

Information and disinformation in the communication of social responsibility: building customer trust

Información y desinformación en la comunicación de la responsabilidad social: la generación de confianza en el cliente

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Abstract

This research analyzes the capacity of corporate communication actions -in the context of social responsibility- to generate customer trust and establish an affective bond between both parties, which can provide companies with a superior competitive situation. In order to carry out this analysis, a qualitative study -through a focus group- and a quantitative study -through surveys- on real communication actions carried out by companies in the context of environmental sustainability have been carried out. The results show that when the public perceives an objective and consistent informational context, aligned with the core business of the firm, it promotes the creation of an affective consumer-company trust relationship. In the case of perceived misinformation, the negative impact on customer trust is high. This study has some limitations, including the inability to infer causality from the established relationships and the complexity of the underlying mechanisms and interdependencies among the variables analyzed. However, these limitations are in line with the exploratory approach adopted in the research. The findings point to significant practical implications, emphasizing

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the importance of aligning communication strategies with the organization's corporate identity and image.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, corporate communication, affective trust, disinformation, sustainability

Resumen

La presente investigación analiza la capacidad de las acciones de comunicación corporativa - en el contexto de la responsabilidad social- para generar confianza en el cliente y establecer un vínculo afectivo entre ambas partes, lo cual puede proporcionar a las empresas una situación competitiva superior. Para realizar dicho análisis se ha realizado un estudio cualitativo -mediante focus-group- y otro cuantitativo –mediante encuestas- sobre acciones de comunicación reales que han llevado a cabo empresas en el contexto de la sostenibilidad medioambiental. Los resultados muestran que cuando el público percibe un contexto informativo objetivo y coherente, alineado con el core business de la empresa ee favorece la creación de una relación de confianza afectiva consumidor-empresa. Y que, en el caso de percepción de desinformación, el impacto negativo sobre la confianza del cliente es elevada. El estudio presenta algunas limitaciones, como la no posibilidad de establecer causalidad en las relaciones encontradas y la necesidad de avanzar en los mecanismos subyacentes a dichas relaciones, si bien se corresponden con el carácter exploratorio del estudio. Los resultados tienen importantes implicaciones prácticas, ya que ponen de relieve la necesidad de alinear estratégicamente la comunicación con la identidad y la imagen corporativas

Palabras clave: Responsabilidad Social Corporativa, comunicación corporativa, confianza afectiva, desinformación, sostenibilidad

Summary

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1. INTRODUCTION

Trust is a key factor in social and institutional relationships, and therefore, a fundamental aspect of organizational relationships. Specifically, the generation of trust is a primary element in relationship marketing activities, as it is considered a priority asset for organizations and businesses and a particularly critical aspect during periods of instability and uncertainty (Abad, 2013).

In this context, trust is widely regarded as a source of competitive advantage for firms (Barney & Clark, 2007). Such advantages, which may arise at any stage of an organization's value chain, can also be sustained over time through their integration and alignment with the organization's other primary and support activities (Porter, 1985). Generating trust therefore

constitutes a fundamental corporate objective established by the senior management of firms (Markham, 2024).

In this context, corporate communication stands as a fundamental instrument for projecting an organization's external identity and image (Van Riel, 1997). Aspects such as the persuasive capacity or credibility that communicators can achieve are key in generating a specific attitude in the target audience (Martínez-Fresneda, 2010). From a public relations perspective, trust has historically been conceptualized as a direct consequence of strategic communication practices aimed at stakeholders (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), where trust arises not only from persuasive communications, but also from the organization's ability to maintain transparency and relational commitment with its audiences. Consequently, trust stands as a key indicator of the success of public relations, aligning communication strategies with the culture and values of the organization and the expectations of stakeholders.

Within the communication context, the feeling of trust is closely linked to the public's perception of different communicative actions —whether as trustworthy information, disinformation or fake news— (D'Ambrosi et al., 2021). The customer's perception of corporate credibility or integrity is, therefore, key in generating trust, requiring the full satisfaction of the expectations of the audience to whom the information is transmitted (Cambier & Poncin, 2020).

Thus, while effective management of an organization's communicative actions—strategies, message design, channels, targets, etc.—can always generate high levels of trust among stakeholders, it takes on fundamental importance in the current disruptive, turbulent, complex, and polarized environment, especially when the public receiving the communication is more deeply involved (Abad, 2013). In this scenario, public relations research has highlighted its strategic role as a mediator between the organization and its various audiences to prevent, mitigate, or correct misinformation (Fawkes, 2014).

In this regard, one of the activities that has received special attention recently is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR represents an organization's commitment to achieving, through its activities, the greatest possible economic, social and environmental well-being by applying a series of practices and utilizing its organizational resources (Du et al., 2010).

CSR has increasingly occupied a prominent role in the corporate strategy agenda of organizations, influenced by an increasingly competitive market that is more informed (and, paradoxically, misinformed) due to the explosion of information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as by growing awareness of the environmental and social challenges present in the environment. Furthermore, with the new integrated management systems, communication actions related to CSR activities emerge as a fundamental element, becoming part of the company's comprehensive organizational strategy. CSR is thus established as the materialization of an organization's commitment to its environment, forming an integral part of its ability to generate public trust and shaping the strategy and approach developed in its public relations (Xifra, 2005).

When considering the field of public relations, CSR communication constitutes a relational strategy aiming to promote the legitimacy of the organization and strengthen long-term relationships with stakeholders (Ihlen, 2008). Therefore, if any corporate communication

action is currently subject to high scrutiny, those related to aspects of social or environmental impact, such as those concerning CSR, are even more so (Forcadell et al., 2023).

Thus, the present study analyzes the specific role that the communication of organizations' CSR actions plays in generating affective trust in the public, which refers to trust based on emotional links, arising from perceptions of mutual care and concern, rather than rational assessments or analyses of competence or reliability (McAllister, 1995). Given that CSR actions can be categorized into different dimensions—charity, employment development, fair operations, environmental protection, customer orientation (Maignan & Ralston, 2002)—the analysis carried out in this research focuses on CSR actions related to the environmental dimension, which has an intense and high presence in companies' public communications.

In this way, the objective of the present research is to explore under what conditions the joint action of Corporate Communication and an organization's CSR actions can be an effective tool to achieve companies' strategic objectives, specifically as a generator of affective trust in consumers. It is thus intended to verify the role that communication plays in building the trust relationship between the company and its stakeholders, a fundamental factor for a stable and sustainable long-term relationship. These objectives guide both the selection of methodological tools and the interpretation of the results achieved.

The significance of the present study lies in the fact that while other aspects related to the effects of corporate communication have been extensively studied, trust in its affective dimension has been studied with much less intensity and frequency. The mechanisms that lead to its construction—as a fundamental intangible asset of companies—through communication are still not fully established, especially in the complex circumstances previously mentioned that characterize current social and economic environments.

This article is structured as follows. After this introductory section, the theoretical framework supporting the proposed model and hypotheses is established. Next, the methodology employed, consisting of an initial qualitative study followed by a quantitative study, is described. Subsequently, the results obtained in the two phases of the research are presented and discussed. Finally, the main conclusions drawn from the research are outlined.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Dimensions of Trust: Cognitive and Affective Trust

In the context of organizational relationships with their stakeholders, especially with their potential consumers, two dimensions of trust are distinguished (Du et al., 2011). The first is cognitive trust, characterized by rationality, and built as a result of the perception regarding the company's capabilities and know-how to satisfy consumer needs. It, therefore, has a transactional nature, being based on and oriented towards customer-company exchange. The second dimension is affective trust, which relates to consumers' consideration of how much an organization cares for or looks after its stakeholders. It is thus driven by corporate behaviors perceived as reflecting care and concern toward stakeholders at large or specifically toward consumers.

From a public relations perspective, trust—both cognitive and affective—is a fundamental outcome of an organization's ability to establish long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with its audiences (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). By considering organizations as relationshipbuilders whose communication practices foster credibility, commitment, satisfaction and mutual understanding (Hon & Grunig, 1999), affective trust aligns with the relational approach to public relations, which emphasizes the organization's responsiveness to stakeholder concerns, promoting a long-term relationship of trust between the organization and its stakeholders.

2.2. Corporate Identity, Image and Reputation as Bases of Affective Trust

Corporate identity, the main explanatory support for corporate image and reputation (He & Balmer, 2007), encompasses the visual image of the company through the set of communication media used to reach its internal and external stakeholders (Karaosmanoglu & Melewar, 2006). Corporate image, for its part, formed by an organization's various publics, is constructed from the overall perceived idea of its products, activities, conduct and behavior, thus being a reflection of the objective and subjective evaluations made by its stakeholders (Martínez & Olmedo, 2010).

Since affective trust depends on the consistency between identity, behaviour and communicated values by the organization, reputation becomes a key relational mechanism that links communication practices with trust building. This supports the claim that transparent, consistent, and trustworthy communication strategies have a positive influence on the generation of affective trust.

2.3. Corporate Communication as a Driver of Affective Trust

As previously mentioned, generating or maintaining trust—whether affective or cognitive—is a fundamental corporate objective for organizations. While the generation of cognitive trust falls—primarily but not exclusively—on the primary activities of the value chain (Porter, 1985), in the generation of affective trust—given its relationship with corporate identity, image, or reputation—marketing and communication activities play a significant role, with the adopted communication approach being key to analyzing the corporate identity and image transmitted to a company's potential consumers (Price et al., 2008).

In this context, corporate communication emerges as a fundamental tool in the external projection of corporate identity, values, image and brand (Van Riel, 1997). It is, therefore, a decisive factor in generating affective trust in consumers. Its implementation involves a strategic process that goes beyond the mere transmission of a message or information, possessing the capacity to shape public perception of the organization, building narratives of emotional connection with the audience (Blanco, 2013). Thus, through communication based on dialogic, ethical, and transparent interaction with the audience, the affective trust generated can be interpreted as the result of dialogic public relations practices that contribute to stronger and more resilient relationships between the organization and the audience (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

2.4. Corporate Social Responsibility as a Strategic Relational Mechanism

A fundamental aspect linking corporate communication with affective trust is reputation management (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). A solid reputation, generated through transparent, consistent and responsible communication, fosters the construction of a perception of reliability. At this point, organizational CSR emerges as a key player in the communication-reputation-trust relationship.

In the context of public relations, CSR communication is considered a strategic tool for generating legitimacy and fostering relationships with stakeholders (Ihlen et al., 2011). CSR communication contributes to generating affective trust when it is perceived as authentic, transparent, and responsive to society's expectations (Kim & Ferguson, 2018). This perspective aligns CSR not only with corporate strategy but also with the relational objectives of public relations, positioning CSR communication as a mechanism for strengthening the organization's reputation and building trust.

Therefore, consumers are more likely to perceive ulterior motives—mainly economic or image-washing—when CSR actions focus on generic social aspects than when they are related to the company's ordinary activities, with stereotyped communication regarding philanthropy often being rejected by the public (Du et al., 2010). In any case, transparent, coherent and well-managed CSR communication improves stakeholders' knowledge of the company, a perception that favors reputation and, indirectly, strengthens affective trust in the organization (Afandi et al., 2023).

Based on the foregoing, two determining factors can be identified in the relationship between CSR activities, the communication of these actions, and the generation of affective trust. The first is the typology of the CSR action and its level of integration with the company's value chain activities. The second is the typology of communication (channels, message, format, coherence).

Thus, affective trust is affected by both the CSR activities implemented and how these actions are communicated. First, it is necessary to consider whether the CSR action undertaken is reactive—acting as a good corporate citizen, in response to stakeholders' social concerns, mitigating adverse effects of business activities—or proactive—anticipating social or environmental challenges, linking them with the core strategy (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Second, the level of integration of these CSR actions with the company's ordinary activities must be considered (Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2014). Third, the characteristics of the message itself, in terms of consistency with the company's identity and image, transparency, channel used and content (Pattanaik, 2024).

With regard to CSR actions, previous research (Porter & Kramer, 2006) distinguishes between proactive actions, which are strategically integrated into the company's core activities, and reactive actions, which are implemented in response to external pressures. Proactive CSR, especially when aligned with the organization's value chain, has been found to contribute more effectively to building trust, as it transmits both a long-term commitment and consistency with the organization's usual activities (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015). However, reactive CSR actions tend to be perceived as opportunistic (Yu et al., 2022). This perception of alignment between CSR actions and corporate activity reinforces credibility and reduces

skepticism among stakeholders, which strengthens affective trust (Du et al., 2010; Dahrouj et al., 2025).

2.5. Communication Strategies for CSR and Their Effects on Affective Trust

The tone and style of the messages —objective or neutral, distant from advertising approaches—their quality and the channel used—one that generates trust, not identified as a source of disinformation—significantly influence the construction of affective trust (Kovács, 2020). Importantly, these efforts should not be limited to external audiences, but should begin with fostering trust internally among employees—trust that can subsequently be extended and amplified to all stakeholders (Gara & La Porte, 2020).

By integrating these elements, public relations offers a comprehensive framework that connects communication strategies, CSR initiatives, and reputation building under the overall target of generating trust-based relationships with stakeholders (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). Therefore, affective trust can be considered a key relational outcome of effective public relations management, which arises when organizations commit to consistent, transparent, and socially responsible communication with all their audiences.

Given that trust is enhanced when CSR communication is transparent, consistent with corporate identity, and delivered through channels perceived as trustworthy, communication characteristics become decisive in building affective trust.

2.6. Proposed hypotheses

Based on this theoretical framework, two hypotheses are proposed to empirically examine the relationships identified in the literature:

H1: The implementation of proactive CSR activities integrated into the company's ordinary operations is associated with the generation of affective trust.

H2: The coherence, transparency, and objectivity of corporate communication actions favor the generation of affective trust.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodological design and instruments were selected to directly address the research objectives and test the proposed hypotheses in an exploratory manner. Therefore, this research employed a sequential exploratory design using mixed qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). The qualitative stage provided inductive insights that were used to refine the quantitative instrument, while the quantitative stage allowed us to examine the relationships between CSR typology, communication attributes, and affective trust. Both stages of the research, which were consistent with the theoretical model and the proposed hypotheses, examined a specific issue related to environmental sustainability, along with a range of CSR initiatives addressing this issue and different forms of corporate communication employed by various companies. As the aim was to address a widely recognized issue that would engage a significant portion of the population, the topic selected was the generation of plastic waste by companies as part of their regular operations, either

stemming from their production processes or as part of the final product or service delivered to customers.

Affective trust was operationalized through changes in perceived corporate image following exposure to CSR communication actions. This methodological decision is based on the above-mentioned literature, which establishes a strong link between corporate image, reputation, and affective trust. Although there are validated scales for measuring affective trust (Delgado-Ballester, 2004), their application in this case was not appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the study and the respondents' exposure to multiple real communicative stimuli in a row. Therefore, the variation in brand image (improvement, no change, deterioration) was used as an indirect indicator of affective trust.

Regarding the categorization of the other variables under analysis, CSR activities are classified into two types: proactive (intimately associated with the company's value chain) and reactive (not related—or weakly related—to the company's ordinary activities). With respect to the communication channels employed, they are separated by the use of corporate website; company social media profiles; traditional media—radio, press, specialized magazines, television. And concerning the format of the messages used, they are divided into objective/informative—non-promotional, highly consistent with the company's existing image; emotional and/or advertising-oriented approach. The different categories described for the three variables and their coding are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Coding of communication actions presented in the focus group

Variable	Category	Coding
Type of CSR action	<i>Proactive-integrated</i>	P
	<i>Reactive-non-integrated</i>	R
Communication Channel Used	<i>Social networks</i>	SN
	<i>Web</i>	W
	<i>Traditional</i>	T
Message Characteristics	<i>Objective/Informative</i>	O
	<i>Emotional/Promotional</i>	E

Source: own elaboration.

Based on these three variables and their respective categories, 12 real communication actions related to the problem of plastic waste were selected. All of the communication actions analyzed belong to companies in the consumer goods and retail sector. The actions were shown using images and screenshots. They were presented randomly and differently in each focus group or respondent to avoid possible bias. The specific actions were selected with the aim of providing representative coverage of the different categories of descriptive variables used, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of Communication Actions Presented in the Focus Group

Action	CSR Action	Channel	Message
Action 1 (A1)	P	T	O
Action 2 (A2)	P	T	E
Action 3 (A3)	P	SN	O
Action 4 (A4)	P	SN	E
Action 5 (A5)	P	W	O
Action 6 (A6)	P	W	E
Action 7 (A7)	R	SN	O
Action 8 (A8)	R	SN	E
Action 9 (A9)	R	W	O
Action 10 (A10)	R	W	E
Action 11 (A11)	R	T	O
Action 12 (A12)	R	T	E

Source: own elaboration.

3.1. Qualitative research

The qualitative study employed the focus group methodology, following the design and procedures recommended for this type of exploratory research (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Four focus groups, each composed of eight participants, were carried out, ensuring the presence of two individuals from each of the age segments defined in the research within every group: 18-30 years old, 31-45 years old, 46-65 years old, and over 65 years old. The number of groups and participants per group was determined following qualitative research standards, aiming to ensure thematic saturation while maintaining manageable group sizes for in-depth discussion (Guest et al., 2020; Krueger & Casey, 2014). Participants were recruited through community networks (universities, municipal centers, etc.) and online advertisements. The requirements were to be over 18 years of age and a regular consumer of packaged products. Heterogeneity in terms of gender, educational level, income, use of ICTs, and degree of environmental awareness was deliberately sought. All participants gave their informed consent before participating.

The focus groups were conducted following a semi-structured discussion guide, validated by two experts in CSR communication, ensuring content validity. A semi-structured script organized into four thematic blocks was used: (1) perception of the plastic waste problem; (2) attitudes and personal involvement in sustainability issues; (3) knowledge and assessment of CSR initiatives; (4) reaction to specific CSR communication actions and their impact on brand image and trust. The structure comprised four thematic blocks: (1) perception of the plastic waste problem; (2) attitudes and personal involvement in sustainability issues; (3) knowledge and assessment of CSR initiatives; (4) reaction to specific CSR communication actions and their impact on brand image and trust. Each session lasted approximately one and a half hours.

The sessions began with the presentation of the topic to be discussed: plastic waste and the necessity, or not, of addressing its reduction or elimination. After the presentation, the moderator asked all participants to state their position regarding. Following this, various questions were posed to deepen participants' knowledge on the topic. Next, participants were

asked to share examples of actions they knew companies were implementing to address the problem of plastic waste, and to express their opinion on each of them. The aim was to detect their prior knowledge and positioning regarding these actions. Afterwards, participants were shown the 12 selected CSR communication actions, and a discussion was held on both the CSR activity and the communicative action, collecting participants' opinions on the matter. Finally, it was recorded how each shown action influenced the participants' pre-existing image of the brand, in terms of whether the communicative action improved, worsened or did not affect the perceived image of the company.

The sessions were recorded and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. In addition, two researchers other than those who conducted the sessions analyzed and coded them independently, and discrepancies within the research team were resolved by consensus, which reinforced the reliability of the analysis.

3.1. Quantitative research

The quantitative study was conducted through a random survey of individuals over 18 years of age. The total sample size used was 476 people, and it was carried out between September 2023 and February 2024. Although the sample is not statistically representative, its size is adequate for exploratory statistical analysis and allows the identification of significant patterns and associations between variables. The methods employed were both online—distributed through various forums—and in-person—conducted in a shopping center in the city of Zaragoza (Spain). The sample was non-probabilistic and non-representative, as the profile of the study conducted in this research is exploratory and not confirmatory, for which the characteristics of the sample used are sufficient (Hair et al., 1999).

The questionnaire was designed based on the results of the qualitative study and underwent a preliminary pilot test, which allowed the survey format to be determined in order to avoid bias in the responses (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2001). The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential technique—chi-square tests (Agresti, 2006)—with the aim of exploring the relationship between the type of CSR action, the characteristics of communication, and affective trust.

4. RESULTS

The results achieved are presented following the structure of the research objectives and hypotheses.

4.1. Results of the qualitative research

The participants in the focus groups predominantly viewed the plastic waste problem as serious or very serious, with most also indicating their involvement in reducing the issue. During the discussion, preconceived notions linked to disinformation, fake news, and alarmist approaches also emerged. For instance, it was dominant to assign 50% to 90% of the responsibility for plastic waste dumped into oceans to Europe and the United States, a view that contrasts with empirical estimates pointing to riverine areas in Asia or Africa as the primary sources of marine plastic pollution (Meijer et al., 2021). At the opposite extreme, denialist stances were also observed among participants less concerned with the problem,

who attributed a state of general alarmism to the actions of certain lobbies and interest groups. However, this perspective was very minor.

Regarding possible actions for mitigating the problem, the vast majority believed that much more could be done institutionally, corporately and socially. Participants showed low awareness regarding CSR actions related to plastic waste reduction. When the 12 CSR communication actions included in the research were presented, participants' majority opinions varied between perceiving economic motives, image-washing or corporate responsibility, depending on the distinct characteristics of the presented actions already mentioned. In any case, the prevailing idea was that, regardless of the motivation, it was important to act against the problem.

Among the 12 actions presented, the closer the alignment between CSR activities and the company's core business, the more favorable the public perception, with some socio-environmental philanthropic actions even being rejected. Similarly, activities considered to have a greater impact and sustainability over time received better evaluations, compared to those considered sporadic. In these cases, the company's image was strengthened when the CSR initiative was evaluated positively, and weakened when it was evaluated negatively.

In all analyzed cases, the communication format used acted as a catalyst and enhancer of the action considered. Thus, more objective messages were generally perceived more positively. In contrast, messages of a more advertising nature received more negative considerations, associated with greenwashing, disinformation or hypocritical behavior by the companies carrying them out.

The medium through which the message was conveyed was found to influence its impact, depending on participants' age group and their degree of ICT engagement. Older participants showed lower receptivity to messages on social media and higher receptivity in traditional or specialized media. And, regarding ICT use, the higher the level of ICT use, the greater the acceptance of social media channels compared to other media. Nevertheless, despite using traditional media less than social media for information, younger segments also expressed a higher degree of trust in the content of the former than the latter.

In all analyzed cases, participants' evaluations—whether positive or negative—of each communication action were directly reflected in the corporate image, often reshaping prior perceptions of the company and brand, and influencing their intention to consume or reject the brand.

4.2. Results of the quantitative research

The main results obtained from the quantitative study phase are presented below. First, table 3 shows the sociodemographic profile of the sample. Table 4 shows the respondents' positioning—their level of awareness regarding the plastic waste generation problem—their involvement in reducing this waste, and their level of knowledge of CSR actions carried out. Table 5 details respondents' initial perceptions of companies' CSR actions, taken at the beginning of the interview. Regarding the CSR communication actions analyzed, the results are presented in Table 6. These tables show respondents' reactions and their subsequent

perception of the company/brand for each of the same 12 communication actions analyzed in the qualitative part of the research.

Table 3. Sociodemographic profile of the sample

Variable	Category	%
Gender	Male	52.1
	Female	46.8
	Other/Prefer not to say	1.1
Age	18-30	25.6
	31-45	29.6
	46-65	31.3
	Over 65	13.4
Level of education	Primary	32.8
	Secondary	25.1
	University	42.1
Employment status	Student	17.6
	Employee	58.1
	Unemployed	13.2
	Retired	11.1

Source: own elaboration.

Table 4. Positioning, Involvement and Knowledge of CSR Actions Among Respondents

Variable	High	Medium	Low
Positioning	71.45%	19.34%	9.31%
Implication	66.78%	25.63%	7.59%
CSR Knowledge	43.06%	37.75%	17.19%

Source: own elaboration.

Table 5. Perception of CSR Actions

Variable	Positive	Neutral	Negative
CSR Perception	30.44%	49.84%	19.72%

Source: own elaboration.

Table 6. Reaction to Communication & Effect on the Brand

Action	Reaction			Effect		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Improved	Unchanged	Worsened
A1	87.14%	4.51%	8.35%	86.10%	9.11%	4.74%
A2	76.87%	3.84%	19.29%	71.93%	7.05%	21.02%
A3	83.19%	4.26%	12.55%	81.42%	8.19%	10.39%
A4	82.64%	3.95%	13.41%	79.83%	6.07%	14.1%
A5	85.57%	4.17%	10.26%	80.91%	7.78%	11.31%
A6	79.05%	3.78%	17.17%	76.44%	6.94%	16.62%
A7	66.92%	3.98%	29.1%	60.12%	6.88%	33.00%
A8	61.22%	3.05%	35.73%	54.01%	6.06%	39.93%
A9	66.56%	4.02%	29.42%	62.55%	7.92%	30.53%
A10	65.36%	3.26%	31.38%	60.98%	6.54%	32.48%
A11	70.56%	5.20%	24.24%	68.76%	9.02%	23.22%
A12	66.45%	3.58%	29.97%	61.04%	6.57%	32.39%

Source: own elaboration.

The average recognition level among respondents for the proposed CSR communication actions was 28.42%. The most recognized actions reached levels of 59.14% (A4), 56.82% (A3), and 49.14% (A8). The least recognized was A5 (10.42%) and A6 (12.80%).

The correlation between participants' reactions to communication actions and the resulting impact on the brand was analyzed—specifically, the degree to which a positive, neutral, or negative reaction corresponded, respectively, to an improved, unchanged, or worsened perception of the brand. The analysis revealed a 79.6% correlation between the two variables.

With the aim of going beyond descriptive analysis, chi-square tests were performed to examine the relationship between the type of communication actions and changes in corporate image. Regarding the type of CSR and changes in corporate image, $\chi^2(1)=24.87$, $p<0.001$ was obtained. Therefore, proactive and integrated CSR actions were significantly more likely to generate improvements in corporate image than reactive initiatives (hypothesis H1).

When considering the type of message and the effect on corporate image, the results indicate a significant relationship between the two, $\chi^2(1)=17.42$, $p<0.001$. Therefore, objective and informative messages were more likely to improve corporate image than emotional or promotional messages (hypothesis H2). And, finally, a statistically significant association was also found between the communication channel and corporate image results, $\chi^2(2)=9.63$, $p=0.008$, suggesting that the effectiveness of CSR communication varies depending on the channel (hypothesis H2).

5. DISCUSSION

The following discussion interprets the results in relation to the initial research objectives and the hypotheses guiding the study. The results indicate a substantial level of awareness regarding the problem, which translates into a majority of respondents being involved and actively contributing, to varying degrees, to reduce the environmental issue. This involvement

and awareness regarding the specific issue addressed influence the different perceptions observed, as they act as a reinforcing factor for responses to both CSR actions and the communication efforts carried out, as previously mentioned. Furthermore, CSR actions—a priori and generically—are mostly perceived neutrally. This outcome might be partly due to the high level of unfamiliarity with these actions, but it also minimizes biases in the study caused by preconceived notions.

These findings are consistent with previous research already mentioned that highlights the central role of consistency in CSR communication in building trust, while expanding on this literature by empirically examining the impact of different communication formats and channels in a context susceptible to misinformation.

In any case, the observed combination of high involvement with the problem and a significant lack of knowledge about its genesis, mitigation actions and minimization alternatives creates a fertile ground for two important effects. First, the proliferation of disinformation. Second, the greater impact—positive or negative—that appropriate or inappropriate corporate communication can have on corporate reputation or public trust in the company (Zhou et al., 2024).

The qualitative results reinforce the patterns observed in the quantitative phase, showing that the effectiveness of CSR communication is closely related to how the activities carried out are articulated and transmitted, rather than to their mere existence. When considering the three variables of analysis—CSR actions, communication channel, and message format—the results suggest that proactive initiatives integrated into the company's value chain, combined with objective messages disseminated through trustworthy channels, are more effective in fostering positive perceptions and affective trust. These results highlight the importance of consistency and credibility in CSR communication strategies, especially in contexts characterized by information overload and growing scepticism towards corporate messages.

Secondly, regarding the communication format used, respondents show a high perception of greenwashing actions. As a result, those employing advertising techniques or message types aimed at emotional aspects generally receive fewer positive reactions and worse subsequent brand perceptions than messages that are more objective and data-focused. This again indicates the significant impact disinformation has had on public discourse in general, and on environmental issues in particular (Drummond et al., 2020), leading to a high degree of public skepticism toward corporate communication efforts. This pattern is also supported by the results of the inferential analysis, which reveal statistically significant differences in brand perception depending on the format of the message, whether objective or promotional.

Concerning CSR action, a better response is observed for proactive CSR actions associated with the company's value chain compared to reactive CSR actions focused on generic aspects. When comparing pairs of actions, holding two variables constant and changing the third, the largest differences occur with changes in the CSR action. This result is consistent with previous studies showing the alignment of CSR with the company's core business as a central factor in positive public reception (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015). This helps to avoid situations where CSR is perceived more as a marketing tool than as a genuine social and environmental commitment, where the company appropriates social legitimacy without backing it with

consistent actions (Packard et al., 2025). Inferential analysis confirms that these differences are statistically significant, demonstrating the association between CSR typology and corporate image.

When applying multivariate analysis to the three variables their joint effects on consumer perception are accentuated. The maximum difference in message reaction and subsequent brand perception occurs between actions A1 and A8, with 25.92% less positive message reaction and 32.39% less positive brand perception for the latter compared to the former. In other words, this maximum difference occurs between a proactive action, communicated via traditional media with an objective message (A1), and a reactive action, communicated via social media with an emotional message (A2). In this sense, multivariate analysis reinforces the inferential results by showing that CSR typology and message characteristics maintain their explanatory power when considered together, confirming their predictive role in the formation of affective trust.

The results show that, while the main factor influencing public reaction is the type of CSR action performed, the role of communication is key to the final reaction. As can be seen in Table 6, the use of an appropriate message and channel can substantially mitigate the negative effect that a CSR action might have on the public. The most notable effect in this regard is observed when considering action A11. This reactive CSR action, communicated via traditional media with an objective message, stands out among other reactive actions, performing more than six points above the next best-rated.

All these results are consistent with previous studies, which observe that communications of CSR actions focused on generic social problems are more likely to be perceived as disinformation, greenwashing or incentivized by economic motives, compared to those associated with CSR activities related to the company's own operations and with a clear fit within specific problems (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015).

Based on all of the above, the research results support the established hypotheses in the study. Messages about proactive CSR actions that align more closely with companies' value chains receive a greater positive response from the public (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, when the message is perceived as objective, coherent, and has used a channel that inspires trust, positive perception increases, which favors consumer trust and dispels the specter of greenwashing and disinformation (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, the combination of both aspects reinforces the final outcome in terms of positive reaction and perception (Hypotheses 1 and 2). This support is based not only on descriptive patterns, but also on statistically significant inferential results that reinforce the empirical validation of both hypotheses.

This indicates and reinforces that, while strategic alignment of all value chain activities is always imperative (Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2014; Porter & Kramer, 2006), in the case of communication actions, the consequences can be especially critical due to the pernicious effects of both real disinformation and the perception of disinformation prevalent in contemporary society (García-Marín & Salvat-Martinrey, 2021). Corporate identity and image are highly valuable intangible assets, generated and accumulated slowly within an organization, and strategic changes in them must be managed in a coherent and gradual manner. Otherwise, misalignments perceived by the public, resulting from inappropriate

communication actions, can lead to a loss of consumer trust, with the harmful effects derived therefrom.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article investigated the effect that the communication of CSR activities has on the public in terms of generating affective trust, which should be considered a key objective of organizational communication efforts. To achieve this, a two-stage study was conducted. The first stage involved in-depth opinions gathered through focus groups on the addressed topic, which simultaneously served to refine the second stage of the research—a quantitative study using a survey to test the formulated hypotheses.

Within this exploratory framework, the main contribution of this study lies in its integrative analysis of the typology of CSR actions, communication channels, and message formats, as well as in the empirical examination of their association with affective trust using real communication stimuli.

The results indicate that, given the relevance of non-cognitive factors in generating trust, CSR communication plays a significant role in shaping affective trust, especially when actions are consistently aligned with the organization's activities and communicated in an objective and credible manner. Within the exploratory scope of this research, these findings suggest that strategic consistency between CSR practices and communication appears to be a key factor in fostering positive perceptions, while misaligned or overly promotional approaches may undermine trust.

This study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting its results. On the one hand, its exploratory nature and the use of a non-probability sample prevent the findings from being generalized. Although the sample size and sociodemographic diversity allow relevant patterns and relationships to be identified, the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than confirmatory. Second, affective trust was observed using an indirect indicator. Although this decision is supported by previous research, this approach does not capture all dimensions of the observed construct. Finally, the study focuses exclusively on CSR actions related to the environmental dimension. While this choice responds to its high social and communicative relevance, future research should extend the analysis to other dimensions of CSR to test the consistency of the results. Despite these limitations, the research provides relevant evidence of the mechanisms through which CSR communication influences the generation of affective trust, offering a solid basis for further confirmatory research.

7. AI STATEMENT

During the preparation of this work, the authors used AI tools to improve language and readability. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary. The authors assume full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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