

THE EFFECTS OF CONSUMER EVALUATIONS OF CORPORATE SOCIAL
RESPONSIBILITY CONTENT AND DELIVERY ON SKEPTICISM
AND BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS: FROM AN INFORMATION
PROCESSING THEORY PERSPECTIVE

By

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DEDICATION

Todo mi esfuerzo y determinacion es por ustedes, papas.

No hubiera alcanzado mis suenos si no fuera por todo su apoyo.

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ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a rising concern for consumers as well as a growing determinant on how consumers perceive a company, especially in the apparel industry. More so, the benefits to both society and companies through CSR have further increased the use of CSR as a way to differentiate between competing apparel companies. Because of the advantages of establishing a socially responsible reputation, apparel companies want to comprehend how they can keep a loyal consumer base. Limited research on how CSR communication messages are delivered and the content of these communication messages (what companies do in regards to CSR) amid skepticism toward overall corporate social responsibility and how it affects retail patronage intention exists. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by analyzing how a consumer's evaluations amid skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility affects consumers' retail patronage intention through company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone.

Thorough review of the literature leads the author to hypothesize that the content of CSR messages and how these messages are delivered affect a consumer's level of skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility and their retail patronage intention. Specifically, company-CSR congruence and consumer-CSR relevancy can mitigate the level of a consumer's overall skepticism toward corporate responsibility thus allowing a consumer to have greater retail patronage intention. On the other hand, the presence of information distrust and self-promotional tone can heighten skepticism toward overall

corporate responsibility leading to a lower level of retail patronage intention.

Furthermore, skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility will mediate the effects of company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone on a consumer's retail patronage intention. Practical implications of the study will offer apparel companies an insight to how consumers process skepticism and if the portrayal of the right CSR activities and the right communication of these activities affects a consumer's retail patronage intention.

I. INTRODUCTION

The complexity and nature of the apparel industry makes it prone to the issues that surround CSR and magnifies the implications of irresponsibility. Increased globalization creates extensive supply chains, increasing apparel companies' involvement in issues related to fair labor wages, environmental degradation, and inefficient waste management (Diddi & Niehm, 2016). Because of the effects of globalization on the apparel industry, CSR has taken the front seat in the apparel industry for the last couple decades. Many apparel companies strive to integrate CSR into their business core values and everyday operations. Several apparel companies have come across a diverse set of problems associated with the use of CSR. The task of finding what CSR activity is appropriate to use in a communication message and how to deliver that message has become increasingly difficult (Kim & Ferguson, 2016; Kim, 2017; Schmeltz, 2010). Being able to choose a right CSR initiative and then effectively communicate their CSR initiative with customers is now more important than ever for a company to get consumers to shop with them and keep their loyalty. A once prominent apparel retailer known for positioning itself as a company driven by CSR, Toms Shoes is now criticized for their once acclaimed philanthropic approach centered on the premise of donating one pair of shoes to children from poverty-stricken parts of the world every time a customer bought a pair (Montgomery, 2015). Consumers now question if Toms Shoes' business model is in fact as helpful as it seems to proclaim (Montgomery, 2015). With the advent of technology and digital media, consumers are increasingly, exposed to an array of information regarding CSR and will use such resources to evaluate the efficacy of a company's CSR (Mann, Byun, Kim, & Hoggie, 2014). Therefore, it is no longer enough for companies, especially apparel retailers, to just use CSR. Companies' engagement in

CSR needs to be communicated in a way that reflects the right CSR activity appropriately and deliver the CSR messages in a manner consumers understand and won't be skeptical about.

Even though CSR has been widely researched in various academic contexts, in actual practicality apparel companies are still struggling to effectively communicate and engage in CSR, especially with the heightened presence of skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility (Pérez & del Bosque, 2015). More so, defining CSR has become increasingly complex with its expanded use in recent years by various businesses. For this particular study, CSR is referred to as activities in which a company participates that address environmental, social, and ethical issues while keeping all stakeholders involved and informed (Pérez & del Bosque, 2015). Extensive research has been conducted to investigate whether CSR practices have created a change in consumers' behavior such as intention to purchase products from a company, engagement in word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, consumer-based brand equity, and increased company-consumer identification (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006; Diddi & Niehm, 2016; Eberle, Berens, & Li, 2013; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014a; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014b; Lee, Park, Rapert, & Newman, 2012). However, few studies have been conducted that view skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility as an influencing factor when analyzing a consumer's retail patronage intention. In this study, skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility, hereafter *skepticism*, refers to consumers' doubt toward the ethicality and social responsibility of a company. The literature on CSR covers an array of studies dedicated to consumer behavior based on CSR perceptions among many of which (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Hustvedt & Kang, 2013; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014a;

Pérez & del Bosque, 2015; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013) specified brand trust as a mediator between perceived CSR and the aforementioned consumer behavioral outcomes (e.g., purchase intention, WOM intention, etc.) but little exists on how a factor that is opposite of trust, like skepticism, affects a consumer's retail patronage intention. A deep analysis of what influences skepticism and a consumer's retail patronage intention is necessary for companies to better communicate their engagement in CSR.

Consumers' skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility has become a prevalent problem for managers of apparel companies trying to communicate the authenticity and reliability of their CSR practices. (Connors, Anderson-MacDonald, & Thomson, 2015). Additionally, academic literature lags in keeping up with the growing presence of consumer skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility. Understanding how skepticism affects the communication of CSR messages both in the content and delivery of these messages is important to determine how retail patronage intention is affected. Today's consumers are known to be information seekers. Because of social media and the internet, information of a company's CSR practices is readily available (Schmeltz, 2010). How consumers scrutinize the information presented in CSR communication messages could determine whether or not they will visit the retailer again and if they are willing to support the company in other ways than the repurchase of their products. For this particular study, *retail patronage intention*, or consumers' overall support toward a company demonstrated through advocacy behaviors such as willingness to maintain the relationships with the brand, is an important indicator of how a consumer will behave when confronted with skepticism. Concurrently, consumer's evaluation of CSR practices through their communication efforts have a significant impact on whether

a company is successful or not. Due to consumer's demand of CSR-related information, companies have to be aware of any information that could invoke skepticism. Having a loyal consumer base, is more important than ever which requires companies to make sure that their efforts of communicating CSR are not dwarfed. In other words, having consumers with a greater level of patronage intention despite skepticism will be extremely beneficial for a company's profits, but even more for their reputation (Kim, 2017). This study argues that a brand's efforts toward CSR would play a significant role in building its consumers' overall retail patronage intention. However, it would be only effective when the information is processed through evaluation of the content and delivery of CSR communication messages and association of the evaluations to the level of skepticism. Therefore, conducting just any CSR practice is not enough. A company that is fully invested in giving reliable and substantial information regarding their CSR practices should communicate it by displaying the right content and delivering it in a manner the consumer understands (Kim & Ferguson, 2016; Kim, 2017; Schmeltz, 2012; Schmeltz, 2010). In essence, this study investigates "what characteristics of CSR practices a company should use" and "how to communicate its CSR efforts with its consumers" by specifically looking at company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone.

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of consumers' perceptions about a brand's CSR practices from both content and delivery perspectives in shaping consumers' skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility and further consumers' retail patronage intention through the Information Processing Theory. Specifically, the study focuses on how company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information

distrust, and self-promotional tone influence the level of consumers' skepticism toward the brand's overall corporate responsibility. This study further examines whether consumers' skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility mediates the effects of company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone on consumers' retail patronage intention. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by building onto the IPT by establishing how consumers process elements of CSR communication messages instead of focusing on attitude-behavioral changes. This study also enhances existing CSR literature by providing insight to how consumers use certain characteristics (i.e. company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, self-promotional tone) of CSR communication messages to process CSR information as well as an understanding of how these characteristics affect consumer skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility by analyzing its antecedents.

In addition, this study also provides practical implications by offering insight into how managers and CEOs of apparel companies can further enhance the effectiveness of their CSR communication messages during a time when skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility is easily instigated through media coverage and availability of information on the web and social media. This study attempts to provide managers with information on how the content and delivery of CSR communication messages could potentially influence consumers' retail patronage intention despite the presence of skepticism. To further aid apparel company's attempt to establish trust through effective CSR communication efforts, factors present in communication messages that could influence consumers' skepticism must be identified in order to streamline a strategy for

apparel companies to pinpoint what they can do to mitigate the effects of irresponsibility and eventually boost consumer's retail patronage intention.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Since this study focuses on how consumers process the information provided in CSR communication messages, information processing theory (IPT) is used as the theoretical framework. Information processing theory, as used in the marketing context, indicates that consumer behavior is determined by not just what the information entails but also how consumers think about the information they receive (Miller, 1994; Tybout, Calder, & Sternthal, 1981). In other words, IPT does not limit the cause of behavioral actions to traits or attitudes but relies more on the specific manner consumers encode, judge, and associate the information presented to them.

In the context of this study, company-CSR congruence and consumer-CSR relevancy pertain to what elements companies need to include in the content of their CSR communication messages. Additionally, information distrust and self-promotional tone are characteristics that a consumer will encode into their memory to later evaluate how the CSR communication message was delivered. Thus, these factors influence how consumers go through the second step in the IPT which involves consumers encoding the information they receive and judging the CSR actions depicted in the communication messages (Tian, Wang, & Yang, 2011). More specifically, consumers will judge the level of company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone from the CSR activity in the communication message.

Consumers would then take the information they have evaluated based on the level of company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and

self-promotional tone to form associations on the company itself. In this study, the consumer would associate the content of the CSR message (company-CSR congruence and consumer-CSR relevancy) as well as the delivery of the CSR message (information distrust and self-promotional tone) toward the level of skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility. The manner in which consumers reason with the information from evaluating the previous elements present in the content and delivery of the CSR communication message would affect how they associate skepticism with that particular brand. Finally, the consumer would take all pertinent information along with how skeptic he/she feels toward overall corporate responsibility and manifest it through a behavioral action (Tian et al., 2011), in the case of this study, his/her level of retail patronage intention. To summarize, IPT in this study is applied to how a consumer processes information on the content and delivery of CSR messages and how this impacts the way they associate that information to the level of skepticism, which leads to the level of retail patronage intention consumers will demonstrate when confronted with skepticism.

Company-CSR Congruence

A matching fit between a company's CSR practices and the company's business entity is important for several reasons. Fit between a company's CSR practices and what the company stands for is important for consumers to believe that the CSR practices they are engaging in are not just being done for publicity or firm-serving motives (Schmeltz, 2010; Sohn, Han, & Lee, 2012). Consumers' perceived fit between the company's business core values and its CSR practices (hereafter, *company-CSR congruence*) can influence the level of skepticism a consumer might develop by lowering the need for a consumer to find justification behind the CSR practice employed. If a CSR practice

seemingly represents the same business core values of a company, there is less hesitancy for a consumer to believe in the authenticity of the practice (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Sohn et al., 2012). Furthermore, previous research has provided evidence that a consumer's choice in the company they purchase products from is influenced in part by the degree of compatibility between the CSR practice used and the company itself (Lee et al., 2012).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) also found that skepticism of a company's intention to engage in CSR is often influenced by a company's credibility or reputation as well as the perceived fit of the practice within the business itself. A company's credibility is often accredited to a compatible fit between a company and its CSR activity as well as give the consumer an impression that the company is not acting out of self-interest (Rifon, Sejung, Trimble, & Li, 2004). Congruence between a company and its CSR activities not only enhances a company's overall credibility but also leads to the credibility of its CSR communication efforts. When a company's CSR messages make it evident that there is a clear connection between the company's core values and its CSR practices, consumers are inclined to believe the intentions of a company are sincere (Schmeltz, 2012).

Because previous research indicates that consumers favor a company that is engaged in CSR than a company that is not (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), the level of fit between a company's values and ethics to the CSR activity in the CSR communication message is likely to influence a consumer's level of skepticism (Dean, 2004; Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006). By establishing congruence between the company's core value and its CSR, it is also likely for the consumer to disregard unfavorable information

regarding the corporate responsibility of a brand and demonstrate a higher level of retail patronage intention. Thus, this discussion leads to the following hypothesis.

H1: Company-CSR congruence negatively affects skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility.

Consumer-CSR Relevancy

Relevance between a company's CSR activity and a consumer is important in establishing trust. Not only must a consumer be able to see fit between the company and the CSR activity in which it engages, but the consumer also needs to have a sense that he/she can connect to the CSR activity on a personal level (Schmeltz, 2010). A consumer's perception on the level of fit between a company's CSR activity and the consumer's own personal values, goals, and morals, referred in this study as *consumer-CSR relevancy*, is an important determinant on whether a consumer will be more skeptic of a company's stated intentions when engaging in CSR. Furthermore, consumers tend to favor CSR activities that reflect their own core values and moral identity (Schmeltz, 2012). If a consumer is an advocate for the better treatment of employees and is someone who believes in fair labor practices, then a CSR initiative that focuses on labor relations would appeal more to the consumer. A consumer would then be more willing to support the company through several advocacy behaviors, if the consumer's own values are represented through the actions of the company. In other words, the CSR activity must be relevant enough to the consumer that it becomes an important factor when evaluating the company's actions (Schmeltz, 2017). Thus, if a consumer establishes a connection with a company that engages in a CSR activity that is important to them, the consumer will be

less susceptible to developing skepticism because of the close tie he/she feels to the activity itself (Schmeltz, 2017).

A company's CSR messages must consist of information that makes their engagement in CSR relevant to a consumer's tangible future (Schmeltz, 2012). It is important for a company to choose and conduct a CSR activity that is relevant to their target consumers' own values. Specifically, when a consumer feels more personally relevant to the company's CSR activity, he/she is more likely to process the information present in CSR communication messages because they feel the content of the message is important to them (Schmeltz, 2014). Consumers are generally inclined to process information that displays elements connected to their own values and ideals. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Consumer-CSR relevancy negatively affects skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility.

Information Distrust

Consumers' awareness of a company's CSR engagement relies heavily on the communication of its efforts by relaying pertinent and timely information in a manner that consumers can readily access and be able to understand. Presently, information on CSR is communicated via news reports, blogs, company websites, word-of-mouth, and social media (Diddi & Niehm, 2016). The intensified proliferation of information via new communication channels has heightened consumer's awareness and acknowledgement on the importance of obtaining information that report a company's assessment of CSR practices (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Diddi & Niehm, 2016). More importantly,

dissemination of information alone is not sufficient to proclaim authentic participation in CSR (Rawlins, 2009). Information must not only be available but it must be concrete enough for a consumer to develop an understanding that is satisfactory to themselves (Rawlins, 2009). Unfortunately, the easy proliferation of negative information of a company's corporate responsibility can lead to consumers' distrust of its originality. Because of this, *information distrust* in this study refers to consumers' reluctance to believe in the content and authenticity of the data provided. Companies that act ethically are known to provide their consumers with information that is reliable and accurate about their engagement in CSR (Park et al., 2017). A company's CSR communication messages need to be explicit, but not overwhelmingly detailed to not confuse the consumer on what the CSR activity is about and why it is of importance. More than anything, communication of a CSR activity must be factual, focused on giving the consumer information supported by tangible evidence (Schmeltz, 2012). Schmeltz (2012) further exemplified that information in CSR messages must be communicated in a manner that is straightforward and open.

In addition, the findings from Schmeltz's (2012) study revealed the contradiction that companies face when conveying information on their CSR practices. Companies cannot overtly advertise their engagement in CSR, though consumers expect them to provide information on their CSR initiatives, because it often leads to consumers' distrust and skepticism of the company's intentions. Academics and managers alike refer to this phenomena as promoter's paradox (Kim & Ferguson, 2016; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). Providing information that is believable and trustworthy is difficult when consumers expect companies to be open but not so

straightforward that it becomes almost ostentatious (Schmeltz, 2012). One attribute that helps to combat promoter's paradox is a company's credibility. Credibility also plays a role in how trustworthy a consumer perceives information to be. The way they communicate their involvement in CSR practices adds value to the believability of the information provided (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Hustvedt & Kang, 2013).

Because understanding information about a company's actions is key to forming an evaluation or opinion on the level of a company's commitment to CSR, having information that is reliable and trustworthy is more important than ever. Thus, if a consumer has a higher level of information distrust, he/she is more likely be skeptic about a company's overall corporate responsibility, specifically it's motives and the information portrayed in CSR communication messages. Based on this discussion along with the literature review, the following hypothesis is generated:

H3: Information distrust positively affects skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility.

Self-Promotional Tone

Though decreasing the occurrence of consumers' information distrust is important, equally important is the tone used to convey the message to consumers. Tone is a type of nonverbal communication element known as a vocal cue (Beebe, Mottet, & Roach, 2013). Nonverbal communication is highly influential in comparison to verbal communication (Beebe et al., 2013). Communication literature provides evidence that nonverbal communication is much more believable in the eyes of the public than verbal communication especially when verbal cues do not seem to match nonverbal cues (Beebe

et al., 2013; Knapp & Hall, 2006). Because nonverbal cues, such as tone, are considered more credible than verbal cues, tone is an important characteristic of a company's written communication efforts (Kulhavy & Schwartz, 1981). Due to the influential nature of tone in communication, *self-promotional tone* for this study is defined as the quality of the attitude conveyed through words or voice that seek to enhance the source of the message. Tone presented in a communication message has the potential to change how an individual perceives a company's overall character which encompasses company values, ethics, and how it operates daily (Kulhavy & Schwartz, 1981).

As applied to CSR communication, message tone could influence whether a consumer perceives a company's communication efforts to be truthful or not. Kulhavy and Schwartz's (1981) study provides evidence that changes in tone (3% change in word structure) in a document written by the organization, reflected a change in the way individuals perceived a company's social responsibility components. Furthermore, Kim and Ferguson's (2014) study on public expectations of CSR communication identified message tone as the most important factor on how to communicate CSR efforts based on consumer responses. According to their research, a message tone that relied heavily on facts was preferred over a message tone that seemed to serve more of a promotional purpose. The results of Kim & Ferguson's (2014) study are aligned with previous research that messages of a promotional nature often provoke a consumer to doubt the intentions behind the purpose of the message (Ellen et al., 2006). Often, when companies present CSR messages that elicit motives strictly based on their own goodwill, consumers are prone to question whether the CSR initiative is beneficial to anyone other than the company itself (Ellen et al., 2006; Elving, 2010; Forehand & Grier, 2003). Doubt of a

company's stated intentions when conducting a CSR initiative can provoke a consumer to feel skeptic about the company's overall corporate responsibility (Ellen et al., 2006; Forehand & Grier, 2003). Furthermore, because message tone is an important factor to determine how to communicate CSR, Kim and Ferguson (2016) identified self-promotional message tone as one of six predictors of effective CSR communication based on consumer's expectations. In other words, self-promotional tone should be accounted for when deciding how to communicate CSR messages. More so, consumers expected companies to avoid tones that were congratulatory or self-enhancing in nature when communicating CSR (Kim & Ferguson, 2016). Accordingly, it is a logical premise that if a consumer feels the message communicated conveys a self-promotional tone, he/she is inclined to doubt the authenticity of the company's overall responsibility or ethicality and less inclined to believe the message is used for purposes other than just promotional. Thus:

H4: Self-promotional tone positively affects skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility.

Skepticism Toward Overall Corporate Responsibility

Skepticism toward corporate responsibility has become prevalent in recent years (Connors et al., 2015; Elving, 2010; Schmeltz, 2017) due to the magnitude of social irresponsibility often exposed by media outlets on a continuous basis. Inconsistencies between a company's CSR practices and actual employment of such practices have heightened consumer's level of skepticism and doubt regarding whether a company's engagement in CSR practices is based on genuine intentions to benefit the society as a

whole (Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2008). Because skepticism is becoming a factor to consider when communicating CSR, it is important to identify what elements of a communication message make a consumer doubt that it is acting ethically and not just to increase their profits (Podnar, 2008; Schmeltz, 2014).

In this study, special attention is paid to how skepticism affects the apparel industry. Apparel companies are exposed to scrutiny much more than other businesses due to the complexity of their global supply chains. Needless to say, corporate scandals regarding apparel companies' disregard for unfair labor standards in developing countries and the extensive environmental degradation caused by the manufacturing of apparel products have led consumers to rethink the validity of a company's stated CSR practices (Mann et al., 2014; Vlachos et al., 2008). Recently, H&M, who leads efforts in CSR among the fast fashion sector, has been under fire for what appears to be a disregard for the usage of child labor (Kaye, 2016). Per various media outlets, 14-year-old girls were found to be working in one of H&M's clothing manufacturers located in Burma (Kane, 2016; Kaye, 2016). Although not necessarily illegal in Burma, many activists, labor organizations, and consumers believe employing children under the age of 16 is unethical (Kaye, 2016). H&M's recent scandal is an example of how media coverage made easy by the onset of digital media (i.e. social media, online newspapers, blogs) has further created a discourse in the reliability of the information a consumer receives (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

Consumers become displeased by unfavorable information about a company's corporate responsibility practices, as in the case of H&M's child labor transgression. It is hard for consumers to believe in a company that has already instigated some level of

skepticism especially through CSR communication messages (Schmeltz, 2017). If a company is unable to provide assertive communication that it is acting in accordance to its CSR practices, it is difficult for consumers to see themselves supporting a company they feel skeptical about. Thus, consumers are less likely to show positive advocacy behaviors in the long-term which in turn diminishes a company's loyal consumer base. Accordingly, the discussion leads to the following hypothesis.

H5: Skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility negatively affects retail patronage intention.

Retail Patronage Intention

Consumers' overall support toward a company demonstrated through advocacy behaviors such as willingness to maintain a relationship with the brand, referred to in this study as *retail patronage intention*, is an important predictor of how successful a company is. An example of how retail patronage intention can be a determinant of success is the case of online overnight success, Nasty Gal. This online retailer, which started as an eBay vintage-selling business, rose to unprecedented global success, producing sales of over \$100 million in less than six years (Sherman, 2016). This booming success though, brought problems that the company eventually could not overcome and is now facing bankruptcy (O'Connor, 2016). One of the most notable causes of the trendy online retailer's demise was that they could not hold on to consumers. Most consumers who visited Nasty Gal did not return a second time nor showed any interest in sharing other types of support toward the company. Nasty Gal instead invested millions of dollars in advertising and marketing to acquire new customers, instead of focusing on maintaining a relationship between their existing

consumer base (Li, 2017). The case of Nasty Gal's unexpected failure was a reminder to many fashion retailers and startups that ultimate profitability and overall success lies in their target consumers' level of retail patronage intention. More so, for companies that want to incorporate CSR practices as part of their business core values, it is even more important to give attention to the role retail patronage intention has on whether a company will be successful or not due to the personal nature of CSR content.

Retail patronage intention, unlike purchase intention or word-of-mouth communication, focuses on how a consumer continually maintains their relationship with a brand (Diddi & Niehm, 2016). Retail patronage intention implies a consumer will be more invested in supporting the company overall through an extended period of time. Because retail patronage intention is important to a company's success and profitability in the long-run, factors that could deter a company's ability to foster a relationship with consumers are important to identify. Although previous literature provides evidence that in fact certain CSR elements can contribute to a consumer's purchase intention (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Diddi & Niehm, 2016; Eberle et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2012), few studies have been conducted to examine if skepticism is an important predictor of how the content and delivery of CSR communication messages affects retail patronage intention. Furthermore, retail patronage varies from *retail patronage intention* in that the latter is a long-term commitment that companies seek to instill through the use of CSR tactics as opposed to a one-time demonstration of support (Dagger, David, & Ng, 2011; Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, & Sierra, 2015).

Establishing retail patronage intention is important for companies to know that their CSR efforts are in fact conveying the messages intended. If consumers understand

and connect with CSR communication messages, they are more willing to show overall financial and social support toward a company (Schmeltz, 2017). Higher levels of consumer-CSR congruence and consumer-CSR relevancy would allow consumers to easily understand and relate to the information presented in CSR communication messages. On the other hand, if the presence of information distrust and self-promotional tone causes a consumer to doubt the authenticity of a company's corporate responsibility, they are less likely to show support in any way or form. Due to this line of reasoning, the following hypothesized relationship is developed.

H6: Skepticism toward the company's overall corporate responsibility mediates the effects of company-CSR congruency, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone on retail patronage intention.

Conceptual Model

Based on the previous CSR literature and the Information Processing Theory, a theoretical, conceptual model was developed to examine the possible effects of company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone on skepticism of overall corporate responsibility and retail patronage intention (see Figure 1).

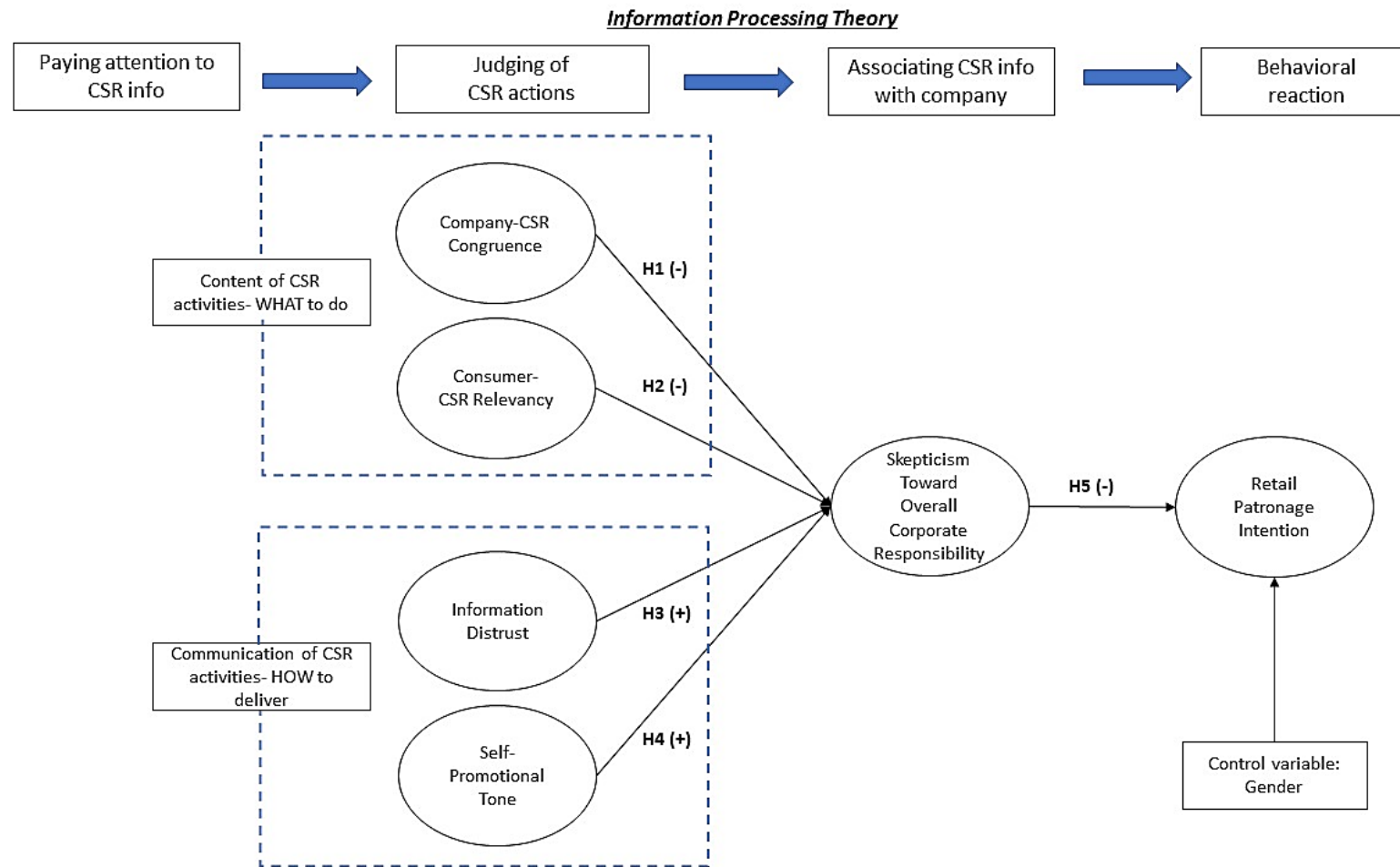


Figure 1- Conceptual Model

III. METHODS

An online survey was conducted to test the conceptual model as well as the hypothesized relationships specified in the model. A pretest of the online questionnaire was conducted to clarify any confusing language or instructions. Because the survey was conducted online, it was important to ensure that there were no discrepancies throughout the questionnaire concerning format and accessibility. After improvements were made, the survey was fully launched online.

Funding from the Thesis Support Fellowship allowed for the purchase of sample data from a large data collecting company (Qualtrics) which uses a nationwide consumer panel to collect pertinent information. The target sample size of the study was 400 U.S. respondents, 18 years or older with a 50/50 gender split. A gender split was requested to address limited generalization issues identified in many of the previous studies especially because apparel related surveys tend to be skewed with a greater number of female responses than males (e.g., Kim & Ferguson, 2016). Further, the use of a nationwide consumer panel was expected to enhance generalization of the results. Also, since the data were collected from a nationwide sample as opposed to a convenience sample, the results of the study will have greater external validity. Furthermore, a speeding check and a filtering question were added to ensure that only valid responses were included in the final analyses. Participants that went too quickly through the survey or answered the filtering question incorrectly were disqualified and not included in the final analyses.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, each respondent was required to think of the most recent purchase of apparel or apparel-related items. With this question in place, each of the participants was able to type in the name of the brand they actually purchase

from. The question enabled participants to be fully engaged in the questionnaire because the participant would be able to readily and truthfully answer the questions as opposed to having a brand that might have been unfamiliar to them. Once the brand name was entered, an algorithm was used so the brand name would appear in the following measurement items to personalize the experience of every participant accordingly. Because of the use of the algorithm, participants were less likely to forget the brand name he/she chose and the presence of the brand name chosen gave the participants a point of reference.

Participants were then shown a case of a CSR activity. Because this study focuses on the apparel industry, the CSR activity chosen for the survey was a type of activity commonly used by many apparel brands. The CSR activity contained an initiative to improve labor relations with employees in overseas manufacturing facilities, mainly focused on providing resources for women (see Appendix A). Since the algorithm previously used for the brand name chosen by the participant was already in place, the survey questionnaire automatically referred to the CSR activity as part of the brand's communication efforts. Thus, when participants read the contents of the CSR communication message, their frame of mind was that their brand of choice was engaged in that specific CSR activity. After participants completed the survey, a debriefing message was used to explain that the CSR activity used was an actual activity that a company currently engages in and that it was only used as a reference point for the questionnaire.

IRB Exemption

Participants in the study were presented with a consent form prior to the initial question of the survey explaining that participation was completely voluntary and if they chose to participate it would be solely for the improvement of research on consumer behavior. Participation in the survey was only allowed for individuals who were 18 years and older. Before, ending the survey participants were fully debriefed on the nature of the questionnaire. The debrief explained how the CSR activity in the survey was a real-world CSR activity currently used by a brand and that it was only used to provide participants with a context for the survey questions. Because the nature of the questions were not life-threatening, did not expose participants to undue stress or unnecessary risk, and the research design was in accordance to IRB guidelines, exemption was granted (Approval No: 2017248) before the data collection (see Appendix B).

Sample Demographics

A total of 402 responses were collected after examination and deletion of invalid responses. Due to the gender split quota placed on the survey questionnaire, there was an even distribution of male and female respondents ($n = 201$ for each gender). The median age of respondents was 45, and respondents ranged from 18-77 years of age. Most respondents were of Caucasian descent (79.6%) and had incomes between \$25,000 and \$50,000 (30.1%). Additionally, the majority of respondents were married (48.5%), and had some college (38.1%) in terms of their education level. Forty-five percent of respondents had full-time time jobs at the time of the data collection. Completed information pertaining to demographics of final respondents appears in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographics of Final Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	201	50
Female	201	50
Age		
18-24 years	29	7.2
25 to 34 years	81	20.1
35 to 44 years	81	20.1
45 to 54 years	89	22.1
55 to 64 years	69	17.2
65 years or more	53	13.2
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	320	79.6
Black/African American	34	8.5
Hispanic/Latino	24	6
Asian	16	4
Native American	5	1.2
Other	3	.7
Marital Status		
Single, Never married	135	33.6
Married	195	48.5
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	64	15.9
Other	8	2
Employment		
Full-time employment	181	45
Part-time employment	49	12.2
Not currently employed	123	30.6
Other	49	12.2
Highest Level of Education		
High school or less	101	25.1
Some college or equivalent	153	38.1
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	111	27.6
Graduate degree or equivalent	37	9.2
Annual Household Income		
Under \$25,000- \$50,000	79	19.7
\$25,000- \$50,000	121	30.1
\$50,001- \$75,000	82	20.4
\$75,001- \$100,000	52	12.9
\$101,001- \$125,000	21	5.2
Over \$125,000	34	8.5
Prefer not to answer	13	3.2
Total	402	100

Note: Median age = 45

Instruments

The instruments used in the survey are all based on established measures from previous literature. Other than information distrust, which was measured using a semantic differential scale, all the other instruments were measured with a seven-point Likert scale. All of the scales were slightly modified to fit the current study (Table 2). Company-CSR congruence, the extent to which a consumer perceives a fit between the brand's business core values and its CSR practices was measured using Perez and Rodriguez Del Bosque's (2014) scale of company-CSR congruence ($\alpha = .89$). Consumer-CSR relevancy, consumer's perception on the level of fit between a brand's CSR activity and the consumer's own personal values, goals, and morals, was measured using Kim and Ferguson's (2016) scale of personal relevance ($\alpha = .95$). For information distrust, operationalized in this study as consumers' reluctance to believe in the content and authenticity of the data provided, Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran's (2000) scale of believability of the information was used ($\alpha = .87$). Self-promotional tone, consumers' perception that the message contains words that are used for the sole purpose of positively enhancing the creator of the message, was also adapted from Kim and Ferguson's (2016) study. Skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility was adopted from Skarmeas and Leonidou's (2013) scale for CSR skepticism ($\alpha = .92$) and for the purpose of this study is operationalized as consumers' doubt toward the ethicality and social responsibility of a company. Lastly, retail patronage intention, consumers' overall support toward a company demonstrated through advocacy behaviors such as willingness to maintain the relationships with the brand, was adopted from Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, and Sierra's (2015) and Dagger, David, and Ng's (2011) study ($\alpha = .91$, $\alpha = .96$).

Table 2: Measurements

Constructs:	Revised scales this study	Source
Company-CSR Congruence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Carrying out this CSR initiative is compatible with ABC's core business. 2. It makes sense that ABC carries out this CSR initiative. 3. Carrying out this CSR initiative is complementary to ABC's core business. 4. There is a logical fit between the core business of ABC and the CSR initiative that it carries out. 	Perez & Rodriguez del Bosque (2014)
Consumer-CSR Relevancy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ABC's CSR activity (that I just read) is relevant to me. 2. ABC's CSR initiative (that I just read) is personally relevant to me. 3. ABC's CSR activity (that I just read) affects my personal life. 	Kim & Ferguson (2016)
Information Distrust	<p>In your opinion, the claim made by ABC was:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not at all believable / highly believable (R) 2. Not at all true /absolutely true (R) 3. Not at all acceptable / totally acceptable (R) 4. Not at all credible / very credible (R) 5. Not at all trustworthy / completely trustworthy (R) 	Gurhan-Canli & Maheswaran (2000)
Self-promotional tone	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The message from ABC sounds like it is based on facts. ^a 2. The messages from ABC (that I just read) sound promotional. 3. The messages from ABC (that I just read) sound self-congratulatory. 4. The message from ABC sounds like it is focused on just facts. ^a 	Kim & Ferguson (2016)
Skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It is doubtful that ABC is a socially responsible retailer. 2. It is uncertain that ABC is concerned to improve the well-being of society. 3. It is unsure that ABC follows high ethical standards. 4. It is questionable that ABC acts in a socially responsible way. 	Skarmeas & Leonidou (2013)
Retail patronage intention	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I will consider ABC my first choice when I purchase the products they supply. 2. I am willing to maintain my relationships with ABC. 3. I will continue to be loyal to ABC. 	Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, & Sierra (2015); Dagger, David, & Ng (2011)

ABC= name of brand (R) = indicates reverse coding

^a Deleted item due to low content and face validity and low factor loadings

IV. ANALYSIS

Path analysis through Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS) was used to test the proposed model along with hypothesized relationships in the model. Path analysis was chosen as the means to analyze the data in this study because it is considered an appropriate method to test possible causal relationships among a number of constructs simultaneously and to examine mediating effects more clearly than regression analyses (Grimm & Yarnold, 2000; J. S. Park & Hoy, 2013).

Before conducting path analysis, reliability of each construct was examined. Cronbach's alpha were examined to ensure the reliability of each sets of measures. Reliability testing of self-promotional tone revealed low reliability. After careful examination of item content for domain representativeness, two items were deleted due to their low content and face validity which threatened domain representativeness. In fact, these two items (“The message from ABC sounds like it is based on facts”; “The message from ABC sounds like it is focused on just facts”) showed low item-total correlations (below .40). After adjusting the scale for self-promotional tone accordingly, all measures had acceptable reliability: α was between .702 and .944 which satisfied the recommended threshold of .70. Given the adequate reliability, items for each construct were summed and averaged for further analyses. Scale reliabilities and correlations between each of the constructs are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Scale Reliabilities, Number of Scale Items, and Correlations of Constructs

	CG	RV	IDB	TON	SK	RPI
Cronbach Alpha	.939	.905	.944	.702	.894	.929
Number of Items	4	3	5	2	4	3
Mean	5.478	4.565	2.456	4.457	2.855	5.708
Standard Deviation	1.285	1.632	1.227	1.418	1.489	1.204
Company-CSR Congruence (CG)						
Consumer-CSR Relevancy (RV)	.575**					
Information Distrust (IDB)	-.608**	-.426**				
Self-Promotional Tone (TON)	.078	.081	.058			
Skepticism Toward Overall Corporate Responsibility (SK)	-.294**	-.131**	.454**	.304**		
Retail Patronage Intention (RPI)	.559**	.408**	-.614**	-.007	-.364**	

Note: ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

V. RESULTS

Model Fit of Path Analysis

Based on the proposed hypothesized relationships within the conceptual model, the model identified company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone as exogenous variables in the path model. The outcome construct, retail patronage intention, was identified as an endogenous variable. Skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility was specified as a mediator in the paths from the four exogenous variables to retail patronage intention, the endogenous variable. Gender was used as a control variable (Zhu & Chang, 2013) to ensure the results of the model testing are applicable regardless of the participant's gender (Zhu & Chang, 2013).

Once the path model was specified as describe above, the model fit was estimated. The initial model fit was slightly below the thresholds for achieving a good fit: goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .907, comparative fit index (CFI) = .761, normed fit index (NFI) = .761, root mean square residual (RMR) = .225. Because goodness-of-fit thresholds were not all met, modification indices were then used to identify the source of poor fit and if there was a theoretically meaningful path not present in the conceptual model. Modification indices (MIs) revealed that there were two potential paths that needed to be specified to enhance the model fit: company-CSR congruence to retail patronage intention (M.I.= 92.888) as well as information distrust to retail patronage intention (M.I. = 93.253). Because theoretical support exists for a relationship between company-CSR congruence and retail patronage intention but not for the other path, a path from company-CSR congruence to retail patronage intention was chosen to be added to

the original model. After rerunning the data with the added path between company-CSR congruence and retail patronage intention, the model fit was substantially enhanced: GFI = .962, CFI = .922, NFI = .919, RMR = .069. The competing model significantly enhanced the model fit from the original model, thus it was accepted as the final path model.

Direct Effect Testing Results

Given the adequate model fit of the final path model, examination of the hypothesized direct effects between constructs took place (H1 through H5). First, the direct effects of company-CSR congruence on skepticism was examined (H1). Company-CSR congruence negatively affected skepticism ($\gamma = -.123, p < .05$). Therefore, H1 was supported. After adding the path identified between company-CSR congruence and retail patronage intention to establish good fit, the direct effects of company-CSR congruence on retail patronage intention was also examined. Thus, company-CSR congruence has a significant and positive effect on retail patronage intention ($\gamma = .492, p < .01$). Next, the direct effect of consumer-CSR relevancy on skepticism was examined (H2). The results indicate that consumer-CSR relevancy did not have a significant effect on skepticism ($\gamma = .087, p = .092$). Therefore, H2 was rejected.

The direct effects of information distrust on skepticism (H3) was examined next. Information distrust had a positive and significant direct effect on skepticism ($\gamma = .400, p < .01$). Afterward, the direct effect of self-promotional tone on skepticism was examined (H4). Self-promotional tone positively and significantly affected skepticism ($\gamma = .283, p < .01$). Therefore, H3 and H4 were both supported.

Lastly, skepticism's direct effect on retail patronage intention was examined. Results indicated that skepticism negatively affects retail patronage intention ($\gamma = -2.91, p < .01$). Therefore, H5 was supported. All path estimates are shown in Figure 2.

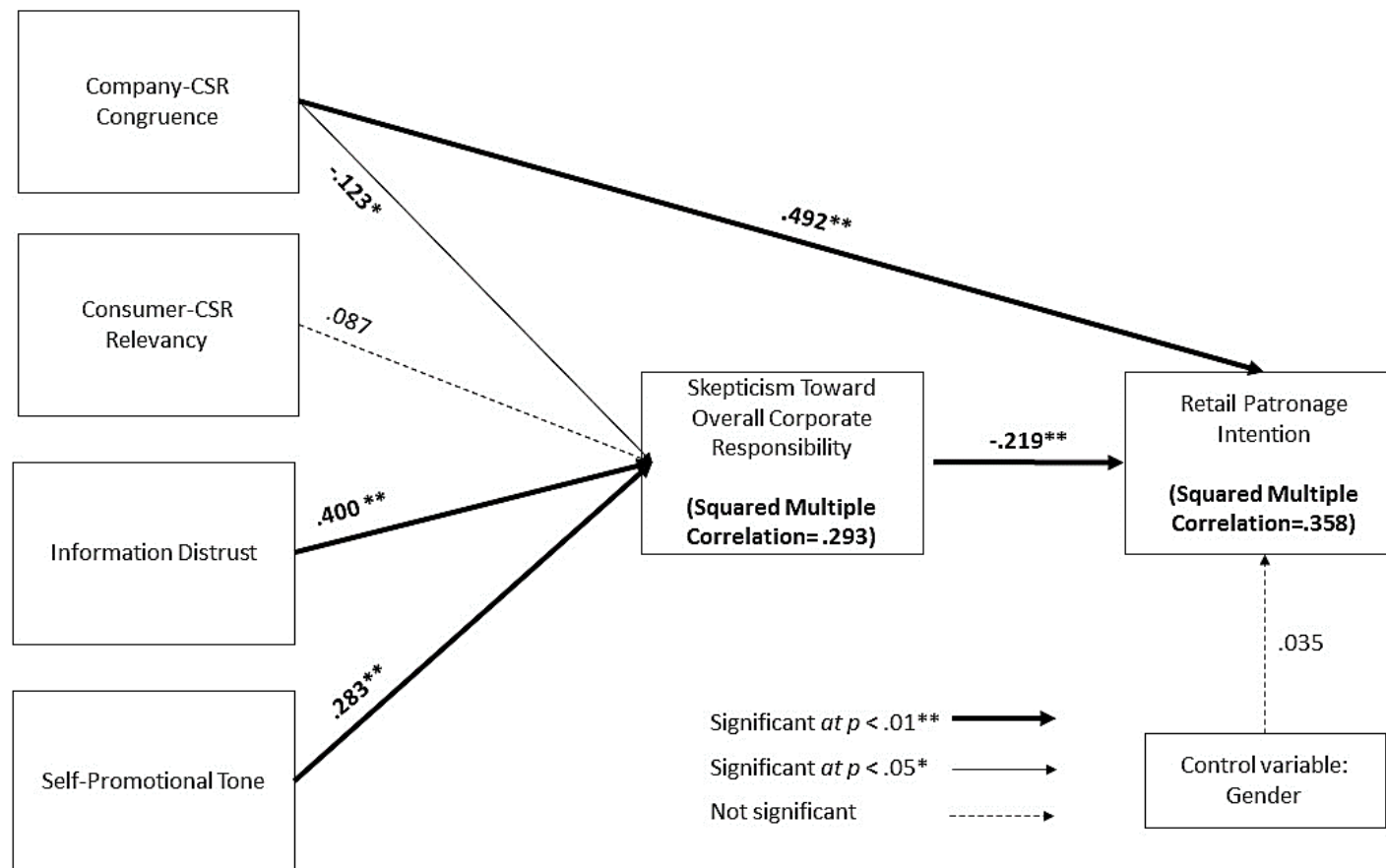


Figure 2: Path Analysis Results

Indirect Effect Testing Results

Indirect effect testing was conducted to test if skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility mediated the effects of company-CSR congruence, consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone on retail patronage intention (H6). To identify the significance of the indirect effects, the decomposition test using the bootstrapping method along with bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals was used (c.f., Hays, 2009). The test results indicate that there are significant, indirect effects between consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone on retail patronage intention. Although the model did not specify significant direct effects between consumer-CSR relevancy, information distrust, and self-promotional tone on retail patronage intention, indirect effect testing did reveal that these three constructs indirectly affected retail patronage intention mediated through skepticism. Additionally, the results showed that company-CSR congruence did affect retail patronage intention not only directly but also indirectly. Thus, the results confirmed the role of skepticism as a significant mediator in the model, which supported H6. However, it should be noted that although indirect effects were all significant, the effect sizes are minimal. The completed results of indirect effect testing are provided in Table 4.

Table 4: Indirect Effect Testing for H6

	Standardized total effects	Standardized direct effects	Standardized indirect effects
CG → RPI	.519	.492	.027*
RV → RPI	-.019	.000	-.019*
IDB → RPI	-.088	.000	-.088*
TON → RPI	-.062	.000	-.062*

Note: * $p < .05$ (bias-corrected percentile method).

VI. DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

The results of the study make important contributions to the use of Information Processing Theory (Miller, 1994) in the CSR communication context. The results indicate that the judgments consumers make about both the content and delivery of the CSR communication message significantly affects how doubtful they are towards the company's ethicality and corporate responsibility, in other words, skepticism. Specifically, the evaluations consumers make based on the level of company-CSR congruence, information distrust, and self-promotional tone influence how a consumer associates their evaluations with the level of skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility. The findings of the study further reveal that a consumer's association of the CSR communication elements with skepticism does affect how the consumer will behave. In this study, the associations made between consumer's evaluations of the content and delivery of a CSR message with skepticism did influence consumer's intention to maintain a relationship with the company or brand. This study expands the use of Information Processing Theory to the CSR communication context and further demonstrates its effectiveness in explaining how a consumer processes CSR-related information.

This study also contributes to academic literature centered on CSR, especially on CSR communication. The focus of this study was to determine if the content and delivery of a CSR communication message would impact the level of skepticism a consumer would show toward corporate responsibility. Findings of this study suggest that the content of a CSR communication message should focus on demonstrating fit between the

company's stated CSR activity and its business core values. Previous studies have also provided evidence that in fact the level of fit between the company's CSR activities and the company itself is an important determinant on how favorable consumers evaluate a company (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Forehand & Grier, 2003; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006). However, these studies did not look into how congruency between the company and CSR activity directly affected consumers' level of skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility. More so, was the interesting and significant finding that company-CSR congruency directly affected retail patronage intention. Other studies have identified company-CSR congruence to have significant effects on certain behavioral actions (Kim & Choi, 2016; Markovic et al., 2015; E. Park, Kim, & Kwon, 2017), providing an indication that that fit between CSR activity and company could lead to retail patronage intention. The finding of this relationship could be a result of the unique contribution of this study, in which content and delivery of CSR communication messages were both studied simultaneously.

This study also revealed that consumer-CSR relevancy did not directly affect skepticism toward overall corporate responsibility. This finding contradicts prior research that suggests relevancy plays an important role in consumers' evaluation of CSR activities (Kim & Ferguson, 2016; Lee et al., 2012). Participants in this study indicated that the fit between the activity and the company is more important than how personally relevant the activity is to them. This could be because incongruence between CSR activity and a business' core values confuses the consumer more. Consumers would then have to look for some type of justification as to why the company is engaging in that particular CSR activity. Consumers would support a company that engages in an activity

that hits close to home without much hesitation. On the other hand, how relevant consumer feels a CSR activity is to them personally might not make a significant difference in their perception toward a company's overall ethicality.

Though the type of CSR activity that takes place (the content of the CSR activity) is important to establish an ethical and responsible image in the consumers' mind, the delivery of the communication message must also be taken into account so as to not invoke skepticism. The results of this study indicate that both self-promotional tone and information distrust affect how a consumer evaluates the delivery of the communication messages and thus attribute it to the level of skepticism a consumer feels. These findings are in alignment with prior research that suggests message tone and the quality of information are an important factor when communicating about CSR (Kim & Ferguson, 2016; Mann et al., 2014; Rawlins, 2009). Providing CSR communication messages that contain information that causes a consumer to distrust a company's stated intentions or what the CSR activity is about, increases the likelihood that a consumer will develop feelings of doubt and uncertainty. In addition, companies should avoid using a tone that is self-promotional in nature since this could discourage consumers from thinking that a company's CSR engagement is authentic in purpose and not just a publicity stunt.

Although there has been plenty of research dedicated to examining how CSR efforts lead to behavioral actions (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Diddi & Niehm, 2016; Eberle et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2012), few studies have taken the role of skepticism into account especially in regards to CSR communication. Skepticism, in today's day and age is especially relevant because consumers are continually exposed to CSR communication messages and other sources of information that influence how a consumer perceives a

company's corporate responsibility. The results of the study demonstrate that in fact, how a CSR communication message is delivered and the characteristics of the content of such messages impacts the level of skepticism a consumer might develop toward a company's corporate responsibility. Furthermore, skepticism does play a role in how much support a consumer is willing to continue to show for a company. Diddi and Niehm (2016) found that universalistic values, moral norms, expectations of ethical behavior, and knowledge of environmental issues in the apparel industry affect patronage intentions. The study concurs with the results of this study that in fact, elements of CSR does have an impact on retail patronage intention but it does not focus on CSR communication nor on how skepticism could affect retail patronage intention. As was in the case of Nasty Gal, companies tend to invest funds in acquiring new customers as opposed to finding ways to retain the loyal consumer base they already have. Though purchase intention is important, especially in CSR literature (Ailawadi, Neslin, Luan, & Taylor, 2014; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), retail patronage intention is more cost-effective than creating a new consumer based on how many times they will purchase in the future. Thus, retail patronage could be considered an increasingly important outcome when analyzing how successful a company is in portraying their CSR engagement to its consumers.

Practical Implications

The apparel industry could benefit tremendously from the results of the study. The fact that this study did not limit participants to choose between online or brick-and-mortar retailers allows for the generalization of the results to all apparel retailers. In other words, if CSR communication messages, both portrayed online and in-stores, apply

elements of company-CSR congruence when developing the content of the messages, they are more likely to decrease consumer skepticism and increase the level of retail patronage of their consumer base. There is nothing more important to apparel retailers, especially in the present age of globalized competitiveness, than increasing consumers' commitment to shop and promote the company. Furthermore, the results of this study could provide aid to apparel managers who invest money on creating communication messages that are personalized to fit consumer's values or goals. Instead, managers should focus on engaging in a CSR activity that truly stems from what the company values and create communication messages that better reflect the company's core values, especially since company-CSR congruence has a direct effect on a company's ability to maintain a relationship with their consumer base. Strategically creating communication messages that match a company's CSR activity to their core values could also avoid unnecessary spending on the company's behalf. Investing in acquiring new customers through advertising and promotions is exponentially costly. Therefore, using a strategy that will ensure consumers will continue to support the company is not just a smart decision, but one that is time and cost-effective.

Furthermore, because gender did not show any significant effects on retail patronage intention, the results are applicable to all individuals regardless of gender. With this information, apparel retailers can focus more on the content and delivery of the communication messages by enhancing fit between the company's core values and the CSR activity as well as avoiding a congratulatory tone and conveying information that seems distrustful. Time and money would be better spent in finding ways to incorporate company-CSR congruence in communication messages since all individuals regardless of

gender demonstrated a higher level of retail patronage intention. Additionally, managers and CEOs should pay more attention to how they communicate their CSR engagement by adjusting the tone they use in their messages and providing information that is factual and easy to understand.

Limitations and Future Studies

The conceptual model was developed based on a strong theoretical foundation and tested through path analyses, where ‘potential’ casual effects among variables were specified. However, in order to confirm any causal effects, future studies can design an experiment in which any confounding variables can be controlled.

For the purpose of the study, an online survey was used. Although data retrieval was quick and efficient, individuals who did not have access to the internet could have been left out of the study. Future studies could employ traditional survey designs to ensure that individuals who do not have access to the internet can be included in the study. However, the online survey design allowed for the minimization of invalid responses because of the filtering question and speeding check in place. Although, the online survey design used in this study through Qualtrics provided an opportunity to collect data from a sample that is representative of the general U.S. population, a high percentage (79.6%) of participants were of Caucasian descent. Future studies should consider having a sample that is more ethnically diverse by ensuring a more equal distribution. Ethnicity could be a factor to consider in future research to analyze if it has any effects on the hypothesized relationships presented in this study.

Because CSR has become an important competitive advantage for apparel companies, this study focused on how the content of delivery of CSR messages would affect the level of skepticism and thus a consumer's patronage intention on apparel brands. Though the results of the study could be applied in general to research in business ethics, future research could consider applying the findings of this study in an industry other than apparel. In the future, researchers could look into other factors that affect CSR communication messages' effectiveness. More so, because the mediating role of skepticism in this study suggests that it is highly influential in the CSR communication context, future studies should focus on how skepticism affects CSR communication after a crisis or scandal affects a company's corporate responsibility.

VII. CONCLUSION

CSR communication is a topic that is highly debated among scholars and managers alike. Regardless, research demonstrates that companies who effectively communicate their engagement in CSR tend to have more success, especially in a world where consumers are placing corporate responsibility as an important factor when it comes to choosing what apparel company they will continue to support. This study attempts to bridge the gap in the literature by providing support that certain elements of CSR communication can impact retail patronage intention. More importantly, this study identifies the mediating role of skepticism in the CSR communication process. Consumers, whether deliberately or not, process CSR-related information through a looking glass that is embedded with skepticism. Skepticism is a feeling that is hard to ignore when communications of a company's CSR do not reflect the company's own values. It is also difficult for consumers to not feel skeptic when the tone of the communication message reveals that a company is more interested in ingratiating themselves than being purposely committed to the CSR activity they engage in. A lack of trustworthy information can also lead consumers to feel discouraged to continue to maintain a relationship with a company when they cannot be sure of the authenticity of the company's ethicality. All in all, companies must be invested in communicating their CSR engagement by portraying the right content and knowing how to deliver their message without invoking skepticism so that they can enjoy the long-term benefits of a committed consumer.

APPENDIX SECTION

Imagine that you run across the following message about ABC's most recent CSR (corporate social responsibility) activity.

Note: Please take time to read carefully through the message. Once you have read through the message, you will be asked a series of questions regarding your perceptions of the message.

Committing to educate one million women throughout the world

In 2007, we launched P.A.C.E. (Personal Advancement & Career Enhancement) to provide opportunities for the women who make our clothes to gain the skills and confidence they need to advance at work and in life. More than 30,000 women in 10 countries have participated in the program to date, and in September 2015, we committed to continue to expand beyond factories and into communities to reach one million women throughout the world by 2020.

Many women say P.A.C.E. has not just taught them tangible skills, but shifted their perception of themselves and their abilities. They describe becoming better at communicating, managing their finances, taking care of their health and planning for the future. Each woman has her own story to tell about the change she has experienced – whether in her own life or that of her family and community.





In future correspondence please refer to 2017248

November 15, 2016

Floritzel Moreno
Texas State University
601 University Drive.
San Marcos, TX 78666

Dear Floritzel:

Your IRB application 2017248 titled "Bouncing Back: Consumer's Perception of Corporate Social Responsibility Amid Skepticism and Negative Information," was reviewed and approved by the Texas State University IRB. It has been determined that risks to subjects are: (1) minimized and reasonable; and that (2) research procedures are consistent with a sound research design and do not expose the subjects to unnecessary risk. Reviewers determined that: (1) benefits to subjects are considered along with the importance of the topic and that outcomes are reasonable; (2) selection of subjects is equitable; and (3) the purposes of the research and the research setting is amenable to subjects' welfare and producing desired outcomes; that indications of coercion or prejudice are absent, and that participation is clearly voluntary.

1. In addition, the IRB found that you need to orient participants as follows: (1) signed informed consent is not required as participation will imply consent; (2) Provision is made for collecting, using and storing data in a manner that protects the safety and privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the data; (3) Appropriate safeguards are included to protect the rights and welfare of the subjects.

This project is therefore approved at the Exempt Review Level

2. Please note that the institution is not responsible for any actions regarding this protocol before approval. If you expand the project at a later date to use other instruments please re-apply. Copies of your request for human subjects review, your application, and this approval, are maintained in the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance. Please report any changes to this approved protocol to this office. Sincerely,

Monica Gonzales
IRB Regulatory Manager
Office of Research Integrity and Compliance

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