CSR communication on social media: the impact of source and framing on message credibility, corporate reputation and WOM

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Abstract

Purpose – When communicating CSR initiatives on social media, companies need to choose the appropriate source and type of messages. Over the last few years, influencers have emerged as a relevant endorser for CSR messages, but there is a lack of research investigating their effectiveness. Hence, the purpose of the study is to analyze how the type of source and message framing on social media influence message credibility, corporate reputation (CR) and word-of-mouth (WOM).

Design/methodology/approach – An online experiment with 2 (source: influencer vs corporate) × 2 (CSR frame motives: values-driven vs performance-driven) between-subject design was conducted among 200 participants.

Findings – Results showed that the type of source does not affect message credibility or CR but a corporate source generates more WOM. Moreover, values-driven motives increase CR and generate more WOM. However, the type of frame motives does not impact message credibility.

Originality/value – The current paper tests the effect of framing and source when communicating CSR on social media. The paper shows that overall an effective CSR communication should be posted by a corporate source and framed by values-driven motives. Hence, the study contributes to the contemporary literature regarding CSR communication and provides practical implications for companies.

Keywords Corporate social responsibility, Social media, Communication, Framing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Although the notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) features a wide range of definitions, the standard interpretation refers to companies' responsibility for their impacts on society (Moratis, 2016). A large part of their positive outcomes depends on its communication to stakeholders (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Colleoni, 2013), and studies highlight how stakeholders increasingly expect from companies not only to engage in CSR efforts but also to communicate about that (Beckmann *et al.*, 2006). Thus, CSR communication refers to "the ways that corporations communicate in and about this process" (Ihlen *et al.*, 2011, p. 8).

To maximize corporate value and reputation, companies are increasingly using CSR as a strategic tool. Several studies have demonstrated positive effects of CSR communication on consumers' attitudes toward the company, trust and perceptions of CR (Boccia *et al.*, 2019; Kim, 2019), but the benefits might depend on several characteristics, such as the source and the

message framing. For instance, Wang and Huang (2018) found that CSR messages raise great perceptions of trust and commitment toward the company, but the level varies depending on the communication source. Likewise, Wang and Anderson (2008) highlight the valence of CSR framing on how participants judge a firm's CSR practices and form an attitude toward that.

Hence, many studies have tested different CSR communication strategies to identify the more effective ones on stakeholders. However, existing literature on CSR communication, besides presenting different focuses, leads to mixed findings. Moreover, numerous studies tested the type of framing used by news media speaking about a company's CSR (e.g. Aksak et al., 2016; Wang and Anderson, 2008), while it is also relevant to test the framing used in the message given by the company itself or by an influencer. As for the communication source, nowadays influencers are important actors in social-mediated CSR communication, connecting organizations and stakeholders by endorsing organizational CSR initiatives through self-generated messages (Cheng et al., 2021). Indeed, earned media from key influencers has the potential of spreading a company's CSR message much further than owned media (Sarkar, 2018). According to De Veirman et al. (2017), influencers are individuals who have amassed a sizeable social network of followers and who are considered trusted tastemakers in one or more areas. Consequently, brands are increasingly reaching them to endorse their products. Literature offers several studies on different types of endorsers in brand marketing and advertisements, especially testing celebrity endorsement, but few focus on CSR communication through influencers. Moreover, research in influencers' communication effectiveness provides mixed results.

Therefore, in this study, we investigate the impact of the source, comparing corporate and influencer sources, and the message framing, comparing values-driven or performance-driven motives, in CSR communications. Specifically, the purpose of the study is to understand the effect of the communication source and framed motives in CSR communication to identify the best combination to be used on social media to increase message credibility, CR and WOM.

Literature review
CSR communication and message credibility, corporate reputation and word-of-mouth
Three different variables related to CSR communication are discussed. First, message credibility is strongly related to the concept of communication source along with the source credibility model successively presented. Source credibility perceptions determine consumer judgment of how believable the communication is, which, in turn, has a strong impact on attitudes toward the company (Choi and Rifon, 2002). However, it is important to separate these two concepts, as credibility may be influenced by non-source factors, such as the channel and framing.

Message credibility is considered an essential element of CSR communication (Lock and Schulz-Knappe, 2019). Indeed, it has been proved that credibility perception plays a role in consumer response towards a company's CSR efforts (Bialkova and Te Paske, 2020). In particular, it is related to WOM, as stakeholders perceive a CSR communication as more credible if consumers' general opinion is positive (Smith and Vogt, 1995), and vice versa, message credibility could have positive effects on their intentions of spreading WOM and recommend the company to others (Eberle et al., 2013).

Second, CR can be defined as a "collective construct that describes the aggregate perceptions of multiple stakeholders about a company's performance" and at the same time as a "collective assessment of a company's ability to provide valued outcomes to a representative group of stakeholders" (Fombrun et al., 2000, pp. 242–243). These two definitions highlight a dual perspective of CR: on one side, it is given by perceptions stakeholders have, and on the other, by the company's ability toward stakeholders. In this respect, Maden et al. (2012) indicate that CR

is examined from a multi-stakeholder perspective, given that literature considers this concept for customers, employees and investors.

What is important for companies and communicators is that a positive CR can successfully affect stakeholders' behavior, ultimately, facilitating better corporate performance (Maden *et al.*, 2012). Eberle *et al.* (2013) found that an increase in perceived interactivity in CSR messages on online media leads to higher-message credibility, which also boosts CR and WOM. They concluded that using online media to communicate CSR initiatives can improve CR (Eberle *et al.*, 2013).

Finally, WOM is a source of information among consumers that involves people sharing information about their own evaluation of experiences through oral communication which, according to marketing researchers, has an impact on consumers' attitudes, judgments and choice behavior (Sallam, 2016). One of the reasons why WOM is such a crucial concept for companies is that it represents a free form of advertisement or promotion (Mosley, 2017). Depending on the studies, WOM can be conceptualized as referring to positive comments only or as referring to both positive or negative comments (Casidy and Wymer, 2015), but following previous research this study uses the term WOM referring to positive comments only.

The distinctive feature of WOM is that the communication is usually unbiased, given that the source of information does not get anything in return from the receiver (Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2015), which is probably why information spread by consumers is perceived as more reliable than the same delivered from a company (Schindler and Bickart, 2005). Wee *et al.* (1995) showed that WOM sources were generally considered to be more reliable and influential than other sources of information.

In analyzing outcomes of CSR, Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) found consumers' willingness to talk positively about companies that are engaged in CSR activities. Similarly, Walsh and Beatty (2007) found a positive association between customer-based CR and WOM, i.e. companies with a positive reputation have a greater probability that their customers act as company advocates. According to Bialkova and Te Paske (2020), CSR motives and message credibility modulate the willingness to spread electronic WOM (e-WOM). This willingness is higher when the message combines value and performance-driven CSR motives.

The influence of CSR communication source
The source-credibility model states that the effectiveness of a message relies on the perception of expertise and trustworthiness of the endorser (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Specifically, a communicator perceived as untrustworthy interferes with the acceptance of the information and consequently source trustworthiness causes changes in opinion (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Hence, low-credibility sources are perceived and judged less fair or justified than high-credibility sources.

Generally, CSR can be communicated through corporate sources [e.g. the company chief executive officer (CEO) or the company itself] or non-corporate sources (e.g. customers' testimonials or influencers). Previous studies on CSR communication suggest that non-corporate sources are perceived as unbiased (Skard and Thorbjørnsen, 2014). For instance, it has been found that celebrity endorsement increases initial interest and likelihood of seeking additional information (Maronick, 2005). Likewise, consumers attribute more sincere CSR motives when they learn about the CSR activity from a neutral source than from a company source (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Relatedly, Howes and Sallot (2013) compared a company spokesperson and a customer spokesperson in the context of message credibility and found that the second has a better impact on the audience because it is considered more trustworthy.

On the contrary, Agnihotri and Bhattacharya (2019) found that when the title and designation of CEOs and founders are signaled, the communication is more effective with corporate sources than with celebrities. However, other studies have found no differences. Maronick (2005) compared the effectiveness of a celebrity endorser and a company president

but found no differences in belief of claim. Similarly, Rantanen (2020) compared the effect of CSR communication from an influencer and from the company itself and found no difference in credibility.

Therefore, further and deeper research is needed (Herold *et al.*, 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2018). In general, non-corporate sources are perceived as more reliable than corporate sources for being unbiased (Schindler and Bickart, 2005; Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2015) and expressing their expectations. Consumer-publics prefer non-corporate sources over CEOs and public relations spokespersons (Kim and Ferguson, 2014). Based on the abovementioned, we can conclude that a non-corporate source, often a celebrity, is more effective than a corporate source. Hence, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1. An influencer source will lead to higher levels of message credibility than a corporate source.

Influencer-generated content on social media positively affects brand awareness and purchase intentions (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Skard and Thorbjørnsen (2014) showed that a non-corporate source generates more positive brand evaluations than a corporate source when the sponsor has a positive reputation. However, the current study uses a fictional brand to avoid participants' preconceptions. Given the scarcity of research, a research question is asked as follows:

RQ1. Does an influencer source lead to higher levels of CR than a corporate source?

Finally, Herold *et al.* (2016) suggest that the processing of WOM differs depending on the source. Even though research has indicated that the source might impact credibility, according to Lee *et al.* (2018), the relationship between source and message in WOM influence is still not clear. They found that judgment of message quality is influenced by the level of expertise, trustworthiness, homophily and opinion leadership of the WOM source. Based on this, we assume that an influencer source generates higher WOM than a corporate source. Hence, our second hypothesis is as follows:

H2. An influencer source will generate more WOM than a corporate source.

Framing and CSR motives
Message framing consists of "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Frames shape perceptions in communication (Hallahan, 2011) and guide people in forming judgments (Wang and Anderson, 2008), influencing, therefore, their attitudes and behavioral intent. For this reason, framing theory is often studied in the context of persuasive communication. As frames affect how audiences may respond, communicators often consciously select specific frames to arouse the greatest persuasiveness or credibility (Geise and Coleman, 2015). For this reason, this study considers different CSR motives as different frames in communicating to stakeholders and tests their effect on message credibility and other variables.

Literature suggests that the valence of CSR framing affects external judgments and attitudes toward a company (Wang and Anderson, 2008). In that regard, CSR communication can be framed by performance-driven motives or value-driven motives. Value-driven motives reflect the willingness to positively impact society through CSR initiatives, i.e. society-oriented activities (Bialkova and Te Paske, 2020), while performance-driven CSR motives or egoistic motives reflect the perception that a company focuses on itself and its performance objectives only (Swanson, 1995, cited in Bialkova and Te Paske, 2020). Also known as positive duty, value-driven motives recognize that a company may be involved in CSR to help others and not only to meet stakeholder expectations, i.e. negative duty (Swanson, 1995). According to Rives *et al.* (2015, p. 4), values-driven motives affect consumers' recommendation intentions and "are

sufficient motivation for consumers to speak positively of a company". However, performance-driven motives may be perceived as sincere leading to positive outcomes (Kim, 2019).

Previous research testing framing of CSR motives has found that participants respond most positively to CSR motives they perceive as values-driven, while negatively to motives judged as egoistic (Ellen *et al.*, 2006). Similarly, negative outcomes were identified when companies with poor CR emphasize only performance-driven motives, omitting value-driven motives (Kim and Ferguson, 2014). On the contrary, Kim (2019, p. 838) found that acknowledging a performance-driven motive "reduces skeptical attribution and enhances stakeholders' favorable intent to support, seek employment with, invest in and purchase from the company". Thus, although CSR communication with a self-promotional tone has a negative relationship with consumer's trust and CR, it improves consumers' CSR knowledge and, in turn, has a positive effect on the perception of CR (Kim, 2019).

Therefore, what is evident is that CSR motives have a strong impact on message credibility and on CR. Consequently, the research questions are formulated as follows:

RQ2. Do performance-driven motives lead to higher levels of message credibility than value-driven motives?

RQ3. Do values-driven CSR motives lead to higher levels of CR than performance-driven motives?

RQ4. Do values-driven CSR motives increase WOM more than performance-driven CSR motives?

Comparing internal and external sources, Groza *et al.* (2011) provide evidence that consumers attribute different motives to a CSR initiative depending on the source of the message. They showed that the publication of a company's CSR initiative internally (vs externally) amplified the effects of the CSR initiative on perceived values-driven and strategic-driven motives but not on perceived stakeholder-driven motives (Groza *et al.*, 2011). However, they used a newspaper as an external source in opposition to the company's official website. Therefore, the existing literature does not offer research on the interaction between communication source and framed CSR motives in the context of CSR communication. As a result, the research question is formulated as follows:

RQ5. Is there an interaction effect between source and CSR framed motives?

Method
Research design and procedure
An online experiment with a 2 (corporate source vs influencer source) × 2 (values-driven motives vs performance-driven motives) between-subjects design was created on online surveys and distributed via social media and personal communication. Ethical approval was provided by the ethical review committee of the university where the study was developed. Data were collected in May 2021.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. First, the instructions were presented and their consent was asked. Then, each participant was asked to read the Facebook post with the CSR communication. Immediately, following the exposure, participants answered the manipulation check and questions about the credibility of the message, CR and WOM. After answering demographic questions, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Stimulus material
The four experimental conditions were created through fictitious Facebook posts of a fictitious luxury company named "Infinity Lusso" Two posts (one framed by values-driven

motives and one by performance-driven motives) appeared to be written by a fictitious CEO and the other two by a real well-known influencer. The fictitious company was used to ensure participants "would not have any prior perception toward the company" as suggested by Wang and Huang (2018, p. 332) and consequently the CEO could not be real. However, to test the real effect of an influencer source compared to a corporate source, only a real influencer could be used as in Seiler and Kucza (2017) and Weismueller et al. (2020). Considering that often women are the face of luxury brands (Fedon and Schockert, 2017), we chose a female source. Chiara Ferragni was chosen as the influencer since she is the most important influencer in Italy and has an overall positive image and has sponsored content from luxury brands (Zanetti, 2021). We made sure that the fictitious CEO and the influencer were as similar as possible in appearance, i.e. gender, age, hair and skin color, haircut and style.

The source was manipulated creating two different Facebook profiles: one of the fictitious CEO and one of the influencer; besides name, surname and picture, we included the occupation (CEO at Infinity Lusso or influencer) following Agnihotri and Bhattacharya (2019) to ensure participants had the communication source clear.

With regards to the framing, the CSR communication post was manipulated to get a message with perceived performance-driven motives and a message with perceived values-driven motives (see Figure A1). The messages were created based on Ellen et al. (2006) as in Shemetkova (2017). For example, to communicate values-driven motives the post included phrases such as "*We aim to protect the environment for the better future of our planet.*" For conditions with performance-driven motives the post featured phrases such as "*We decided to engage in corporate social responsibility projects because it is beneficial for our company and will help to improve brand image.*"

Finally, as Yang et al. (2020) have noted, social media is becoming increasingly crucial for CSR communication. Following these authors, Facebook was specifically chosen as a social media platform because nine out of ten leading companies use it to communicate their CSR initiatives.

Participants

A sample of 200 participants living in Italy and aged between 21 and 63 [Mean (M) = 36.99, Standard Deviation (SD) = 13.04] took part in the study; in total, 60.5% of them were females, 39% were males and one participant preferred not to specify (0.5%). Regarding the highest level of education, 3% only had compulsory education, 36.5% had a high school diploma, 20% had a bachelor's degree, 36.5% owned a masters and 4% had a PhD. Finally, regarding the employment status, 14.5% were students, 71% declared to be self-employed, work full-time or part-time, 3.5% were unemployed or retired and 11% selected the option "others."

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (corporate source and value-driven message n = 49, influencer source and value-driven message n = 49, corporate source and performance-driven motives n = 51 and influencer source and performance-driven motives n = 51).

Measures

Message credibility. The scale from Newell and Goldsmith (2001), which was originally created to measure corporate credibility, was adapted by using the post (i.e. the message) as the subject of the items. The scale consisted of four items (e.g. After reading the post, I think it contains honest information) measured in a five-point Likert scale, from (1) totally disagree to (5) totally agree (Cronbach's α = 0.75; M = 3.33, SD = 0.60).

Corporate reputation. CR was measured using an adapted scale from Fombrun et al. (2000). Only three sections of the scale, i.e. emotional appeal, workplace environment, social and environmental responsibility, were selected because relevant for a fictitious company

(e.g. I admire and respect this company) and measured in a five-point Likert scale, from (1) totally disagree to (5) totally agree (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$, $M = 3.35$, SD = 0.56).

Word-of-mouth. WOM was measured using the scale from Walsh and Beatty (2007). The three items (e.g. to what extent is it likely that you would say good things about this company) were measured in a five-point Likert scale, from (1) very unlikely to (5) very likely (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$, $M = 3.13$, SD = 0.76).

Manipulation check. Two questions were included: (1) the post that I have just read is posted by: an influencer or someone from the company (CEO) (2) the company affirms to engage in CSR projects because: it is beneficial for the company or because they care about the environment and other social issues.

Control variables. As previous research has found gender (Boysselle, 2015) and age (Wee *et al.*, 1995) effects on CSR communication, several socio-demographic variables (i.e. gender, age, educational level and employment status) were controlled as they might provide alternative explanations for the hypothesized effects.

Results
Manipulation check
In the corporate source condition, 98% correctly said the post was posted by someone from the company (CEO). In the influencer source condition, 86% correctly said the post was posted by an influencer. This difference was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 200) = 143.18$, $p < 0.001$. Although the source was not correctly noticed by all participants, the manipulation was successful.

In the value-driven condition, 85.7% correctly said that the company affirms to engage in CSR projects because they care about the environment and other social issues. In the performance-driven condition, 63.7% correctly said that the company affirms to engage in CSR projects because it is beneficial for the company. This difference was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 200) = 51.12$, $p < 0.001$. Although several participants did not perceive the intended framed motives, the majority answered correctly and the manipulation was successful.

Randomization check
The four experimental groups did not differ with regard to age, $F(3, 196) = 1.7$, $p = 0.153$, gender, $\chi^2 (6, N = 200)$ 4.22, $p = 0.646$ and employment status $\chi^2 (18, N = 200)$ 21.26, $p = 0.266$. However, the four groups were not equally distributed with respect to educational level, i.e. $\chi^2 (12, N = 200)$ 25.74, $p = 0.012$. Therefore, educational level was used as a covariate in the analyses.

Hypothesis testing
To test the hypothesis and answer the research questions three analysis two-way ANCOVA were conducted with source and framing as fixed factors; message credibility, CR and WOM as dependent variables and educational level as a covariate.

Regarding the impact of source (H1) and framed motives (RQ2) on message credibility, there was not a statistically significant main effect for source, i.e. $F(1, 195) = 1.07$, $p = 0.300$ and for framed motives, $F(1, 429) = 0.19$, $p = 0.662$. Moreover, the interaction effect between source and framed motives, shown in Figure 1, was not statistically significant, $F(1, 195) = 0.45$, $p = 0.499$. Corporate or influencer source and value or performance-driven framed motives do not differ in influencing message credibility.

As for the impact of source (RQ1) and framed motives (RQ3) on CR, there was a statistically significant main effect for framed motives, $F(1, 195) = 7.09$, $p = 0.008$ but not for source, $F(1, 195) = 0.40$, $p = 0.524$. Moreover, the interaction effect between source and framed motives, shown in Figure 2, was not statistically significant, $F(1, 195) = 0.019$,
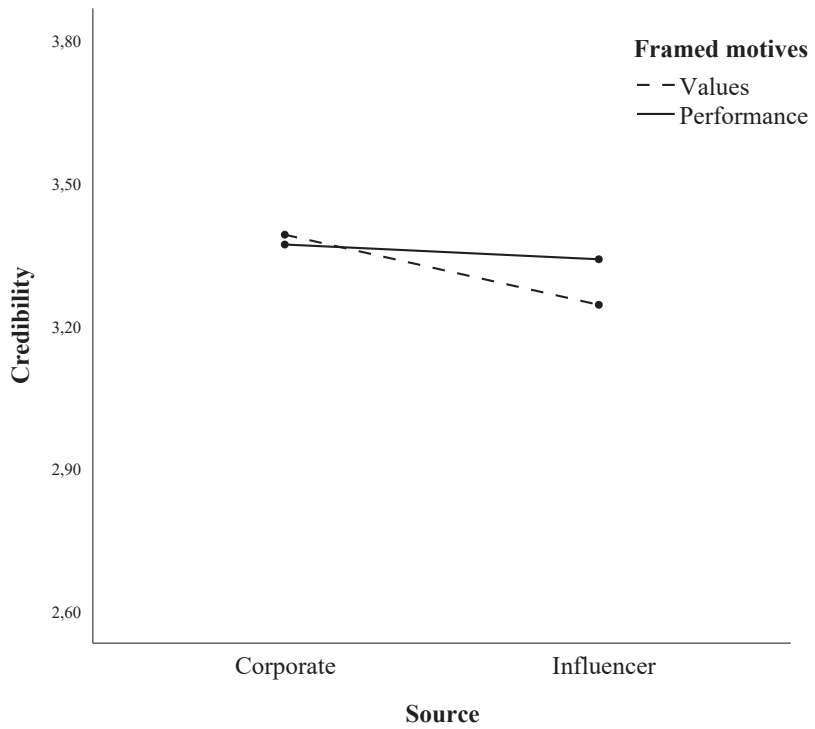
Figure 1.
Interaction effect of
source and framed
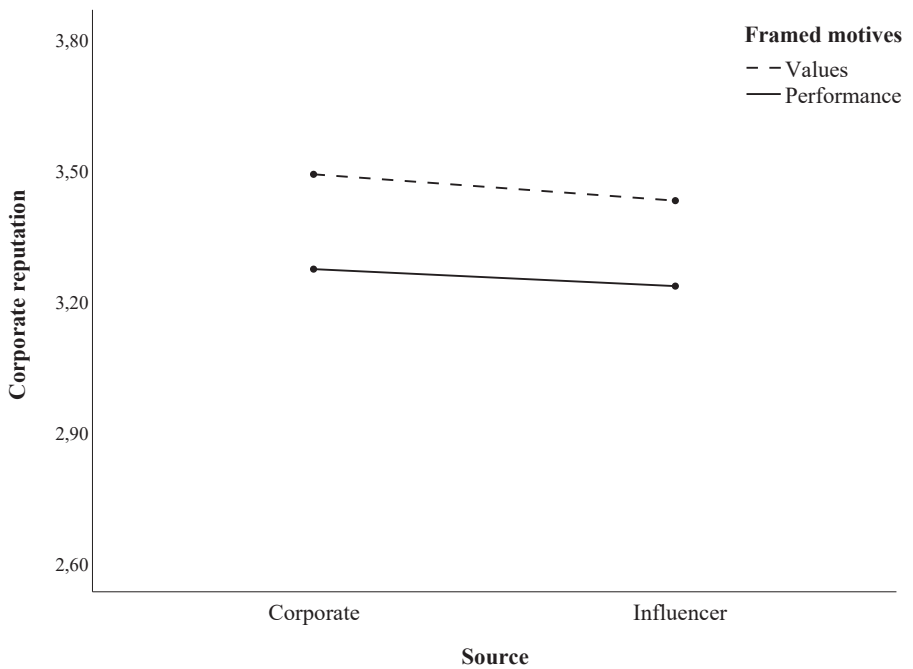motives on message
credibility

Figure 2.
Interaction effect of
source and framed
motives on corporate
reputation

$p = 0.890$. Thus, while the impact of corporate or influencer source does not change on CR, framing the message by values-driven instead of performance-driven motives has a better impact on CR.

Finally, and regarding the impact of source (H2) and framed motives (RQ4) on WOM, there was a statistically significant main effect for source, $F(1, 195) = 5.04$, $p = 0.026$ and for framed motives, $F(1, 195) = 8.05$, $p = 0.005$. However, the interaction effect between source and framed motives, shown in Figure 3, was not statistically significant, $F(1, 195) = 0.22$, $p = 0.635$. Hence, H4 was rejected, since a corporate source generates more WOM than an influencer source. Moreover, a CSR message framed by value-driven motives generates more WOM than performance-driven motives.

Because the impact of the source does not differ on message credibility or CR and considering that young people are more familiar with social media and influencers, we checked if the influencer source had a different effect on young and adult participants. Only the data of participants who were exposed to the influencer source were selected, and a Pearson correlation was conducted to check whether there was a relationship between age and evaluation of message credibility, CR and WOM. There was not a significant relationship between age and variables of message credibility, $r(100) = -0.12$, $p = 0.222$; CR, $r(100) = -0.09$, $p = 0.392$ and WOM, $r(100) = 0.12$, $p = 0.24$, among the participants who were exposed to the influencer post.

Finally, RQ5 looked into the interaction between source and CSR framing motives. As it has been shown previously, there was no interaction effect between these two variables.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the effect of the communication source and framed motives in CSR communication to identify the best combination to be used on social media to increase message credibility, CR and WOM. We tested a message given by a corporate source (CEO)
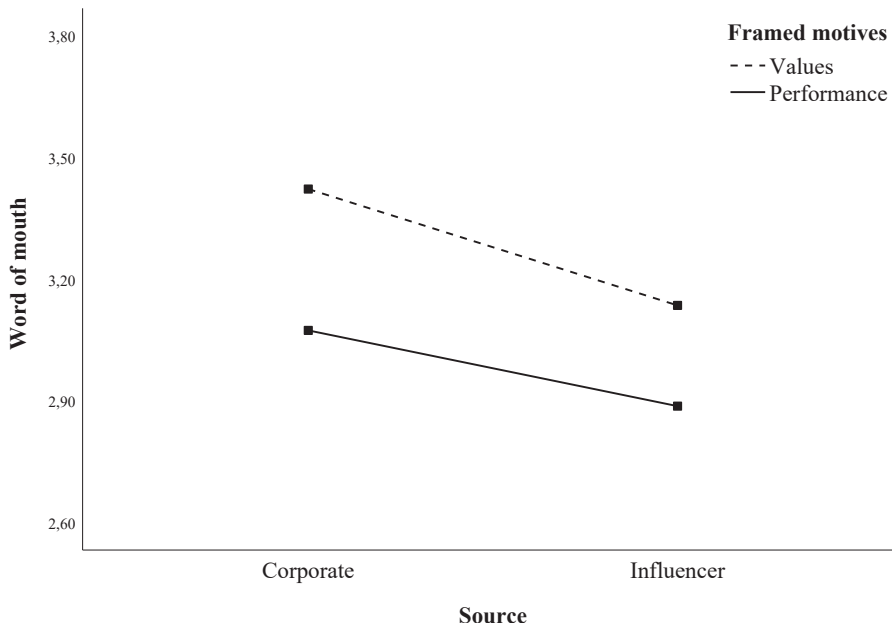

Figure 3.
Interaction effect of source and framed motives on word of mouth

compared to an influencer source and framed by values-driven motives in comparison to performance-driven motives.

According to the results, there was no significant difference in the impact between corporate and influencer source neither on message credibility nor on CR, while there was a different impact on WOM. Although prior research showed that a neutral non-corporate source is perceived as more credible than a corporate source (Schindler and Bickart, 2005; Skard and Thorbjørnsen, 2014), similar to Rantanen (2020), this study does not show a significant difference in the level of credibility perceived of a message given by a company's CEO or an influencer.

In contrast, an important finding is that the source impacted WOM, confirming that the processing of WOM differs depending on the source (Herold *et al.*, 2016). Contrary to expectations, a CSR message given by the CEO seems to generate more WOM than the same message given by an influencer. This effect might be related to the fact that the title and designation of the CEO were intentionally signaled, which according to Agnihotri and Bhattacharya (2019), makes the communication more effective than with celebrities. Furthermore, because the judgment of message quality is influenced by the level of expertise and opinion leadership of the WOM source (Lee *et al.*, 2018), it might happen that considering the CEO as more expert, stakeholders are more likely to spread positive information.

As for framed motives, results show that framing the message with value or performance-driven motives had a different impact on CR and WOM but not on message credibility. This reflects previous studies which suggest that the valence of CSR framing affects external judgments toward a company, i.e. CR (Wang and Anderson, 2008) and influence recommendation intentions, i.e. WOM (Bialkova and Te Paske, 2020; Rives *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, it confirms Ellen's *et al.* (2006) findings that show that participants respond most positively to CSR motives they perceive as values driven and it is in line with Rives *et al.* (2015), who states that values-driven motives motivate consumers to speak positively of a company.

Regarding the relationship between communication source and CSR-framed motives, the analysis does not show a statistically significant interaction effect on message credibility, CR or WOM. However, we can conclude that communicating a CSR message through a corporate source framed by value-driven motives has a better impact on CR and WOM, even though it does not affect message credibility. Therefore, it has been proven to be crucial for luxury companies to communicate their CSR initiatives through a corporate source and to frame the social media message by values-driven motives.

Conclusions
Addressing the increased demand for CSR communication, the current paper explored how corporate vs influencer sources and value-driven vs performance-driven framed motives affect message credibility, CR and WOM, providing understanding on how to optimize CSR effectiveness on social media.

Results show that corporate or influencer source do not differently affect message credibility or CR but do have a different impact on WOM. Contrary to prior research, a CSR message given by a CEO generates more WOM than the same message given by an influencer. With regards to framed motives, results reflect previous studies showing that framing the message with value or performance-driven motives has a different impact on CR and WOM, although not on message credibility. Values-driven motives increase CR more than performance-driven motives and consequently generate more WOM. As previously suspected, it might happen that even when the company frames the message with value-driven motives, stakeholders are skeptical and believe that the company has egoistic and performance purposes.

Finally, we can conclude that the most effective CSR communication on social media should be posted by a corporate source (e.g. CEO) and should be framed by values-driven motives (i.e. it should be society oriented).

This study is of great value to both scholars and practitioners, as it analyses CSR communication in relation to stakeholders' preferences and its outcomes are crucial in understanding the way CSR is perceived on social media. It gives a deeper understanding of the role of source and message framing in CSR communication in order to enable companies to select the most effective combination to increase CR and stimulate WOM, addressing Lee's *et al.* (2018) suggestion. In particular, showing that influencers are not more effective for communicating CSR than CEOs, indeed, they are less effective for spreading WOM. While it is true that numerous studies proved that influencer endorsement positively affects consumer's attitudes, this study considered both influencer and corporate sources and compared them to find the most effective. Given that nowadays influencers are considered important actors in CSR communication on social media and that companies over the last two decades have collaborated with social media influencers, this result highlights the relevance of the study for the professional world. Therefore, the current research stresses the importance of selecting the right type of source before sharing CSR information on social media.

Nonetheless, this study presents several limitations. First, although the CSR messages were created based on Ellen's *et al.* (2006) items together with CSR information of different luxury companies' official websites, the manipulations of CSR motives did not work properly for every participant. However, in reality, CSR messages on social media are not as clear and detailed as they were in the questionnaires, which might raise concerns about whether people in real life understand CSR messages on social media. Therefore, more research about that and for manipulation of CSR motives in social media messages is needed.

Second, for the experiment we chose a real influencer and this might have affected the results. Although we used a fictional company to remove the influence of pre-existing beliefs, it is not possible to use a fictitious influencer. We made sure to choose a popular influencer, but people might have different feelings about her, and results might have been influenced by participants' preconceptions. Further, and considering that influencers can also become CEOs, it could be relevant to include a third experimental condition with a source performing both roles in future research. Moreover, given that our results do not show significant results regarding credibility, research is needed to understand which other elements can affect the perception of message credibility.

Third, although previous literature on CSR on social media has shown the connection with e-WOM, our study only measured the communication outcomes on the traditional concept of WOM. Since literature suggests that influencer' messages are likely to be perceived as highly credible e-WOM (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017), future research should also include the measurement of e-WOM as a variable in connection to WOM. Even though our study found that a corporate source generates more WOM, results could be different with e-WOM.

Finally, even though CSR communication can lead to positive outcomes, it might be ineffective or even detrimental, when it comes across stakeholders' disbelief and skepticism (Kim, 2019). Hence, future research should analyze whether skepticism moderates the effect of framing and source.

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Appendix

Condition 1 - CEO & Values

Beatrice Marchesi
CEO at Infinity Lusso

We are pleased to announce our donation of over 30 million essential goods, safe water and medical supply to support children in need and communities around the world during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. As we aim to protect the environment for the better future of our planet, we are also investing over 60 million to sustainable materials and renewable energy projects, with the goal to procure 35% of our energy needs from renewable sources, as well as to support research institutes focused on addressing climate change and species extinction. Following the core values of our company, we are looking to diversify our workforce and we are actively ensuring that we set strict international labour policies to protect the safety and rights of our employees and to set examples of ethical behaviour.

You can find more detailed information on our website: www.infinitylusso.it

#InfinityLusso #CSR #social #environment #values

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Condition 2 - Influencer & Values

Influencer

Infinity Lusso announced their donation of over 30 million essential goods, safe water and medical supply to support children in need and communities around the world during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. As they aim to protect the environment for the better future of our planet, they are also investing over 60 million to sustainable materials and renewable energy projects, with the goal to procure 35% of their energy needs from renewable sources, as well as to support research institutes focused on addressing climate change and species extinction. Following the core values of their company, they are looking to diversify their workforce and they are actively ensuring to set strict international labour policies to protect the safety and rights of their employees.

You can find more detailed information on their website: www.infinitylusso.it

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Condition 3- CEO & Performance


Beatrice Marchesi
CEO Infinity Lusso

We are pleased to announce our donation of over 30 million essential goods, safe water and medical supply to support children in need and communities around the world during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. To help strengthen our market position and attract new customers, we are also investing over 60 million to sustainable materials and renewable energy projects, with the goal to procure 35% of our energy needs from renewable sources, as well as to support research institutes focused on addressing climate change and species extinction. Finally, we are looking to diversify our workforce and we are actively ensuring that we set strict international labour policies to protect the safety and rights of our employees and to set examples of ethical behaviour. We decided to engage in corporate social responsibility projects as it is beneficial for our company and will help to improve our brand image.

You can find more detailed information on our website: www.infinitylusso.it

#InfinityLusso #CSR #brandimage #environment #market

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Condition 4 - Influencer & Perfomance

Influencer

Infinity Lusso announced their donation of over 30 million essential goods, safe water and medical supply to support children in need and communities around the world during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. To help strengthen their market position and attract new customers, they are also investing over 60 million to sustainable materials and renewable energy projects, with the goal to procure 35% of our energy needs from renewable sources, as well as to support research institutes focused on addressing climate change and species extinction. Finally, they are looking to diversify their workforce and they are actively ensuring to set strict international labour policies to protect the safety and rights of their employees and to set examples of ethical behaviour. They decided to engage in corporate social responsibility projects as it is beneficial for their company and will help to improve their brand image.

You can find more detailed information on their website: www.infinitylusso.it

#InfinityLusso #CSR #brandimage #environment #market

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Figure A1.
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