

# Corporate Social Responsibility Priming and Valence of CSR Framing on CSR Judgments

Alex Wang and Ronald B. Anderson

*This study tested the effects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) priming (without CSR priming vs. CSR priming) and valence of CSR framing (positive framing vs. negative framing) on how participants judged a target corporation's CSR practices and formed attitude toward the target corporation. Results suggested that the main effects of CSR priming and valence of CSR framing affected participants' judgments of the target corporation's CSR practices and attitudes toward the target corporation. The crucial effects, however, were the interaction effects between CSR priming and valence of CSR framing. The interaction effects captured the degree to which the impact of valence of CSR framing depended on whether participants were primed with messages about CSR practices. Implications for public relations professionals are also presented.*

## Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a citizenship function with moral, ethical, and social obligations between a corporation and its publics (David et al., 2005). More corporations are becoming aware of the importance of CSR and actively engage in CSR practices such as corporate philanthropy and ethical advertising practices (Wang, 2007). Due to the nature of CSR communication, CSR practices have become an important part of public relations activities since "public, or social, responsibility has become a major reason for an organization to have a public relations function" (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 48).

Increasing corporate reputation and giving public positive impressions as good citizens are the main reasons of companies' CSR activities. Although many corporations invest considerable amounts in CSR communication to enhance their reputations, the effects of CSR communications are mixed. Some studies suggest a positive relationship between CSR communications and consumers' positive attitudes toward a corporation and its products or services (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Creyer and Ross, 1997; Pam et al., 2000), other studies suggest the impact of CSR communications can vary depending on conditions (Dean, 2002; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Wang, 2007).

This study aims at complementing a previous experimental study (Wang, 2007) by examining people's attitudes toward corporations' CSR practices in a realistic setting. This study uses message priming and framing as the theoretical foundation to examine people's attitudes toward corporations' CSR practices.

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Message priming and framing play pivotal roles in shaping social issues and subsequent judgments in dealing with them (Gergen, 1992). Thus, the present study can also add to the literature by testing how positively and negatively framed publicity about a target corporation and priming of CSR messages affect judgments of a target corporation's CSR practices and attitudes toward the corporation. The results can also provide public relations professionals with practical implications.

## **Literature Reviews**

### *CSR Practices and Corporate Image*

Most people are dependent on news media for gathering corporate information. As a result, publicity in the form of news coverage related to a corporation's CSR practices plays an important role in shaping people's perceptions of the corporation (David et al., 2005; Wang, 2007). Manheim and Albritton (1984) found that exposure to news media reporting of a corporation's CSR practices significantly influenced public opinion toward the corporation. Such perceptions have important implications in a number of areas, ranging from the nature of attitudes toward CSR to the judgment of a corporation's image and identity (Perry, 1987). Projecting good CSR practices presumably influences a corporation's image since corporate image is the result of interactions between organizational members and publics as well as a corporation's attempts to engage in impression management (Balmer, 2001; Hooghiemstra, 2000). Conversely, negative publicity about a corporation's CSR practices can damage the corporation's image (Ahluwalia et al., 2000).

Two streams of research have addressed CSR practices: Wood's (1991) social performance model and the stakeholder-management framework proposed by Clarkson (1995) and Donaldson and Preston (1995). Examples of CSR practices include protecting the environment, building long-term customer relationships, competing fairly, and telling the truth (Maignan and Ferrell, 2001; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Epstein and Roy (2001) suggested that a key performance driver of a successful CSR campaign is communication and promotion of CSR practices. Similarly, Maignan and Ferrell (2001) suggested that positive assessments of a corporation's CSR practices rests heavily on a corporation's ability to create linkages between a corporation's CSR practices and its corporate image. The key outcome is familiarity in the collective consciousness of publics.

Miles and Covin (2000) suggested that corporate reputation is an intangible asset related to a corporation's marketing and financial performance. For example, sustainable practices such as solid waste recycling and conserving materials represent a new source of competitive advantage since being a good environmental steward helps create a reputational advantage. Projecting good CSR practices can influence corporate image since it is the result of a corporation's attempts to engage in impression management (Balmer, 2001; Bowen, 2005; Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Hooghiemstra, 2000). Thus, publics would form positive attitude and would be likely to buy from companies that employ sustainable practices. Consequently, sustainable practices can help companies increase sales and increase revenues. In

fact, David et al. (2005) found that consumers' positive evaluations of corporations' CSR practices directly affect their intentions to purchase the corporations' products or services.

### *CSR Priming and Framing*

The message priming effect states that by making some issues or messages more salient than others, a prime influences the standards by which a particular issue or message is judged (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar and Simon, 1993). Message framing involves the organization and packaging of messages and the process by which a communication source defines and constructs the messages (Nelson et al., 1997a). Consequently, these two effects influence people's subsequent thoughts and actions (Nelson and Kinder, 1996; Zhou and Moy, 2007). The primary assumption underlying message priming is that a stimulus can activate previously learned cognitive structures, thereby influencing the judgment process (Iyengar and Simon, 1993). When a particular subject is primed, it becomes more accessible and thus more likely to play a role in the formation of subsequent judgments (Wyer and Srull, 1989). Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that news coverage of a subject primed audiences to give that subject more weight in their overall judgments of political candidates. Research also found that audiences often use a shortcut strategy, basing their judgments on the pieces of information most easily retrieved from memory (Krosnick and Brannon, 1993). Thus, exposure to media coverage of a subject tends to make that subject more accessible in audiences' minds. Consequently, the heightened accessibility increases the likelihood that audiences will base subsequent judgments on their thoughts about the subject (Sheafer and Weimann, 2005). Thus, this study tests the following hypotheses.

**H1.** People who are primed and not primed with messages about CSR practices will judge the target corporation's CSR practices differently.

**H2.** People who are primed and not primed with messages about CSR practices will form different attitudes toward the target corporation.

In the case of Hypothesis 1, people who are primed with messages about CSR practices should judge the target corporation's CSR practices more seriously than those who are not primed with messages about CSR practices based on the heightened accessibility and awareness of CSR practices. This is because people should think about their judgments more seriously once they are primed. The assumption of hypothesis 2 is reflected in the activation of associations between CSR practices and attitude toward the target corporation.

When communication researchers examine the message-framing effect, they generally refer to the relationship between context and information as it determines meaning (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987). Nelson et al. (1997b) view framing as "the process by which a source defines the essential problem underlying a particular social or political issue and outlines a set of considerations purportedly relevant to that issue" (p. 222). A frame is a story line or organizing idea that provides meaning

(Gamson, 1992; Gamson and Modigliani, 1987). Similarly, message framing can also work through an accessibility-driven process since message framing consists of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text (Entman, 1993), in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, or moral judgment (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997).

Based on an accessibility-driven explanation, frames influence the accessibility of associations in memory, thereby increasing the likelihood that people will follow those associations when thinking about a subject. In other words, frames guide how people understand the subject and thus form judgments. However, some researchers argue that framing works through a more thoughtful process than the accessibility model suggests (Sheafer and Weimann, 2005). Research has shown that news frames come in many forms and influence public opinion in a number of domains such as political campaigns in terms of policy or strategy (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Particularly relevant in the case at hand is CSR publicity that explicitly associates a specific CSR issue with a specific corporation and suggests an evaluative implication for that association. As a result, a second set of hypotheses revolves around whether exposure to a negatively or positively framed news report that directly links CSR practices to the target corporation will influence people's judgments about the target corporation and its CSR practices.

In the associative network model, exposure to such a frame may activate and thus heighten the accessibility of a particular association negatively or positively between a stance on an issue and a corporation (Iyengar, 1991; Price and Tewksbury, 1997). This, in turn, may produce a framing effect on judgments of the corporation. Using a rather simple example, a news report describing an unethical advertising practice as a way to deceive people may strengthen or create associations between unethical standards of a corporation and the unethical advertising practice. In this way, the concepts of unethical standards and the corporation's advertising practice are framed together. Thus, this study tests the following framing hypotheses.

**H3.** Compared to participants exposed to a positive news report framing the target corporation as practicing ethical advertising, participants exposed to a negative news report framing the target corporation as practicing unethical advertising should be more likely to judge the corporation's CSR practices negatively.

**H4.** Compared to people exposed to a positive news report framing the target corporation as practicing ethical advertising, people exposed to a negative news report framing the target corporation as practicing unethical advertising should be more likely to form less favorable attitudes toward the target corporation.

Now the question is will the framing effect still emerge if the priming effect is not present? This study proposes to examine an interaction effect between CSR

priming and valence of CSR framing on CSR judgments. If the framing effect does not emerge when the priming effect is not present, it may suggest framing works better with the priming effect. In other words, a frame that is supposed to set up an issue may not influence judgments if there is no prime that builds up the heightened accessibility and awareness of the issue. As a result, while the priming effect influences the nature of information processing through information accessibility and, therefore, the subsequent CSR judgments, the framing effect influences the specific aspect of judgments.

Research has found that people process negative news regarding a corporation in a relatively objective manner when they do not have preexisting attitudes toward the corporation. In the same line of reasoning, people who are less aware of CSR practices may not have preexisting attitudes and process news regarding CSR practices based on accuracy motivation, being involved with the issue in an unbiased, open-minded fashion (Chaiken et al., 1996). In this case, people who are less aware of CSR practices may not have inferential biases, manifested as goal-consistent overestimation or underestimation of the valence of a piece of information (Herr et al., 1991). In other words, people who are less aware of CSR practices may not respond to negative and positive news regarding CSR practices differently.

People who are more aware of CSR practices may be influential to the effects of framing invoked regarding CSR practices since people who are more aware of CSR practices are likely to engage in biased assimilation that maintains proattitudinal consistency (Edwards and Smith, 1996). This is because people who are more aware of CSR practices may believe CSR practices are important. These people are likely to regard negative news as more useful information than positive news about the target corporation. As a result, the framing effect of negative news is likely to affect the attitudinal changes experienced by these people as they encounter and react to the negative news (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). Thus, people who are more aware of CSR practices are likely to respond to the negatively framed news report regarding the target corporation's CSR practices. Thus:

**H5.** When people are more aware of CSR practices, people exposed to a negatively framed news report about the target corporation's CSR practices are likely to give less favorable judgments of the target corporation's CSR practices than people exposed to a positively framed news report about the target corporation's CSR practices.

**H6.** Consequently, when people are more aware of CSR practices, people exposed to the negatively framed news report about the target corporation's CSR practices are likely to generate less favorable attitudes toward the target corporation than people exposed to the positively framed news report about the target corporation's CSR practices.

## **Methodology**

### *Design and procedure*

The study employed a 2 (CSR priming vs. without CSR priming) x 2 (negatively framed news report versus positively framed news report) between-participants design. Participants were recruited from psychology and communication classes at a northeastern university and instructed not to discuss this study with any other students or anyone else once they were recruited to participate in the study. They were selected based on the criterion that they had rented a movie. All participants have had rented a movie before.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. Random assignment was administered when participants arrived at a computer lab to participate in the experiment. They were asked to choose one of the 24 seats randomly and sit with at least one seat between them. Then, they were randomly given an instructional booklet marked with a manipulation code, PPF (CSR priming/positive framing), WPPF (without CSR priming/positive framing), PNF (CSR priming/negative framing), and WPNF (without CSR priming/negative framing). Participants were told that they were participating in a study conducted by the experimenters to collect their opinions of a movie rental store, Blockbuster, in the U.S. market. The participants were told that they would review one piece of information about Blockbuster. The experiment began by having the participants answer several demographic questions. Responses collected from 240 participants were recorded and analyzed.

The participants in the CSR priming/positive framing condition were primed with CSR practices first and, then, exposed to a positively framed news report about Blockbuster's CSR practices. The participants in the positive framing condition without CSR priming were not primed with CSR practices, but reviewed the positively framed news report about Blockbuster's CSR practices. The participants in the CSR priming/negative framing condition were primed with CSR practices first and, then, exposed to a negatively framed news report about Blockbuster's CSR practices. In the negative framing condition without CSR priming, the participants were not primed with CSR practices, but reviewed the negatively framed news report about Blockbuster's CSR practices. There were 60 participants in each condition.

### *Stimuli*

CSR priming was manipulated by asking the participants to review several statements regarding CSR practices. The following statements were used as primes. "Corporations have various options to choose from in terms of how they contribute to the community and society at large. In this page, we have listed a set of activities that fall under the area of corporate citizenship. In your opinion, how important is each of these attributes when you think about corporate citizenship as a whole?" (David et al., 2005, p. 302). The set of activities included CSR practices discussed further in the measures section.

Two news reports were edited to contain either negatively or positively framed messages regarding Blockbuster's 2005 ad campaign that promoted "The End of Late Fees." Both news reports were directly adopted from a 210-second segment of a 30-minute news program in 2005. The negatively framed news report reported the findings of an investigation of Blockbuster's new promotion and found there were still hidden fees such as a purchasing price of a movie charged after 8 days of no return and a restocking fee within 30 days of returning the movie. The segment also revealed that several customers interviewed were not aware of these charges, and a lawsuit is pending for Blockbuster's unethical advertising practice. One of the customers mentioned that the promotion was not advertised correctly. Note that the negatively framed news report not only suggested which issues audiences should consider in renting from Blockbuster but also suggested particular evaluative implications (negative CSR practices).

The positively framed news report reported the findings of an investigation of Blockbuster's new promotion and found Blockbuster's employees explaining to customers about fees such as a purchasing price of a movie charged after 8 days of no return and a restocking fee within 30 days of returning the movie. The segment also revealed that pamphlets about the new promotion were available. Several customers interviewed were pleased with this new policy. One of the customers mentioned that the promotion was a good business practice for customers. Like the negatively framed news report, the positively framed story not only suggested which issues audiences should consider in renting from Blockbuster but also suggested particular evaluative implications (positive CSR practices).

### *Measures*

The questionnaire administered to the participants adopted established items and scales. This study measured two dependent variables: judgment of CSR practices and attitude toward the target corporation (brand attitude). Participants' judgments of CSR practices were captured by five items that covered a range of issues: (1) "strives to build long-term relations with its consumers," (2) "is willing to listen to its consumers and is open to constructive criticism about its business practices," (3) "competes fairly with its competitors," (4) "acts responsibly toward its marketing promotions," and (5) "is honest and upfront about telling the truth in its advertising campaign" (David et al., 2005).

This study identified the most relevant measurements of CSR practices for the purpose of this study. These items are not exhaustive, yet they captured the essence of most mainstream CSR practices (David et al., 2005). The ratings of judgment on each item of CSR practices were measured using a scale ranging from 1 (performs very poorly) to 7 (performs extremely well). Attitude toward Blockbuster (brand attitude) was measured by asking the participants to complete the sentence, "I would describe Blockbuster as ...," using a 6-item scale composed of good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, high quality/low quality, like it/don't like it, desirable/not desirable, and favorable/unfavorable (Hallahan, 1999a).

This study measured and used three covariates for data analysis. When people are familiar with a brand and therefore have prior positions, their preexisting cognitive structure will guide the interpretation and integration of any new information (Ahluwalia, 2002). For instance, people are more likely to support positive information relating to a familiar brand as compared with an unfamiliar brand (Ahluwalia, 2002). Thus, it is important to control participants' perceived familiarity with the brand tested in this study.

Two measures of familiarity were used: brand familiarity and familiarity with CSR practices (David et al., 2005). Brand familiarity and familiarity with CSR practices were measured by asking the participants 'how familiar they are with Blockbuster as a movie rental store' and 'how familiar they are with CSR practices. Both familiarity measures were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all familiar) to 7 (extremely familiar). The means for familiarity with CSR practices and brand familiarity were 2.74 ( $SD = 2.02$ ) and 5.98 ( $SD = 1.37$ ), respectively. The results revealed that the participants were familiar with Blockbuster as a movie-rental store, whereas they were not familiar with its CSR practices.

Socialization theory suggests that there is gender difference in ethical standard (McCabe et al., 2006). Research has revealed that women may be conditioned to reject less ethical actions to obtain desired outcomes because they have been conditioned to take actions which gain the approval of others (McCabe et al.). Thus, it is important to control participants' gender as a factor. Consequently, participants' gender was also asked and coded. There were 115 male participants (48%) and 125 female participants (52%), indicating a fair distribution of gender in this study. Male and female participants were also distributed equitably within four experimental conditions tested in this study. There were 30 males and 30 females in the negative framing condition without CSR priming, 30 males and 30 females in the positive framing condition without CSR priming, 29 males and 31 females in the CSR priming/negative framing condition, and 26 males and 34 females in the CSR priming/positive framing condition.

### *Statistical Analysis*

Bivariate correlations revealed all dependent variables were highly intercorrelated ( $p < .000$ ). Thus, this study used *MANCOVA* as the statistical procedure for data analysis. An advantage of the *MANCOVA* procedure is that the set of dependent variables are considered simultaneously. That is, the test considers the correlations among the set of dependent variables.

## **Results**

### *Manipulation checks*

A bipolar, 7-point scale (ranging from "negative = 1" to "positive = 7") tapped perceptions of the news coverage about Blockbuster. Participants exposed to the negative-news story perceived the news report negatively ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ), whereas participants exposed to the positive news report perceived the news report

positively ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ),  $F(1, 238) = 277.6$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .54$ . Hence, the valence of the CSR framing manipulation was successful. A bipolar, 7-point scale (ranging from “not aware of = 1” to “very aware of = 7”) measured awareness of CSR practices. Participants primed with CSR practices ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ ) exhibited higher awareness of CSR practices than did participants not primed with CSR practices ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ),  $F(1, 238) = 15.66$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ , thereby validating the CSR-priming manipulation.

### *Hypothesis tests*

To test for main effects and interaction effects, the MANCOVA procedure was used with participants' judgments of CSR practices and attitudes toward Blockbuster as the dependent variables. CSR priming and valence of CSR framing ( $2 \times 2$ ) were used as the fixed factors (or independent variables), whereas brand familiarity, familiarity with CSR practices, and gender were used as the covariates. No covariates were found to contribute to the model significantly.

The results showed that there was a main effect for CSR priming, Wilks'  $\lambda = .93$ ,  $F(2, 232) = 8.23$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ ; the mean vectors were not equal and the set of means between conditions (CSR priming vs. without CSR priming) was different (Table 1). There was a main effect for valence of CSR framing, Wilks'  $\lambda = .8$ ,  $F(2, 232) = 29.39$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .2$ , as the set of means between conditions (positive framing vs. negative framing) was statistically significant.

**Table 1**  
Multivariate Tests

Effect	Wilks' $\lambda$	$F$	$df$	$p$	$\eta^2$
Intercept	0.72	45.81	2, 233	0.000	0.28
Familiarity with CSR practices	0.99	1.68	2, 233	0.188	0.01
Familiarity with Blockbuster	0.98	2.18	2, 233	0.115	0.02
Gender	0.99	1.21	2, 233	0.300	0.01
CSR priming	0.93	8.23	2, 233	0.000	0.07
CSR framing	0.8	29.39	2, 233	0.000	0.2
CSR priming $\times$ CSR framing	0.87	18.16	2, 233	0.000	0.14

The tests of between-participants effects based on the individual univariate tests and means (standard deviations) of key dependent variables were reported in Table 2 and Table 3 respectively. The hypothesis 1 was supported as the participants primed with messages about CSR practices ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ) had lower judgments of CSR practices than the participants not primed with messages about CSR practices ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ),  $F(1, 233) = 11.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . The hypothesis 2 was also supported as the participants primed with messages about CSR practices ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) formed less favorable attitudes toward Blockbuster than the participants not primed with messages about CSR practices ( $M = 5.21$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ),  $F(1, 233) = 14.47$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ .

**Table 2**  
Tests of Between-Participants Effects

Source	Dependent variable	Df	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	$\eta^2$
Corrected Model	CSR practices	6	18.64	0.000	0.32
	Brand attitude	6	11.4	0.000	0.23
Intercept	CSR practices	1	78.74	0.000	0.25
	Brand attitude	1	64.35	0.000	0.22
Familiarity with CSR practices	CSR practices	1	2.52	0.114	0.01
	Brand attitude	1	2.76	0.098	0.01
Familiarity with Blockbuster	CSR practices	1	3.67	0.057	0.02
	Brand attitude	1	3.17	0.076	0.01
Gender	CSR practices	1	1.37	0.243	0.01
	Brand attitude	1	0.04	0.850	0.00
CSR priming	CSR practices	1	11.14	0.001	0.05
	Brand attitude	1	14.47	0.000	0.06
CSR framing	CSR practices	1	56.85	0.000	0.2
	Brand attitude	1	30.06	0.000	0.11
CSR priming × CSR framing	CSR practices	1	35.48	0.000	0.13
	Brand attitude	1	17.57	0.000	0.07
Error	CSR practices	233			
	Brand attitude	233			
Total	CSR practices	240			
	Brand attitude	240			
Corrected Total	CSR practices	239			
	Brand attitude	239			

Compared to the participants exposed to the positive news report ( $M = 4.92$ ,  $SD = .99$ ), the participants exposed to the negative news report ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) were more likely to judge Blockbuster's CSR practices negatively,  $F(1, 233) = 56.85$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .2$ . Compared to the participants exposed to the positive news report ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ), the participants exposed to the negative news report ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) were more likely to form less favorable attitudes toward Blockbuster,  $F(1, 233) = 30.06$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ . Thus, the hypothesis 3 and the hypothesis 4 were supported.

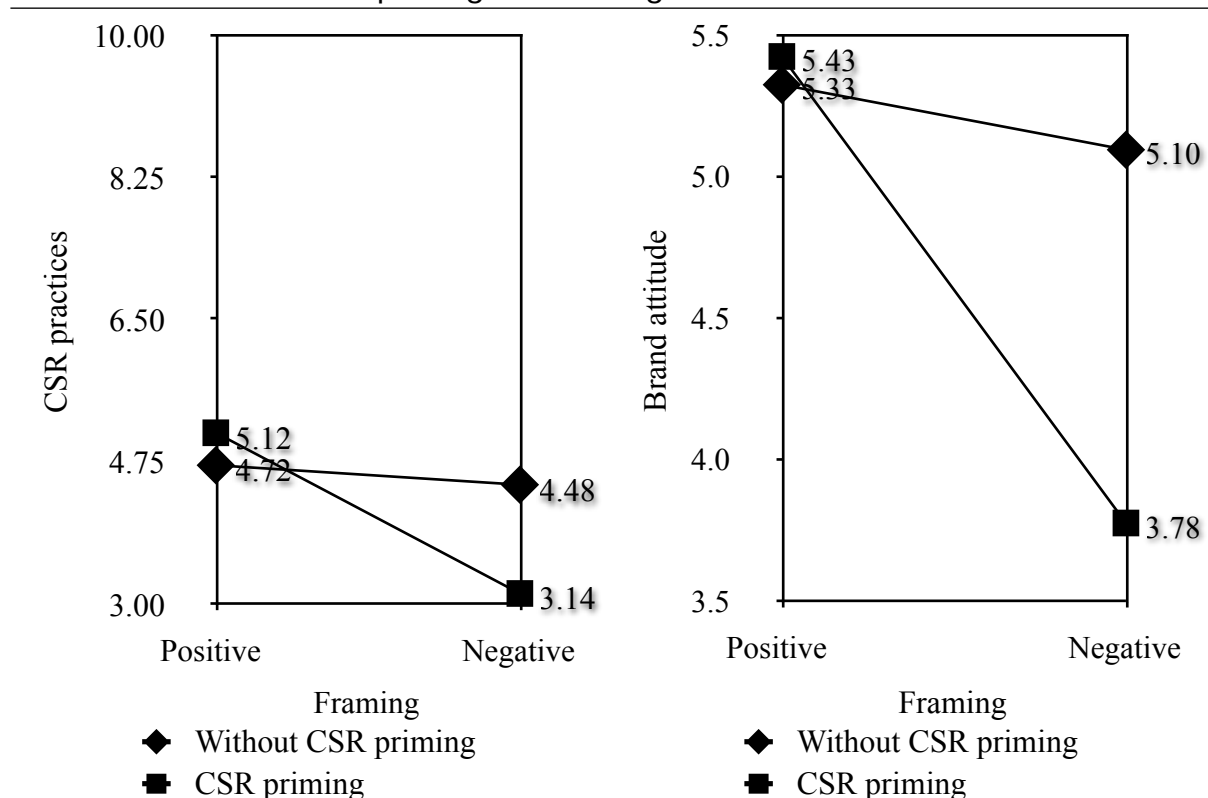
**Table 3**  
Means (Standard Deviations) of Key Dependent Measures

	Without CSR priming		CSR priming		Significant effects	<i>F</i>
	Positive framing	Negative framing	Positive framing	Negative framing		
CSR practices	4.72	4.48	5.12	3.14	CSR priming	11.14**
	(.93)	(1.29)	(1.02)	(1.24)	CSR framing	56.85***
					CSR priming × CSR framing	35.48***
Brand attitude	5.33	5.1	5.43	3.78	CSR priming	14.47***
	(1.06)	(1.41)	(1.27)	(1.41)	CSR framing	30.06***
					CSR priming × CSR framing	17.57***

Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

An interaction effect between the CSR priming effect and the CSR framing effect was significant, Wilks'  $\lambda = .87$ ,  $F(2, 232) = 18.16$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .14$ , based on the multivariate tests. Based on the individual univariate tests, the interaction effects between the CSR priming effect and the CSR framing effect were significant on participants' judgments of CSR practices,  $F(1, 233) = 35.48$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .13$ , and attitudes toward Blockbuster,  $F(1, 233) = 17.57$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . As Figure 1 depicted, the participants exposed to the positive news report ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = .93$ ) and the negative news report ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) judged Blockbuster's CSR practices equally,  $F(1, 118) = 1.38$ ,  $p < .243$ , under the condition without CSR priming. Under the CSR priming condition, the participants exposed to the negative news report ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) were more likely to judge Blockbuster's CSR practices negatively than the participants exposed to the positive news report ( $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ),  $F(1, 118) = 91.31$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .44$ . The participants exposed to the positive news report ( $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) and the negative news report ( $M = 5.1$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) generated no difference in their attitudes toward Blockbuster,  $F(1, 118) = 1.01$ ,  $p < .318$ , under the condition without CSR priming. Under the CSR priming condition, the participants exposed to the positive news report ( $M = 5.43$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) generated stronger attitudes toward Blockbuster than the participants exposed to the negative news report ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $F(1, 118) = 45.58$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .28$ . Thus, the hypothesis 5 and the hypothesis 6 were supported.

**Figure 1**  
Interaction between CSR priming and framing



**Discussion**

By investigating the effects of CSR priming and framing on judgments of a target corporation, the findings in this study confirmed previous research that illustrated the interaction effects between CSR priming and framing on people’s judgments of the target corporation’s CSR practices and attitudes toward the target corporation (Wang, 2007). Research has suggested that there are conceptual differences or differences in the levels of analysis under which message priming and framing are operating (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Wang, 2007). CSR framing, positive or negative, influences the directions of people’s judgments by packaging an issue in attempt to influence people’s judgments. While CSR priming increases the awareness and accessibility of an issue, CSR framing attributes meanings to the issue and, in turn, directs people’s judgments.

In addition to the confirmation of previous research, this study adds some insight to the literature. In Wang’s (2007) previous study, he only tested the negative CSR framing effect. The negative CSR framing condition was compared to a control group not exposed to any CSR framing. Two implications are derived from different but comparable conditions in these two studies. On one hand, this study confirms the robust effect of negative CSR framing on people’s judgment and attitudes toward a corporation. On the other hand, it suggests that the positive CSR framing effect might not be as effective as what research has suggested in terms of CSR communications. If CSR communications were effective, people would have

responded better to positive CSR framing than people who were not exposed to any CSR communication.

Finally, this study found CSR priming was a moderator of CSR framing effects on participants' judgments of CSR practices as well as their brand attitudes. These results seem to suggest that the effects of message framing depend on factors that may moderate the processing of information. Allen, O'Loughlin, Jasperson, and Sullivan (1994) defined framing as the interpretation and subsequent assignment of symbolism contextually and defined priming as referring to activating without obstruction. Their definitions of framing and priming seem to reflect the results of this study as primes activate people's awareness of an issue without obstructing people's pre-stored attitudes on the issue, whereas frames influence the directions of people's judgments on the issue.

#### *Implications for theory and public relations practice*

In considering more broadly the linkages among the effects of CSR framing and priming, the findings may offer some additional insights for public policy and practice related to CSR communications. The CSR priming effect is characterized by the accessibility of particular cognitions. As a result, what issues primes emphasize and how those issues are covered may substantially influence which thoughts or ideas come to mind for people as they judge a corporation's CSR messages. This is to say framing may only be effective when individuals' issue preferences and interpretations are matched. Thus, in developing CSR communication, public relations managers should fundamentally operate as prime and frame strategists who strive to determine how situations, attributes, actions, and issues related to CSR practices should be communicated to publics to achieve favorable outcomes.

In terms of negative CSR communication, repriming and reframing are valuable concepts for public relations managers in the context of response planning. Issue management essentially involves efforts to control or contain the development, growth, and maturation of issues regarding a controversy such as negative publicity examined in this study (González-Herrero and Pratt, 1996). As evidenced in the study's results, the negative framing effects affected people who were more aware of CSR practices more than people who were less aware of CSR practices. Thus, effective issue management should involve controlling the prominence the issue attains in these people by repriming and reframing the issue to reverse their negative attitudes.

Finally, this study contributes in expanding the understanding of CSR priming and framing to mass media ethics context. Given that negative publicity surrounding unethical advertising practices is rather prevalent in the consumer environment, the study's findings can also help inform policy makers in this particular area of research inquiries in the future such as deception created by unethical advertising campaigns. Previous research on inference making from an advertisement has demonstrated that consumers routinely make inferences and then believe these to have been directly stated in the advertisement (Burke et al., 1988). Thus, deceptive

information in the advertisement is the first element examined for possible deception.

The definition of deceptive advertising explicitly includes the content and/or context of the advertisement as elements that could be responsible for deception (Jacoby and Small, 1975). However, regulatory agencies will only request corrections made to a deceptive advertising when consumers respond to the alleged deceptive advertising practice consistently (Richards, 1990). If consumers do not respond to the alleged deceptive advertising practice negatively due to unawareness of ethical advertising practice, the deceptive advertising case may not be substantiated. Thus, a moderation of CSR priming found in this study becomes an important finding to demonstrate the necessity of consumer education on CSR practices. This is especially true for corporations' advertising practices.

#### *Study limitations and future research*

When interpreting the findings from this study, some of the limitations should be taken into consideration. While this research has focused more on ethical judgments of CSR practices, other aspects of CSR practices such as discretionary CSR practices (David et al., 2005) should also be examined since media coverage of issues seems likely to influence how relevant issues are interpreted in cross-issue priming and framing effects. Additionally, future studies should combine this study and previous study by using positive framing, negative framing, and control group conditions to test the same hypotheses. The observed relationship between CSR framing and priming can also be explained by behavioral variables such as purchase intention. In the same line of reasoning, future work should examine if the effects of CSR framing and priming will materialize on actual behavior. Finally, future research should also investigate effects of CSR publicity in addition to news coverage tested in this study.

#### **Conclusion**

Despite the inherent limitations of this study (e.g., context-specific) that have to be confirmed in future research, this study provides a bridge between differing theoretical perspectives to compare the effects of CSR priming and framing on consumers' assessments of CSR practices and brand attitudes. This study's focus was to differentiate the effects of CSR priming and framing by examining the moderating role of CSR priming. The findings presented here showed that CSR priming and framing influenced the standards and the directions by which people judged a target corporation in terms of CSR practices and attitude towards the target corporation. At the same time, the results also revealed that there were limits to this influence.

When people review a news report that offers a direct link between an issue and a target corporation and carries a specific evaluative implication, they tend to adopt this frame of reference in their own thinking. The results have confirmed that CSR frames that provide this sort of link shape how people form judgments if people are more aware of CSR practices. However, the absence of the CSR priming

effect prevents the framing effect from influencing people's judgments. Under this explanation, one would not necessarily expect frames to influence how people think about particular issues unless primes provide necessary background information that associates particular issues with particular frames.

This discussion has suggested that the relationship between CSR priming and framing is a good paradigm to build on CSR communication and corporate communication. On one hand, communication strategists and managers should consider the effects of CSR priming and framing in designing CSR messages before disseminating CSR messages to publics. On the other hand, undesirable responses to issues taken by affected publics should be resolved by repriming and reframing the issues. These tasks make understanding CSR priming and framing even more important in the corporation communication context.

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