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Who can afford to blame? Sender effects in blame-shifting crisis communications

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SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

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3 Greg W. Marshall
4 Editor-in-Chief, European Journal of Marketing
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7 Re: Decision on EJM-05-2022-0331R2
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10
11 Thank you very much for your letter offering a conditional acceptance of the subject
12 manuscript.
13

14
15
16 We have worked to improve the paper further and address the remaining comment from the
17 Regional Editor.
18

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20
21 The Regional Editor commented as follows:
22

23 *Well done on a good revision. Your AE and I agree that you have made good progress*
24 *on this manuscript and it is great to see how it has developed.*
25

26 *Having read through your work again, I feel that it would benefit from more nuancing*
27 *in the text around your use of the word 'scapegoating'. Picking up on my point from the*
28 *last round, it is worth critically going through your work to pick up on points that might*
29 *need some more reflection with respect to the ethical issues surrounding scapegoating.*
30 *(Thank you for what you have included to date on this.)*
31

32
33 *To illustrate my point, I provide the following two examples. This is not an exhaustive*
34 *list and you will need to work carefully through your text, but they will hopefully*
35 *explain what I mean.*
36

37 *The first example is at the end of the theoretical implications where you write: 'Our*
38 *research reveals that CSR also has the advantage of allowing more aggressive*
39 *response strategies aimed at attributing blame to a single employee inside the*
40 *organization'*
41

42
43 *This comes across to the reader as a statement in support of blaming an individual (it*
44 *being an advantage). However, what I think that you actually mean is that where blame*
45 *lies with an individual person then this strategy can be used.*
46

47 *The second example is in a similar vein, where you write: 'Scapegoating seems to be*
48 *persuasive only when it is used by small senders or by senders with strong CSR*
49 *engagements. Large senders can still deploy scapegoating successfully if they are also*
50 *known for their CSR.'*
51

52
53 *Again here this comes across as a statement in support of blaming an individual (it*
54 *being persuasive or successful). Your managerial section now has better caveats for*
55 *this, but I recommend that you are more critically reflective in the way that you write*
56 *such statements.*
57

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59 *So, in sum, a good revision to date, but your text needs more nuance with respect to the*
60 *ethics around scapegoating. Work through your text with a critical eye. You may also*

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3 *wish to reflect on whether the term itself needs to be changed with respect to CSR*
4 *practice.*
5

6 *I wish you all the best.*
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10 We are thankful for this relevant comment and the opportunity to improve further the paper.
11 We agree that our characterization of scapegoating could be confusing and lead some readers
12 to interpret our claims as endorsing an excessively aggressive response strategy. While our
13 conceptual arguments show that this is not what we are suggesting, some elements of the
14 manuscript remained relatively unclear in this respect. To address this issue, we have
15 implemented the following changes:
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19

- 20 1. We have changed throughout the label and we do not refer to *scapegoating* anymore but
21 call our target strategy *blame shifting*. The label blame shifting clarifies that the strategy is not
22 intended to find targets of blame that are not actually responsible for the crisis but rather
23 communicate about the distribution of responsibility in the crisis.
24
- 25 2. We have also introduced a footnote in the introduction (footnote 1) that explains why we
26 prefer the label blame shifting to scapegoating and why the latter might be problematic,
27 despite its current use in the literature.
28
- 29 3. We have amended the text you refer to at page 4 and we now include a new passage that
30 clarifies how we advocate only for legitimate forms of blame shifting
31
32

33 *Attempting to shift blame toward actors who are not ultimately responsible would be*
34 *an unethical strategy (Fricker, 2016) and one that would be likely to backfire (Park*
35 *et al., 2018). Consistent with previous research in this domain (Antonetti and Baghi,*
36 *2021a; Hersel et al., 2022; Gangloff et al., 2016; Moisio et al., 2020; Park et al.,*
37 *2018), we focus instead on crises where blame shifting is a reasonable, structural*
38 *option for the sender because there is an actor that can be portrayed as sharing an*
39 *(arguably) large share of responsibility.*
40
41

- 42 4. We amended a statement at page 5 to clarify the same issue and the new statement reads as
43 follows:
44

45 *The opportunity to potentially deflect blame when this is reasonable given the*
46 *circumstances is not granted to organizations not known for their engagement in*
47 *CSR.*
48
49

- 50 5. At page 6, when introducing the difference between accommodative and defensive
51 strategies we have added the following passage:
52

53 *In all circumstances, organizations have a responsibility to care for stakeholders*
54 *affected for a crisis (Coombs, 2015). This duty of care for affected stakeholders,*
55 *however, does not oblige companies to also invariably accept causal responsibility*
56 *for the event and in some cases companies feel it is justifiable to argue that the crisis*
57 *was ultimately not their fault.*
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3 6. We have revised the entire paper to avoid referring to blame shifting as an “aggressive”
4 strategy as we felt that such a characterization again could be confusing since blame shifting
5 does not imply attacking a target but rather influencing the perception of responsibility for the
6 negative event.
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9

10 Taken together all these changes have further strengthened the manuscript and clarified its
11 focus and goals. Thank you very much for your continuous support in developing the paper.
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Who can afford to blame? Sender effects in blame-shifting crisis communications

Purpose - When companies face a crisis, they sometimes deliver blame-shifting communications, trying to shift blame onto another actor to protect their reputation. While previous research has considered how different features of the message affect its persuasiveness, little is known about whether specific senders can blame more effectively. We add to research in this domain through an investigation of *sender's social perception* as a critical moderator to the persuasiveness of blame shifting.

Methodology - We conduct four between-subjects scenario experiments to test our research hypotheses. In each experiment participants are presented with a realistic crisis scenario and the crisis communications delivered by the company. We assess the extent to which perceptions of the sender influence the message's ability to reduce negative word of mouth intentions and to increase purchase intentions.

Findings - We show that blame shifting is more likely to be effective when deployed by senders that are small (Study 1) or have a positive CSR track record (Study 2). Furthermore, we find that even large senders can successfully deploy blame shifting if they can benefit from being known for their CSR programs (Study 3). Finally, we show that the effect of blame shifting depends on the receiver's level of concern about the crisis: stakeholders significantly concerned by the crisis reject blame-shifting communications (Study 4).

Originality/value - The study extends our understanding of how sender effects influence blame-shifting communications. Our analysis allows us to clarify why this strategy is effective for certain senders and certain receivers while for others it tends to backfire. Blame shifting backfires for large senders, unless they can boast a strong CSR record.

Research limitations – Further research should examine the impact of information about brand competence on blame shifting effectiveness. Further research is also needed to explore sender

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3 effects for other defensive crisis communication strategies such as denial or the use of excuses
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5 or justifications.
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8 *Practical implications* – The study offers critical information for marketers considering the use
9
10 of defensive crisis communications strategies such as blame shifting.
11

12
13 Keywords: *crisis communications, blame shifting, company perceptions, company size, CSR.*
14

15 Article type: *Research Paper*
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Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of a crisis companies often try - with varying degrees of credibility, legitimacy, and success - to blame external actors when faced with negative events (Coombs, 2015). Despite the frequent use of blame shifting or scapegoating¹ (Erickson *et al.*, 2011), there is scant research on the factors determining its persuasiveness. Defined as an attempt at shifting blame onto a specific target, this is a communication strategy that allows companies to avoid taking responsibility for the negative event (Coombs, 1995). Current literature shows that senders can successfully distance themselves from a partner's wrongdoing, although the effectiveness of blame shifting depends on a range of different boundary conditions (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a; Gangloff *et al.*, 2016; Moisisio *et al.*, 2020; Park *et al.*, 2018). This study extends research on blame-shifting communications by exploring how the sender's social perception contributes to their relative effectiveness.

Extant research has focused predominantly on boundary conditions pertaining to the nature of the crisis (e.g., ambiguity of the causes) and content of the message (e.g., vividness of the message) (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a; Coombs, 2015). It is reasonable to expect, however, that the perception of the sender would also influence whether a blame shifting message is effective (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021b). Research in persuasion (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) and in social perception (Cuddy *et al.*, 2008; Kervyn *et al.*, 2022) demonstrates that the image of the source of a message contributes to audience responses. The current study extends ongoing debates about blame shifting by examining how 1) the size of the sender, 2) the sender's relative involvement in CSR and 3) the receiver concern for the crisis interact to influence the relative persuasiveness of blame-shifting communications.

¹ While the label *scapegoating* is routinely used in the literature for this approach (Coombs, 2007; Gangloff *et al.*, 2016), we prefer here to refer to *blame shifting* or *blame-shifting communications* since scapegoating already implies a questionable strategy where the company attempts to blame someone that is not ultimately responsible for the crisis (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a). In this study we focus instead of blame shifting toward an actor that is ultimately directly responsible for wrongdoing (Coombs, 1995; Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015; Raithel and Hock, 2021).

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3 Consistent with previous research (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a; 2021b; Bundy and Pfarrer,
4 2015; Bundy *et al.*, 2017; Shea and Hawn, 2019), we focus on blame shifting's persuasiveness
5 for individual stakeholders that are observers of the crisis and can be affected by the crisis in
6 their decisions to engage with the company. In other words, we focus on external evaluators—
7 persons who are not directly affected by the crisis but who can evaluate its impacts on others
8 and on the environment (Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015). We assess to what extent the crisis affects
9 their intentions to engage in negative word of mouth and their purchase intentions.
10 Furthermore, we focus on crises where the structural distribution of responsibilities makes
11 blame shifting communications conceivable. Scholars have shown that blame shifting is a
12 reasonable course of action only when the target of blame can be reasonably portrayed as
13 carrying responsibility for the crisis (Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015; Coombs, 1995; 2007).
14 Attempting to shift blame toward actors who are not ultimately responsible would be an
15 unethical strategy (Fricker, 2016) and one that would be likely to backfire (Park *et al.*, 2018).
16 Consistent with previous research in this domain (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a; Hersel *et al.*,
17 2022; Gangloff *et al.*, 2016; Moisisio *et al.*, 2020; Park *et al.*, 2018), we focus instead on crises
18 where blame shifting is a reasonable, structural option for the sender because there is an actor
19 that can be portrayed as sharing an (arguably) large share of responsibility. Finally, we compare
20 the effects of blame shifting, as a quintessentially defensive strategy, to an apology, which
21 represents the prototypical accommodating response (Bundy *et al.*, 2017; Coombs, 2015).
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46 The study provides several contributions to existing research. First, we extend research on
47 crisis communications (Bundy *et al.*, 2017; Coombs, 2015). Previous research has shown that
48 blame-shifting messages can sometimes backfire (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a; Park *et al.*,
49 2018). However, there is still little empirical evidence on the specific conditions that
50 differentiate between effective blame-shifting communications and situations that instead are
51 likely to lead to the rejection of such messages. We extend extant research (Antonetti and
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3 Baghi, 2021a; 2021b; Gangloff *et al.*, 2016) by demonstrating that sender size, CSR
4 involvement and receiver concern about the crisis are fundamental to the persuasiveness of
5 blame-shifting communications. Second, we contribute to research on the social perception of
6 organizations (Kervyn *et al.*, 2022). Previous research has shown that company size
7 perceptions influence stakeholder responses in a range of domains (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019).
8 We extend this stream of work by showing that small players and brands highly engaged in
9 CSR are more likely to be able to effectively implement blame shifting while the same
10 approach would backfire for a big player and/or a company with a poor CSR record. Third, we
11 contribute to the literature on the benefits organizations can draw from CSR investments (e.g.,
12 Chernev and Blair, 2015; Klein and Dawar, 2004) by showing that CSR perceptions allow
13 companies to choose from a broader range of crisis communications and offer, when suitable,
14 the opportunity to successfully implement blame-shifting communications. The opportunity to
15 potentially deflect blame when this is reasonable given the circumstances is not granted to
16 organizations not known for their engagement in CSR.

35 **Conceptual development**

37 *Blame shifting crisis communications: A literature review*

39
40 When faced with a significant and unexpected negative event, companies communicate to
41 stakeholders in an attempt to reduce the ensuing negative consequences (Bundy *et al.*, 2017;
42 Davies and Olmedo-Cifuentes, 2016; Robson and Farquhar, 2021). Crisis communication
43 researchers have explored the different response strategies available to corporations in such
44 circumstances (Coombs, 2015). The crisis communications literature differentiates between
45 two major types of crisis response strategies (Coombs, 1995; Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015):
46 defensive versus accommodative strategies. The two approaches differ in the amount of
47 responsibility that the organization accepts for the crisis (Coombs, 1995). When using
48 defensive strategies, such as denial, attack the accuser, or blame shifting, the organization
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3 rejects the responsibility for the crisis. Conversely, when using an accommodative strategy,
4 such as apology or compensation, the organization admits full responsibility for the crisis. In
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6 all circumstances, organizations have a responsibility to care for stakeholders affected for a
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8 crisis (Coombs, 2015). This duty of care for affected stakeholders, however, does not oblige
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10 companies to also invariably accept causal responsibility for the event and in some cases
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12 companies feel it is justifiable to argue that the crisis was ultimately not their fault.
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17 Crisis communications research has shown that crisis responses tend to be more effective
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19 when they match stakeholders' situational expectations (Coombs, 1995; Bundy and Pfarrer,
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21 2015; Raithel and Hock, 2021). Managers should therefore select crisis response strategies that
22
23 match the organization's responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Organizations can use
24
25 blame shifting effectively only in situations when a sender can credibly claim not to be
26
27 responsible for the misbehavior (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a, Hersel *et al.*, 2022; Guckian *et*
28
29 *al.*, 2018). Crisis responses that do not conform with expectations tend to yield negative
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31 responses from the public (Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015; Raithel and Hock, 2021). In general,
32
33 however, most research tends to warn against the persuasiveness of blame-shifting
34
35 communications. Crises are often complex events and stakeholders dislike companies who are
36
37 perceived as trying to pass on responsibility to other parties for something negative that has
38
39 happened (Coombs, 2017; Park *et al.*, 2018). Blame shifting is often perceived as a
40
41 manipulative strategy used to extricate the company from the crisis: an attempt to persuade
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43 stakeholders that some negative fallout is not the responsibility of the company by conveniently
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45 finding someone to sacrifice (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a; Coombs, 2015). Consequently,
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47 blame shifting is considered likely to aggravate, rather than ameliorate, the negative
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49 consequences of a crisis (Formentin, *et al.*, 2017). However, growing evidence also shows that
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51 some forms of blame shifting are effective.
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3 When responsibility can reasonably be shifted to a partner, the sender is not simply trying
4 to escape blame, but primarily reclaiming its innocence to protect its reputation (Antonetti and
5 Baghi 2021a; Coombs, 2007). In this respect, previous studies have identified several boundary
6 conditions that explain the relative persuasiveness of blame shifting in different circumstances.
7 Blame shifting is more likely to be effective when responsibility for the crisis can be
8 unambiguously attributed to the target and when the message is vivid (Antonetti and Baghi,
9 2021a). Vivid communications include specific and detailed information that helps readers
10 forming an impression of the alleged culprit and the circumstances leading to the crisis
11 (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a). Similarly, scholars have shown that blame shifting is effective
12 when it is coherent with other messages sent by the company (Hersel *et al.*, 2022) and when
13 stakeholders are likely to have a negative perception of the culprit (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021b;
14 Paharia *et al.*, 2011).

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Extant research, however, has largely overlooked the question of which (type of) sender can afford to blame. This is an important question given that, when inappropriately deployed, blame-shifting communications are not just ineffective; they can backfire (Coombs, 2015; Park *et al.*, 2018). It is important, therefore, to examine what types of companies can deploy blame-shifting communications effectively, thus avoiding the risks linked with this aggressive strategy.

Why blame shifting persuades: reinforcing perceived ethicality

In situations where the company can be reasonably described as not responsible for wrongdoing (Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015), the persuasiveness of blame shifting communications is due to their ability to protect the perceived ethicality of the sender, defined as the overall judgment that the sender behaves in line with moral and social norms of conduct (Brunk, 2012). Blame shifting suggests that ethical wrongdoing is limited to only one partner (e.g., a supplier

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3 or an employee) and is not generalizable across the sender. Furthermore, the message proposes
4 a target of blame and, as a consequence, highlights the relative morality of the sender when
5 compared to the target of the message—that is, the culprit deserving the condemnation of the
6 observer (Rothschild *et al.*, 2012). This comparison process highlights the morality of the
7 sender and consequently protects its perceived ethicality (Rothschild *et al.*, 2012).
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15 Crises are expected to damage (primarily) perceptions of a sender's ethicality because they
16 raise important ethical concerns. The appraisal of a crisis involves appreciating how certain
17 stakeholders have been harmed by the company's wrongdoing (Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015;
18 Coombs, 2007). Such appraisals trigger concerns with fairness and care for the potential
19 victims which are strongly associated with ethical considerations (Antonetti and Maklan, 2016;
20 Brunk, 2012). In such circumstances, the perceived ethicality of the sender is salient and
21 threatened (Shea and Hawn, 2019). Consequently, a persuasive blame-shifting communication
22 is expected to be able to reaffirm the ethical values of the sender and reinforce perceived
23 ethicality.
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36 Perceived sender ethicality is expected to increase positive stakeholder responses to the
37 company. Specifically, we focus here on two critical outcomes that past research shows to be
38 explained significantly by the perception that the company respects moral norms: negative
39 word of mouth (Antonetti and Maklan, 2016) and intentions to purchase the brand (Bolton and
40 Mattila, 2015). Judgments of ethicality are linked to retaliatory behaviors since stakeholders
41 want to punish organizations that are seen as disrespecting important moral rules (Antonetti
42 and Baghi, 2021a; Moisisio *et al.*, 2020). By increasing perceived ethicality, we expect, blame
43 shifting might be able to reduce negative word of mouth because it will mitigate the desire to
44 retaliate against the organization. Stakeholders often punish companies' violations through the
45 spreading of negative information about the company because negative word of mouth offers
46 an opportunity to express disapproval concerning unethical corporate actions (Grappi *et al.*,
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3 2013; Antonetti and Maklan, 2016). Consequently, intentions to talk negatively about the
4 company have often been investigated as a response aimed at punishing the company and
5 exacting revenge (Grégoire *et al.*, 2010) due to dissatisfaction with a service failure (Choi and
6 La, 2013) and/or following cases of corporate irresponsibility (Antonetti and Maklan, 2016;
7 Grappi *et al.*, 2013). Negative word of mouth is therefore an important outcome to consider as
8 a measure of the relative effectiveness of blame-shifting communications to reduce consumers'
9 retaliation against the firm.

10
11 In contrast, purchase intentions represent a conciliatory behavior associated with the desire
12 to support the company (Joireman *et al.*, 2013). Past research has shown that successful crisis
13 recovery strategies can retain loyalty (Bolton and Mattila, 2015) and stakeholders' commitment
14 to the organization (Dick and Basu, 1994; Yani-de-Soriano *et al.*, 2019). If blame shifting
15 increases ethicality, it will have managed to reassure stakeholders that, despite the negative
16 event, the company was not malevolent and does not have a questionable moral character
17 (Joireman *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, increases in ethicality are expected to yield higher
18 conciliatory responses from stakeholders in an attempt to protect a valuable relationship despite
19 the crisis.

20
21 We compare the relative effectiveness of blame shifting to an apology for several reasons.
22 First, the literature clearly sets out apology and blame shifting as two logical alternatives that
23 differ in relation to the acceptance of responsibility (Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015; Coombs, 2007;
24 2015). Second, it is reasonable to compare these two options since both apology and blame
25 shifting are purely verbal responses that imply neither financial compensation nor the
26 implementation of specific new policies (Bundy *et al.*, 2017). Third, while apologies are not
27 always persuasive and can even be rejected by stakeholders (Rasoulilian *et al.*, 2017), the
28 literature agrees that blame shifting tends to be a more risky and controversial response because
29 it implies a defensive stance aimed at focusing condemnation toward a relevant target
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(Coombs, 2007; 2015). In this respect, scholars tend to consider accommodative recovery, which typically includes an apology, as a gold standard because this approach is least likely to generate resistance or skepticism among stakeholders (Béal and Grégoire, 2022; Rasoulia *et al.*, 2017). It is therefore interesting to evaluate the relative persuasiveness of blame shifting over an apology considering the riskier profile of this latter response strategy. Based on the rationale above, we hypothesize that:

H1: Blame shifting (when compared to an apology) improves stakeholder responses to the company through the mediation of perceived ethicality.

How sender size moderates the persuasiveness of blame shifting

Consistent with our theoretical grounding on social perception theories (Kervyn *et al.*, 2022), we focus on sender size as a cue triggering inferences about the power of the company² (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019; Rucker *et al.*, 2014). Power is generally defined as having the ability to influence others by controlling important resources (Rucker *et al.*, 2014). Low power is associated with communal behavior while high power is tied to high authority (Rucker *et al.*, 2014). Small senders normally have low power in the marketplace, and this justifies their orientation to helpful and friendly behaviors (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019). Low power senders have little control over resources and lack the ability to act independently, so they must pay close attention to the behaviors and needs of other actors to survive (Rucker *et al.*, 2014). Large senders, on the other hand, often have control over valued resources (e.g., money, knowledge, suppliers), which allows them to act with little consideration of others' needs and to aggressively pursue their competitors and partners (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019). Large senders

² This approach is notably different from accounts based on brand biography and the differences between underdogs and top dogs (Paharia *et al.*, 2011). Brand biography studies focus on the founding stories of a brand, rather than their current market position, and discuss persuasion mechanisms based on feelings of empathy and identification with the brand.

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3 engage in agency behaviors that emphasize an assertive, instrumental orientation aimed at
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5 “getting things done” (Abele *et al.*, 2008).
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8 Consistent with research on the social perception of brands (Cuddy *et al.*, 2008; Kervyn *et*
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10 *al.*, 2022), the arguments above suggest that stakeholders should respond more favorably to
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12 blame-shifting communications from small senders. Since small senders are seen as highly
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14 friendly and cooperative (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019), their blame-shifting message is less
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16 likely to be resisted and more likely to be processed favorably. Specifically, given their positive
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18 image of the sender, stakeholders will quickly look for evidence that allows them to confirm
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20 the positive impression they have of a friendly and cooperative source (Cuddy *et al.*, 2008;
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22 Kervyn *et al.*, 2022). Evidence from persuasion research also suggests that, when they rely on
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24 heuristic processing, stakeholders tend to agree with messages from more favorable sources
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26 (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), proposed by Petty and
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28 Cacioppo (1986), posits that people process persuasive messages through two routes: central
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30 (systematic) and peripheral (heuristic) processing (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, 1980).
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32 Research shows that the peripheral route is preferred when motivation or cognitive resources
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34 are low leading individuals to rely on peripheral cues or heuristics to evaluate the message such
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36 as message length (Petty *et al.*, 1983), the order of information presentation (Pierro *et al.*, 2005)
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38 and source attractiveness (Chaiken and Maheswaran, 1994). This will lead to stakeholders
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40 agreeing with the claim of innocence that is implicit in a blame-shifting message. As the sender
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42 claims innocence and blames a third party, the blame-shifting message delivered by a small
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44 sender is more likely to reinforce perceived ethicality.
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51 On the contrary, the large size of a sender will reduce the persuasiveness of blame shifting.
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53 Large senders are less friendly (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019), and this will lead to higher
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55 suspicion about the motives of the source (Isaac and Grayson, 2017). When observers are
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57 suspicious, they are more likely to ultimately conclude that the communication is attempting
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3 to manipulate them (Campbell, 1995). Stakeholders' suspicion will reduce any inferences of
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5 ethicality because it reduces the likelihood that stakeholders will trust the claim of innocence
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7 implicitly delivered through blame-shifting communications. It is instead more likely that,
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9 given their suspicion, stakeholders will simply dismiss the company's communication.
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11 Consequently, we hypothesize that:
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14 **H2:** Sender size moderates the influence of blame shifting (over an apology) on perceived
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16 ethicality so that perceived ethicality is higher (lower) when sender size is small (large).
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21 *How CSR engagement moderates the persuasiveness of blame shifting*

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23 A sender's engagement in CSR activities is another common element of company image
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25 that could influence the relative effectiveness of blame-shifting communications. CSR, similar
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27 to small size, improves a company's reputation (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) because socially
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29 responsible firms are perceived as helpful and caring (Shea and Hawn, 2019). CSR signals the
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31 good intentions of the organization (Vanhamme and Grobбен, 2009). Observers are also more
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33 likely to self-identify with firms known for their socially responsible practices (Klein and
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35 Dawar, 2004). This positive bond can then insulate the firm from the impact of negative events
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37 (Vanhamme and Grobбен, 2009). CSR can refer to a wide range of potential initiatives. In this
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39 study, and consistent with earlier research (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Shea and Hawn,
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41 2019), we focus on charitable initiatives and the sender's contribution to the local community.
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46 Since CSR senders are considered well intentioned and caring (Shea and Hawn, 2019),
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48 stakeholders are likely to process a blame-shifting message more favorably. The message of
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50 care and concern for others implicit in CSR involvement may protect the sender from being
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52 considered unfair (Vanhamme and Grobбен, 2009). This positive perception will increase
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54 ethicality through a mechanism similar to the one discussed above for smaller senders. The
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56 positive perception of a CSR company is likely to activate heuristic processing (Chaiken, 1980;
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Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), leading them to accept the sender's claim of innocence. As the sender is appreciated for its positive social engagements, stakeholders are likely to accept the attempt at blame shifting and protect the perceived ethicality of the sender. We expect, therefore, that the CSR involvement of the sender moderates the effectiveness of blame shifting so that this crisis communication strategy is more persuasive when the sender is engaged in CSR. Based on this rationale, we predict that:

H3: Sender's CSR engagement moderates the influence of blame shifting on perceived ethicality so that perceived ethicality is higher (lower) when the sender has high (low) CSR engagement.

The interaction of sender size and sender CSR engagement

The preceding discussion suggests that large senders might find it difficult to successfully use blame shifting because stakeholders receive their communications with a certain level of distrust. In this vein, it is interesting to consider the possible interaction between CSR and sender size. We evaluate the possibility that a large sender might be able to deploy blame shifting effectively provided that they can boast of a CSR engagement. We hypothesize that only one cue is needed to communicate a positive image of the sender and, consequently, the positive effect of CSR would allow even large senders to use blame-shifting communications effectively.

We suggest that CSR and sender size have a conjunctive effect on the perception of the sender (Einhorn, 1970; Dawes, 1979), meaning that it is sufficient for just one of the two beneficial attributes to be present to obtain a positive overall evaluation of the source. This is because both small size (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019) and CSR (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001), communicate a positive impression of the company. Furthermore, CSR represents a more intentional and therefore potentially costlier signal than an indication of size. Past research

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3 shows that costlier altruistic actions are particularly likely to have a positive influence on
4 stakeholders (Ohtsubo and Watanabe, 2009; You *et al.*, 2020). This suggests that even a large
5 company should benefit from the positive halo (Chernev and Blair, 2015) associated with CSR.
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10 The arguments above suggest four potential combinations of sender effects. First, we
11 expect that blame shifting (compared to an apology) increases perceived ethicality (**H4a**) for a
12 small sender that boasts a strong CSR engagement. Second, we predict a positive effect on
13 perceived ethicality (**H4b**) of blame shifting (over an apology) for a small sender without a
14 CSR engagement. Third, we expect a positive influence on ethicality (**H4c**) of blame shifting
15 (over an apology) for a large sender boasting a strong CSR engagement. Finally, for a large
16 sender without CSR engagement, we expect blame shifting (over an apology) to backfire,
17 leading to a negative effect on perceived ethicality (**H4d**). In other words, we expect that, given
18 its controversial nature (Bundy *et al.*, 2017; Coombs, 2007; 2015), blame shifting requires at
19 least one positive image trait to be deployed successfully.
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35 *Considering receivers' differences: the moderation of stakeholders' concern about the crisis*

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37 The arguments we developed above suggest that blame shifting would be most effective
38 when delivered by a small sender with a strong CSR record. In this condition, the sender
39 benefits from the positive perceptions associated with two cues (i.e., small size and CSR
40 engagement) that maximize the constructive effect on ethicality. Building on persuasion
41 research (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), however, we contend that the positive effect of blame
42 shifting further depends on the characteristics of the sender and specifically on the adoption of
43 a heuristic processing style. According to the ELM, as discussed above, individuals motivated
44 and with the suitable cognitive resources will tend to engage in analytic, central processing that
45 will enable a more critical evaluation of the persuasive message (Petty and Cacioppo in 1986,
46 Petty *et al.*, 1983). Evidence shows that individuals motivated to process information
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3 thoroughly were persuaded by stronger arguments (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984). Similarly, when
4 stakeholders are very concerned about the crisis presented, they are more likely to abandon a
5 heuristic style in favor of analytic processing of the information presented (Chaiken, 1980;
6 Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). This type of information processing will be characterized by a more
7 careful and effortful scrutiny of the arguments proposed (Campbell, 1995). We reason that such
8 a processing style will reduce the influence of blame shifting on ethicality for two reasons.
9

10
11 As discussed above, blame shifting implies a claim of innocence that is expected to
12 positively influence perceptions of ethicality. Such a claim, however, does not really provide
13 additional proof or a specific explanation of why the company should not be considered
14 complicit. In other words, while rhetorically affirming its innocence and shifting blame away,
15 the company does not engage with a detailed explanation of the evidence for its innocence.
16 Since analytical processing rewards high quality arguments (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), it
17 might diminish the positive effect of blame shifting on perceived ethicality because this
18 communication fails to offer additional, convincing evidence of the sender's innocence.
19 Furthermore, stakeholders highly concerned about the crisis are likely to value a specific,
20 detailed discussion about the causes of the crisis (Ariely, 2000; Liu and Shrum, 2009; Petty
21 and Cacioppo, 1986). Given their concern about the topic, they would value specific
22 explanations about the potential consequences and implications of a crisis over an account that,
23 like blame shifting, focuses exclusively on attributions of blame. The lack of such information
24 might make a blame-shifting account less interesting for them and less convincing overall.
25 Finally, stakeholders highly concerned about the crisis are also more likely to be resistant in
26 general to defensive responses that shift blame away from the sender and are instead more
27 appreciative of accommodative responses where the sender accepts its role in the crisis. Given
28 their high level of concern, this group of stakeholders is likely to be especially reactive to the
29 negative consequences of the crisis. Consequently, highly concerned stakeholders might
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3 perceive a defensive response as dissatisfactory because it fails to accept any responsibility for
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5 the crisis and its consequences (Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015; Coombs, 2007).
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8 Based on this rationale, we hypothesize that the positive effect of blame shifting on
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10 stakeholder responses for a CSR sender further depends on stakeholders' concern about the
11
12 crisis. We therefore hypothesize as follows:
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14 **H5:** Stakeholders' concern about the crisis moderates the influence of blame shifting on
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16 perceived ethicality so that perceived ethicality is higher (lower) when the stakeholder
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18 has low (high) concern about the crisis.
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24 Figure 1 presents our conceptual model. The mediation of perceived ethicality (H1) is tested
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26 in all empirical studies. Study 1 considers sender size (H2) while Study 2 focuses on CSR
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28 engagement (H3). Study 3 focuses on the interaction between the two factors (H4a-d). Finally,
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30 Study 4 considers the moderation of stakeholder concern about the crisis (H5), considering two
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32 senders with strong CSR engagement.
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35 INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE
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40 Study 1

41 *Participants and research design*

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43 We conducted a 2 (crisis communications: apology vs. blame shifting) X 2 (sender size:
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45 large vs small) between-subjects experiment. We manipulated sender size through the
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47 description of the company's relative size in its industry (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019). We
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49 recruited 422 U.S. participants³ (48% male; mean age 41) for participation on the online panel
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51 Prolific (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2018). Participants completed an online survey delivered through
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59 ³ An a priori power analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul *et al.*, 2007) suggests that a sample size of 420 will
60 be able to give the analysis sufficient statistical power to detect even small-medium effects ($\alpha = 0.05$, effect size $f^2(V) = .025$, sample size 422, power =0.96).

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3 the software Qualtrics. We first presented participants with information about a fictitious
4 chocolate brand characterized as a large or small player in the chocolate industry. After reading
5 this information, participants evaluated the brand's size. We then showed participants a news
6 report describing a crisis involving the company. The article presented a crisis caused by one
7 of the brand's suppliers using child labor on its farms. The article ended with the sender's
8 response to the accusation (all materials are available in Web Appendix A). After reading the
9 scenario, participants answered our questions and provided demographic information.

19 *Stimuli and measures*

21 Consistent with previous research we manipulated sender size with information about the
22 number of stores managed by the brand, the number of employees, and the annual revenue
23 (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019) in comparison with the average of the sector. In the small size
24 condition, the sender was presented as a small-scale artisan chocolate maker while in the large
25 size condition, the sender was described as a large-scale chocolate-maker owned by a
26 multinational conglomerate. In the apology condition, the sender accepted responsibility, and
27 expressed regret. In the blame shifting condition, the sender accused the supplier and refused
28 any responsibility (see Web Appendix A for more details).

30 As expected, we manipulated perceptions of sender size successfully (measured on 4 items
31 on a 7-point Likert scale, e.g., "very small in size/very large in size", "a small player in the
32 industry/a big player in the industry"; Yang and Aggarwal, 2019) ($M_{\text{large}} = 5.98$, $M_{\text{small}} = 2.45$,
33 $t(422) = 30.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.01$). Finally, we used two items to check whether the crisis
34 response message was correctly perceived. Participants' perception of whether the sender
35 "tried to blame" the target or "tried to shift peoples' attention exclusively" onto the supplier
36 (7-point Likert scale; we used the average of the two items) were consistent with expectations
37 ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 5.98$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 4.53$, $t(422) = -9.68$, $p < .001$, $d = .21$).

Our measures are borrowed from existing research. We measured respondents' perception of sender ethicality (Brunk, 2012; $\alpha = .79$), intentions to spread negative word of mouth against the sender (Antonetti and Maklan, 2016; $\alpha = .85$) and purchase intentions (Bolton and Mattila, 2015, $\alpha = .88$). All conceptual scales perform satisfactorily in terms of reliability and discriminant validity. Detailed information is available in Web Appendix B.

Results

Mean values across conditions are reported in Figure 2. An ANOVA of perceived ethicality, with communication response (blame shifting vs apology) and sender size (large vs small) as between-subjects factors indicate a significant communication response X sender size interaction suggesting that blame shifting reduces perceived ethicality when the sender is large ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 2.82$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.55$, $t(209) = -3.46$, $p < .001$; $d = .48$) and it marginally increases perceived ethicality when the sender is small ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.28$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.86$, $t(209) = 1.80$, $p = .07$; $d = .25$). Furthermore, a significant communication response X sender size interaction indicates that blame shifting increases negative word of mouth when the sender is large ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.06$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.49$, $t(209) = 2.65$, $p < .005$, $d = .36$). The effect, however, is not statistically significant when the sender is small ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 3.25$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.49$, $t(209) = -1.12$, $p > .05$, $d = -.15$). Finally, an ANOVA shows a significant communication response X sender size interaction indicating that blame shifting decreases purchase intentions when the sender is large ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 2.96$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.57$, $t(209) = 2.57$, $p < .005$, $d = .40$) and it marginally increases purchase intentions when the sender is small ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.05$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.72$, $t(209) = 1.46$, $p = .07$; $d = .20$).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

To test the hypothesized moderated mediation represented in Figure 1, we ran two conditional process analyses, one for each dependent variable, using PROCESS Model 7

(Hayes, 2018) with 10,000 resamples for the estimation of bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence intervals. The independent variable was coded 0 (apology) and 1 (blame shifting), the moderator variable was coded 0 (large size) and 1 (small size) and perceived ethicality was considered as mediator. Age and gender were included as covariates. Details of the estimated paths and the indices of moderated mediation are presented in Web Appendix C. Table 1 shows the indirect effects at different levels of sender size, offering an explicit test of our research hypotheses (Zhao *et al.*, 2010).

Consistently with H1 and H2, blame shifting reduces perceived ethicality when the sender is large (effect = $-.73$, CI from -1.17 to $-.30$) and increases the same variable when the sender is small (effect = $.45$, CI from $.02$ to $.89$). Consequently, when the sender is large, blame shifting increases intention to spread negative word of mouth and reduces purchase intentions through the mediation of perceived ethicality (negative word of mouth indirect effect = $.26$, CI from $.11$ to $.43$; purchase intentions indirect effect = $-.36$, CI from $-.54$ to $-.19$). When the sender is small, blame shifting reduces negative word of mouth and enhances purchase intentions through the mediation of perceived ethicality (negative word of mouth indirect effect = $-.16$, CI from $-.34$ to $-.01$; purchase intentions indirect effect = $.22$, CI from $.09$ to $.41$).

Discussion

Study 1 shows that sender size shapes how consumers react to blame-shifting communications. The findings show that blame shifting is a very dangerous strategy for large brands, as it tends to backfire for this type of sender. At the same time, blame shifting has a small positive effect when deployed by small brands.

Study 2

Participants and research design

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3 We conducted an online experiment where we manipulated the description of the sender
4 and the crisis communication used. To vary perceptions of the sender, we manipulated
5 information about the brand's engagement in socially responsible initiatives. We conducted a
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10 2 (crisis communications: apology vs. blame shifting) X 2 (sender: low CSR vs high CSR)
11 between-subjects experiment. We recruited 608 U.S. participants⁴ (41% male; mean age 43)
12 for participation on Prolific (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2018). We used the same procedures described
13 in Study 1. The sender was a fictitious sports retailer and participants were asked to evaluate
14 its perceived CSR involvement. After that, participants saw a news report describing a case of
15 corruption involving the company. The article presented a senior buyer as the only culprit and
16 ended with the company's response to the accusation. After reading the scenario, participants
17 answered our questions and provided demographic information.
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31 *Stimuli and measures*

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33 In the high CSR condition, the sender was presented as well known for investing in
34 charitable initiatives and supporting grassroots sports initiatives in local communities. In the
35 low CSR condition, the sender was described as being very aggressive against small and
36 independent stores and showing little concern for its employees (Shea and Hawn, 2019; Sen
37 and Bhattacharya, 2001). The case of corporate corruption and the company's response to it
38 were developed using relevant literature (Coombs, 2015). The apology and the blame shifting
39 conditions were consistent with Study 1.
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49 As expected, we manipulated perceptions of sender CSR involvement (4 items on a 7-point
50 Likert scale, e.g., "*SportNow is a socially responsible company*", "*SportNow is a company*
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committed to charity programs"; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) successfully ($M_{\text{low CSR}} = 2.17$,

⁴ An a priori power analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul *et al.*, 2007) suggests that a sample size of 600 will be able to give the analysis sufficient statistical power to detect even small-medium effects ($\alpha = 0.05$, effect size $f^2(V) = .025$, sample size 608, power = 0.99).

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3 $M_{\text{high CSR}} = 5.69, t(607) = -41.31, p < .001, d = 2.02$). We used the same items used in Study 1
4
5 to check whether the crisis response message was correctly perceived. Participants' perception
6
7 of the crisis response was in line with the expectations ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 6.21, M_{\text{apology}} = 5.05, t$
8
9 $(607) = -10.13, p < .001$).

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12 Our measures are the same used in Study 1, but we did not measure purchase intentions.
13
14 All conceptual scales perform satisfactorily in terms of reliability and discriminant validity.
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16 See Web Appendix B for details.
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18

19 Results

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21 The mean values across conditions are plotted in Figure 3. An ANOVA of perceived
22
23 ethicality indicates a significant crisis communications X sender CSR interaction ($F(1, 607) =$
24
25 $4.61, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$). Blame shifting increases perceived ethicality when the sender is
26
27 highly involved in CSR ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.17, M_{\text{apology}} = 3.68, t(301) = 2.74, p < .05; d = .32$)
28
29 but not when the sender is low in CSR ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 2.11, M_{\text{apology}} = 2.11, t(301) = .002, p >$
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31 $.05; d = .001$).

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35 Finally, the same ANOVA of intention to spread negative word of mouth shows a
36
37 significant crisis communication X sender CSR interaction ($F(1, 607) = 10.06, p < .01, \text{partial}$
38
39 $\eta^2 = .02$) suggesting that blame shifting reduces intention to spread negative word of mouth
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41 when the sender is highly involved in CSR ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 3.34, M_{\text{apology}} = 4.12, t(301) = -4.25,$
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43 $p < .001; d = -.48$) but not when the sender has a low involvement in CSR ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 5.10,$
44
45 $M_{\text{apology}} = 5.09, t(301) = .01, p > .05; d = .01$).

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49 INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

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51 To test our hypotheses, we conducted a conditional process analysis using PROCESS
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53 Model 7 (Hayes, 2018) with the same procedures adopted in Study 1. The details of the
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55 estimated paths and the indices of moderated mediation are presented in Web Appendix C.
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57 Table 1 shows the indirect effects at different levels of sender CSR engagement.
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3 Consistent with H3, results show that blame shifting increases perceived ethicality when
4 the sender has a high engagement in CSR (effect = .50, CI from .19 to .81) while the effect is
5 not significant when the sender has a low CSR engagement (effect = -.01, CI from -.30 to .32).
6
7 Consequently, blame shifting reduces intentions to spread negative word of mouth through the
8 mediation of perceived ethicality when the sender is highly involved in CSR (indirect effect =
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Consequently, blame shifting reduces intentions to spread negative word of mouth through the mediation of perceived ethicality when the sender is highly involved in CSR (indirect effect = -.32, CI from -.54 to -.10). When the sender has low CSR engagement, blame shifting does not reduce negative word of mouth through perceived ethicality (indirect effect = .01, CI from -.19 to .17).

Discussion

Study 2 shows that engagement in CSR contributes to explain the relative effectiveness of blame shifting communications. Companies known for their CSR engagement are more likely to be able to implement blame shifting effectively. This finding extends our understanding of the boundary conditions of the effectiveness of blame shifting (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a; 2021b). In this study, however, we have considered a low CSR condition that is overtly negative in the description of the company (presented as aggressive toward competitors and tough toward employees). It seems reasonable to ask whether the differences presented would hold when the low CSR condition does not entail explicitly negative behavior. To explore this question, and to be consistent with much existing research on the effect of CSR information (Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001), in Study 3 we compare high CSR to a condition where CSR information is not presented. At the same time, we also test H4, evaluating the potential interaction of CSR with information about the size of the sender.

Study 3

Participants and research design

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3 We conducted an online experiment where we manipulated the description of the sender
4 and the crisis communications used. To vary perceptions of the sender, we manipulated
5 information about sender size and the presence or absence of information about its engagement
6 in socially responsible initiatives. We conducted a 2 (crisis communications: apology vs. blame
7 shifting) X 2 (sender size: large vs. small) X 2 (CSR engagement: No CSR vs. CSR) between-
8 subjects experiment. We recruited 503 U.S. participants⁵ (45% male; mean age 44) for
9 participation on Prolific (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2018). We used the same procedures described in
10 Study 1 and 2. The sender was a fictitious chocolate brand characterized as a large or small
11 player in the chocolate industry (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019) and as engaged or not in socially
12 responsible activities. After reading the description of the sender, participants saw a news
13 report describing a case of child labor in the farms of the brand's supplier (the same report used
14 in Study 1). The article ended with the sender's response to the accusation (all materials are
15 available in Web Appendix A). After reading the scenario, participants answered our questions
16 and provided demographic information.

35 *Stimuli and measures*

37 The manipulation of the sender's size was accomplished the same way as in Study 1 (Yang
38 and Aggarwal, 2019). In the CSR condition, the sender was presented as well known for its
39 investments in corporate social responsibility and its involvement in philanthropic initiatives.
40 In the No CSR condition, the information about the sender's corporate social responsibility
41 involvement was omitted. The apology and the blame shifting conditions were consistent with
42 Studies 1 and 2.

43 As expected, we manipulated perceptions of sender size successfully (measured on 4 items
44 on a 7-point Likert scale, e.g., "very small in size/very large in size", "a small player in the
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⁵ An a priori power analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul *et al.*, 2007) suggests that a sample size of 500 gives the analysis sufficient statistical power to detect even small-medium effects ($\alpha = 0.05$, effect size $f^2 (V) = .025$, sample size 503, power = 0.99).

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3 *industry/a big player in the industry*"; Yang and Aggarwal, 2019) ($M_{\text{large}} = 6.00$, $M_{\text{small}} = 2.33$,
4 $t(503) = 35.12$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.13$). Also, the manipulation of the perceptions of the sender's
5
6 CSR record (4 items on a 7-point Likert scale, e.g., "*Choco Delizia is a socially responsible*
7
8 *company*", "*Choco Delizia is a company committed to charity programs*"; Sen and
9
10 Bhattacharya, 2001) was in line with the expectations ($M_{\text{CSR}} = 5.71$, $M_{\text{NoCSR}} = 3.84$, $t(503) = -$
11
12 21.37 , $p < .001$, $d = 1.90$). We used the same items used in Studies 1 and 2 to check whether
13
14 the crisis response message was perceived correctly. Participants' perception of the crisis
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16 response was successfully manipulated ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 6.28$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 4.70$, $t(503) = 10.64$, p
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18 $< .001$).

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24 Our measures are the same as those used in Study 1. All conceptual scales performed
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26 satisfactorily in terms of reliability and discriminant validity. See Web Appendix B for details.
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29 30 31 *Results*

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33 An ANOVA of perceived ethicality, with crisis communication (apology, blame shifting),
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35 sender size (small, large) and CSR engagement (no CSR, CSR) as between-subjects factors,
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37 indicate a significant three-way interaction ($F(1, 503) = 5.12$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$). The
38
39 relevant data are plotted in Figure 4. To explore this interaction further we stratified the analysis
40
41 by CSR record. A significant crisis communication X sender size interaction in the No CSR
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43 condition ($F(1, 250) = 13.06$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$) indicates that blame shifting reduces
44
45 ethicality for the large sender ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 3.52$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 4.49$, $t(125) = 3.30$, $p < .001$; $d =$
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47 $.59$) but increases ethicality for the small sender ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.68$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 4.14$, $t(125) =$
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49 -1.80 , $p < .05$; $d = -.32$). In the CSR condition, the interaction of crisis communication and
50
51 sender size is not statistically significant ($F(1, 250) = 0.01$, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$), since
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53 blame shifting increases ethicality both in the small sender ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 5.09$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 4.33$,
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3 $t(122) = 2.49, p < .05; d = .45$ and in the large sender condition ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.63, M_{\text{apology}}$
4 $= 3.98, t(122) = -1.98, p < .05; d = -.35$).

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8 Furthermore, an ANOVA of negative word of mouth, with crisis communication (apology,
9 blame shifting), sender size (small, large) and CSR record (no CSR, CSR) as between-subjects
10 factors, also indicates a significant three-way interaction ($F(1, 503) = 8.19, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 =$
11 $.07$). To explore this interaction further we stratified the analysis by CSR record. A significant
12 crisis communication X sender size interaction in the No CSR record condition ($F(1, 250) =$
13 $16.09, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$) indicates that blame shifting reduces negative word of mouth
14 for the small sender ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 2.68, M_{\text{apology}} = 3.46, t(125) = 2.51, p < .05; d = .54$) and
15 increases negative word of mouth for the large sender ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.12, M_{\text{apology}} = 3.08, t$
16 $(125) = 3.15, p = .001; d = -.55$). In the CSR record condition, the same interaction is not
17 statistically significant ($F(1, 250) = 0.00, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00$). This reflects a null effect of
18 blame shifting in both the small sender ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 2.68, M_{\text{apology}} = 3.05, t(122) = -1.24, p$
19 $> .05; d = -.23$) and the large sender condition ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 3.13, M_{\text{apology}} = 3.49, t(122) =$
20 $1.04, p > .05; d = .19$).

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38 Finally, an ANOVA of purchase intentions, with crisis communication (apology, blame
39 shifting), sender size (small, large) and CSR record (no CSR, CSR) as between-subjects
40 factors, indicate a significant three-way interaction ($F(1, 503) = 7.86, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$).
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Once again, we stratified the analysis by CSR record. A significant crisis communication X
sender size interaction in the No CSR condition ($F(1, 250) = 25.39, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .09$),
indicates that blame shifting increases purchase intentions when the sender is a small company
($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.24, M_{\text{apology}} = 3.48, t(125) = 2.56, p < .05; d = .46$) and reduces purchase
intentions when the sender is a large company ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 3.01, M_{\text{apology}} = 4.41, t(125) = -$
 $4.51, p < .001; d = -.80$). In the CSR record condition, the same interaction is not statistically
significant ($F(1, 250) = 0.99, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00$), since blame shifting increases purchase

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3 intentions both in the small ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.52$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.80$, $t(122) = 2.27$, $p < .05$; $d =$
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6 $.41$) and the large sender condition ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 4.37$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.78$, $t(122) = 4.24$, $p < .05$;
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8 $d = .31$).

10 INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

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12 To test our hypotheses, we ran two conditional process analyses, one for each dependent
13 variable, using PROCESS Model 11 (Hayes, 2018) with the same procedures adopted in
14 Studies 1 and 2 with sender size (0 = large and 1 = small) and CSR engagement (0 = no CSR
15 and 1 = CSR) as moderating variables. Details of the estimated paths and the indices of
16 moderated mediation are presented in Web Appendix C. Table 1 shows the indirect effects at
17 different levels of sender size and CSR record, offering an explicit test of our research
18 hypotheses (Zhao *et al.*, 2010).
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28 Supporting our hypotheses, blame shifting appears to be effective in enhancing perceived
29 ethicality when deployed by a small sender with a strong CSR engagement (effect = .83, CI
30 from .22 to 1.143, consistent with H4a) or by a large sender with CSR record (effect = .61, CI
31 from .10 to 1.12, consistent with H4c). When the sender is small without a CSR record, the
32 effect is positive although only marginally significant (95% CI effect = .60, CI from -.01 to
33 1.21; 90% CI effect = .60, CI from .09 to 1.11, offering partial support for H4b). Finally, blame
34 shifting decreases perceived ethicality when deployed by a large sender without CSR record
35 (effect = -1.00, CI from -1.48 to .46, consistent with H4d). Blame shifting has a positive effect
36 on stakeholder responses through the mediation of perceived ethicality when the sender is small
37 with a CSR record (negative word of mouth indirect effect = -.41, CI from -.65 to -.16; purchase
38 intentions indirect effect = .37, CI from .14 to .60) or small without a CSR record (negative
39 word of mouth indirect effect = -.30, CI from -.60 to -.01; purchase intentions indirect effect =
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60 .27, CI from .02 to .54). When the sender is large with a CSR record the effect is positive
although only marginally significant (negative word of mouth indirect effect 95% CI effect =

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3 - .30, CI from -.61 to .01; 90% CI effect = -.30, CI -.56 to -.03; purchase intention indirect effect
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5 95% CI effect = .27, CI -.01 to .56; 90% CI effect = .27, CI .03 to .52). The only condition in
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7 which blame shifting increases negative word of mouth and reduces purchase intentions is the
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9 case of a large sender without a CSR record (negative word of mouth indirect effect = .48, CI
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11 from .23 to .74; purchase intentions indirect effect = -.44, CI from -.68 to -.20). These results
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13 indicate that CSR allows large companies to deploy blame shifting effectively.
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16 17 *Discussion*

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19 The results offer further evidence in support of the role of CSR in enabling a company to
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21 deploy blame-shifting communications effectively. Importantly, we complement the findings
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23 of Study 1 by demonstrating that CSR can also aid a large sender by allowing them to
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25 implement a defensive communication strategy during a crisis. The results also add to existing
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27 research by demonstrating further that blame shifting is very risky for large companies that are
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29 not supported by a positive CSR image. Consistent with Study 1, we find that blame shifting
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31 backfires for this type of sender. Our analysis so far is focused on sender effects and has not
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33 yet considered potential differences across stakeholders. In Study 4 we consider this question
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35 and explore how the effectiveness of blame shifting might vary depending on the level of
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37 stakeholder concern for the crisis.
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45 **Study 4**

46 47 *Participants and research design*

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49 We conducted an online experiment with one factor (crisis communications: apology vs.
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51 blame shifting) between-subjects. We recruited 203 U.S. participants⁶ (43% male; mean age
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53 42) for participation on the online panel Prolific (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2018). We used the same
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59 ⁶ An a priori power analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul *et al.*, 2007) suggests that a sample size of 203 will
60 give the analysis sufficient statistical power to detect even small-medium effects ($\alpha = 0.05$, effect size $f^2 (V) = .025$, sample size 203, power = 0.98).

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3 procedures described in Studies 1, 2, and 3. The sender was a fictitious fresh juice brand
4 engaged in CSR activities. After reading the description of the sender, participants saw a news
5 report describing a case involving the sale of contaminated apple juice. The article presented a
6 crisis caused by one of the brand's suppliers falsifying documentation about the use of an illegal
7 chemical fertilizer that ultimately led to product contamination. Importantly, and different from
8 the previous studies, we explore here a crisis that is linked with product performance. The
9 article ended with the sender's response to the crisis (all materials are available in Web
10 Appendix A). After reading the scenario, participants answered our questions and provided
11 demographic information.
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23 *Stimuli and measures*

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26 Since we were focused on testing the moderation of the level of concern for the crisis, we
27 chose to focus on conditions where blame shifting is likely to be effective. For this reason, in
28 both conditions the sender was presented as well known for its investments in corporate social
29 responsibility and involvement in philanthropic initiatives (same description used in Study 3).
30 The apology and the blame shifting statements were consistent with Studies 1, 2, and 3.
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38 We used the same items adopted in previous studies to check whether the perceptions of
39 CSR (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) were correctly perceived. The perceptions of sender CSR
40 engagement were significantly higher than the middle value of the scale ($M_{\text{CSR}} = 5.76 > 4$, t
41 $(203) = 28.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.01$). Finally, the manipulation check for crisis response showed
42 that the communications were successfully manipulated ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 6.30$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 4.73$, t
43 $(203) = 8.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.23$).
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52 Our measures are the same as those used in Study 1. To measure concern about the crisis,
53 at the end of the survey participants were asked to rate their level of concern on a food safety
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concern scale⁷ (6 items on a 7-point Likert scale, e.g., “*The quality and safety of food nowadays concerns me*”, “*I am highly involved in searching and reading information about good quality of foods*”; Shahabi Ahangarkolae and Gorton, 2021). All conceptual scales perform satisfactorily in terms of reliability and discriminant validity. See Web Appendix B for details.

Results

As expected, blame shifting improves perceived ethicality ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 5.25$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 4.35$, $t(202) = 3.80$, $p < .001$, $d = .53$), intentions to spread negative word of mouth ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 2.64$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.88$, $t(202) = -5.61$, $p < .001$, $d = -.79$), and purchase intentions ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 5.04$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 3.62$, $t(202) = 5.96$, $p < .001$, $d = .84$). To test the hypothesized moderated mediation, we ran a conditional process analysis using PROCESS model 7 (Hayes, 2018) and with food safety concern as moderating variable. Details of the estimated paths and the index of moderated mediation are presented in Web Appendix C. Table 1 presents the simple and conditional effects estimated. Consistently with H5, the effect of blame shifting on perceived ethicality is significant for low (-1 SD – effect: 1.43, CI .78 to 2.11) and average values of food safety concern (effect: .90, CI .44 to 1.37). The same effect, however, is not statistically significant when food safety concern is high (+1 SD – effect: .37, CI -.29 to 1.03). A Johnson-Neyman analysis (Spiller *et al.*, 2013) shows that the moderation of food safety concern on perceived ethicality is significant for a large share of the distribution of this variable (73%).

When food safety concern is low, blame shifting, through the mediation of perceived ethicality, yields positive stakeholder responses (negative word of mouth indirect effect = -.33, CI -.59 to -.10; purchase intention indirect effect = .60, CI .31 to .89). The same indirect effects are significant also at average values of food safety concern (negative word of mouth indirect

⁷ Results show that crisis communication does not affect perceived food safety concern ($M_{\text{blame shifting}} = 5.05$, $M_{\text{apology}} = 5.29$, $t(402) = 1.22$, $p > .05$, $d = .17$).

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3 effect = -.21, CI -.40 to -.05; purchase intentions indirect effect = .37, CI .18 to .59). However,
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5 the effect of blame shifting is not significant when food safety concern is high (negative word
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7 of mouth indirect effect = -.08, CI -.29 to .07; purchase intention indirect effect = .15, CI -.14
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9 to .46). These results indicate that concern about the topic of the crisis nullifies the effect of
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11 blame shifting on stakeholders' responses.
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17 *Discussion*

19 The findings extend current research on blame-shifting communications by demonstrating
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21 that the effectiveness of this strategy rests on the level of stakeholder concern regarding the
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23 crisis. Even when the sender can boast strong CSR engagement, we find that blame shifting is
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25 more likely to be effective when stakeholders are (at most) only moderately concerned by the
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27 crisis. The findings thus identify a managerially important boundary condition and clarify that
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29 blame shifting should not be used in situations that are likely to be very concerning for the
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31 public. The evidence suggests that blame-shifting accounts are more likely to be persuasive
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33 when stakeholders adopt a heuristic processing style (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo,
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35 1986). In contrast, when messages are processed analytically, stakeholders tend to reject
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37 defensive communications such as blame shifting.
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44 **General discussion**

46 The results of four experiments demonstrate that the effectiveness of blame shifting
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48 depends on perception of senders and on stakeholders' concern regarding the crisis. For the
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50 types of crisis we have examined, where an external agent can be reasonably presented as
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52 responsible for the crisis, we find that blame shifting is effective only for small senders or
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54 senders known for their CSR engagements (irrespective of their size). For large senders without
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56 a reputation for CSR, we find that apologies are more effective than blame shifting.
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3 Furthermore, for senders boasting a strong CSR profile, blame shifting is effective only at low
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5 or moderate levels of stakeholder concern about the crisis.
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7 *Theoretical implications*

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10 Answering a call for more experimental research on crisis communication strategies
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12 (Bundy *et al.*, 2017), we show that the social perceptions of the sender determine the relative
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14 persuasiveness of blame shifting. Importantly, we focus on situations where blame shifting is
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16 a reasonable approach, as the direct responsibility for the crisis falls with either an employee
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18 or a supplier. Past research has privileged the study of stakeholders' attributions of the causes
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20 of the crisis (Coombs, 2015) and overlooked the potential role played by social perception. We
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22 extend existing research by identifying three sender-related boundary conditions of blame
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24 shifting effectiveness: the relative size of the sender, the CSR engagement of the sender, and
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26 the interaction between the two. We extend past research on blame shifting (Antonetti and
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28 Baghi, 2021a; 2021b; Gangloff *et al.*, 2016; Mosio *et al.*, 2020) by clarifying that, even in
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30 situations where the responsibility for the crisis seems to be lying with another actor, this is not
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32 a crisis communication strategy that all senders can afford. Indeed, the strategy is effective
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34 only when senders have positive social evaluations that they can leverage, as in the case of a
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36 positive CSR engagement or a small size. In contrast, CSR backfires for large senders, as
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38 documented in Study 1 and Study 3, where apologies are considered more effective. However,
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40 large senders can implement blame shifting if they can demonstrate strong CSR engagement.
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42 In general, the effect of CSR appears stronger than the role played by sender size. This seems
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44 consistent with the idea that the former is an intentional and costly form of altruistic behavior
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46 and therefore perceived as more indicative of the company's character (Ohtsubo and Watanabe,
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48 2009; Yu *et al.*, 2020). The study also adds to current debates by demonstrating that internal
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50 agents such as employees can be successfully blamed (Study 2). Past evidence was
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52 contradictory on this point, with some arguing that only external agents can be successfully
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3 blamed (Mosio *et al.*, 2020). Finally, we add to existing research on blame shifting and crisis
4 communication in general by demonstrating the crucial moderating effect of stakeholder
5 concern. We show that blame shifting is less likely to be effective when concern about the
6 crisis is high; this confirms existing case-based evidence that presents this type of
7 communication as very risky (Coombs, 2007; 2015; Formentin, *et al.*, 2017). The evidence
8 seems to suggest that when stakeholders are closely scrutinizing the information disseminated
9 by the sender, as in the case of major crises that elicit significant media scrutiny, a defensive
10 strategy can be highly problematic.
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21 A second contribution of this study relates to research on the social perception of
22 organizations and its implications for a wide range of marketing strategies. This study extends
23 work by Yang and Aggarwal (2019) on the implications of different types of service failures
24 for small versus large senders. We show that relative size also represents an important
25 boundary condition for how the sender should respond to an ethical crisis. Small senders,
26 because of the perception of warmth afforded to them (Yang and Aggarwal, 2019), might be
27 able to deploy a broader range of responses, including defensive stances aimed at diverting
28 responsibility away from the sender (Coombs, 2015). In contrast, large senders are better
29 served by responses that are less aggressive and that try to accommodate stakeholders'
30 demands. As demonstrated in Study 3, however, even a large sender can successfully deploy
31 blame shifting if they have demonstrated strong CSR engagement.
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47 Finally, we contribute to the literature on how stakeholders perceive an organization's
48 engagement in CSR and its consequences (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Extant research has
49 documented a range of benefits that stem from being perceived as a socially responsible
50 organization (e.g., Chernev and Blair, 2015). One of these advantages is the possibility of
51 benefiting from a buffer following an ethical crisis (Vanhamme and Grobben, 2009). Our
52 research reveals that CSR also offers the opportunity to use defensive strategies aimed at
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3 attributing blame to a single employee inside the organization. This is the first study to
4 demonstrate how CSR has an influence on the range of crisis response strategies available to
5 an organization.
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10 *Managerial implications*

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12 The findings add to the evidence on the business case for CSR (Carroll and Shabana, 2010),
13 suggesting that investments in CSR are worthwhile also because they allow a company to
14 choose between a wider range of crisis communication strategies. This does not mean that
15 companies should strategically engage in CSR activities with an eye to successfully deflecting
16 responsibility for a future crisis. Research shows that stakeholders would disapprove and
17 punish such a cynical approach to CSR initiatives (Vlachos *et al.*, 2009). Rather, it means that
18 CSR investments can be (further) justified by the fact that they allow the opportunity, if and
19 when this is justifiable, to adopt a defensive stance when responding to a crisis. Senders that
20 are not known for their CSR activities lose this opportunity and need to rely exclusively on
21 accommodative strategies like apologies.
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35 It is worth reiterating that both the literature on CSR (Vanhamme and Grobbsen, 2009;
36 Vlachos *et al.*, 2009) and on blame-shifting (Antonetti and Baghi, 2021a; Park *et al.*, 2018) has
37 shown that a purely instrumental use of either strategy would lead to significant negative
38 consequences for the organization. In other words, in addition to being definitely unethical,
39 attempts at blame shifting a target instrumentally would backfire. At the same time, companies
40 can legitimately plead their innocence by stressing that someone else is responsible for
41 wrongdoing, provided this is done in the right way and in the right circumstances (Fricker,
42 2016). Blame-shifting can therefore fulfil an acceptable social role if it is not abused and can
43 prove persuasive in certain circumstances.
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56 In this respect, the findings offer several recommendations relevant to companies managing
57 the negative fallout from a crisis. The main insight is that only certain companies can expect
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3 to use blame-shifting messages effectively to mitigate stakeholders' reactions. It is vital that
4 managers consider how their company is perceived before deciding whether to engage in
5 blame-shifting communications. Blame shifting seems to be persuasive only when it is used by
6 small senders or by senders with strong CSR engagements. When suitable, large senders can
7 still deploy blame shifting persuasively if they are also known for their CSR. However, large
8 companies with no CSR involvement should avoid blame-shifting communications in all
9 circumstances, as they are likely to backfire disastrously (Coombs *et al.*, 2015).
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21 *Limitations and areas for further research*

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23 The study's limitations offer interesting avenues for further research. We considered factors
24 (sender size and CSR engagement) that we expected to be associated with a relative positive
25 (or negative) perception of the organization. We have not considered, however, information
26 linked to the competence or performance of the company (e.g., technological prowess, financial
27 performance). It is possible that highly competent senders might be able to use blame shifting
28 effectively since competence perceptions could be linked with admiration and prestige (Cheng
29 *et al.*, 2013). This is an interesting question to explore in future research, extending our
30 understanding of the circumstances that might lead to successful blame shifting approaches.
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42 A related question, also of interest for further research on crisis communications, is whether
43 sender size and/or sender CSR are discriminating factors on the potential effectiveness of other
44 defensive response strategies often considered along with blame shifting, such as denial or
45 excuses or justifications deployed to limit the impact of the crisis (Coombs, 2015). These other
46 strategies might be effective because of a process similar to the one discussed in this research.
47 It is possible that all strategies not involving an apology, an attempt at redressing the problem,
48 or compensating the victims, might be effective only when used by likable, caring senders.
49 This seems an especially important avenue for further research because of its managerial
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3 relevance: senders need to know whether, given their current situation, defensive response
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5 strategies have a chance of succeeding in improving stakeholders' reactions to a crisis.
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8 While in this study we focused on CSR, recent debates on corporate citizenship have given
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10 prominence to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices as an avenue for
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12 companies to contribute positively to society (Barko *et al.*, 2022). ESG tends to focus more on
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14 corporate governance and on quantifying the specific contribution of an organization to society,
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16 while arguably CSR relates to broader and more qualitative societal concerns pertaining the
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18 interaction between the firm and its stakeholders. The existence of different practices and their
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20 related terminology could influence the findings of this research, especially in light of evidence
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22 of a backlash against ESG/CSR in certain quarters (Kerber, 2023). Future research can examine
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24 how different configurations of corporate citizenship initiatives influence the relative
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26 effectiveness of defensive crisis communications strategies.
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30 Moreover, the current research used scenario-based manipulations with fictitious sender
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32 profiles. It could be relevant to test our hypotheses with real companies to verify how
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34 familiarity with the brand may affect results. It should also be noted that our findings remain
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36 limited to the settings examined. Specifically, the studies considered three types of crisis (child
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38 labor, supply chain corruption, and product contamination), and our hypotheses should be
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40 tested in other crisis contexts and with different levels of perceived severity. It seems
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42 reasonable to expect that, in case of high-severity crisis, the positive effect of blame shifting
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44 might be limited while the same effect might be larger in low-severity crises. Furthermore, our
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46 hypotheses should be examined in different cultural contexts, as blame shifting may be
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48 differently perceived depending on the cultural framework shared (e.g., collectivist vs
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50 individualist cultures). For instance, in collectivist cultures, blaming a member of the group
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52 could be perceived as a very aggressive and unethical stance because individuals high in
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54 collectivism see themselves as an integral part of one or more collectives or in-groups, such as
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3 family and co-workers (Soares *et al.*, 2007). In an individualist society, the same strategy may
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5 be acceptable and even very persuasive, as people view themselves as autonomous and
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7 independent. Finally, our research has explicitly focused on the responses of evaluators
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9 external to the sender and not directly affected by the crisis. This is a common approach in
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11 crisis communications research (Bundy *et al.*, 2017; Coombs, 2015). Future research would
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13 benefit from considering more specific stakeholder groups (e.g., customers, employees,
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15 jobseekers), whose responses might differ based on the nature and intensity of their
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17 involvement with the events.
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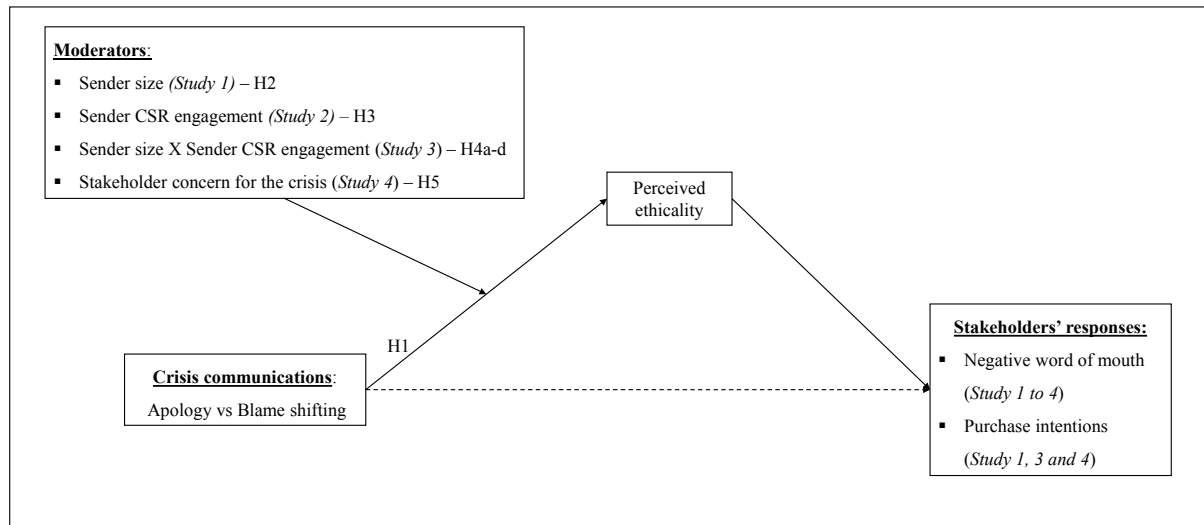
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Figure 1: Conceptual model

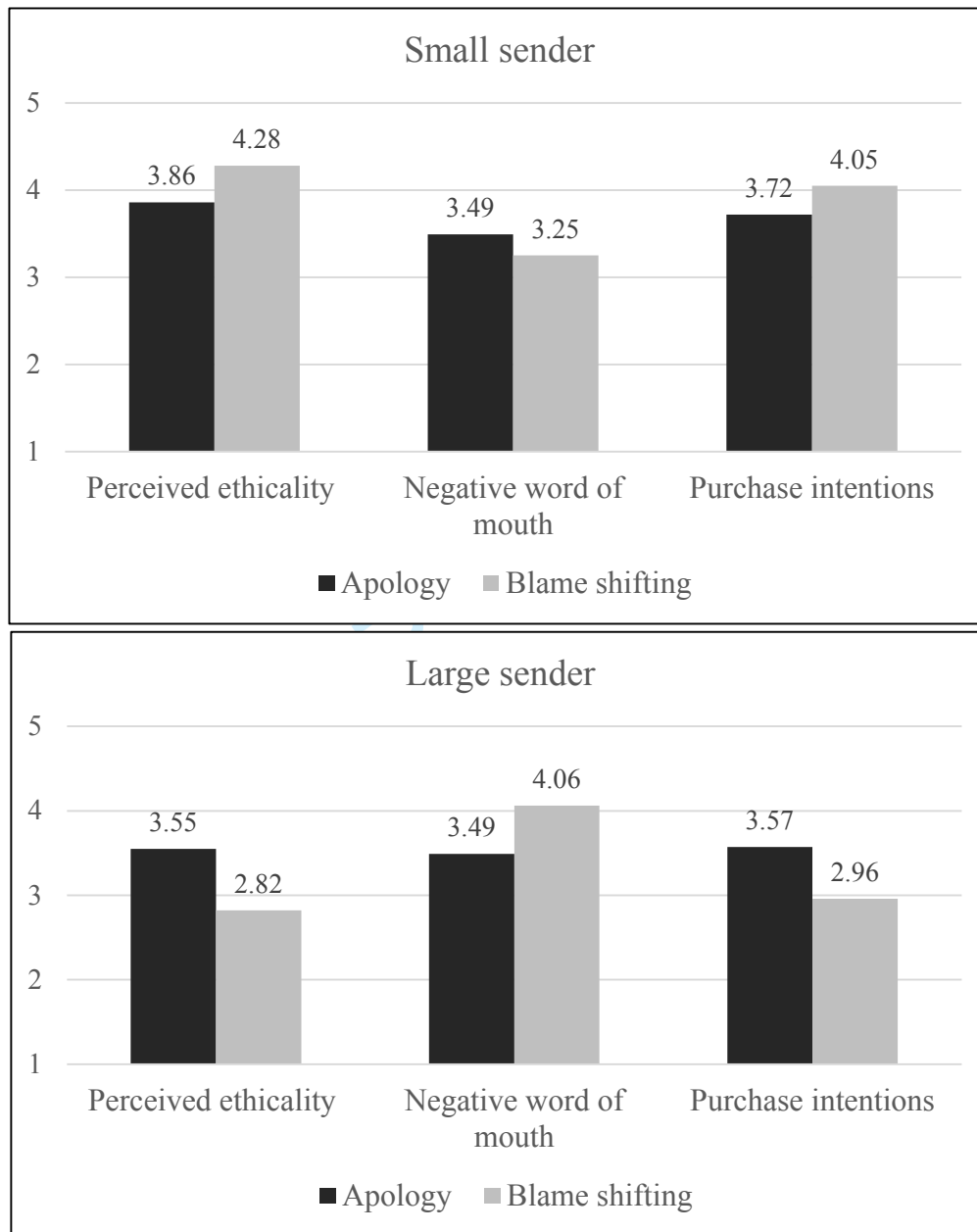


Figure 2: The effect of blame shifting for a large/small sender (Study 1)

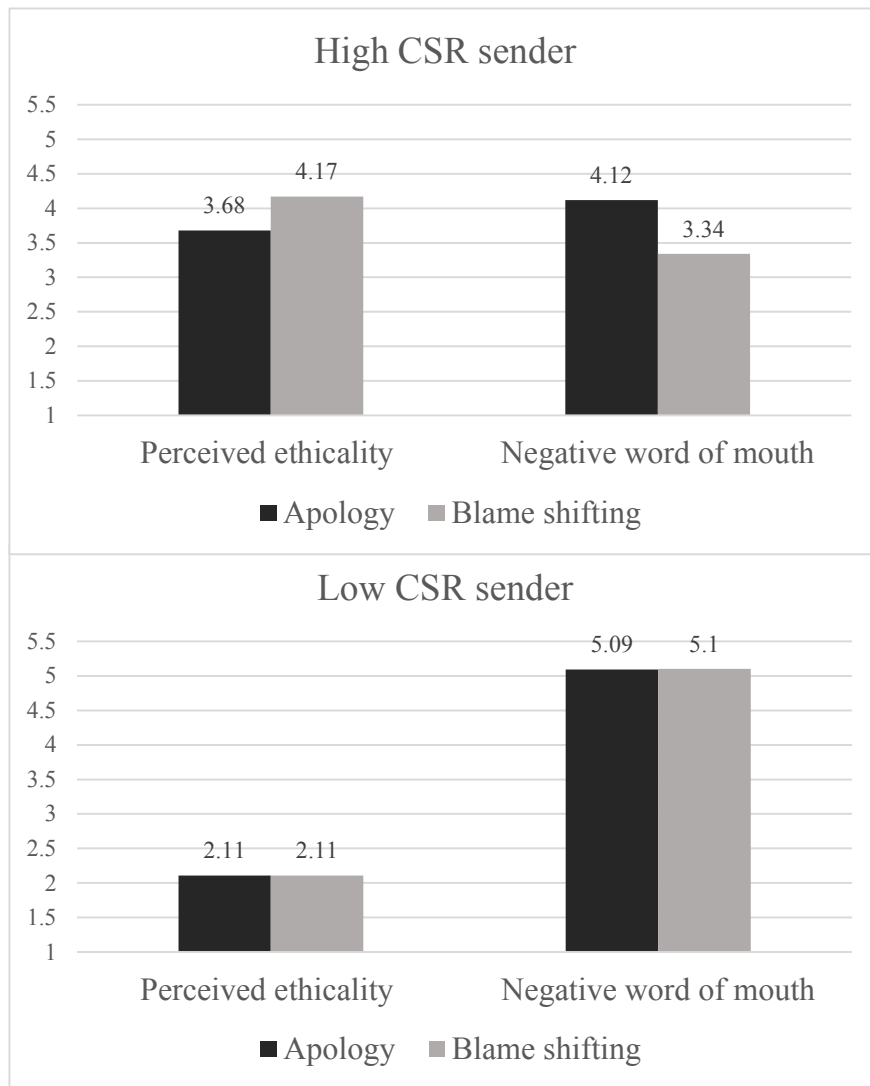


Figure 3: The effect of blame shifting for a high/low CSR sender (Study 2)

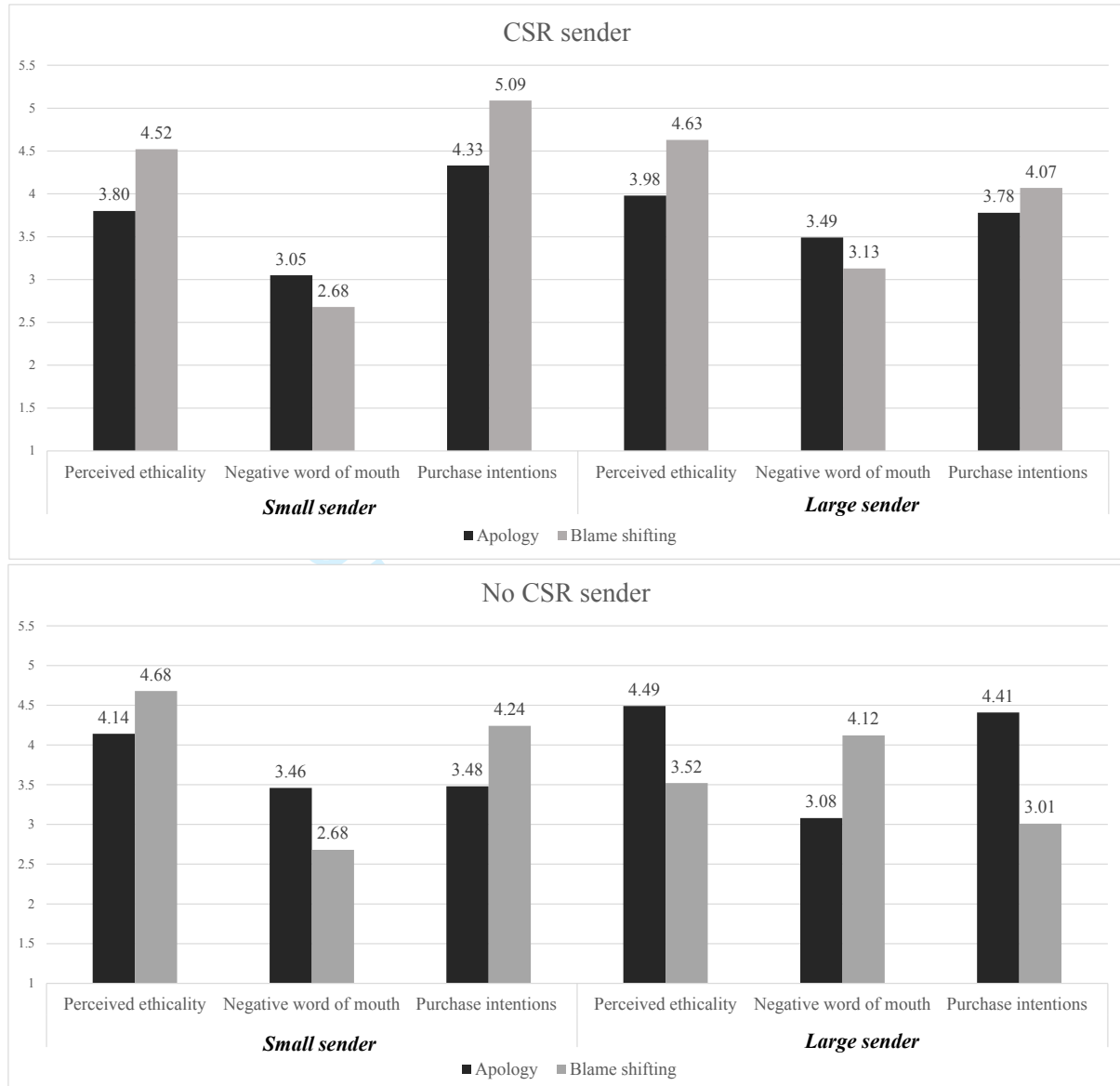


Figure 4: The effect of blame shifting for a senders of different size/CSR engagement (Study 3)

Table 1: Indirect effects of blame shifting on stakeholders' responses at different levels of the moderators

Levels of the moderators	Direct effects	Indirect effects	
	95% Confidence Intervals	95% Confidence Intervals	
	Perceived ethicality	Negative word of mouth	Purchase intentions
<i>Study 1</i>			
Large size	-.73, CI -1.17 to -.30	.26, CI .11 to .43	-.36, CI -.54 to -.19
Small size	.45, CI .02 to .89	-.16, CI -.34 to -.01	.22, CI .09 to .41
<i>Study 2</i>			
Negative CSR	-.01, CI -.30 to .32	.01, CI -.19 to .17	NA
Positive CSR	.50, CI .19 to .81	-.32, CI -.54 to -.10	NA
<i>Study 3</i>			
Small size with CSR	.83, CI .22 to 1.14	-.41, CI -.65 to -.16	.37, CI .14 to .60
Small size without CSR	.60, CI -.01 to 1.21 ^a	-.30, CI -.60 to -.01	.27, CI .02 to .54
Large size with CSR record	.61, CI .10 to 1.12	-.30, CI -.61 to .01 ^b	.27, CI -.01 to .56 ^c
Large size without CSR record	-.97, CI -1.48 to -.46	.48, CI .23 to .74	-.44, CI -.68 to -.20
<i>Study 4</i>			
High concern	.37, CI -.29 to 1.03	-.08, CI -.29 to .07	.15, CI -.14 to .46
Low concern	1.43, CI .78 to 2.11	-.33, CI -.59 to -.10	.60, CI .31 to .89

^a 90% CI .09 to 1.11

^b 90% CI -.56 to -.03

^c 90% .27, CI .03 to .52

Web Appendix A – Scenarios used in the research

Study 1:

Sender: Large size vs small size



Choco Delizia is a large-scale artisan chocolate maker owned by a multinational conglomerate. The brand specializes in gourmet chocolate products. The company offers a wide range of premium dark and milk chocolates, including bars and pralines, crafted with meticulous care using only the finest ingredients.

The company is a large player in the industry. While its national competitors have on average around 30 stores and employ on average about 225 employees, **Choco Delizia** runs 90 stores across the country and has 700 employees. **Choco Delizia** has revenues of US\$18 million against an average for other players in the industry of US\$5 million.



Choco Delizia is a small-scale artisan chocolate maker founded by an independent entrepreneur. The brand specializes in gourmet chocolate products. The company offers a wide range of premium dark and milk chocolates, including bars and pralines, crafted with meticulous care using only the finest ingredients.

The company is a small player in the industry. While its national competitors have on average around 90 stores and employ on average about 700 employees, **Choco Delizia** only runs 30 stores across the country and has 225 employees. **Choco Delizia** has revenues of US\$5 million against an average for other players in the industry of US\$18 million.

Crisis communication: Apology vs Blame shifting

www.alpress-internationalnews.com – Breaking news and analysis

THE CHOCOLATE INDUSTRY TAINTED BY A CHILD LABOR SCANDAL

A consortium of investigative journalists has exposed the widespread use of child labor in a cocoa plantation in Ghana that supplies the popular brand **Choco Delizia**. Most of the children working on the cocoa farm are between the ages of 10 and 14, but reporters have found children as young as five year old. Many children in Ghana grow up in severe poverty and are attracted by work opportunities at a young age to help support their families. Depriving these children of a regular education, however, means that the children working on cocoa farms have little hope of ever breaking the cycle of poverty.

The investigation has concluded that **Kobo Plantations**, the biggest cocoa beans supplier of **Choco Delizia**, owns the plantation. **Kobo Plantations** has falsified the relevant documentation to hide the use of child labor in the plantation. **Choco Delizia** was completely unaware of the use of children in cocoa farms. The brand organizes regular visits of all suppliers to inspect working conditions on site. It has emerged that during such visits children were kept away from the plantation to pretend that working conditions respected the international standards set by **Choco Delizia**. The investigation has therefore cleared **Choco Delizia** of any responsibility.

After the child labor incident surfaced in the press, **Choco Delizia** issued the following statement: “**Choco Delizia** apologizes unequivocally for **Kobo Plantations’** actions which contradict the values and mission of our organization. We are sincerely sorry for the harm caused by these cruel work conditions. We are currently reviewing internal policies to monitor more closely and more effectively our partners to ensure that similar events do not happen again in the future.”

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www.alpress-internationalnews.com – Breaking news and analysis

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After the child labor incident surfaced in the press, **Choco Delizia** issued the following statement: “**Choco Delizia** condemns **Kobo Plantations’** actions unequivocally. It is clear that nobody at **Choco Delizia** was aware of the use of child labor in the cocoa plantations, which was planned and executed entirely by **Kobo Plantations**. The responsibility for this scandal lies with the supplier, not with us. The blame for organizing and carrying these cruel work conditions falls exclusively on **Kobo Plantations**.”

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3 **Study 2:**
4 **Sender: high CSR vs low CSR**
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15 **SportNOW** is a sport retail chain with a network of stores
16 across the country. **SportNOW** specializes in providing
17 customers with a vast selection of sport goods at an
18 affordable price. The brand is well known for investing in
19 charitable initiatives and supporting grassroots sports in
20 local communities. Recently, **SportNOW** has decided to
21 extend its excellent health insurance cover to all its part
22 time workers.
23



40 **SportNOW** is a sport retail chain with a network of stores
41 across the country. **SportNOW** specializes in providing
42 customers with a vast selection of sport goods at an
43 affordable price. The brand is well known for competing very
44 aggressively against small independent stores and offering
45 tough working conditions to its employees. Recently,
46 **SportNOW** has decided to terminate health insurance for all
47 its part time workers.
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Crisis communication: Apology vs Blame shifting

www.alpress-internationalnews.com – Breaking news and analysis

A corruption case in the retail industry

Robert Chapman a Senior Buyer for the sport retailer **SportNOW**, was sentenced yesterday to four years in jail for corruption. The court heard that Chapman falsified internal paperwork concerning quality control information in exchange for cash payments or luxury items. One company paid him £50,000 to get its range of clothing selected. The investigation revealed how some of the items sold by **SportNOW** were in breach of US manufacturing standards. The items were manufactured in appalling conditions in sweatshops where toxic chemicals were routinely used to dye the fabric used for several lines of clothing. The payment of bribes guaranteed to the suppliers that the products would be commercialized. The judge, Nicholas Oxley, said it was “a case of corruption involving theft on a huge scale.”

Chapman had been working with the sports retailer for 10 years. He worked on the selection of the range of outdoor clothing sold by the company..

The company issued the following statement: “**SportNOW** apologizes unequivocally for Mr Chapman’s actions which contradict the values and mission of our organization. We are sincerely sorry for the harm caused by this corruption scheme. We are currently reviewing internal policies to ensure that similar events do not happen again in the future.”



Mr Robert Chapman

AL PRESS © - 17 March 2020

www.alpress-internationalnews.com – Breaking news and analysis

A corruption case in the retail industry

Robert Chapman a Senior Buyer for the sport retailer **SportNOW**, was sentenced yesterday to four years in jail for corruption. The court heard that Chapman falsified internal paperwork concerning quality control information in exchange for cash payments or luxury items. One company paid him £50,000 to get its range of clothing selected. The investigation revealed how some of the items sold by **SportNOW** were in breach of US manufacturing standards. The items were manufactured in appalling conditions in sweatshops where toxic chemicals were routinely used to dye the fabric used for several lines of clothing. The payment of bribes guaranteed to the suppliers that the products would be commercialized. The judge, Nicholas Oxley, said it was “a case of corruption involving theft on a huge scale.”

Chapman had been working with the sports retailer for 10 years. He worked on the selection of the range of outdoor clothing sold by the company.

The company issued the following statement: “**SportNOW** condemns Mr Chapman’s actions unequivocally. It is clear that nobody else at **SportNOW** was involved in this corruption scheme, which was planned and executed entirely by Mr Chapman. The responsibility for this fraud lies with the individual, not the institution. The blame for organizing this corruption falls exclusively on Mr Chapman.



Mr Robert Chapman

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Study 3:**Sender: Large size with CSR record vs small size with CSR record.****In No CSR record conditions, information about CSR was not provided.**

Choco Delizia is a large-scale artisan chocolate maker owned by a multinational conglomerate. The brand specializes in gourmet chocolate products. The company offers a wide range of premium dark and milk chocolates, including bars and pralines, crafted with meticulous care using only the finest ingredients.

The company is a large player in the industry. While its national competitors have on average around 30 stores and employ on average about 225 employees, **Choco Delizia** runs 90 stores across the country and has 700 employees. **Choco Delizia** has revenues of US\$18 million against an average for other players in the industry of US\$5 million.

Choco Delizia is known for its investments in corporate social responsibility. The company is involved in philanthropic initiatives and supports a range of charities, especially in the fight against child poverty and gender discrimination. **Choco Delizia** also boasts an advanced green strategy aimed at energy efficiency and waste control. The company was recently ranked first among 14 major chocolate brands in the country for its commitments.



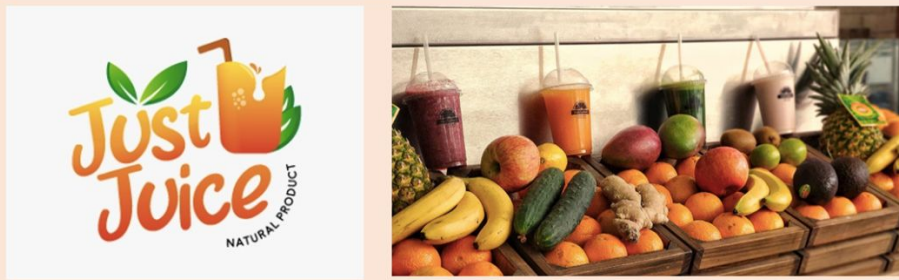
Choco Delizia is a small-scale artisan chocolate maker founded by an independent entrepreneur. The brand specializes in gourmet chocolate products. The company offers a wide range of premium dark and milk chocolates, including bars and pralines, crafted with meticulous care using only the finest ingredients.

The company is a small player in the industry. While its national competitors have on average around 90 stores and employ on average about 700 employees, **Choco Delizia** only runs 30 stores across the country and has 225 employees. **Choco Delizia** has revenues of US\$5 million against an average for other players in the industry of US\$18 million.

Choco Delizia is known for its investments in corporate social responsibility. The company is involved in philanthropic initiatives and supports a range of charities, especially in the fight against child poverty and gender discrimination. **Choco Delizia** also boasts an advanced green strategy aimed at energy efficiency and waste control. The company was recently ranked first among 14 major chocolate brands in the country for its commitments.

Crisis communication: Same used in Study 1.

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3 **Study 4:**
4 **CSR Sender**
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16 **Just Juice** is a fresh juice maker that has built its reputation on
17 offering the most delicious, 100% natural juices with no artificial
18 flavors, colors or preservatives. The company's products offer a
19 wide range of fresh juice and smoothies for every taste
20 and preferences.
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23 **Just Juice** is known for its investments in corporate social
24 responsibility. The company is involved in philanthropic initiatives
25 and supports a range of charities, especially in the fight against
26 child poverty and gender discrimination. **Just Juice** also boasts
27 an advanced green strategy aimed at energy efficiency and waste
28 control. The company was recently ranked first among 14 major
29 consumer brands in the country for its commitments.
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European Journal of Marketing

Crisis communication: Apology vs Blame shifting

www.alpress-internationalnews.com – Breaking news and analysis

CONTAMINATED APPLE JUICE: SCANDAL AT JUST JUICE

A recent investigation has concluded that the juice brand **Just Juice** has sold for over 8 months contaminated apple juice in its US store. The recalled apple juice was detected to have elevated levels of patulin - a fruit-based toxin which is found in the rotten parts of fruits and vegetables, such as apples, pears, peach, apricots, and grapes. Currently, the Food and Drug Administration and US authorities recommend a maximum level of 50 µg/L patulin for apple products while in the apple juice sold by **Just Juice** the presence of patulin was found in a concentration of more than 70 µg/L. Such concentrations of Patulin can cause nausea, gastrointestinal disturbances, and vomiting, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Although it is impossible yet to produce accurate estimates, investigators believe that hundreds of customers will have been exposed to harmful amounts of Patulin.

The investigation has concluded that **Sunrise Plantations**, an organic certified farmer and one of the largest suppliers of **Just Juice**, has falsified the relevant documentation to hide the use of an illegal chemical fertilizer. This substance stimulates the growth of the crop but can be also associated with an increase in harmful toxins, such as Patulin, in the fruits. **Just Juice** was completely unaware of the use of these substances by **Sunrise Plantations**. The brand organizes regular visits of all suppliers to inspect suppliers on site. It has emerged that during such visits all the pesticide storage containers were kept away from the farms to pretend that organic farming standards set by **Just Juice** were being respected. The investigation has therefore cleared **Just Juice** of any responsibility.

After the scandal surfaced in the press, **Just Juice** issued the following statement: "**Just Juice** apologizes unequivocally for **Sunrise Plantations'** actions which contradict the values and mission of our organization. We are sincerely sorry for the harm caused by these harmful cultivation methods. We are currently reviewing internal policies to monitor more closely and more effectively our partners to ensure that similar events do not happen again in the future."

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CONTAMINATED APPLE JUICE: SCANDAL AT JUST JUICE

A recent investigation has concluded that the juice brand **Just Juice** has sold for over 8 months contaminated apple juice in its US store. The recalled apple juice was detected to have elevated levels of patulin - a fruit-based toxin which is found in the rotten parts of fruits and vegetables, such as apples, pears, peach, apricots, and grapes. Currently, the Food and Drug Administration and US authorities recommend a maximum level of 50 µg/L patulin for apple products while in the apple juice sold by **Just Juice** the presence of patulin was found in a concentration of more than 70 µg/L. Such concentrations of Patulin can cause nausea, gastrointestinal disturbances, and vomiting, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Although it is impossible yet to produce accurate estimates, investigators believe that hundreds of customers will have been exposed to harmful amounts of Patulin.

The investigation has concluded that **Sunrise Plantations**, an organic certified farmer and one of the largest suppliers of **Just Juice**, has falsified the relevant documentation to hide the use of an illegal chemical fertilizer. This substance stimulates the growth of the crop but can be also associated with an increase in harmful toxins, such as Patulin, in the fruits. **Just Juice** was completely unaware of the use of these substances by **Sunrise Plantations**. The brand organizes regular visits of all suppliers to inspect suppliers on site. It has emerged that during such visits all the pesticide storage containers were kept away from the farms to pretend that organic farming standards set by **Just Juice** were being respected. The investigation has therefore cleared **Just Juice** of any responsibility.

After the scandal surfaced in the press, **Just Juice** issued the following statement: "**Just Juice** condemns **Sunrise Plantations'** actions unequivocally. It is clear that nobody at **Just Juice** was aware of the use of chemical fertilizers in the plantations, which was planned and executed entirely by **Sunrise Plantations**. The responsibility for this scandal lies with the supplier, not with us. The blame for organizing and carrying these harmful cultivation methods falls exclusively on **Sunrise Plantations**

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Web Appendix B – Measurement model

<i>Constructs</i>	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
Perceived sender ethicality (from 1= Strongly disagree to 7= Strongly agree) Study 1 $\alpha = .87$, CR= .99, AVE= .79; Study 2 $\alpha = .95$, CR= .96, AVE= .89; Study 3 $\alpha = .95$, CR= .86, AVE= .82, Study 4 $\alpha = .97$, CR= .86, AVE= .83				
[Company name] respects moral norms	.92	.89	.92	.91
[Company name] always adheres to the law	.89	.78	.77	.87
[Company name] is a socially responsible company	.80	.95	.95	.55
[Company name] is concerned with improving the well-being of society	.85	.84	.89	.82
[Company name] follows high ethical standards	.96	.98	.97	.97
Negative word of mouth (from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree) Study 1 $\alpha = .86$, CR= .84, AVE= .78; Study 2 $\alpha = .97$, CR= .95, AVE= .94; Study 3 $\alpha = .89$, CR= .86, AVE= .93; Study 4 $\alpha = .87$, CR= .86, AVE= .97				
Complain about [Company name] to other people	.89	.91	.96	.93
Spread negative information about [Company name]	.89	.87	.97	.93
Denigrate [Company name] in front of your friends	.90	.88	.98	.88
Purchase intentions (from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree) Study 1 $\alpha = .86$, CR= .84, AVE= .78; Study 3 $\alpha = .89$, CR= .86, AVE= .93, Study 4 $\alpha = .97$, CR= .96, AVE= .95				
It's very likely that I will buy products of [Company name] in the future.	.92	.87	.82	.92
I would buy products of [Company name] the next time	.88	.92	.89	.95
If I were going to purchase chocolates/sporting goods/fresh juice, I would consider buying from [Company name].	.98	.85	.92	.91
Food safety concern (from 1= extremely uncharacteristic of me to 7= extremely characteristic of me) Study 4 $\alpha = .98$, CR= .86, AVE= .85				
The quality and safety of food nowadays concerns me	NA	NA	NA	.82
I am concerned about food processing	NA	NA	NA	.95
I am very concerned about the amount of artificial additives and preservatives in foods	NA	NA	NA	.81
Nowadays most foods contain residues from chemical agents and fertilisers	NA	NA	NA	.87
Pure food items are very important to me	NA	NA	NA	.75
All good foods are continually of interest to me	NA	NA	NA	.81

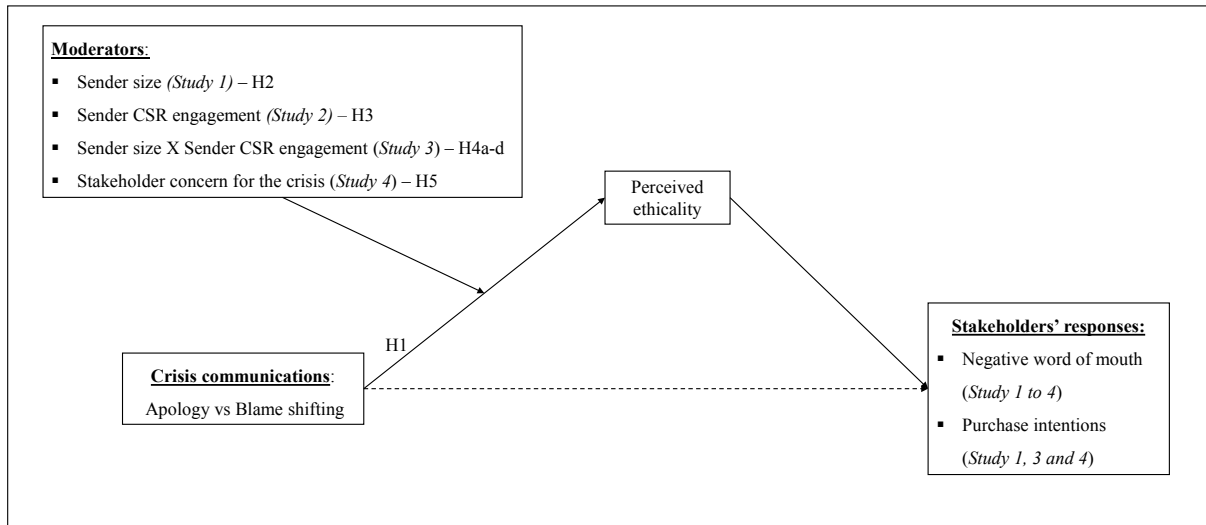
CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted

Web Appendix C – Moderated mediation model estimations

Parameter estimates for Studies 1, 2, 3 and 4

Path tested	Study 1			Study 2			Study 3			Study 4		
	β	LLCI	ULCI	β	LLCI	ULCI	β	LLCI	ULCI	β	LLCI	ULCI
Blame shifting → Perceived ethicality	-.73**	-.17	-.30	.01	-.30	.32	-.97**	-1.48	-.46	2.94**	1.06	4.81
Moderator [†] → Perceived ethicality	.28	-.16	.72	1.53**	1.22	1.85	-.37**	-.87	-.14	.23	-.05	.50
Blame shifting X Moderator [†] → Perceived ethicality	1.19**	.57	1.81	.49*	.05	.93	1.57**	.84	2.29	-.39*	-.74	-.04
Blame shifting X Moderator [†] X CSR engagement → Perceived ethicality	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1.35*	-2.37	-.33	NA	NA	NA
Perceived ethicality → Negative word of mouth	-.36**	-.44	-.28	-.64**	-.70	-.57	-.49**	-.56	-.42	-.23**	-.35	-.10
Blame shifting → Negative word of mouth	.11	-.17	.38	-.23**	-.44	-.02	-.01	-.25	.23	-1.03**	-1.47	-.59
<i>Model Summary</i>	$R^2 = 18\%$, $F(3, 422) = 23.35$, $p < .001$			$R^2 = 41\%$, $F(3, 609) = 106.52$, $p < .001$			$R^2 = 26\%$, $F(3, 487) = 41.51$, $p < .001$			$R^2 = 19\%$, $F(3, 203) = 11.39$, $p < .001$		
<i>Indices of moderated (moderated) mediation</i>	-.43, CI -.68 to .20			-.31, CI -.61 to -.04			.66, CI .14 to 1.20			.09, CI .001 to .20		
Perceived ethicality → Purchase intentions	.48**	.42	.55	NA	NA	NA	.45**	.38	.52	.42**	.29	.54
Blame shifting → Purchase intentions	-.07	-.29	.15	NA	NA	NA	.01	-.23	.24	1.05**	.61	1.50
<i>Model Summary</i>	$R^2 = 28\%$, $F(3, 422) = 40.16$, $p < .001$			NA			$R^2 = 24\%$, $F(3, 487) = 37.39$, $p < .001$			$R^2 = 30\%$, $F(3, 203) = 21.54$, $p < .001$		
<i>Indices of moderated (moderated) mediation</i>	.57, CI .31 to .84			NA			-.61, CI -1.08 to -.13			-.16, CI -.32 to -.01		

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. [†] The moderator considered is sender size in Study 1 and 3, sender CSR engagement in Study 2, and food safety concern in Study 4. We used 10,000 bootstrap estimation resamples and included gender and age as covariates in the analysis. Reported β are unstandardized. The independent variable was coded 0 (apology) and 1 (blame shifting) in all studies. We do not present the results for the covariates, since the effects were not statistically significant.

Figure 1: Conceptual model

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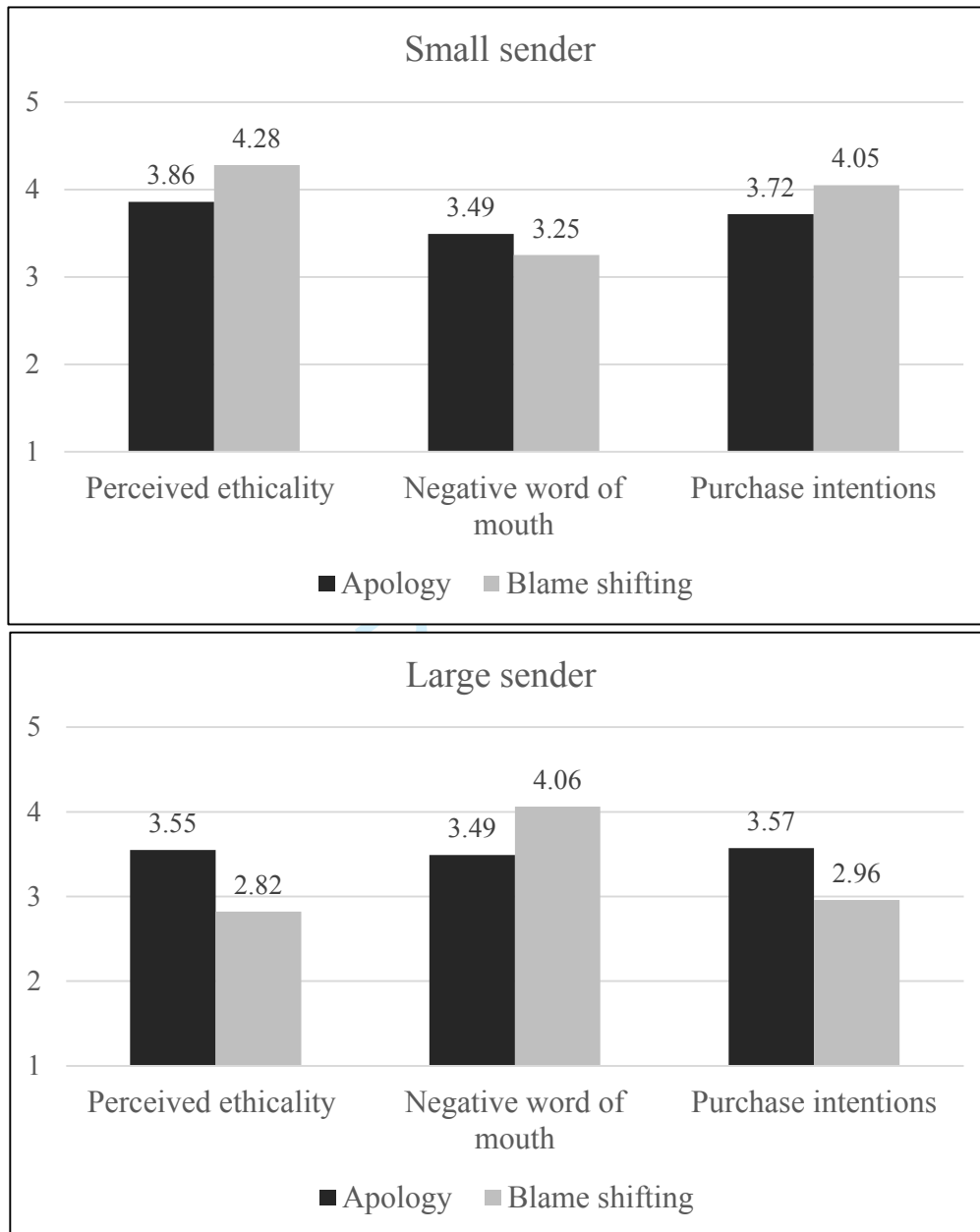


Figure 2: The effect of blame shifting for a large/small sender (Study 1)

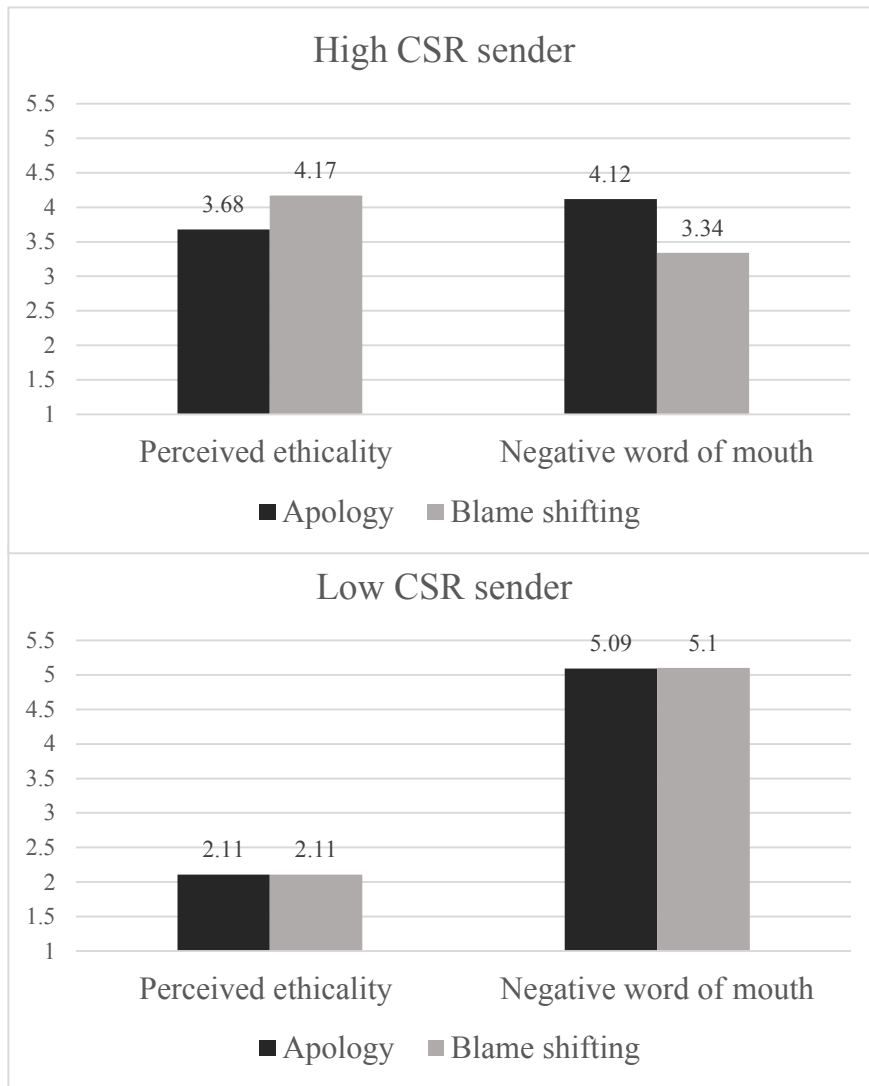


Figure 3: The effect of blame shifting for a high/low CSR sender (Study 2)

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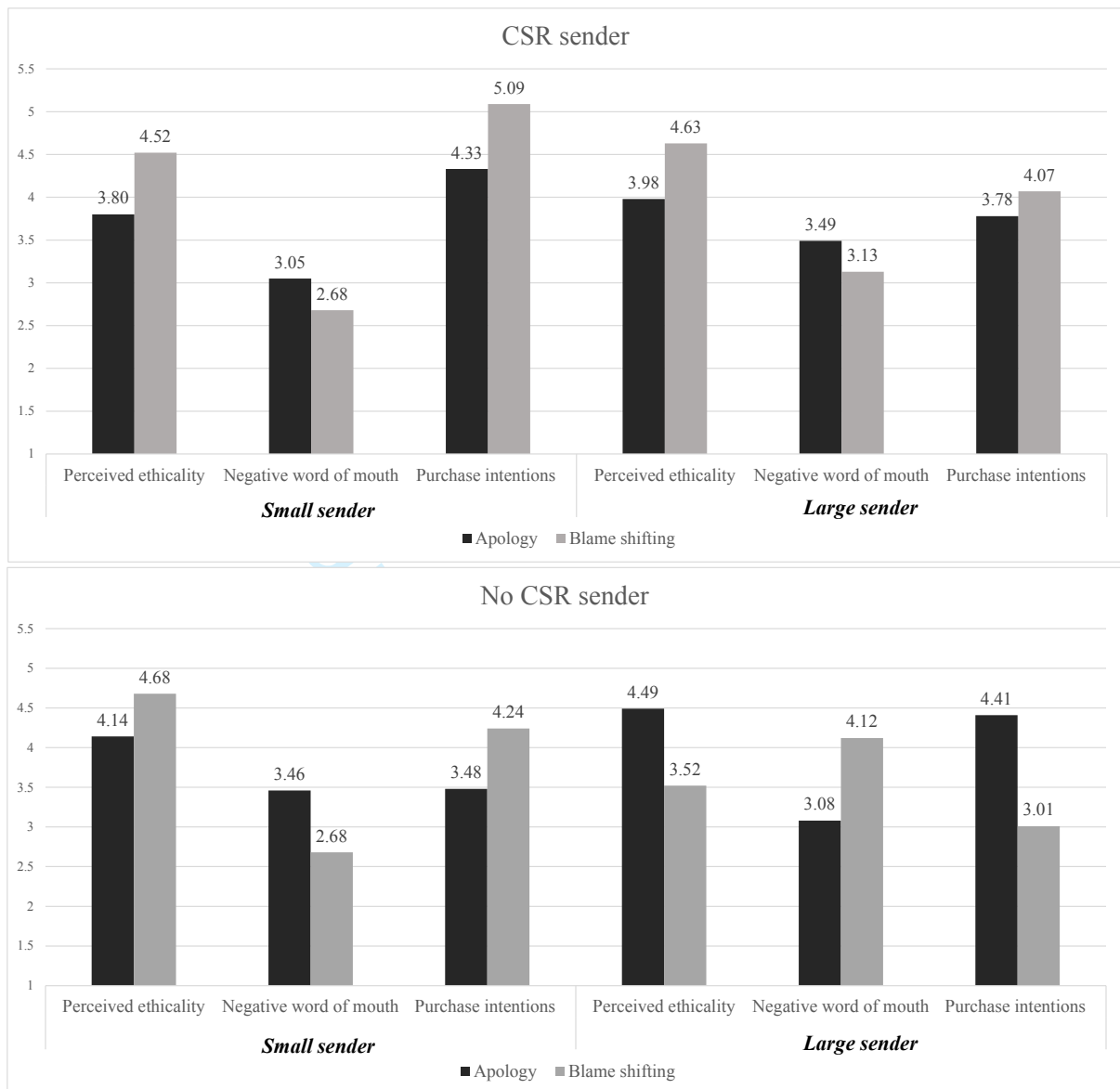


Figure 4: The effect of blame shifting for a senders of different size/CSR engagement (Study 3)

Table 1: Indirect effects of blame shifting on stakeholders' responses at different levels of the moderators

Levels of the moderators	Direct effects	Indirect effects	
	95% Confidence Intervals	95% Confidence Intervals	
	Perceived ethicality	Negative word of mouth	Purchase intentions
<i>Study 1</i>			
Large size	-.73, CI -1.17 to -.30	.26, CI .11 to .43	-.36, CI -.54 to -.19
Small size	.45, CI .02 to .89	-.16, CI -.34 to -.01	.22, CI .09 to .41
<i>Study 2</i>			
Negative CSR	-.01, CI -.30 to .32	.01, CI -.19 to .17	NA
Positive CSR	.50, CI .19 to .81	-.32, CI -.54 to -.10	NA
<i>Study 3</i>			
Small size with CSR	.83, CI .22 to 1.14	-.41, CI -.65 to -.16	.37, CI .14 to .60
Small size without CSR	.60, CI -.01 to 1.21 ^a	-.30, CI -.60 to -.01	.27, CI .02 to .54
Large size with CSR record	.61, CI .10 to 1.12	-.30, CI -.61 to .01 ^b	.27, CI -.01 to .56 ^c
Large size without CSR record	-.97, CI -1.48 to -.46	.48, CI .23 to .74	-.44, CI -.68 to -.20
<i>Study 4</i>			
High concern	.37, CI -.29 to 1.03	-.08, CI -.29 to .07	.15, CI -.14 to .46
Low concern	1.43, CI .78 to 2.11	-.33, CI -.59 to -.10	.60, CI .31 to .89

^a 90% CI .09 to 1.11^b 90% CI -.56 to -.03^c 90% .27, CI .03 to .52