

Original Research

Leveraging Construal Fit Between Message Framing and Spatial Distance in CSR Communication

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ABSTRACT

Construal level theory (CLT), which describes the relationship between psychological distance and mental construal, has implications for message effects research. We seek to gain clarity in the application of CLT in the context of CSR campaigns by examining the role of the construal fit between message framing and spatial distance to a CSR campaign in generating positive outcomes of CSR communication. A 3 (message framing: why vs. how-company-framed vs. how-beneficiary-framed) x 2 (spatial distance to a CSR campaign: domestic vs. international) between-subjects experiment demonstrated the effects of construal fit between a domestic CSR campaign and how-framed messages on authenticity perception, company trust, and attitudes toward the company. However, these effects were not found in the setting of an international CSR campaign, implying that there is a boundary condition for “construal fit” effects. The present study provides theoretical insights by highlighting how message framing and spatial distance interact to shape consumer perceptions in CSR communication. Practically, the findings provide actionable guidance for practitioners, emphasizing the importance of tailoring message framing based on the spatial proximity of CSR campaigns to create more effective communication strategies.

KEYWORDS

construal level theory (CLT), spatial distance, message framing, corporate social responsibility (CSR) authenticity, company trust, attitudes toward the company

Over the past few years, companies' engagement with communities, society, and environmental issues through corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns has received increasing attention, and CSR engagement can no longer be relegated to a peripheral role. In particular, there has been a growing understanding both within companies and among consumers regarding companies' roles in society and how they are interwoven in the fabric of society (Molleda, 2010; Tata & Prasad, 2015). Nevertheless, regardless of the success of their

CSR campaigns, companies often face public criticism, such as allegations of “washing”—for example, greenwashing, or exaggerating the environmental benefits of a company’s products or services; pinkwashing, or claiming to advocate for the LGBTQ community without taking meaningful action; and wokewashing, or using social justice for a company’s image-making without making real changes. As a result, both scholars and practitioners have long been interested in how to persuade individuals that CSR initiatives are genuine and authentic, perceptions that ultimately lead to campaign success (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015; Pérez, 2019).

A body of literature has delved into the concept of authenticity or related areas, such as perceived CSR motives and skepticism of consumers or employees toward CSR campaigns (Fatma & Khan, 2022; Forehand & Grier, 2003; Jeon & An, 2019; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). Prior studies have demonstrated how different CSR motives, such as self- and public-serving motives (Fatma & Khan, 2022), value-driven, stakeholder-driven, strategic, and egoistic motives (Jeon & An, 2019), and unselfish (versus selfish) and noneconomic (versus economic) motives (Schaefer et al., 2019), have distinct effects on perceived CSR authenticity. Perceptions of the underlying motives of CSR communications impact consumer responses to CSR communication and can result in CSR skepticism (e.g., Forehand & Grier, 2003; Mohr et al., 1998; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009).

Most studies have focused on CSR fit, which is “the perceived congruence between a social issue and a company business” (Du et al., 2010, p. 12), as a condition of generating CSR authenticity. In other words, studies have examined how closely CSR initiatives align with a company’s core business—for example, a food company sponsoring the nonprofit No Kid Hungry or an outdoor products company initiating an environmental campaign—influences customer perceptions of CSR authenticity (S. Kim & Lee, 2020; Liu & Jung, 2021). High-fit CSR actions

reduce suspicion when a business has a good reputation. Conversely, a bad reputation paired with high-fit CSR might increase skepticism and worsen the already bad reputation (Aksak et al., 2016). However, fewer studies have explored how strategic message framing and contextual factors, such as spatial distance, interact to influence perceived CSR authenticity.

The present study seeks to fill this gap by applying construal level theory (CLT) to examine the interaction between message framing (why-framed vs. how-framed messages) and spatial distance (domestic vs. international campaigns). CLT provides a framework for exploring how individuals process information at varying levels of abstraction, which can offer new insights into the strategic alignment of message design with consumer perceptions based on psychological distance. Focusing on the “construal fit” between message framing and spatial distance, this study advances the literature by identifying conditions under which CSR messages are perceived as more authentic, which promotes positive attitudes and trust toward the company.

The results have both theoretical and practical implications. In terms of theory, we are applying CLT to the CSR context, which broadens the scope of CLT’s application. Furthermore, we focus on interactions between message framing and spatial distance to the CSR campaign, seeking the boundary condition of the construal fit. In terms of practice, the results provide implications for how communication strategies can be deployed depending on the campaign context.

Authenticity in CSR Communication

Consumers search for genuine, unique, and relevant brands, indicating that they value authenticity in businesses (Beverland & Luxton, 2005; Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Morhart et al., 2015). Consequently, when companies are employing CSR communication, stakeholders have a greater demand for increased

transparency, openness, and accountability (Molleda, 2010). CSR has been defined as an organization's obligation to maximize its beneficial impact while minimizing its harm to society (Brown & Dacin, 1997; David et al., 2005; Grunig, 2000; Mohr et al., 2001) and as operations that appear to improve society beyond business interests and legal requirements (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). According to Tata and Prasad (2015), businesses can use CSR communication to convey a certain identity and image, demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility, boost corporate legitimacy, and improve organizational reputation.

Perceived CSR authenticity has emerged as a critical factor in the effectiveness of CSR communication (Lv & Wokutch, 2024; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015; Pérez, 2019). Customers frequently question why businesses engage in CSR activities (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Vanhamme & Grobбен, 2009). Consumer responses to CSR communication are influenced by their perception of the underlying motives of CSR messages, which can lead to CSR skepticism (e.g., Forehand & Grier, 2003; Mohr et al., 1998; Vanhamme & Grobбен, 2009). Authenticity is defined as evaluations, judgments, or assessments of how real or genuine something is (Beckman et al., 2009). A person, business, or message can be considered authentic if it is a true representation of the original, as opposed to a copy (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Peterson, 2005; Schallehn et al., 2014). Thus, genuineness, reality, and truth are closely linked to the concept of authenticity (Chiu et al., 2012). In the context of CSR, taking a stakeholder-oriented perspective, Alhouti et al. (2016) defined CSR authenticity as the perception that a business's socially conscious acts are a genuine and true representation of its beliefs and behavior toward the community, going beyond what is required by law. Similarly, Mazutis and Slawinski (2015) defined CSR authenticity as the degree to which a company's CSR initiatives are genuine; that is, whether they are consistent

with the organization's values as well as social norms and expectations. Accordingly, perceptions of CSR authenticity relate to the idea that the company's CSR initiatives are genuine acts of respect and concern for diverse stakeholders, rather than being a means of maximizing corporate profits.

Research has revealed that authenticity leads to other positive outcomes. For consumers, Chiu et al. (2012) found that it improves customers' brand attitudes toward experience items (such as casual dining restaurants and financial investment services) more than it does for search products (such as English language magazines and fashion clothing). In the context of CSR, message authenticity had a positive influence on consumer attitudes toward information about a company's CSR efforts and initiatives (Pérez, 2019), purchase intentions, loyalty toward the company, reducing boycott actions (Alhouti et al., 2016), and organization–public relationship (OPR) outcomes, such as trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality (Lim & Jiang, 2021). Authenticity also positively impacted internal stakeholders. Servaes et al. (2023) found that authentic CSR increased organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), implying that employees will be encouraged to pursue OCB if the company demonstrates genuine commitments to the CSR program that align with the organization's core values. Given the importance of CSR authenticity, scholars began exploring CSR motives as a precondition to generate authenticity (Fatma & Khan, 2022; Jeon & An, 2019; Schaefer et al., 2019). Higher CSR fit between a company's primary areas of business and its CSR initiatives improved consumer perceptions of CSR authenticity (S. Kim & Lee, 2020; Liu & Jung, 2021). Similarly, Mazutis and Slawinski (2015) discovered that two attributes—distinctiveness and social connectedness—were linked to a company's CSR initiatives being perceived as authentic by stakeholders. *Distinctiveness* refers to how closely a company's

CSR actions align with its core mission, vision, and values, whereas *social connectedness* refers to how well an organization's CSR efforts are integrated into a broader societal context.

In exploring effective message strategies for CSR communication, Pérez et al. (2020) found that information specificity and social issue awareness enhance consumer perceptions of CSR authenticity. The former pertains to how specific CSR information is provided, and the latter is concerned with how knowledgeable consumers are about the particular social problem that the company is addressing with its CSR activities. Their findings highlight the importance of carefully crafted messaging in influencing authenticity perceptions. However, how the framing of CSR messages can shape consumer perceptions of authenticity remains relatively underexplored. Message framing is crucial in CSR communication because it influences how people perceive and evaluate CSR messages as well as consumer attitudes and behavior (Cordero-Gutiérrez et al., 2024; Y. Kim & Chon, 2022; Schade et al., 2022; Schmeltz, 2014). This is an important consideration, because framing messages as “why” (high-level) versus “how” (low-level) provides distinct cognitive pathways for processing information. This distinction is grounded in CLT, which suggests that physically distant events (e.g., internationally implemented CSR campaigns) are processed on a higher, more abstract level (i.e., “why” framing), while physically proximate events (e.g., domestically implemented CSR campaigns) are processed on a lower, more concrete level (i.e., “how” framing). By framing CSR messages in accordance with this distinction, organizations can align the level of abstraction with the spatial distance of the campaign, resulting in a construal fit that improves perceptions of both the message and the firm.

By incorporating social distance into our framework, we illustrate how the perceived proximity or distance of a CSR campaign can influence the effectiveness of different message

framings. This congruence between message framing and spatial distance can enhance the perceived authenticity of the CSR message, which is critical for building trust and developing positive consumer attitudes. To identify strategic combinations for fostering consumers' perceptions of CSR authenticity, this study investigates the role of message framing as a message factor and spatial distance as a contextual factor, guided by CLT.

Construal Level Theory (CLT) as a Theoretical Framework

Construal level theory (CLT), a framework in social psychology, explores how individuals' psychological distance to an object or event influences their thinking patterns (Trope & Liberman, 2010). According to CLT, the farther away an object or event is perceived to be, the more abstractly it is contemplated. Conversely, objects or events that are closer are thought of more concretely. The theory suggests that individuals interpret events across a spectrum from concrete to abstract, depending on their perceived distance (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010; Trope et al., 2007).

CLT identifies four dimensions of psychological distance: temporal (present vs. past/future), social (self vs. other), spatial (close vs. far), and hypothetical (certain vs. probable; Liberman et al., 2007). Individuals tend to abstractly conceptualize temporally, physically, and socially distant or hypothetical situations, employing high-level construals. Conversely, they approach temporally, physically, and socially close or probable events concretely, utilizing low-level construals. The literature has also demonstrated that the level of psychological distance and its corresponding construal level affect each other in a bidirectional fashion (Fujita et al., 2006; Liberman et al., 2007; Stephan, 2004).

In the context of message effects research, CLT offers valuable insights for studying optimal

combinations of message components such as message topics, design, and processing styles (Lee, 2019). This is particularly relevant because message framing, whether it emphasizes the “why” or “how” aspects, can induce different construal levels (Soderberg et al., 2015). The “why” frame addresses the desirability or value of an action’s end state, while the “how” frame focuses on the feasibility or the complexity of achieving the desired outcome (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996; Liberman & Trope, 1998). For instance, previous research using the Behavioral Identification Form (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) found that participants construed actions differently depending on whether they were asked why or how they should perform them (Freitas et al., 2004; Fujita et al., 2006). Specifically, participants exposed to why-based questions tended to rely more on abstract descriptions of behaviors, whereas those exposed to how-based questions leaned toward concrete descriptions. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that activating high-level construal by providing why-information leads people to perceive events as occurring at a more distant point in time (Liberman et al., 2007; McCrea et al., 2008). Additionally, Liviatan et al. (2008) revealed that actions of socially close individuals were often identified in more concrete, subordinate means-related terms, rather than in abstract, superordinate ends-related terms.

Construal Fit Effects Between Message Framing and Spatial Distance

Several studies have examined the effectiveness of construal fit, focusing on the alignment between message factors and psychological distance, such as physical and social. Previous research (Trope et al., 2007) showed that geographic distance influences people’s reaction times to stimuli with varying construal levels of information. Recipients reacted faster to the matched stimulus (a near event represented by concrete information) than

to the unmatched stimulus (a near event described by abstract information). Because the information in the matched stimulus is more noticeable and accessible to recipients than the information in the unmatched stimulus, people may exhibit more positive attitudes when they observe the matched stimulus.

Investigating whether a match between construal level and social distance leads to favorable outcomes, S. Y. Park et al. (2020) illustrated this in the context of recycling promotion campaigns. They found that abstract messages laden with “why” were more persuasive when the target comprised socially distant entities, such as “world” and “our planet.” Conversely, concrete messages laden with “how” were more persuasive when the target comprised socially close entities, like one’s “local community” and “country.” Specifically, they conceptualized socially close entities as immediate or directly relevant, while distant entities were considered to be broader or further away. Within organizational communication, Berson and Halevy (2014) found that employees favored detailed and concrete feedback from direct supervisors (socially close), while abstract visions from hierarchically distant leaders (socially distant) were preferred. Another exploration into the effects of construal fit by Cai and Leung (2020) demonstrated that, for people residing in regions with high COVID-19 severity, that is, with a temporally immediate danger (vs. regions with low severity), how-framed messages were more effective in increasing the intention to order online food deliveries to prevent disease spread compared to why-framed messages.

In the context of CSR, researchers have also found that the fit between construal level and psychological distance increases the effectiveness of CSR strategies. For example, Zhu et al. (2017) compared the impact of donations that are framed to emphasize a company’s effort (effort-oriented framing) versus those that are framed to emphasize its ability (ability-oriented

framing). The former highlights the company's commitment, which aligns with high-level (abstract) construal, and the latter aligns with low-level (concrete) construal, where the company's resources and capacity are highlighted. Their results indicated that when the initiative is distant (e.g., in time or location), an effort-oriented approach focusing on the company's commitment is more effective. This alignment between message framing and psychological distance increased brand favorability and purchase intentions. The strategies interacted with the temporal and spatial distance to an environmental campaign, confirming that the fit mattered. Similarly, G. Park and Park (2016) demonstrated the effects of congruence between message framing and psychological distance in global environmental CSR campaigns. Feasibility framing that focuses on how to help solve the problem and emphasizes the immediate results of the campaign was more effective in increasing intention to support the campaign and willingness to donate in a nearby location. Furthermore, desirability framing illustrating the need for the campaign and emphasizing the results was more effective when done in a distant time and place.

However, the results of such studies are sometimes inconsistent, suggesting that construal fit effects vary depending on the context. Take, for example, the context of cause-related marketing (CRM). Although typical CSR efforts can achieve goals such as enhanced brand awareness or reputation, it is difficult for a firm to quantify the positive impact on sales. To address this challenge, corporations may incorporate CRM as a tactical approach within their broader CSR strategy. By tying product sales to charitable donations, CRM programs—often referred to as “purchase-based philanthropy”—are transactional in nature, with the goal of increasing sales while contributing to a social cause (Morris et al., 2013; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). According to T. Kim and Kim (2021), the effectiveness of CRM ads depends on a construal fit between the spatial distance

of the cause (global vs. local) and the message strategy (abstract vs. concrete). In particular, consumer attitudes toward advertisements and their perceived believability are influenced by the alignment between the cause's spatial distance and the message framing (T. Kim & Kim, 2021). Their findings suggest that abstract messaging resonates more with consumers when the cause is global (spatially distant), while the difference between abstract and concrete messaging is less pronounced for local causes (spatially near). This highlights the advantage of using abstract, high-level messaging in CRM efforts to optimize consumer reactions, especially when addressing global causes.

Applying CLT to the context of corporate crises, Oh et al. (2022) found that individuals showed more negative reactions toward a defensive response strategy rather than an accommodating response in the socially close company. However, there was no such difference for the socially distant company. Their findings showed that when a firm that is closer to its customers experiences a crisis, those customers are more likely to focus on the company's crisis response than on the business itself, making them more perceptive and critical of corporate crisis messaging. They reasoned that while crisis severity inspires “why” the organization engages in crisis management, crisis response messages about “how” to handle the situation could act as low-construal level communication. Therefore, the impact of a “construal fit” condition can differ between one of the psychological distance dimensions, such as social and spatial distance, and the manner in which the message is conveyed, based on issues and circumstances.

As reviewed, there is limited literature on how construal fit works in exploring the interaction between psychological distance and the construal itself (T. Kim & Kim, 2021; E. Kim et al., 2024; S. Y. Park et al., 2020). The results from the literature generally support that how-framed messages were more effective than why-framed messages.

Nevertheless, exceptions exist. For example, S. Y. Park et al. (2020) found that why-framed messages were more effective when the campaign is targeted at the global community. Similarly, Kim and T. Kim (2021) showed that abstract messages, which reflected “why” framing, enhanced consumer evaluations of CRM advertising when addressing a global cause (far spatial distance). This type of interaction was not observed in E. Kim et al. (2024): For the distanced spatial condition, the how-framed message was equally effective as the why-framed message.

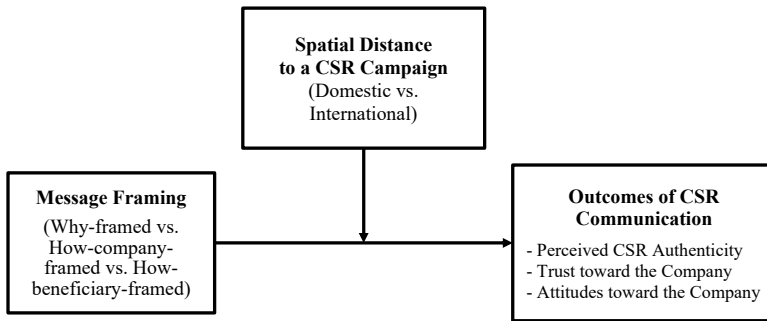
Emphasizing spatial distance and message framing in CRM campaigns, Grau and Folse (2007) reported that local donations, as opposed to national donations, lead to more favorable attitudes and participation intentions, especially among less-involved consumers. For less-involved individuals, positive framing (e.g., focusing on survival rates) proves more effective than negative framing (e.g., focusing on the death rate). These findings emphasize the necessity of focusing on local causes and using positive messaging to engage consumers who may not already be highly involved with the cause (Grau & Folse, 2007). While their study did not apply CLT, our research employs a CLT-based approach to identify a potential construal fit and investigate how the interplay between message frames (why-framed vs. how-framed) and spatial distance (domestic vs. international) serves as a strategic cue that can lead to favorable CSR outcomes. Analyzing this link between message framing and special distance helps us to provide a nuanced understanding of how matching message frames with the proximity of a CSR campaign can result in more successful CSR communication. In addition, we propose effective methods of customizing message framing based on perceived campaign proximity to enhance customer responses. As multinational firms expand their CSR efforts beyond their domestic borders, this study can offer practitioners strategic guidance for tailoring messages in their CSR communication.

Applying CLT-based construal fit, we examine how different message frames (why-framed vs. how-company-framed vs. how-beneficiary-framed) interact with spatial distance to the CSR campaign (exposure to a domestic CSR campaign vs. an international CSR campaign), offering insights into effective CSR communication. Individuals are more sensitive to and influenced by CSR messages when the activity is perceived as close, relying on low-level construal and paying attention to concrete, contextualized information. Therefore, we assume that exposure to a domestic CSR campaign prompts a focus on context-dependent details enhanced by how-framed messages. Similarly, distant CSR activities prompt high-level construal, where why-framed messages convey information in simpler terms.

Based on these assumptions, we hypothesize that individuals engaging in low-level construal and focusing on contextual details (i.e., how-framed messages) have positive reactions when they perceive the campaign as being close to them. Conversely, abstract information (i.e., why-framed messages) elicits positive reactions when individuals perceive the campaign as distant. We propose that these construal-fit effects influence perceptions of CSR authenticity, company trust, and attitudes toward the company by generating positive audience reactions to the campaign (see Figure 1).

- H1a. In a domestic CSR campaign, how-framed messages (i.e., company- or beneficiary-framed) generate higher perceived CSR authenticity compared to a why-framed message.
- H1b. In an international CSR campaign, a why-framed message generates higher perceived CSR authenticity compared to how-framed messages (i.e., company- or beneficiary-framed).
- H2a. In a domestic CSR campaign, how-framed messages (i.e., company- or beneficiary-framed) generate more trust toward the

Figure 1. Conceptual Model Illustrating How Message Framing and Spatial Distance Influence CSR Communication Outcomes



company compared to a why-framed message.

H2b. In an international CSR campaign, a why-framed message generates more trust toward the company compared to how-framed messages (i.e., company- or beneficiary-framed).

H3a. In a domestic CSR campaign, how-framed messages (i.e., company- or beneficiary-framed) generate more favorable attitudes toward the company compared to a why-framed message.

H3b. In an international CSR campaign, a why-framed message generates more favorable attitudes toward the company compared to how-framed messages (i.e., company- or beneficiary-framed).

METHOD

Experimental Design and Procedure

We conducted an experiment with a 3 (message framing: a why-framed message vs. two how-framed messages: how-company-framed vs. how-beneficiary-framed) by 2 (spatial distance: domestic vs. international) between-subjects design. We put the manipulations in a news

article format. A CSR campaign involves at least two entities: a company as an organizer, and participants who engage with the campaign. Accordingly, although the rationale for initiating a CSR campaign may arise only from the organizer's side, news articles can quote various sources representing one of the two entities. To increase generalizability by including two specific examples, for the how-framed message condition, we created two news articles quoting different sources—company representative or CSR campaign participants. We measured CSR authenticity, as well as trust and attitudes toward the company, as dependent variables. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions to ensure that each participant had an equal chance of being assigned to any condition.

In the first step, each participant read a brief introduction about a fictitious company, including product types and consumer base. In the second step, each participant read a fictional news story about the company's recent environmental campaign to raise young adults' awareness and increase their engagement in recycling and upcycling the company's used products into new and inventive ones. We used a fictitious company and CSR campaign to avoid confounding effects from participants' prior knowledge and attitudes

toward a company. After reading the news story, participants were asked to indicate their perception of the company's CSR authenticity and their trust and attitudes toward the company. Demographic information was collected at the end.

Participants

This research received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Incheon National University, ensuring adherence to ethical standards for research involving human participants. After receiving IRB approval, we recruited a total of 290 adults in South Korea using an online survey research firm, where panel members sign up to participate in studies online. Informed consent was obtained from the participants online, and all participants received monetary compensation for their participation. Gender was balanced (male: $n = 142$, 49%; female: $n = 147$, 50.7%; other: $n = 1$, 0.3%). Participant ages ranged from 20 to 69 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 44.30$, $SD = 13.65$).

Stimuli

The news stories about the fictitious company's CSR campaign were framed either as *why* the company initiated the CSR campaign (the why-framed message condition) or *how* the company implemented the CSR campaign (the how-framed message condition). In the why-framed message, the news story described the company's CSR efforts and why it was making such efforts. In the how-framed messages, the news stories depicted specific activities in detail in the company's CSR campaign, such as what kinds of materials were being recycled and what the anticipated positive consequences of the campaign would be. To manipulate the spatial distance to the CSR campaign, the articles indicated the location where the campaign was implemented—either in Korea for the domestic condition or in Vietnam for the international condition.

Measures

Perceived CSR Authenticity

We measured the perceived authenticity of the CSR campaign with four items adapted from Alhouti et al. (2016) using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants rated their agreement with the following statements: (1) "The company's CSR actions are genuine," (2) "The company is being true to itself with its CSR actions," (3) "The company is a socially responsible company," and (4) "The company is concerned about improving the well-being of society" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Trust Toward the Company

We measured the extent to which participants trusted the company, in general, using six items adapted from Kang and Park (2017) on a seven-point response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): (1) "I believe the company is trustworthy," (2) "I believe the company is reliable," (3) "Sound principles seem to guide the company's behavior," (4) "Whenever this organization makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me," (5) "The company has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do," and (6) "The company can keep its promises to its consumers" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Attitudes Toward the Company

To measure attitudes toward the company, we asked the participants to report how they perceived the company. To this end, we used a seven-point semantic differential scale with three items: (1) *bad – good*, (2) *unfavorable – favorable*, and (3) *unlikable – likable* (Spears & Singh, 2004) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

Manipulation Checks

We checked the manipulation of the message framing (why-framed vs. how-framed) by

developing two items that participants rated on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*): (1) “I discovered how the company is running the environmental campaign” and (2) “I learned what specific impacts the environmental campaign can bring” ($r = .57, p < .001$). One-way between-subjects ANOVA results showed significant differences across the message conditions, $F(1, 287) = 4.98, p = .007$. A series of post-hoc tests showed that the how-company-framed message ($M = 5.18, SD = 1.09$) generated a higher mean than did the why-framed message ($M = 4.88, SD = 1.12, p = .052$). Similarly, the how-beneficiary-framed message ($M = 5.36, SD = .98$) yielded a higher mean than the why-framed message ($M = 4.88, SD = 1.12, p = .002$). However, there was no significant difference between both how-framed messages (how-company-framed vs. how-beneficiary-framed, $p = .234$), showing that the message framing was successfully manipulated.

We employed the manipulation check for the spatial distance to the CSR campaign (domestic vs. international) using four items on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*): (1) “The company’s environmental campaign has been carried out domestically,” (2) “The company’s environmental campaign has been carried out internationally” (reverse coded), (3) “The company’s environmental campaign targets domestic young people,” and (4) “The company’s environmental campaign targets young people abroad” (reverse coded). The results showed significant differences between the two conditions ($M_{\text{domestic}} = 5.14, SD = 1.20; M_{\text{int'l}} = 1.99, SD = 1.10; t(288) = 23.40, p < .001$), indicating that the manipulation was successful.

RESULTS

H1a predicted that a how-framed message would generate higher perceived CSR authenticity compared to a why-framed message in a domestic

CSR campaign, while H1b posited that a why-framed message would be more effective than a how-framed message in an international CSR campaign. The ANOVA analysis showed significant interaction effects between message framing and spatial distance to the CSR campaign on perceived CSR authenticity, $F(1, 284) = 4.32, p = .014, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .03$.

A series of post-hoc tests showed that, in the domestic CSR campaign, the how-company-framed message ($M_{\text{company}} = 4.86, SD = 1.18, p = .037$) and the how-beneficiary-framed message ($M_{\text{beneficiary}} = 5.34, SD = 0.86, p < .001$) yielded a significantly higher perceived CSR authenticity than the why-framed message ($M = 4.42, SD = 1.20$). Therefore, H1a was supported. In contrast, in the international CSR campaign, there was no difference between the how-framed messages ($M_{\text{company}} = 5.07, SD = 0.90, p = .397; M_{\text{beneficiary}} = 4.97, SD = 1.02, p = .724$) and the why-framed message ($M = 4.90, SD = 0.91$) in perceived CSR authenticity. Therefore, H1b was not supported. The results of H1a and H1b are presented in Figure 2.

H2a predicted that a how-framed message would generate more trust toward the company compared to a why-framed message in a domestic CSR campaign, whereas H2b predicted message-framing effects in the opposite direction in an international CSR campaign. The ANOVA

Figure 2. Interaction Effects between Message Framing and Spatial Distance on CSR Authenticity

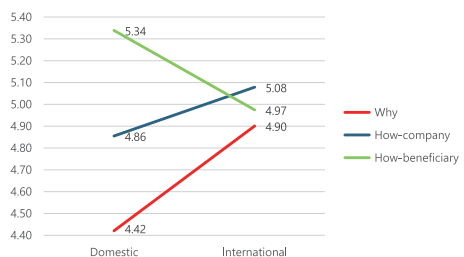
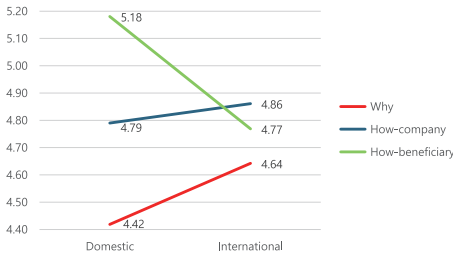


Figure 3. Interaction Effects between Message Framing and Spatial Distance on Trust toward the Company



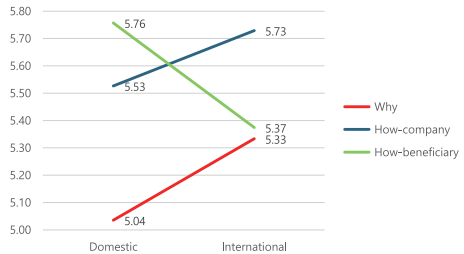
analysis showed significant interaction effects between message framing and spatial distance to the CSR campaign on trust toward the company, $F(1, 284) = 3.37, p = .036, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .02$.

A series of post-hoc tests showed that, in the domestic CSR campaign, the how-company-framed and how-beneficiary-framed messages ($M_{\text{company}} = 4.79, SD = 1.01, p = .040; M_{\text{beneficiary}} = 5.18, SD = 0.82, p < .001$) generated more trust toward the company than the why-framed message ($M = 4.42, SD = 0.73$). Therefore, H2a was supported. However, in the international CSR campaign, there was no difference between the how-framed messages ($M_{\text{company}} = 4.86, SD = 0.88, p = .228; M_{\text{beneficiary}} = 4.77, SD = 1.03, p = .484$) and the why-framed message ($M = 4.64, SD = 0.81$) in trust toward the company. Therefore, H2b was not supported. The results of H2a and H2b are presented in Figure 3.

H3a and H3b posited the same direction of the effects on attitudes toward the company. H3a predicted that, in a domestic CSR campaign, a how-framed message would result in more favorable attitudes toward the company than a why-framed message. The ANOVA analysis showed marginally significant interaction effects between message framing and spatial distance to the CSR campaign, $F(1, 284) = 2.81, p = .062, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .02$.

A series of post-hoc tests showed that, in the

Figure 4. Interaction Effects between Message Framing and Spatial Distance on Attitudes toward the Company



domestic CSR campaign, the how-company-framed and how-beneficiary-framed messages ($M_{\text{company}} = 5.53, SD = 1.06, p = .026; M_{\text{beneficiary}} = 5.76, SD = 1.19, p = .001$) generated more favorable attitudes toward the company than the why-framed message ($M = 5.04, SD = 1.16$). Therefore, H3a was supported. However, in the international CSR campaign, there was no significant difference between the how-framed messages ($M_{\text{company}} = 5.73, SD = 0.95, p = .074; M_{\text{beneficiary}} = 5.37, SD = 1.05, p = .853$) and the why-framed message ($M = 5.33, SD = 1.06$) in attitudes toward the company. Therefore, H3b was not supported. The results of H3a and H3b are presented in Figure 4. Descriptive statistics of the dependent variables are presented in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

The literature suggests that CSR message authenticity can be enhanced through message design, leading to improved consumer responses to CSR communication (Pérez, 2019). Studies have shown that highlighting the connection between a company and a social issue that the company is focusing on in its CSR campaigns, as well as providing details about the campaigns or the social issue itself, may help consumers perceive CSR messages as more authentic (Kim

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Dependent Variables

Spatial Distance to CSR	Message Frame	CSR Authenticity		Trust toward Company		Attitudes toward Company	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Domestic	Why	4.42	1.20	4.42	0.73	5.04	1.16
	How-company	4.86	1.18	4.79	1.01	5.53	1.06
	How-beneficiary	5.34	0.86	5.18	0.82	5.76	1.19
International	Why	4.90	0.91	4.64	0.81	5.33	1.06
	How-company	5.08	0.90	4.86	0.88	5.73	0.95
	How-beneficiary	4.97	1.02	4.77	1.03	5.37	1.05

Note. CSR = corporate social responsibility

& Lee, 2020; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015; Pérez, 2019). However, it is unclear if these message strategies will always be effective.

Highlighting the value of CSR communication, the message factor has been found to have the capacity to determine consumer awareness and reactions, which can help create a successful CSR campaign (Robinson & Eilert, 2018). The present study aimed to contribute to the CLT literature by establishing construal fit effects based on message framing (why vs. how) and spatial distance to CSR campaigns (domestic vs. international).

Previous studies have explored the “why” versus “how” framing combined with spatial or social distance across various contexts, such as environmental, organizational, crisis, and health communication. However, there is a gap in understanding how these factors interact to influence outcomes of CSR communication, including perceived CSR authenticity, which is an important factor in reducing skepticism toward CSR efforts and generating favorable evaluations of the message and credibility perceptions toward the company (Lim & Jiang, 2021; Pérez, 2019). Expanding the application of CLT to the context of CSR, the present study offers not only a better understanding of how consumers interpret framed CSR messages (why-framed vs. how-framed) differently depending on the

spatial distance to a CSR campaign (domestic vs. international) but also a public-based perspective for crafting effective CSR messages. The findings demonstrate interaction effects between message framing and spatial distance to a CSR campaign on perceived CSR authenticity, as well as trust and attitudes toward the company. In communicating domestic CSR campaigns, how-framed messages induced greater perceived CSR authenticity, as well as trust and attitudes toward the company than why-framed messages. However, there was no “construal fit” effect when an international CSR campaign used why-framed messages on CSR authenticity perception, attitudes toward the company, or trust toward the company. Therefore, the “construal fit” effects were observed only when a domestic campaign was combined with how-framed messaging in the context of CSR communication.

Theoretical Implications

This study builds on CSR communication studies that highlight the audience’s role in the process of CSR messages by applying how the “construal fit” influences public responses to corporations’ delivery of CSR messages. Our findings illuminate the empirical evidence of conditional effects for the suggested “construal fit” based on message

framing and spatial distance to a CSR campaign. The results show how consumers interpret CSR messages differently depending on the construal match between message framing and spatial distance. The psychological mechanism underlying this “construal fit” provides new insights into the development of CSR research based on a message recipient’s interpretation of particular messages in differently located CSR campaigns.

The findings suggest that people are more likely to consider proximate CSR campaigns (close spatial distance) as more relatable to them and having more impact on them, subsequently encouraging involvement in an available CSR message at hand, when the message framing highlights the “how” aspects of the message, offering specific details of the CSR initiative, rather than the “why” aspects of the message, conveying general information. In the context of CRM, Grau and Folse (2007) demonstrated that consumers’ donations made to target a local community (a close distance) rather than an international community (a far distance) were perceived as a concrete or tangible value of the campaign due to an expected immediate impact, ultimately leading to low-level construal. When considering how companies leverage their goodwill to benefit themselves as well as their stakeholders (e.g., consumers, employees, and communities), people seem more engaged in the process of concrete messages based on “how” framing, probably due to the potentially desirable impact when a CSR campaign is perceived to be close to them. On the other hand, people would find it difficult to relate to what an international CSR campaign can bring to them, making the construal fit effects weak.

However, previous research has also suggested different “construal fit” patterns. For example, a CRM advertising study (T. Kim & Kim, 2021) showed that when consumers perceive the spatial proximity of a cause to be distant, they are more likely to find a perceived connection with abstract messages emphasizing indirect implications for

the cause (e.g., values for the cause) than with concrete messages suggesting direct implications for the cause (e.g., emphasis on suggested behavior). As such, due to different contexts and roles (e.g., donations by consumers and CRM by a company), the patterns of the “construal fit” effects may not be consistent regarding the relationship between construal levels (low vs. high) and the manner in which the information or the message is given (e.g., abstract vs. concrete, why-framed vs. how-framed). Thus, the empirical evidence of this study contributes to the literature on the dynamics of the “construal fit” effect within the context of CSR.

When we manipulated how- and why-framed messages, we had two different message variations within the how-framed message: one quoting a company spokesperson and the other quoting CSR campaign participants (i.e., beneficiaries). Both how-framed messages led to more positive CSR reactions compared to the why-framed message. For all three dependent variables, the how-framed message with the beneficiary had the highest mean values, followed by the how-framed message with the company spokesperson and the why-framed message. The positive effects of “how” messaging were greatest for domestic CSR efforts with their beneficiaries, indicating that disclosing beneficiary information maximizes construal fit effects. In contrast, the positive effects yielded by “how” messages (as opposed to “why” messages) disappeared in the international CSR condition with its beneficiaries. This outcome suggests that spatial distance can constrain construal fit. Greater spatial distance may lead to higher construal levels, where individuals rely more on heuristic cues than on detailed information processing according to the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Thus, it is plausible to speculate that, rather than being influenced by the overall message framing conveyed by “how” or “why,” individuals are influenced by fragmented and simplified cues. Those acquiring information

about international CSR initiatives may engage in high-level construals and may not systematically analyze messages closely. Therefore, they may be more influenced by conspicuous cues within the information than by differences in framing. If this speculation holds true, international CSR initiatives that offer cues that attract peripheral attention may gain the attention of individuals with high construal levels. For example, the company can provide informational cues by having international CSR initiatives that are noble, unique, innovative, or culturally relevant (Meng & Kim, 2020).

In addition, the findings shed light on the scholarship on perceived authenticity. Perceived authenticity has been widely recognized as a determinant of a CSR campaign's success (Alhouti et al., 2016; Pérez, 2019). Perceived authenticity (or skepticism) has been linked to CSR campaigns themselves, evaluations of companies with CSR campaigns, or engagement with CSR campaigns (Alhouti et al., 2016; Pérez, 2019; Servaes et al., 2023). However, studies on message strategies for communicating CSR campaigns to enhance authenticity are limited. In this regard, the most researched criterion is the fit between the company and the issues in a CSR campaign (e.g., Aksak et al., 2016; S. Kim & Lee, 2020; Liu & Jung, 2021).

Practical Implications

Given the ongoing challenges of creating CSR campaigns that can drive consumer perceptions of message authenticity and build trust in the company, communication professionals can consider both construal levels and spatial distance in planning and designing messages for the development of successful CSR campaigns. Considering global companies' increasing interest in expanding CSR efforts beyond their domestic market, our results help practitioners take strategic approaches to CSR communication depending

on different target audiences, such as domestic and international markets. Incorporating messages that highlight the information about the beneficiaries of CSR initiatives can enhance the construal fit effects, particularly in domestic campaigns. By providing information about the beneficiaries and the tangible impact of the CSR efforts, companies can strengthen perceptions of authenticity and trust, as well as foster more favorable attitudes toward the company. This demonstrates the importance of showcasing the impact of CSR actions to resonate with audiences on a personal level.

In international CSR campaigns, where individuals may engage in heuristic processing due to higher construal levels, companies should consider leveraging conspicuous cues and simplified messaging to capture attention and convey key messages effectively. Conspicuous cues may include a unique title for the campaign, innovative ideas for executing it, and culturally relevant aspects of the CSR initiatives. These cues can help overcome barriers associated with high-level construals and facilitate positive evaluations among consumers.

Based on the study results, we suggest that CSR managers emphasize transparency and accountability by providing clear and detailed information about the goals, progress, and outcomes of the CSR initiative. This approach can include sharing key performance indicators and success stories to demonstrate the effectiveness and authenticity of the company's CSR efforts, which align with corporate identities and values. For instance, a company implementing a sustainable sourcing program could include specific numbers and illustrations of reduced carbon emissions or waste generation, along with testimonials from suppliers and stakeholders confirming the program's positive impact. In addition, the findings of this study remind PR professionals of the importance of two-way dialogues in CSR messages as a cardinal rule of PR for inducing consumer engagement. One

practical consideration involves embracing the voices of beneficiaries to enhance the perceived authenticity of CSR messages, which can lead to favorable evaluations of the message and source credibility, and subsequently drive desired behavioral outcomes, such as word-of-mouth and participation intention.

Our findings offer practical guidance on leveraging fit effects by identifying the location and target audience based on their involvement, familiarity, engagement, and expectations regarding CSR campaigns. We assume that domestic CSR campaigns are more likely to enable consumers to develop certain levels of emotional attachment, such as a sense of comfort, belonging, and familiarity, compared to international CSR campaigns. The familiarity with local issues allows consumers to feel more connected to the campaign's impact, making it easier for them to relate to and trust the company's CSR efforts. For example, a CSR campaign focusing on community recycling programs or local school improvements can evoke a sense of personal relevance (M. Kim et al., 2021), as consumers can see the direct benefits in their surroundings. This contrasts with international CSR campaigns, where the psychological and geographical distance may weaken consumers' emotional attachment.

From a construal-level standpoint, "how-framed" messages detailing specific benefits and impacts on both the company and beneficiaries can lead to the activation of low-level construal, which can work best with a domestic campaign that consumers perceive as being close. In a spatially close CSR campaign, the use of message framing serves as an effective message cue to shape consumer interpretation of CSR communication by creating relevance and identifying the potential benefits associated with "how-framed" messages. When practitioners design messages for a CSR campaign, it is important to consider the psychological mechanism underlying the "construal fit" in their audience within the CSR

context. Doing so ensures that framed messages effectively resonate with target audiences, shaping their perceptions of CSR authenticity and influencing company evaluations, such as trust and attitudes toward the company.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study contributes to the literature regarding "construal-fit" effects in CSR communication, it also has some limitations. First, this study employed CSR messages from a fictitious company's campaign. Despite the benefits of using such fictitious stimuli (e.g., greater experimental control), future research should replicate our research using existing firms and their campaigns to find any unexplained discrepancies.

Second, the findings of this study are based on only one type of CSR campaign focusing on environmental sustainability. With the growing number of CSR campaigns addressing diverse social issues—such as ethical sourcing, community development, employee engagement, diversity, and quality education—future research should explore various CSR initiatives to better understand the role of construal congruence between message framing and spatial distance in shaping CSR communication outcomes.

Third, we manipulated message framing (why-framed vs. how-framed) in CSR communication as a cue to activate different levels of construal to find the "construal fit" effects along with the spatial distance to a CSR campaign. The way we distinguished between "why-framed" and "how-framed" messages was based on attributes such as ends-related features (e.g., goals and rationale) for the "why-aspects" of messages and means-related (specific details and impact) for the "how-aspects" of messages. The key focus of the how-framed messages was to highlight the details of how organizations implemented the initiative, addressing how beneficiaries became involved as part of the concrete process of CSR

campaigns, rather than to promote the overall value of the end goal of CSR. This study reveals the overall effectiveness of how-framed messages over why-framed messages across all dependent variables, regardless of condition. The stronger effect of how-framed messages over why-framed messages, particularly in the domestic context, may have been influenced by the information on beneficiaries and the favorable impacts of CSR campaigns. Future research may consider different approaches to construal levels by utilizing message framing, such as ability-oriented vs. effort-oriented, to highlight the authenticity of CSR efforts.

Furthermore, it is possible that issue familiarity or knowledge may have influenced the effects of message framing. We acknowledge that familiarity with domestic CSR issues, such as recycling, may have contributed to the focus on “how” aspects, as consumers are more likely to already understand “why” the issue is important. This could have diminished the distinct effects of message framing between domestic and international contexts. Therefore, future research should consider incorporating mediators and using varied manipulation checks to more accurately assess construal levels.

Fourth, this study assessed spatial distance as the physical distance at which CSR campaigns take place from a consumer’s standpoint. Future research might attempt to examine potential factors such as involvement and motivation that influence consumer perceptions of spatial distance, as they may contribute to active message processing, determining activation of different construal levels. Individual factors such as ethnocentrism can also be used (Tran et al., 2023).

Based on the conditional effect of the “construal fit,” this study shows the importance of nuanced approaches to creating the “right fit,” depending on various factors in the context of CSR communication. The seemingly suitable match based on construal levels and perceived distance,

such as high construal with a distant event and low construal with a close event, may not work best when communicating CSR messages due to public attitudes toward and expectations for CSR activities. Thus, future research should continue to test various combinations between construal levels and varying psychological distance to demonstrate what contributes to conditional fit effects by examining different contexts, such as communicating for the promotion of new products and services and managing corporate controversy, enhancing the applicable value of construal level theory to various strategic communication.

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