boxes within restaurants within the United States."</p>
Toms	10	<p>"I think TOMS is known for their all-around attitude of social good. They are a shoe company that uses transparency through their supply chain, and they offer a buy one pair of shoes, and they donate a pair of shoes model. They also donate a portion of their profits to organizations. I think the fact that TOMS is doing social good at every turn shows their passion for helping and makes them 100% trustworthy. I don't have to look up their specific actions because they obviously aren't driven by corporate greed."</p>

^aMentioned at least 10 times. *Note.* Google (9), Microsoft (8), can't think of any (7), Nike (7), Target (7), Disney (6), Patagonia (6), Tesla (6), Walmart (5), Chick-Fil-A (4), Publix (3), Whole Foods (3)

Table 9*Companies That Could Improve Communicating Their Social and Corporate Good Efforts^a*

Company	Mentions	Example comments
Several, most, or all	25	“I think that more companies in general could do a better job of being transparent and talking about they give back to the community more.”
Amazon	23	“They could improve by helping take care of the planet and paying better wages.” “I feel like Amazon could do a better job communicating. They cause a lot of emissions with all the packages they ship with planes and trucks. They do a lot of things and have made promises about sustainability but I feel like they’re not backing it up.”
Nike	18	“I think companies like Nike need a lot of work, with their social communication and social good deeds. Their supply chain has a lot of very shady practices going on, with slave labor and child labor already identified. They need to fix that and communicate that they have fixed it.”
Walmart	18	“Walmart, they want people to believe they are good but don’t treat workers well” “Walmart needs to improve their message and what social good they are doing. They are so rich and powerful, but I’m not aware of what they do for society”
Can’t think of any	14	I do not know any companies that could improve their communication off the top of my head. I would say any company that is not sincere or transparent about what they are doing, should ultimately look into those problems and try to fix it.
McDonald’s	14	“McDonald’s could do more communicating about what their stances are. I honestly can’t recall hearing about any of them.” “Most, I would say, but McDonald’s is a major perpetrator of the “look at us! We’re doing good!” sin. I think you mean to say above why I think they’re doing a bad job, no? It’s because they shove their “social responsibility” acts down our throats in ads and the like. I miss the old days when you knew they did things like the wonderful Ronald McDonald house simply because there were donation boxes in stores and they had specific commercials (not selling their food) just for the charity. But now, every time they change from plastic to recycled paper or whatever, it’s in their ads, basically going “Here’s the good we’re doing...now buy our burgers!”
Oil, fuel, and energy companies (e.g., Exxon and BP)	12	“Any and all gas and oil companies. They don’t do a good job. I’d like to see fracking ended and more solar and wind companies formed.” “BP gasoline could improve their corporate and social campaigns due to a major gas spill that they had many years ago. They released TV commercials apologizing and stating their clean-up plans, but they could come out with a CSR program on their own accord to further a cause.”
No specific company mentioned	10	“I think that more companies in general could do a better job of being transparent and talking about they give back to the community more.” “Any company who is trying to do damage repair. If a company was ‘caught’ in a bad light and then come back a few months later with how they’re helping society or some other type of cause.”
Apple	10	“Apple. I believe they are doing a good job at social causes, but at the same time, I cannot recall of the top of my head what causes they support. They don’t post much about it, only when it’s convenient.” “I believe that Apple and Nike have room to improve. Their business dealings in China have been well-documented (e.g., sweatshops). Most recently, Nike was found to be supplied by a group that was taking advantage of the Uighur population.”

^aMentioned at least 10 times. *Note.* NA (8), Facebook (7), Coca Cola (6), fast food (6), Starbucks (6), Chick-Fil-A (5), Target (5), Tesla (5), Google (4), none (4), Burger King (3), Wendy’s (3), Nestlé (3)

The pilot analysis enabled confidence in progressing to the next phase of research. The pilot also provided rich context on consumer perspectives related to drivers/barriers to trusting companies communicating about the good they are doing. The next phase of the study entailed conducting experiments with larger samples per condition and testing hypotheses and the relationships among independent and dependent variables.

Chapter 6: Experiment 1: Traditional Corporate Social Responsibility Context

The next phase of research included two experiments, one in the context of CSR (Experiment 1) and one in the context of brand activism (Experiment 2). Each experiment included four test cells and a control cell. This chapter presents the results of Experiment 1.

Methodology

After the pilot study and confirmation of the validity and reliability of tested dimensions, Experiment 1 began with 250 participants randomly assigned to one of four test conditions using a combination of high and low commitment and transparency conditions and a control condition. Each cell included 50 participants. In this study, participants received exposure to CSR in a more traditional, less prosocial context before answering questions to assess trust and perceived motivation (extrinsic/intrinsic). Manipulation check questions and purchase/visit intent were also measures captured. There was randomization of the sequence in which participants reported trust and perceived motivation measures to avoid potential order bias.

Measures

The survey used in Experiment 1 and developed in Qualtrics had scales adopted from prior research, as shown in Table 10. Operationalizing the independent variables of commitment and transparency was done through manipulations and confirmed with commitment and transparency measures. The dependent variables included trust and perceived motive as a proxy for virtue signaling. Dimensionalizing trust entailed using a multidimensional scale (also shown in Table 10). Using 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree* allowed for understanding the various components of trust, including competence-based trust, benevolence-based trust, and integrity-based trust, along with other measures. Capturing perceived motive, with extrinsic motivation presumed to align to virtue signaling, occurred in

two ways. One method of capture was with extrinsic and intrinsic motivation scales that included questions such as, “In your opinion, why does this company communicate about its socially responsible engagements?” Additionally, because academic research on virtue signaling is limited in the context of consumers and corporations, it was necessary to use another ad hoc scale to assess perceived motivation, or virtue signaling. Participants read a definition of virtue signaling and then rated the extent to which they believed a company was virtue signaling based on the given scenarios.

A between-subjects design facilitated randomizing survey respondents into one of five conditions, where the context of the company description was in line with traditional CSR communications. The manipulation conditions were (a) high commitment, low transparency; (b) high commitment, high transparency; (c) low commitment, low transparency; and (d) low commitment, high transparency. There was also a traditional CSR control cell, which excluded the commitment and transparency manipulations.

After reviewing an information sheet, agreeing to participate, answering a series of screening and demographic questions, and confirming that they could view visuals presented in the survey, participants progressed into a commitment and transparency manipulation condition via random selection.

Table 10
Measures: 7-Point Agreement Scales

Construct	Description	Example items
Commitment (manipulation check)	The extent to which stakeholders perceive an organization to be dedicated in their CSR efforts as opposed to modifying efforts to adjust to current trends (Joo et al., 2019)	The company provides a great deal of support for sustainability. The company seems to be highly committed to sustainability. The company seems to be highly involved with its suppliers and partnership agencies on sustainability.
Transparency (manipulation check)	The extent to which stakeholders perceive CSR efforts, decisions, practices, and outcomes to be open and accessible to the public/for public evaluation (Joo et al., 2019)	This company enables me to know what it is doing. All aspects of the company's sustainability efforts are open to public evaluation. This company wants me to understand what it is doing.
Trust	Competence trust: Refers to customer's confidence in a company to realize its promise (Peng & Xie, 2011; Auger, 2014)	I feel very confident about the skills of this organization. The organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do. This organization is known to successful at the things it tries to do. The organization can be relied on to keep its promises.
	Benevolence trust: Refers to customers confidence that a corporation has a sincere concern about the consumers' interests and motivations to do good to its customers (Peng & Xie, 2011; Auger, 2014; McKnight et al., 2002)	Whenever this organization makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me. I believe this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions. This organization is interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself.
	Integrity trust: When a customer the believes that the other party is fair and just (Auger, 2014)	The organization treats people like me fairly and justly The organization does not mislead people like me. Sound principles seem to guide the behavior of this organization.
Intrinsic motivation	The primary reason a company communicates about its CSR; The extent to which a company is perceived as motivated by impacting society or others (Parguel et al., 2009)	Because it is really conscious of the importance of ecological issues. To put forward a genuine consciousness toward regarding ecological issues. To make consumers aware of ecological issues
Extrinsic motivation (virtue signaling)	The primary reason a company communicates about its CSR; The extent to which a company is perceived as motivated to appear to do good out of self-interest (Parguel et al., 2009)	Wants to improve its image Because it is fashionable to do Because it wants to be liked Because it wants to get more business

Sample

A total of 290 subjects completed the survey. 35 subjects were removed due to industry affiliation; three could not see the stimuli or failed the attention check. This data cleansing process yielded a final sample of 252 respondents, with a relatively even split of men and women and representation across age groups, races, and ethnicities. Participants who completed the study in its entirety received an incentive of \$2.50. The average response time was 11 minutes.

Analysis and Results

Construct Reliability and Validity

SPSS version 27 was the software used to evaluate the results of the experimental condition in the context of CSR. Prior to testing the structural model and hypotheses, there were tests conducted to assess the item and construct reliability and validity. As noted in Table 11, Cronbach's alpha of each independent and dependent construct ranged from 0.81 to 0.95. The composite reliability of variables measured was between 0.89 and 0.95, which again exceeded 0.70 and was within an acceptable range. For trust—measured as a multidimensional construct of competence trust, integrity trust, and benevolence trust—Cronbach's alpha scores ranged between 0.86 and 0.90 and aggregate reliability between 0.91 and 0.94, shown in Table 12.

In addition to alpha reliability, it was necessary to evaluate validity. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), an acceptable convergent validity exceeds 0.50. In this test and as indicated in Table 11, the measurement model has good convergent validity, noted by the AVE for each factor ranging between 0.65 and 0.87. Regarding discriminant validity, in assessing the dimensions tested, the squared correlation coefficients were all greater than the AVE, which confirmed the discriminant validity of the model.

Finally, prior to testing the model, there was a CFA conducted to test relationships among variables. (The results of the CFA appear in Table 11.) A dimension reduction analysis confirmed that each measure yielded only a single factor, indicating that further variable rotation was unnecessary. The exception was brand activism, which did not meet the criteria for reliability, as Cronbach's alpha was 0.28. This is an area of opportunity for future research.

Correlation Analysis and Virtue Signaling

Regarding intercorrelations of various measures collected, Table 13 shows the interrelationships between variables. Virtue signaling was measured by asking if what the company described was perceived to be virtue signaling. There was a moderate positive significant relationship with virtue extrinsic motivation (0.61), indicating that the extrinsic motivation scale is a reasonable proxy for virtue signaling. Also noted was that the correlation between CSR values, restaurant frequency (how often respondents typically visit restaurants), and the impact of recent news had a moderately significant but low (< 30%) correlation with independent and dependent variables, which indicate that controlling for these factors would likely have little impact on model implications.

Table 11*Experiment 1 CSR: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Construct Validity, and Reliability*

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Factor loading	AVE	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha
Commitment (COMM)	The company provides a great deal of support for sustainability.	4.88	1.34	0.95	0.65	0.95	0.92
	The company seems to be highly committed to sustainability.			0.93			
	The company seems to be highly involved with its suppliers and partnership agencies on sustainability.			0.92			
Transparency (TRA)	This company enables me to know what it is doing.	5.06	1.24	0.90	0.73	0.89	0.81
	All aspects of the company's sustainability efforts are open to public evaluation.			0.85			
	The company wants me to understand what it is doing.			0.80			
Company CSR (CSR)	This is a socially responsible company.	4.86	1.36	0.93	0.85	0.95	0.91
	This company is concerned about improving the well-being of society.			0.92			
	This company follows high ethical standards.			0.92			
Brand activism (BA)	The company is purpose- and values-driven.	—	—	0.42	—	—	0.28
	The company is addressing a controversial, contested, or polarizing sociopolitical issue(s).			0.26			
	The issue that the company is addressing is progressive.			-0.26			
	The issue that the company is addressing is conservative.			0.85			
	The issue that the company is addressing is political.			0.32			
	The company is making contribution(s) toward this issue through messaging and action.			0.21			
Trust (TOTAL_TR)	I feel very confident about the skills of this organization.	4.78	1.12	0.84	0.67	0.95	0.95
	This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.			0.63			
	This organization is likely to be successful at the things it tries to do.			0.79			
	The organization can be relied on to keep its promises.			0.83			
	The organization treats people like me fairly and justly.			0.88			

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Factor loading	AVE	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha
Intrinsic motivation (INT_MOT)	Sound principles seem to guide the behavior of this organization.			0.85			
	This organization does not mislead people like me.			0.87			
	Whenever the organization makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.			0.85			
	I believe this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.			0.81			
	This organization is interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself.			0.84			
	Because it is really conscious of the importance of ecological issues.	4.83	1.43	0.95	0.87	0.95	0.93
	To put forward a genuine consciousness regarding social issues.			0.94			
	To make consumers aware of its ecological issues.			0.91			
	Because it wants to improve its image.	5.56	1.06	0.77	0.70	0.90	0.85
	Because it is fashionable to do so nowadays.			0.82			
Extrinsic motivation (EXT_MOT)	Because it wants to be liked by consumers.			0.89			
	Because it wants to get more business.			0.86			

Note. 7-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*
N = 252

Table 12*Multidimensional Trust, Experiment 1 CSR: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Construct Validity, and Reliability*

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Factor loading on each dimension	Composite factor loading on total trust	AVE	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha
Competence trust (COMP TRU)	I feel very confident about the skills of this organization.	5.11	1.04	0.87	0.92	0.73	0.91	0.87
	This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.			0.76				
	This organization is likely to be successful at the things it tries to do.			0.90				
	This organization can be relied on to keep its promises.			0.87				
Integrity trust (INT TRU))	The organization treats people like me fairly and justly.	4.71	1.20	0.89	0.96	0.79	0.92	0.86
	Sound principles seem to guide the behavior of this organization.			0.87				
	This organization does not mislead people like me.			0.90				
Benevolence trust (BEN TRU)	Whenever this organization makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.	4.39	1.41	0.92	0.92	0.83	0.94	0.90
	I believe this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.			0.91				
	This organization is interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself.			0.91				

Note. 7-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree**N* = 252

Table 13*Experiment 1 CSR: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Matrix*

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Commitment	4.88	1.34	0.81													
2. Transparency	5.06	1.24	.637**	0.85												
3. Company CSR	4.86	1.36	.885**	.679**	0.92											
4. Competence trust	5.11	1.04	.741**	.648**	.797**	0.92										
5. Integrity trust	4.71	1.20	.771**	.639**	.854**	.835**	0.89									
6. Benevolence trust	4.39	1.41	.703**	.572**	.789**	.727**	.848**	0.91								
7. Trust total	4.78	1.12	.791**	.664**	.872**	.917**	.955**	.924**	0.82							
8. Intrinsic motivation	4.83	1.43	.775**	.577**	.838**	.677**	.737**	.728**	.766**	0.94						
9. Extrinsic motivation	5.56	1.07	-.388**	-.263**	-.445**	-.324**	-.451**	-.425**	-.427**	-.382**	0.84					
10. Visit intent	3.77	1.01	-.388**	-.263**	-.445**	.707**	.739**	.654**	.749**	.721**	-.405**	—				
11. Virtue signaling	3.84	0.92	-.384**	-.245**	-.443**	-.353**	-.448**	-.404**	-.429**	-.412*	-.607**	-.381**				
12. CSR values	3.48	1.10	.192**	.163**	.200**	.250**	.181**	.247**	.245**	.197**	-0.08	.210**	0.09898	-.200**		
13. Restaurant frequency	3.72	1.37	-.197**	-0.1	-.200**	-.156*	-.175**	-.222**	-.199**	-.152*	.137*	-.263**	0.09898	-.200**	—	
14. News impact	0.80	0.69	.280**	.232**	.270**	.215**	.299**	.321**	.298**	.251**	-.158*	.263**	-.145*	.270**	-.085	—

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviations; square root values of the averages of the variables are provided on the diagonal; visit intent, virtue signaling, visit intent: 5-point scale; Scales 1–9: 7-point agreement

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

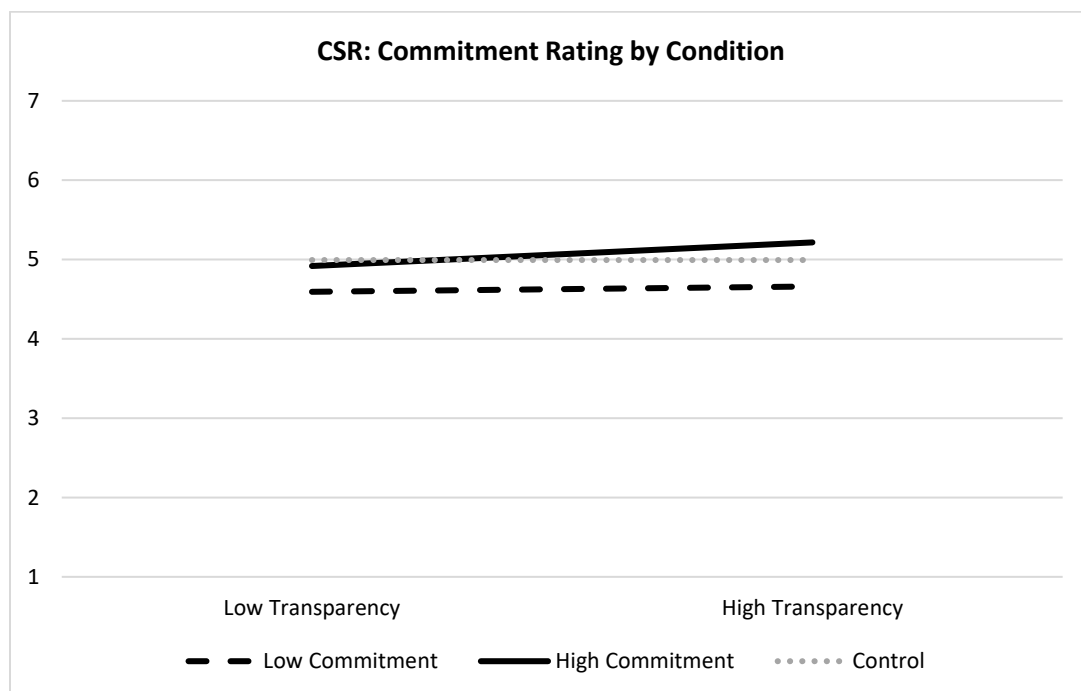
N = 252

Manipulation Checks

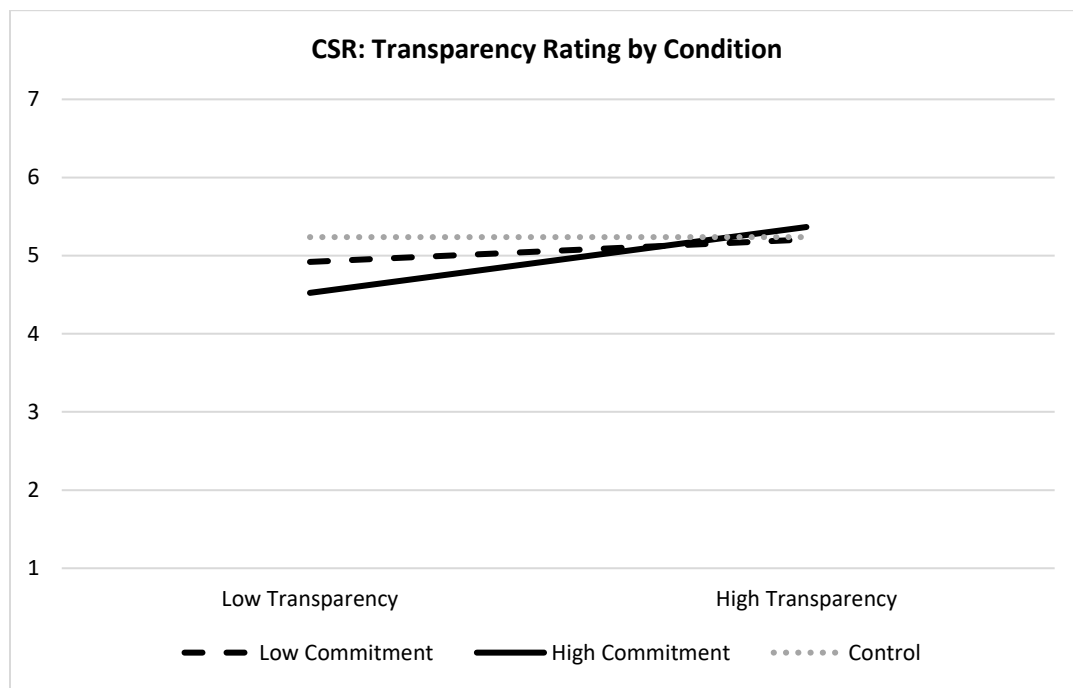
After reliability and validity assessments, a between-subjects test was a way to evaluate the impact of the commitment and transparency manipulations. To quantify the impact of the commitment and transparency manipulations, a commitment scale adopted including items shown in Table 11 provided quantifiable evidence of the independent variable manipulation. Additionally, the transparency scale utilized included items shown in Table 11. Comparing the agreement ratings by condition, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*, the mean ratings for independent variables moved in directions that were intuitive, as shown in Figures 6 and 7. In turn, higher levels of commitment and transparency directionally resulted in higher averages for each variable. Interestingly, however, the control condition appeared to obtain comparable scores to the high commitment/high transparency condition.

Figure 6

Experiment 1 CSR: Mean Commitment Score Comparison by Condition



N = 252

Figure 7*Experiment 1 CSR: Mean Transparency Score Comparison by Condition* $N = 252$

Specific to the test conditions reflecting a test of between-subjects effects, Tables 14 and 15 present comparisons of the means of the independent variables (commitment and transparency) and dependent variables (trust, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation), among others captured for diagnostic purposes.

Commitment

Table 14 shows the comparison of results of the low commitment condition to the high commitment condition. A p value where $0.05 > p < .1$ indicates a marginal significance between respondents for each of the measures evaluated after viewing stimuli in each condition. A p value where $.05 < p > .01$ indicates a moderate significance between respondents viewing stimuli in each condition. Finally, $p < .01$ indicates high significance or little chance that the difference noted would have occurred in error.

Table 14 shows that in the CSR experiment, the commitment manipulation had a significant impact on the commitment score ($p = .02$) and a marginal impact on CSR ($p = .07$), total trust ($p = .07$), intrinsic motivation ($p = .058$), and visit intent ($p = .05$). A low or high commitment manipulation did not significantly impact transparency ($p = .545$) or extrinsic motivation ($p = .75$).

Transparency

Table 15 shows that the transparency manipulation had a strong significant impact on the transparency score ($p = .002$), as expected, but did not impact any other dependent variables.

Table 14

Experiment 1 CSR: Test Between Subject Effects, Commitment

Measure	Condition	Mean	SD	Mean SE	<i>p</i> value
Commitment (IV measure)	Low commitment	4.62	1.41		
	High commitment	5.07	1.26	1.792	0.02**
Transparency (IV measure)	Low commitment	5.06	1.26		
	High commitment	4.95	1.31	1.647	0.545
CSR	Low commitment	4.64	1.43		
	High commitment	4.99	1.22	1.778	0.07*
Total trust (DV)	Low commitment	4.61	1.18		
	High commitment	4.89	1.01	1.209	0.07*
Intrinsic motivation (DV)	Low commitment	4.63	1.5		
	High commitment	5.01	1.32	1.986	0.058*
Extrinsic motivation (DV)	Low commitment	5.55	1.08		
	High commitment	5.51	1.05	1.128	0.75
Visit intent	Low commitment	3.6	1.04		
	High commitment	3.87	0.88	0.936	.050**

Note. Low commitment ($n = 100$)/high commitment ($n = 100$). Visit intent scale = 5-point scale

$N = 200$, $df = 1$

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 15*Experiment 1 CSR: Test Between Subject Effects, Transparency*

Measure	Condition	Mean	SD	Mean SE	<i>p</i> value
Transparency (IV measure)	Low transparency	4.72	1.34		
	High transparency	5.29	1.16	1.57	.002***
Commitment (IV measure)	Low transparency	4.75	1.26		
	High transparency	4.94	1.44	1.833	0.332
CSR	Low transparency	4.82	1.21		
	High transparency	4.82	1.47	1.805	0.974
Total trust (DV)	Low transparency	4.75	0.99		
	High transparency	4.74	1.11	1.229	0.985
Intrinsic motivation (DV)	Low transparency	4.78	1.37		
	High transparency	4.86	1.47	2.021	0.703
Extrinsic motivation (DV)	Low transparency	5.43	0.99		
	High transparency	5.63	1.12	1.119	0.201
Visit intent	Low transparency	3.68	0.924		
	High transparency	3.79	1.023	0.951	0.404

Note. Low transparency ($n = 99$), high transparency ($n = 101$). Visit intent = 5-point scale

$N = 200$, $df = 1$

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Model Testing

Hypotheses (i.e., the structural model paths) testing occurred following confirmation of reliability and validity of the measurement model and scales.

Commitment Impact on Motivation

Testing the main effects and interactions of the independent variables for Hypotheses 1 and 2 entailed analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing using SPSS. H1 predicted that perceived commitment affects perceived motivation such that (H1a) when a company's perceived commitment is low, it signals that the company is more extrinsically motivated to benefit the company (virtue signaling) and (H1b) when perceived commitment is high, it signals that the company is more intrinsically motivated to benefit society or others.

Referencing the results of the test of between-subjects effects (see Table 14), the difference in intrinsic motivation when commitment was high compared to when commitment was low was marginally significant at $p < 0.1$ for intrinsic motivation in the CSR context. For extrinsic motivation, the commitment manipulation did not have a significant impact between subjects. Further, as shown in the test of direct effects in Table 16, the paths leading from COMM to INT MOT and COMM to EXT MOT were insignificant, as the confidence interval at 95% and 90% included 0. As such, H1 was not supported.

Interestingly, although not hypothesized, an evaluation of high, low, and control cells indicated comparable results for high and control as evidenced in both the CSR and brand activism conditions. In other words, the results of the control cell and the high cell were statistically different from the low commitment cell but comparable to one another. This finding may have implications for practitioners. It suggests that companies have little to gain by communicating commitment versus not communicating commitment but stand to lose if perceived to be uncommitted. Although this implication could indicate an opportunity for future research, for subsequent hypothesis tests in the present research, the sample excluded the control cell unless otherwise noted.

Commitment Impact on Trust

Next, H2 predicted that a company's perceived commitment generates trust in the company. As noted in Table 16, commitment had a positive direct effect on trust. However, this was only marginally true at the 90% confidence interval (LLCI: 0.010, ULCI: 0.268, 90%), garnering slight partial support.

Next, H3 and H4 posited that (H3) when perceived commitment is low, trust would be negatively impacted, and conversely, (H4) when perceived commitment is high, trust would be

positively impacted. The univariate analysis (see Table 14) indicated that when commitment was low, the total trust score was 4.61 and was significantly different than when commitment was high and garnered a score of 4.89. With a p value of $p < .1$, H3 and H4 were partially supported.

Trust as a Mediating Variable

Testing the mediation effect of trust presented in H5 entailed using the analytical approach of Hayes Model 4 (Hayes, 2013). This particular model tests direct and indirect effects that occur between independent and dependent variables. Table 16 shows the direct and indirect effects of path estimates and confidence intervals accordingly. In the current research, there were tests of the hypothesized impact of COMM on TRUST and INT MOT in addition to COMM on TRUST and EXT MOT. Specifically, H5a hypothesized that trust mediates the relationship between commitment and motivation such that (H5b) when trust is low, the perceived motive would be extrinsic (virtue signaling) and (H5c) when trust is high, the perceived motive would be intrinsic.

As noted above, the results of Experiment 1 (CSR, $n = 250$) found that low commitment yielded a lower trust score ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.18$), while high commitment yielded a higher trust score ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.01$; $F(3.241, 199) = p < .1$). Additionally, perceived commitment had a positive direct effect on trust ($\beta = .14$, LLCI: 0.010, ULCI: 0.268, 90%). Next, although the direct effect of commitment on motivation was insignificant, the marginal effect of commitment on trust suggested possible indirect influence. When trust was included as a mediator, the relationship between commitment and motivation was shown to be significantly mediated by trust for intrinsic (LLCI: 0.014, ULCI: 0.267, 90%) and extrinsic motivation (LLCI: -0.107, ULCI: -0.003, 90%). These results indicate that even though commitment was not found to predict intrinsic motivation and had only a slight impact on trust, the test of indirect effects (see

Table 16) shows that trust had a slight mediating impact between commitment and intrinsic motivation (COMM → TRU → INT MOT) and commitment and extrinsic motivation (COMM → TRU → EXT), albeit at the 90% confidence interval, garnering partial support for H5 (a, b, and c).

Table 16
Experiment 1 CSR: Model: Direct and Indirect Effects

Total effects		Effect	SE boot	Bootstrap 95% CI		Bootstrap 90% CI		Sig.
				Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	
Direct effects	COMM → INT MOT	0.549	0.663	-0.758	0.186	-0.055	0.164	NS
	TRU → INT MOT	0.965	0.060	0.847	1.084	0.866	1.064	**
	COMM → EXT MOT	0.031	0.069	-0.105	0.168	-0.083	0.146	NS
	TRU → EXT MOT	-0.393	0.063	-0.517	-0.269	-0.497	-0.289	**
	COMM → VISIT INTENT	0.045	0.047	-0.048	0.137	-0.033	0.122	NS
	TRU → VISIT INTENT	0.645	0.043	0.561	0.729	0.575	0.716	**
	COMM → TRU	0.140	0.078	-0.013	0.293	0.010	0.268	*
Indirect effects	COMM → TRU → INT MOT	0.135	0.078	-0.014	0.287	0.014	0.267	*
	COMM → TRU → EXT MOT	-0.055	0.031	-0.122	0.005	-0.107	-0.003	*
	COMM → TRU → VISIT INTENT	0.090	0.051	-0.006	0.193	0.007	0.176	*
	COMM x TRA → TRU	0.090	0.078	-0.064	0.244	-0.039	0.219	NS
	COMM x TRA → TRU → INT MOT ⁱ	0.174	0.153	-0.123	0.468	-0.071	0.424	NS
	COMM x TRA → TRU → EXT MOT ⁱ	-0.071	0.062	-0.193	0.049	-0.174	0.030	NS
	COMM x TRA → TRU → VISIT INTENT ⁱ	0.116	0.101	-0.086	0.312	-0.050	0.282	NS

Note. Includes low/high commitment and transparency conditions (i.e., excludes control). Standardized estimating of 5,000 bootstrapping sample. COMM = perceived commitment, TRA = transparency, TRU = trust, INT = intrinsic motivation, EXT = extrinsic motivation.

N = 200

ⁱIndex of moderated mediation (difference between conditional indirect effect)

** Sig. at 95% and 90% CI, * Sig at 90% CI, NS = no significance

Although not a part of the structural equation model, there was also a test conducted with future visit intent as the dependent variable instead of perceived motivation. Similar to the results for intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, commitment did not predict future visit intent in the CSR context. The test of indirect effects in Table 16, however, shows that trust had a slight mediating

impact between commitment and visit intent (COMM → TRU → VISIT INTENT), albeit at the 90% confidence interval.

Multidimension Trust Exploratory Analysis

As noted, for trust, there was an aggregate score developed for analysis to confirm or disconfirm support of the hypotheses. Analysis of individual trust dimensions (i.e., benevolence trust, competence trust, and integrity trust) occurred for exploratory purposes only. The results (see Table 17) indicated between-groups differences, attributed to commitment, in integrity and benevolence trust. There was no significant impact attributed to transparency among trust variables, as shown in Table 18. The following section includes further exploration of the latter with details of transparency moderation results.

Table 17

Experiment 1 CSR: Trust Test Between-Group Effects, Commitment

IV_COMMITMENT		COMP_TRUST	INTEG_TRUST	BENEV_TRUST
Low commitment	Mean	4.98	4.52	4.20
	<i>n</i>	100	100	100
	Std. deviation	1.12	1.24	1.50
High commitment	Mean	5.18	4.83	4.55
	<i>n</i>	100	100	100
	Std. deviation	0.96	1.09	1.28
Total	Mean	5.08	4.68	4.37
	<i>N</i>	200	200	200
	Std. deviation	1.04	1.18	1.40
Between-group significance		0.170	0.057*	0.080*

N = 200

p* < .1, *p* < .05, ****p* < 0.01

Table 18*Experiment 1 CSR: Trust Test Between-Group Effects, Transparency*

IV_TRANSPARENCY		COMP_TRUST	INTEG_TRUST	BENEV_TRUST
Low transparency	Mean	5.02	4.69	4.45
	<i>n</i>	99	99	99
	Std. deviation	0.95	1.02	1.25
High transparency	Mean	5.14	4.66	4.30
	<i>n</i>	101	101	101
	Std. deviation	1.13	1.32	1.53
Total	Mean	5.08	4.68	4.37
	<i>N</i>	200	200	200
	Std. deviation	1.04	1.18	1.40
	Between-group significance	0.414	0.888	0.457

N = 200**p* < .1, ***p* < .05, ****p* < 0.01**Transparency as a Moderator**

For Hypothesis 6 (a, b, c, and d), Hayes Model 7 (Hayes, 2013) was an appropriate test to assess the significance of relationships, correlations, and the strength of the proposed moderated mediation model. When transparency (TRA) was incorporated into the model, fit was found to be insignificant. Further, as shown in Table 16, there was no significant effect for transparency on trust in the moderated mediation model. As such, H6 overall was not supported.

In summary, when a company engages in traditional CSR, the level of commitment does not necessarily have an impact on consumers' conclusions about the company's motivation. However, based on the research results, a company engaging in CSR could lose trust if consumers perceive its commitment to be low. Although there could be other factors, reduced trust can negatively impact perceived motivation.

Chapter 7: Experiment 2: Brand Activism Context

Simultaneous to Experiment 1 with conditions set in the context of CSR, Experiment 2 occurred to test conditions in the context of brand activism. As discussed, the current work was a means to explore if the proposed model operated similarly or different for CSR and brand activism. This section presents the results of the brand activism experiment. The study designs were comparable; however, the test stimuli presentation was in the specific context of brand activism. The rationale for including different test scenarios in separate study executions was to confirm that exhibited phenomena extended beyond the specific scenario of traditional CSR to the postmodern concept of brand activism. The experiment instrument was identical for both phases of the study except for the stimuli shown.

Methodology

Experiment 2 occurred through an online survey. After reviewing an information sheet, agreeing to participate, answering a series of screening and demographic questions, and confirming their ability to see stimuli, participants viewed a description of a restaurant company increasing its efforts to be more socially responsible. Through a between-subjects design, survey respondents were randomized into one of five conditions, with the company description presented in the context of brand activism with four manipulations conditions: (a) high commitment, low transparency; (b) high commitment, high transparency; (c) low commitment, low transparency; and (d) low commitment, high transparency. There was also a brand activism control cell, which excluded the commitment and transparency manipulations. Each cell included 50 participants. In this study, participants received exposure to CSR in a more prosocial brand activist context before answering questions to assess trust and perceived motivation (extrinsic/intrinsic). Also captured were manipulation check measures and purchase/visit intent.

The sequence in which trust and perceived motivation measures questions appeared in the questionnaire was randomized to avoid potential order bias.

Measures

Similar to Experiment 1, the Experiment 2 survey was also developed in Qualtrics, with the scales adopted from prior research (see Table 10). The independent variables of commitment and transparency were operationalized through manipulations and confirmed with commitment and transparency measures. The dependent variables included trust and perceived motive as a proxy for virtue signaling. Trust was dimensionalized using a multidimension scale (see Table 10). A 7-point Likert scale, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*, allowed for understanding participants' reactions to the stimuli on the variables assessed. The capture of perceived motive, with extrinsic motivation presumed to align to virtue signaling, occurred in two ways. One method of capturing was with extrinsic and intrinsic motivation scales that included questions such as "In your opinion, why does this company communicate about its socially responsible engagements?" Additionally, because virtue signaling academic research is limited in the context of consumers and corporations, there was another ad hoc scale leveraged to assess perceived motivation or virtue signaling. Specifically, participants read a definition of virtue signaling and then noted the extent to which they believed the company was virtue signaling based on the scenarios they read.

Sample

A total of 274 subjects completed the survey, with 23 removed due to industry affiliation and six unable to see the stimuli or failing the attention check. This data cleansing process yielded a final sample size of 245, with a relatively even split of men and women and representation across age groups, races, and ethnicities. (The final respondent profile information

is in Appendix A.) Participants who completed the study received an incentive of \$2.50. On average, the response time was 11 minutes.

Analysis and Results

Construct Reliability and Validity

SPSS version 27 was the software used to evaluate the results of the experimental condition in the context of brand activism. Before testing the structural model and hypotheses, there were tests conducted to assess the item and construct reliability and validity. As shown in Table 19, the Cronbach's alpha of each construct ranged between 0.89 to 0.95. The composite reliability of the variables measured was between 0.93 and 0.96, which again exceeded 0.70 and is within an acceptable range. For trust, measured as a multidimensional construct of competence trust, integrity trust, and benevolence trust, the Cronbach's alpha ranged between 0.87 and 0.90 and aggregate reliability between 0.92 and 0.94 (see Table 20).

In addition to alpha reliability, there was validity evaluated, where an acceptable convergent validity exceeds 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 19, the measurement model had good convergent validity, noted by the AVE for each factor ranging from 0.64 and 0.89. Regarding discriminant validity, the squared correlation coefficients for the dimensions tested were all greater than the AVE, which confirms the discriminant validity of the model.

Finally, before structural model testing, there was a CFA conducted to test relationships among variables. (Table 19 presents the results of the CFA.) A dimension reduction analysis confirmed that each measure only yielded a single factor, indicating that further rotation of variables was not necessary. Similar to the CSR experiment, the exception was the brand activism measure, which did not meet the criteria to be deemed reliable albeit higher than the

CSR experiment, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.42$. This represents an area for exploration in further research.

Table 19*Experiment 2 Brand Activism: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Construct Validity, and Reliability*

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	Composite reliability
Commitment (COMM)	The company provides a great deal of support for sustainability.	5.03	1.33	0.94	0.91	0.64	0.95
	The company seems to be highly committed to sustainability.			0.94			
	The company seems to be highly involved with its suppliers and partnership agencies on sustainability.			0.89			
Transparency (TRA)	The company enables me to know what it is doing.	5.05	1.35	0.94	0.89	0.82	0.93
	All aspects of the company's sustainability efforts are open to public evaluation.			0.90			
	This company wants me to understand what it is doing.			0.88			
Company CSR (CSR)	This is a socially responsible company.	4.89	1.46	0.94	0.94	0.89	0.96
	The company is concerned about improving the well-being of society.			0.94			
	The company follows high ethical standards.			0.95			
Brand activism (BA)	The company is purpose- and values-driven.	—	—	0.22	0.42	—	-
	The company is addressing a controversial, contested, or polarizing sociopolitical issue(s).			0.38			
	The issue that the company is addressing is progressive.			-0.39			
	The issue that the company is addressing is conservative.			0.80			
	The issue that the company is addressing is political.			0.37			
	The company is making contribution(s) toward this issue through messaging and action.			-0.01			
Trust (TOTAL_TR)	I feel very confident about the skills of this organization.	4.79	1.41	0.87	0.95	0.70	0.96
	This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.			0.68			
	This organization is likely to be successful at the things it tries to do.			0.79			
	This organization can be relied on to keep its promises.			0.87			
	This organization treats people like me fairly and justly.			0.88			

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	Composite reliability
Trust (TOTAL_TR)	Sound principles seem to guide the behavior of this organization.			0.90			
	This organization does not mislead people like me.			0.80			
	Whenever this organization makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.			0.86			
	I believe this organization takes the opinions of me into account when making decisions.			0.82			
	This organization is interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself.			0.89			
Intrinsic motivation (INT_MOT)	Because it is really conscious of the importance of ecological issues.	5.01	1.46	0.96	0.94	0.89	0.96
	To put forward a genuine consciousness regarding ecological issues.			0.97			
	To make consumers aware of ecological issues.			0.91			
Extrinsic motivation (EXT_MOT)	Because it wants to improve its image.	5.47	1.22	0.87	0.89	0.76	0.93
	Because it is fashionable to do so nowadays.			0.84			
	Because it wants to be liked by consumers.			0.89			
	Because it wants to get more business.			0.89			

$N = 245$

7-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*

Table 20

Multidimensional Trust, Experiment 2 Brand Activism: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Construct Validity, and Reliability

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	Composite reliability
Competence trust (COMP TRU)	I feel very confident about the skills of this organization.	5.11	1.12	0.91	0.89	0.75	0.92
	This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.			0.82			
	This organization is likely to be successful at the things it tries to do.			0.88			
	This organization can be relied on to keep its promises.			0.84			
Integrity trust (INT TRU)	The organization treats people like me fairly and justly.	4.69	1.26	0.90	0.87	0.80	0.92
	Sound principles seem to guide the behavior of this organization.			0.91			
	This organization does not mislead people like me.			0.88			
Benevolence trust (BEN TRU)	Whenever this organization makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.	4.47	1.46	0.93	0.90	0.84	0.94
	I believe this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.			0.88			
	This organization is interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself.			0.94			

$N = 245$

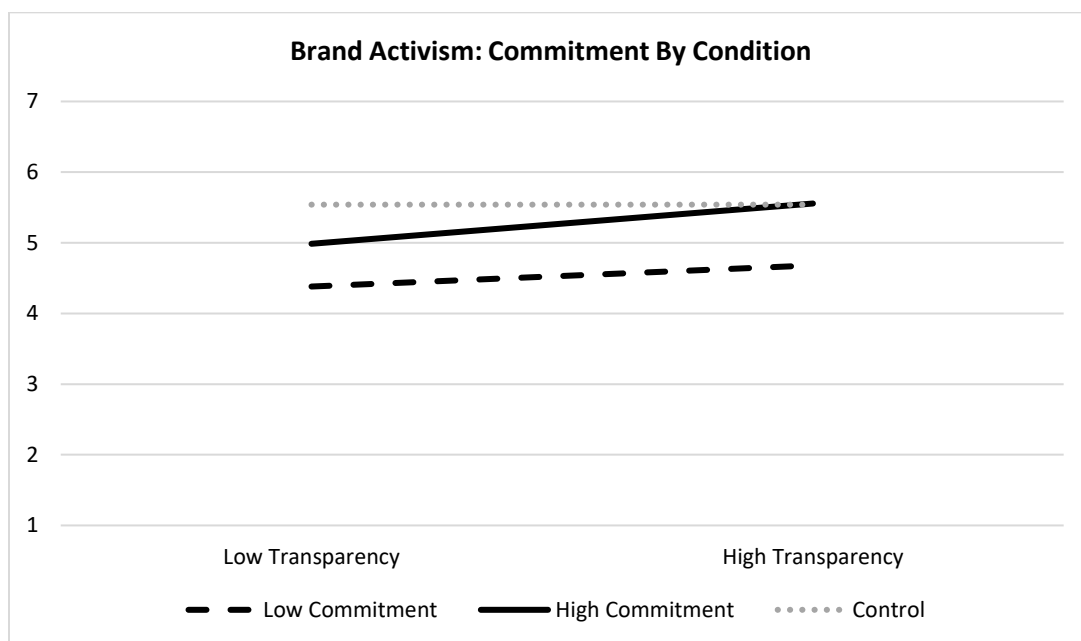
7-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*

Manipulation Checks

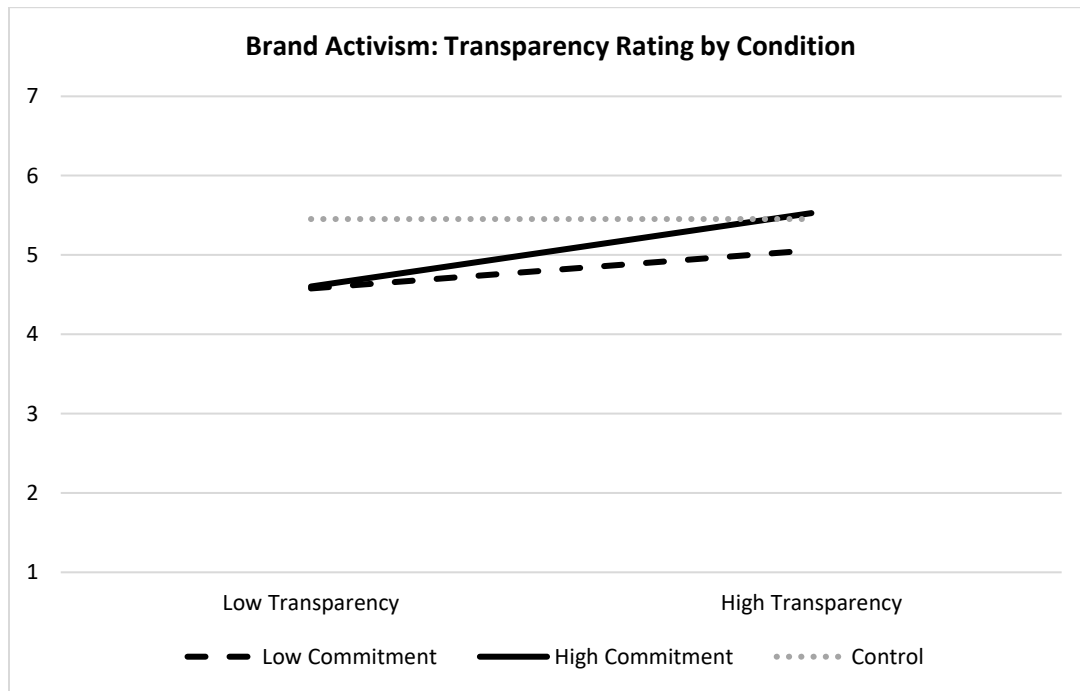
Similar to Experiment 1 (CSR) in the current brand activism experiment, after assessing reliability and validity, there was a between-subjects test conducted to evaluate the impact of each of the manipulations for transparency and commitment for the brand activism context. Quantifying the impact of the commitment and transparency manipulations required leveraging a commitment scale and a transparency scale. Comparing the agreement ratings by condition, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*, the mean ratings for independent variables (see Figures 8 and 9) moved in directions that were intuitive, with higher levels of commitment and transparency directionally resulting in higher averages for each variable. Interestingly, however, that the control condition appeared to obtain scores comparable to the high commitment/high transparency condition. The potential implications receive discussion in the summary and implications.

Figure 8

Experiment 2 Brand Activism: Mean Commitment Score Comparison by Condition



N = 245

Figure 9*Experiment 2 Brand Activism: Mean Transparency Score Comparison by Condition* $N = 245$

Moving to the test cells, Tables 21 and 22 present a comparison of the means of the independent variables (commitment and transparency) and dependent variables (trust, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, trust) for the brand activism experiment, among the other variables captured for diagnostic purposes.

Table 21*Experiment 2 Brand Activism: Test Between-Subject Effects, Commitment*

Measure	Condition	Mean	SD	Mean SE	p value
Commitment (IV measure)	Low commitment	4.53	1.41		
	High commitment	5.27	4.89	1.664	.000***
Transparency (IV measure)	Low commitment	4.82	1.33		
	High commitment	5.07	1.36	1.818	0.203
CSR	Low commitment	4.46	1.34		
	High commitment	5.15	1.21	1.645	.000***
Total trust (DV)	Low commitment	4.46	1.15		
	High commitment	5.00	1.1	1.271	.001***
Intrinsic motivation (DV)	Low commitment	4.55	1.49		
	High commitment	5.31	1.32	1.99	.000***
Extrinsic motivation (DV)	Low commitment	5.75	0.95		
	High commitment	5.46	1.08	1.028	.052*
Visit intent	Low commitment	3.52	1.02		
	High commitment	3.86	0.87	0.902	.013**

Note. Low commitment ($n = 100$)/high commitment ($n = 95$). Visit intent scale = 5-point scale

$N = 195$, $df = 1$

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 22*Experiment 2 Brand Activism: Test Between-Subject Effects, Transparency*

Measure	Condition	Mean	SD	Mean SE	<i>p</i> value
Transparency (IV measure)	Low transparency	4.59	1.48		
	High transparency	5.29	1.11	1.712	.000***
Commitment (IV measure)	Low transparency	4.67	1.39		
	High transparency	5.1	1.26	1.756	.026**
CSR	Low transparency	4.66	1.41		
	High transparency	4.93	1.24	1.748	0.151
Total trust	Low transparency	4.71	1.17		
	High transparency	4.74	1.15	1.343	0.862
Intrinsic motivation	Low transparency	4.84	1.51		
	High transparency	5.01	1.403	2.128	0.417
Extrinsic motivation	Low transparency	5.57	1.04		
	High transparency	5.65	1.02	1.047	0.604
Visit intent	Low transparency	3.66	0.95		
	High transparency	3.72	0.98	0.931	0.66

Note. Low transparency ($n = 96$)/high transparency ($n = 99$). Visit intent scale = 5-point scale

$N = 195$, $df = 1$

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Commitment

Table 21 presents a comparison of the results of the low commitment condition to the high commitment condition for brand activism. Similar to the CSR experiment, in the current brand activism experiment, a p value where $0.05 > p < .1$ indicated a marginal significance between respondents for each of the measures evaluated after viewing stimuli in each condition. A p value where $.05 < p > .01$ indicated a moderate significance between respondents viewing stimuli in each condition, and instances where $p < .01$ indicated high significance, or little chance that the difference noted occurred in error.

Table 21 shows that commitment manipulation had a significant impact on the commitment score given by respondents ($p < .001$), CSR ($p < .001$), total trust ($p = .001$), intrinsic motivation ($p < .001$), and visit intent ($p = .013$). Results in the context of brand

activism were much stronger than in the context of CSR. A low or high commitment manipulation did not significantly impact transparency ($p = .203$), which reaffirmed confidence in the commitment manipulation.

Transparency

As shown in Table 22, the transparency manipulation had a strong significant impact on the transparency score ($p < .001$) as expected, but also a moderate impact on the differences in commitment scores.

Correlation Analysis and Virtue Signaling

Regarding correlations, Table 23 shows the relationships between variables. Importantly, virtue signaling, measured by asking if the company described was virtue signaling, had a moderate positive significant correlation with extrinsic motivation (.59), indicating that the extrinsic motivation scale served as a reasonable proxy for virtue signaling. Notably, the correlation between CSR values and the impact of recent news had a moderately significant but low ($< 30\%$) correlation with independent and dependent variables, indicating that controlling for these factors would likely have little impact on model implications. Restaurant frequency (how often respondents typically visit restaurants did not impact how participants responded to the survey in experiment 2 on brand activism.

Table 23*Experiment 2 Brand Activism: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Matrix*

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Commitment	5.03	1.33	0.80													
2. Transparency	5.05	1.35	.769**	0.91												
3. Company CSR	4.89	1.34	.895**	.761**	0.94											
4. Competence trust	5.11	1.12	.749**	.693**	.785**	0.86										
5. Integrity trust	4.69	1.26	.744**	.672**	.834**	.845**	0.90									
6. Benevolence trust	4.47	1.46	.730**	.661**	.823**	.778**	.875**	0.92								
7. Trust total	4.79	1.19	.787**	.718**	.864**	.927**	.956**	.940**	0.84							
8. Intrinsic motivation	5.01	1.46	.778**	.685**	.827**	.762**	.800**	.763**	.823**	0.95						
9. Extrinsic motivation	5.47	1.22	.365**	.264**	-.433**	-.349**	-.419**	-.423**	-.417**	-.442**	0.87					
10. Visit intent	3.76	0.97	.643**	.569**	.714**	.672**	.638**	.680**	.706**	.624**	-.359**	–				
11. Virtue signaling	3.69	1.06	-.471**	-.279	-.516**	-.407**	-.513**	-.485**	-.499**	-.532**	.589**	-.361**	–			
12. CSR values	3.61	1.09	.145*	.163*	.214**	.257**	.265**	.316**	.306**	.213**	-.06	.397**	-.203**	0.91		
13. Restaurant frequency	3.79	1.36	-0.02	-0.09	-0.07	-0.02	-0.0846	-0.06	-0.06	-0.07	0.09	-.155*	0.0659	-.164	–	
14. News impact	0.58	0.67	.131*	0.119	.141*	.177**	.166**	.215**	.195**	.133*	-0.077	.194**	0.003	0.0851	0.0021	–

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviations; square root values of the avgs. of the variables are provided on the diagonal; visit intent, virtue signaling, visit intent: 5-point scale; Scales 1–9: 7-point agreement

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

N = 245

Model Testing

After confirming the reliability and validity of the measurement model and scales, the hypotheses (i.e., the structural model components) underwent testing in the brand activism context of Experiment 2 hypotheses.

Commitment Impact on Motivation

Similar to the CSR context in Experiment 1, for the brand activism experiment, H1 posited that a company's perceived commitment predicts perceived motivation of the company's actions, whether intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. For Hypotheses 1 and 2, ANOVA testing leveraging SPSS was the approach used to test the main effects and interactions of the independent variables. H1 predicted that perceived commitment affects perceived motivation such that (H1a) when a company's perceived commitment is low, it signals that the company is more extrinsically motivated to benefit the company (virtue signaling), and (H1b) when perceived commitment is high, it signals that the company is more intrinsically motivated to benefit society or others.

Referencing the results of the test of between-subjects effects (see Table 21), the difference in intrinsic motivation when commitment was high compared to when commitment was low was shown to be significant at $p < .001$ for intrinsic motivation. For extrinsic motivation, the commitment manipulation was moderately significantly different between subjects, where $p = .052$. Further testing showed that in the test of direct effects (see Table 24), the path leading from COMM to EXT MOT was found to be insignificant, as the confidence interval at 95% and 90% included 0 for extrinsic motivation, but marginally significant for COMM to INT MOT, intrinsic motivation (ULCI: 0.009, LLCI: 0.219, 90% CI). As such, H1 was partially supported for the brand activism context.

Commitment Impact on Trust

Next, H2 predicted that a company's perceived commitment generates trust in the company. As shown in Table 24, commitment had a positive direct effect on trust (LLCI: 0.109, ULCI: 0.427, 95%), garnering support.

Next, H3 and H4 posited that (H3) when perceived commitment is low, trust would be negatively impacted, and conversely, (H4) when perceived commitment is high, trust would be positively impacted. The univariate analysis (see Table 21) indicated that when commitment was low, the total trust score was 4.46 and significantly different from when commitment was high and garnered a score of 5.00. With a p value of $p < .01$, H3 and H4 were supported.

Table 24

Experiment 2 Brand Activism Model: Direct and Indirect Effects

Total effects		Effect	SE boot	Bootstrap 95% CI		Bootstrap 90% CI		Sig.
				Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	
Direct effects	COMM → INT MOT	0.1138	0.0635	-0.012	0.239	0.009	0.219	*
	TRU → INT MOT	0.9915	0.0551	0.883	1.100	0.901	1.083	**
	COMM → EXT MOT	-0.67	0.712	-0.208	0.073	-0.185	0.050	NS
	TRU → EXT MOT	-0.28	0.0617	-0.402	-0.158	-0.382	-0.178	**
	COMM → VISIT INTENT	0.020	0.052	-0.083	0.122	-0.066	0.106	NS
	TRU → VISIT INTENT	0.567	0.045	0.478	0.655	0.492	0.641	**
Indirect effects	COMM → TRU	0.268	0.0808	0.109	0.427	0.135	0.402	**
	COMM → TRU → INT MOT	0.2657	0.0803	0.107	0.431	0.138	0.398	**
	COMM → TRU → EXT MOT	-0.075	0.0267	-0.132	-0.027	-0.122	-0.035	**
	COMM → TRU → VISIT INTENT	0.152	0.048	0.060	0.251	0.076	0.233	**
	COMM x TRA → TRU	-0.001	0.0812	-0.161	0.159	-0.135	0.133	NS
	COMM x TRA → TRU → INT MOT ⁱ	-0.002	0.161	-0.321	0.320	-0.265	0.269	NS
	COMM x TRA → TRU → EXT MOT ⁱ	0.0006	0.0467	-0.091	0.094	-0.074	0.081	NS
	COMM x TRA → TRU → VISIT INTENT ⁱ	-0.001	0.093	-0.191	0.175	-0.158	0.142	NS

Note. Includes low/high commitment and transparency conditions. Standardized estimating of 5,000 bootstrapping sample. COMM = perceived commitment, TRA = transparency, TRU = trust, INT = intrinsic motivation, EXT = extrinsic motivation.

$N = 195$

ⁱIndex of moderated mediation (difference between conditional indirect effect)

** Sig. at 95% and 90% CI, * Sig at 90% CI, NS = no significance

Trust as a Mediating Variable

Testing the mediation effect of trust presented in H5 entailed leveraging Hayes Model 4 (Hayes, 2013) to assess the direct and indirect effects between independent and dependent variables. (Table 24 shows the results.) In the current research, there was testing of the hypothesized impact of COMM on TRUST and INT MOT in addition to COMM on TRUST and EXT MOT, including the direct and indirect effects of path estimates and confidence intervals accordingly. Specifically, again, H5a was hypothesized to predict that trust mediates the relationship between commitment and motivation such that (H5b) when trust is low, the perceived motive would be extrinsic (virtue signaling), and (H5c) when trust is high, the perceived motive would be intrinsic.

Specific to trust as a mediator, even though commitment showed only a slight direct predictive ability for perceived motivation, higher commitment was found to indirectly affect motivation via trust. The test of indirect effects (see Table 24) indicated that trust had a mediating impact between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation at the 95% confidence interval, garnering support for trust as an indirect mediator as posited by H5a, H5b, and H5c. Specifically, when trust was included as a mediator, the relationship between commitment and motivation was shown to be significantly mediated by trust for intrinsic (COMM → TRU → INT MOT, LLCI: 0.107, ULCI: 0.431, 95%) and extrinsic motivation (COMM → TRU → EXT, LLCI: -0.132, ULCI: -0.027, 95%), garnering support for H5 (a, b, and c).

Multidimension Trust Exploratory Analysis

There was an aggregate score for trust, as indicated by the total trust measure for the sake of analysis of confirming or disconfirming support of hypotheses. Similar to the CSR experiment, in the brand activism experiment, trust dimensions (i.e., benevolence trust,

competence trust, and integrity trust) underwent analysis again for exploratory purposes only.

For brand activism, trust dimensions were not impacted differently by the transparency manipulation (see Table 26). Similar to CSR but to a greater degree, the test between groups for trust and commitment as an independent variable indicated that integrity trust and benevolence trust were highly significant ($p < .01$) in addition to competence trust (see Table 25). This finding indicates differences in trust based on low and high commitment and shows that leveraging the multidimension trust scale provides diagnostic utility.

Table 25

Experiment 2 Brand Activism: Trust Test Between-Group Effects, Commitment

IV_COMMITMENT		COMP_TRUST	INTEG_TRUST	BENEV_TRUST
Low commitment	Mean	4.85	4.32	4.10
	<i>n</i>	100	100	100
	Std. deviation	1.11	1.19	1.41
High commitment	Mean	5.31	4.94	4.65
	<i>n</i>	95	95	95
	Std. deviation	1.02	1.21	1.40
Total	Mean	5.07	4.62	4.36
	<i>N</i>	195	195	195
	Std. deviation	1.09	1.27	1.43
Between-group significance		0.002***	0.000***	0.007***

N = 195

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 26*Experiment 2 Brand Activism: Trust Test Between-Group Effects, Transparency*

IV_TRANSPARENCY		COMP_TRUST	INTEG_TRUST	BENEV_TRUST
Low transparency	Mean	5.01	4.63	4.39
	<i>n</i>	96	96	96
	Std. deviation	1.08	1.24	1.44
High transparency	Mean	5.14	4.61	4.34
	<i>n</i>	99	99	99
	Std. deviation	1.10	1.23	1.43
Total	Mean	5.07	4.62	4.36
	<i>N</i>	195	195	195
	Std. deviation	1.09	1.24	1.43
	Between-group significance	0.411	0.914	0.787

N = 195**p* < .1, ***p* < .05, ****p* < 0.01**Transparency as a Moderator**

For Hypothesis 6 (a, b, c, and d), Hayes Model 7 (Hayes, 2013) was an appropriate test to assess the significance of relationships, correlations, and the strength of the proposed moderated mediation model. When transparency (TRA) was incorporated into the model, fit was found to be insignificant. Further, as shown in Table 24, there was no significant effect for transparency on trust in the moderated mediation model. As such, H6 overall was not supported.

In summary, when a company communicates by taking an activist stance, the level of commitment does not necessarily have a direct impact on consumers' conclusions about the company's motivation; however, commitment does influence perceived motivation indirectly through trust. Table 27 presents an overview of the results of the hypothesis testing. The results of the brand activism experiment replicated those of the previous CSR experiment but with much stronger effects.

Table 27*Summary of Direct and Indirect Effects of Hypothesized Paths*

Hypothesis	Hypothesized path	CSR	BA
H1a	Low commitment → extrinsic motivation (virtue signaling)	Not supported	Partially supported at 90% (INT MOT)
H1b	High commitment → intrinsic motivation		
H2	Commitment generates trust	Partially supported at 90% CI	Supported at 95% CI
H3	Low commitment → lower trust	Partially supported at $p < 0.1$	Supported at $p < .01$
H4	High commitment → higher trust		
H5a	Trust mediates the relationship between perceived commitment and motivation	Partially supported at 90% CI (INT MOT and EXT MOT)	Supported at 95% CI (INT MOT and EXT MOT)
H5b	Low trust → extrinsic motivation (virtue signaling)		
H5c	High trust → intrinsic motivation		
H6a–H6d	Transparency moderates the relationship between commitment and trust	Not supported	Not supported

Chapter 8: Discussion

The goal of this study was to understand how consumers perceive commitment to be a signal of a company's core motivation for its CSR or brand activism, moderated by transparency and mediated by trust. Exploring this topic occurred through a mixed methods study, which included (a) a pilot and two experiments exposing participants to a scenario involving either high or low commitment and high or low transparency in the context of either traditional CSR communication or brand activism and (b) a content analysis on the perceptions of each scenario and overall drivers of trust.

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings and implications of this research. After the results are the known limitations of the study. Finally, there are suggestions and opportunities for future research.

Summary

The empirical results from the current study indicated that CSR and brand activism operate differently and that brand activism commitment more strongly affects perceived motivation mediated indirectly by trust. When tested in the context of CSR, commitment generated trust just enough to marginally impact perceived motivation indirectly. When tested in the context of brand activism, the trust generated by commitment, had a significant, though indirect, impact on whether consumers perceived a company as being intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. The effect was stronger and more evident for brand activism than CSR.

Among the independent variables tested, evidence emerged of level of commitment as a driver of trust. Alternately, the results also indicated that transparency is not as relevant of a factor in the tested model. This finding is consistent with Schnackenberg and Tomlinson's (2016) mixed results related to the impact of transparency on trust. Drawing on Mayer's

framework of trust, Schnackenberg and Tomlinson proposed new associations that illustrate how “disclosure, clarity, and accuracy of information (i.e., transparency) are distinct from, and lead to greater stakeholder perceptions of, organizational ability, benevolence, and integrity (i.e., trustworthiness)” (p. 1802). This view of transparency is potentially worth considering for future research. From a practitioner standpoint, the transparency findings in the current research do not suggest that companies can or should be opaque. What may be more important is consumers’ perceptions of companies as genuinely committed in their efforts by supporting their communications with energy and action. Based on this study’s results, a lack of commitment brings about lesser trust, which is enough for people to believe that a company is virtue signaling and could potentially impact future visit intention, primarily evidenced when communicating via brand activism. Some of the results suggested that a company may be better off not sending any overt signals about commitment and transparency than to risk perceptions of lacking on either, and commitment in particular.

One of the primary purposes of this study was to provide empirical evidence on the cultural phenomenon of virtue signaling. From a measurement standpoint, there was a correlation analysis conducted to gauge whether the extrinsic motivation scale leveraged could act as a proxy for the virtue signaling construct. According to Pearson’s correlation, the significant result of 0.61 and 0.59 in the CSR and brand activism experiments, respectively, indicate that the extrinsic motivation scale is useful for future academic research on virtue signaling.

To gauge whether consumers perceived CSR and brand activist communication conditions as such (brand activism), there was a scale developed leveraging Vredenburg et al.’s (2020) characteristics. According to the results of the pilot and experiments, the brand activism characteristics operationalized into a scale did not prove particularly reliable, indicating

opportunities for development for future quantitative usage. In retrospect, the brand activism item language could need more clear language for purposes of salience.

The results specific to trust suggested that trust subcomponents are impacted differently by the commitment independent variable manipulation. Specifically, low and high commitment tended to have a different impact on benevolence and integrity trust (CSR and brand activism) and competence trust (brand activism only). Benevolence trust, which refers to customers' confidence that a corporation has a sincere concern about consumers' interests and motivations to do good, includes items such as, "This organization is interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself." Integrity trust occurs when a customer believes the other party is fair and just, and includes items such as, "Sound principles seem to guide the behavior of this organization." The findings in the exploratory analysis on trust suggest that future research should incorporate comparable trust scales and/or analysis, as trust is complex.

Regardless of context (CSR or brand activism), future visit intent had a relatively higher correlation with intrinsic motivation than extrinsic motivation. One possible explanation is that people want to believe they are purchasing from companies that are good social actors. They may be less likely to change their behaviors or boycott when they believe a company is more extrinsically motivated. This idea is worth further exploration.

Based on a literature review of CSR and outcomes, the expectation of the qualitative findings was that company communications with high CSR commitment and high transparency would have more positive word associations. Also believed was that companies with low transparency and low commitment could have consumers questioning their purposes or motives. A further belief was that although subjects might question the motives, some would react by rewarding the company's aspirations despite low commitment or low transparency. The

discovery was that consumers are willing to give credit to companies, even those with low commitment and low transparency; however, there was a greater occurrence of participants calling these companies out for pandering or virtue signaling. In the scenarios where companies were high commitment and high transparency, associations tended to be more positive.

Interestingly, among verbatim responses of trust drivers, transparency was less overtly stated but inevitable as a company communicates; this result is consistent with the data found in the quantitative analysis.

Prior to conducting this analysis, the expectation was that CSR would not necessarily be top of mind for consumers. When asked, “What companies do a good job communicating the corporate and social good that they are doing?” the largest group of respondents could not name a particular brand or company. Still, the companies mentioned tended to be larger corporations thought to be good social actors. It was also expected that consumers would place the responsibility on organizations to do social good, which is seemingly becoming a fundamental expectation. With some of the same companies receiving praise and scrutiny, consumers’ expectations of companies may be polarizing and growing further so. In addition, many participants said that most companies could stand to improve. Another anticipation was that participants would mention trusting brands or companies that exhibit a commitment to doing good and remaining skeptical of brands that seem to do social good for financial or strategic intent only. Based on participants’ feedback in the qualitative findings and the data from the quantitative results, people tend to trust companies that put forward action with tangible results and are skeptical of companies that seemed to make claims without action or proof. Perceptions of the latter could cause consumers to believe that companies are leveraging efforts as a ploy to look good and garner profits.

The generally positive reactions consistent across concept exposures indicate that when a company communicates about the corporate and social good it is doing, consumers have positive associations with the company. Still, companies should be cautious about their communications to avoid perceptions of being disingenuous. Providing proof points that convey commitment signal to consumers that a company's efforts and intent are trustworthy. Continuous commitment to doing good also appears to play a role in consumer perceptions of companies' CSR and prosocial efforts. Many participants cited that various companies were doing good but could be doing more; therefore, companies must exhibit long-term commitment. Additionally, many participants did not have top-of-mind examples of companies doing a good job of communicating their social good efforts. This finding, in combination with the experiments, suggested there might not be much to gain (for having high commitment/transparency) but a lot to lose if perceived as having low commitment. In other words, breaking through and being top of mind could be difficult for companies to meet expectations to do good; however, the perception of a company as uncommitted can negatively impact consumer trust. This finding has implications for practice, as discussed in the following section.

Implications for Practice

For marketing practitioners and academics considering socially responsible efforts, the current research suggests that it's a brand new day, or in other words, a new business–consumer environment. With CSR and brand activism operating differently and CSR generating fewer inferences, one reasonable rationale could be that greater CSR visibility resulting from the promotion of efforts have lesser outcomes than brand activism, which is new and action-oriented. Based on this study's results, commitment (to which brand activism clearly applies) is

key, and it is to be seen if transparency is enough to compensate for lower perceived commitment toward a particular cause.

The results of this research have implications for practitioners to understand the importance of commitment when communicating the social good they are doing and how to avoid perceptions of virtue signaling when communicating CSR or via brand activism. The findings show the importance of trust. In particular, the results indicate that to maximize the impact of CSR or brand activist communications, an organization must put forth efforts perceived as trustworthy and not virtue signaling. Communicating commitment, either historic or intended, is a good way to maximize their efforts.

Some CSR and brand activism efforts are means to help people/society and the company. As Ellen et al. (2006) noted, “Consumers are able to reconcile the self-and other-centered motives of strategic and values-driven motives, with both having a positive influence on purchase intent” (p. 155). This finding is particularly relevant for practitioners, indicating that companies do not necessarily have to shield the strategic aspects when communicating CSR. However, it is important to balance the degree to which consumers perceive the company as more self-serving or more prosocial and other-serving.

Practically, this research indicates the need for managers to critically evaluate their commitment to social responsibility and, importantly, values. CSR and brand activism have become organization-wide responsibilities that extend beyond sustainability to product development, supply chain, brand management, and marketing teams. Therefore, commitment to responsible practices has become a values-driven way of being and a way of working instead of merely a way to talk about practices.

Limitations and Future Research Considerations

Timing

Data collection occurred in Winter/Spring 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there were no expectations the pandemic would impact responses, the timing is worth noting. Also noteworthy is that with the heightened awareness of social topics, respondents could have been particularly sensitive to some topics more than others. Assessing the measure of the effect of recent news through the correlation analyses showed that the CSR experiment was seemingly more impacted, albeit minimally, than brand activism. This finding could indicate that participants were less likely to perceive the information presented in the CSR context as new news.

Length of Survey

The average survey length was well under 20 minutes. Even so, the inclusion of several open-ended questions and the use of a multidimensional trust scale with several matrixed questions impacted completion time. The quality of the data collected did not appear to be affected by the survey length, as affirmed with low misses on attention checks in the surveys. Worth noting, however, is that the differences in the brand activism Cronbach's alpha might suggest otherwise. It is unknown if these differences were due to question placement, survey engagement, or an unknown factor – though it is speculated that wording may have played a role.

Generalizability

The participants were a sample of U.S. consumers, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other countries. Additionally, there was a focal product category (restaurants) used for the experiment and analysis. Noted by Mueller Loose & Remaud (2013) as asserted by Auger and Devinney (2007), "The methodology of unconstrained survey responses eliciting purchase

intention, attitudes, satisfaction or product liking, used in most previous research on consumer valuation of ethical behavior, was criticized for social desirability bias (p. 147) and the attitude-behavior gap (Carrington et al., 2010).” To reduce this potential bias, the researchers recommended using specific products, specific behavioral conditions, and incentive-compatible research methods, as intended (Mueller Loose & Remaud, 2013). For this research, a fast-food restaurant served as the focus product. It is unknown if the findings are generalizable to other categories; however, the intercorrelation analysis results suggest that restaurant visitation had little impact on results. In future research, it would be worth testing other categories to confirm generalizability.

Breadth and Depth of Corporate Social Responsibility

Although research on brand activism is still in its infancy, the literature on CSR is extensive. This study did not present all the research on the topic of CSR. In the present study, proxy executions of CSR and brand activism do not account for the breadth and depth of the CSR domain. Given the multitude of industries and CSR domains, analyzing impact can be challenging yet enables future research.

External Validity

Experimental design infers causality but limits external validity. A scenario-based vignette does not perfectly mimic buying or communications experiences. Although the scenarios were realistic, it is important to recognize that familiarity with products and brands likely also had an effect. The goal of this study was not to understand the reputation of a specific brand but to gauge how test variables interact.

Scholars can draw upon this research as an attempt to quantitatively link CSR and brand activism. To date, much brand activism research has been qualitative and theoretical. By

comparing CSR and brand activism quantitatively, this research illuminated whether effects move in a similar manner. The extent to which brand activism will endure as a resonant strategy for companies remains unknown. However, whether intended as moral or virtue signaling, the growing number of companies and brands taking an active stance calls for a better academic understanding. The empirical data in this research suggested that firms could suffer when engaging in brand activism if they come across as uncommitted. Future researchers can explore various ways to signal commitment.

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Appendix A: Respondent Profile

Demographic Variables	Pilot (n=248)		Study 1 (n=252)		Study 2 (n=245)	
	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender						
Male	123	49.6%	134	53.2%	119	48.6%
Female	125	50.4%	117	46.4%	121	49.4%
Other	-	-	1	0.4%	5	2.0%
Age						
18–24	13	5.2%	19	7.5%	16	6.5%
25–34	89	35.9%	85	33.7%	88	35.9%
35–44	78	31.5%	82	32.5%	69	28.2%
45–54	36	14.5%	37	14.7%	41	16.7%
55–64	32	12.9%	29	11.5%	31	12.7%
Race						
White or Caucasian	187	75.7%	194	77.0%	198	80.8%
Black or African American	21	8.5%	28	11.1%	19	7.8%
American Indian, Alaska Native	3	1.2%	1	0.4%	-	-
Asian	23	9.3%	25	9.9%	20	8.2%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	0.4%	-	-	-	-
Other	12	4.9%	4	1.6%	8	3.3%
Ethnicity						
Hispanic or Latino	17	6.9%	18	7.1%	21	8.6%
Not Hispanic or Latino	228	92.3%	232	92.1%	219	89.8%
Prefer not to respond	2	0.8%	2	0.8%	4	1.6%
Employment Status						
Employed full time	181	73.0%	162	64.3%	169	69.0%
Employed part time	31	12.5%	39	15.5%	35	14.3%
Unemployed looking for work	15	6.0%	18	7.1%	17	6.9%
Unemployed not looking for work	7	2.8%	16	6.3%	7	2.9%
Retired	4	1.6%	6	2.4%	7	2.9%
Student	8	3.2%	7	2.8%	6	2.4%
Disabled	2	0.8%	4	1.6%	4	1.6%
Income						
Under \$25,000	48	19.4%	29	11.5%	27	11.0%
\$25,000 - \$34,999	25	10.1%	32	12.7%	28	11.4%
\$35,000 - \$49,999	39	15.8%	41	16.3%	47	19.2%
\$50,000 - \$79,999	52	21.1%	65	25.8%	52	21.2%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	43	17.4%	40	15.9%	38	15.5%
\$100,000 - \$149,999	27	10.9%	29	11.5%	34	13.9%
More than \$150,000	13	5.3%	16	6.3%	19	7.8%