



# CSR Did Not Take Place: An Empirical Study Exploring Consumers Trapped in Paradoxes

Klára Šimůnková<sup>1</sup> · Tomáš Kincl<sup>1</sup> · Daria Gunina<sup>1</sup>

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited 2024

## Abstract

How consumers perceive corporate social responsibility (CSR) has shifted significantly over the past decades. Initially, a voluntary commitment to solving urgent social problems, CSR was once a source of competitive advantage, specific positioning, and exclusivity in customers' eyes. Today, however, CSR has become a fundamental prerequisite for a company to function in society, a source of company legitimacy, expected and demanded by many stakeholder groups. As research demonstrates, young people in particular loudly and intensely declare their interest in today's challenges and vigorously demand that the companies they buy from or work for participate in CSR. On the contrary, in everyday practice, we as scholars and educators have learned that CSR is more of an empty word for consumers, something that is right but of which they have no precise idea. CSR finds itself in a paradoxical situation. Therefore, our study aims to identify the main paradoxes in how millennials perceive CSR. First, it addresses the term *paradox* and its contextualization within the CSR discourse. Second, the three main paradoxes (authenticity/communication, legitimacy/trust, pay-off/non-pay-off) are outlined and verified through mixed methods research. The paradoxes are identified and confirmed through the ambivalent and inconsistent responses to a questionnaire and, subsequently, multiple focus groups. Finally, implications for the CSR concept are suggested. Furthermore, this paper questions the validity of instruments traditionally used to measure consumer attitudes (not only) in the field of CSR.

**Keywords** Corporate social responsibility · Consumers' perception · Paradoxes · Ambivalence · Authenticity · Simulacra

## Introduction

Since its inception in the early twentieth century, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has evolved from a voluntary initiative to a fundamental aspect of business operations. Initially a philanthropic endeavor, CSR has now been simplified to a mere acronym, losing much of its original meaning. In other words, corporate social responsibility has become what Baudrillard (1981) dubs a *simulacrum*—the original meaning of corporate social responsibility has been replaced with a symbol, the three letters C, S, and R. According to

Baudrillard, a symbol is nothing more and nothing less than a symbol. It bears no meaning; it is empty. In this case, all that is left of this grand idea is just three letters. In this study, we analyze the weaknesses of the contemporary CSR concept, that is, the consequences of CSR standardization as a process of “emptying,” which has given rise to today's paradoxical situation: although CSR is everywhere, it has become increasingly harder for consumers to decipher what it means. This study investigates the driving forces of the discrepancies, dissonance, contradictions, and tensions between the *intended* and the *perceived* (often unintended) content of CSR messages.

As suggested by González-González et al. (2019), the complexity and instability of today's world lead to the paradoxical tensions organizations face when trying to be socially responsible. On the contrary, we propose that it is the consumer as the receiver of CSR messages who faces the tensions stemming from the complex and contradictory nature of our digitally mediated world. Therefore, we align with Barthes (1994) in emphasizing the importance of how CSR messages are received and interpreted by consumers,

✉ Tomáš Kincl  
tomas.kincl@vse.cz

Klára Šimůnková  
klara.simunkova@vse.cz

Daria Gunina  
daria.gunina@vse.cz

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Management, Prague University of Economics and Business, Jarosovska 1117/II, 377 01 Jindrichuv Hradec, Czech Republic



rather than just the messages themselves (Pérezts et al. 2011; Smith and Lewis 2011; Van der Byl and Slawinski c). This approach acknowledges the complex interplay of factors that shape consumer perceptions, often leading them to view CSR as paradoxical and contradictory.

Quinn and Cameron (1988) lamented that organizations are exposed to social practices that contradict one another, even though these practices are equally perceived to be legitimate and relevant to the success of an organization. Hoffmann (2018) later commented on this paradox as being an inspiring and, at the same time, an irritating paradigm, since it does not offer simple preferred choices in organizational decision-making. This contradiction underscores the gap in organizational research, which Neugebauer et al. (2016) suggest tends to overlook the ad hoc nature of sustainability strategy development. Our analysis reveals discrepancies between CSR theory and practice, between stated norms and actual behaviors, and between the content and comprehension of CSR messages. These contradictions have turned exceptional situations into a new norm, necessitating a re-evaluation of CSR in theory and practice. It advocates for a more practical approach to CSR, aligning corporate strategic goals with public interests and gaining insights into public demand. This realignment aims to revitalize the meaning of CSR, moving beyond theoretical discourse to practical experience. We adopt Hoffmann's (2018) "third way," which seeks a balanced view that considers cultural contextuality, perception subjectivity, and the communicative power.

This study focuses on millennials (Generation Y). Although millennials are one of the most represented generations in the population (Fry 2020), as well as the most powerful consumers (Gapper 2018), there is surprisingly little focus on them in the current CSR literature (~50 studies on the Web of Science at the time of conducting this research). Previous studies suggest that millennials, more than other generations, reflect CSR in their purchasing decisions and are the most ethical consumers (López-Fernández 2020). However, they also represent a generation that is most skeptical about the authenticity and credibility of CSR corporate activities (Chatzopoulou and de Kiewiet 2021) and indicate a significant attitude-behavior gap (Öberseder et al. 2011). Therefore, this study presents consumers' perspectives on CSR, focusing on millennials to show that the paradoxical situation in which CSR currently is has spilled over into the consumer sphere, an issue that deserves serious attention.

The paper is structured as follows: Firstly, we explore the concept of paradox within the CSR discourse. Secondly, we identify and discuss three main paradoxes arising from this discourse. Thirdly, we present an empirical study and analyze its findings within this context. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for the future of CSR.

## Literature Review

### The Genesis of CSR Paradoxes

Tracing its origins to the Industrial Revolution, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved significantly from its early focus on improving working conditions to encompass a broader spectrum of social and ethical concerns. Initially confined to philanthropy (Chaffee 2017), CSR began to gain traction in the business and academic worlds from the 1950s, with substantial literature emerging in the 1960s, expanding its scope to include customer relations and better working conditions (Latapí Agudelo et al. 2019). In the 1970s and 1980s, CSR research intensified, leading to foundational theories such as Archie B. Carroll's four-level definition of CSR. During the 1980s, CSR research diversified, incorporating adjacent fields like stakeholder theory, business ethics, and corporate social performance (Carroll 2008). The 1990s saw these concepts further developed without significant theoretical advancements. This period marked a shift in CSR from a predominantly ethical practice to a strategic business tool, driven by growing global environmental and social awareness. Since then, CSR has developed into virtually the best advertisement strategy for corporate businesses (Carroll 2015). In other words, the initial purpose of CSR has been lost, as CSR has moved from the ethical to the business dimension, that is, the business scope of CSR now overshadows its ethical foundations. CSR has shifted from a philanthropic or ethical voluntary endeavor to an intrinsic and inherent component of all entrepreneurship (Latapí Agudelo et al. 2019). Crowther and Seifi (2018, p. 78) critique this period as producing a surplus of theoretical discussion with limited practical contribution, reflecting an academic struggle to define CSR's scope amid its expanding literature. The discourse around CSR during this time was rich in both idealistic definitions and pragmatic applications, highlighting its dual nature as a tool for fostering responsible communities and enhancing corporate productivity and brand image.

The new millennium witnessed CSR's association with creating shared value (CSV) by Porter and Kramer (2006) linked CSR to competitive advantage, a shift that, while significant, led to a reduction of CSR to a profit-driven strategy. While Porter and Kramer distinguished CSV from CSR, their interpretation steered CSR toward a business-centric perspective. This reorientation, as Corazza et al. (2017) note, reflected a change in managerial mindset more than a fundamental transformation of CSR.

This evolution of CSR, however, has resulted in a paradox. Despite extensive communication, research, and reporting on CSR activities, there is a lack of authentic



experience and engagement with CSR at its core. This disconnect between the theoretical and practical aspects of CSR has led to a situation where CSR, while omnipresent in corporate discourse, lacks genuine authenticity in its application and perception, especially among consumers. This study examines the implications of this paradox, exploring how the shift in CSR's focus from ethical considerations to strategic business objectives has impacted its authenticity and effectiveness.

### Paradox Spillover

CSR theory recognizes paradoxes as both pivotal and challenging within its framework. Paradox, derived from the Greek “paradoxos,” implies a statement that contradicts itself or defies expectations. These paradoxes, often dismissed as illogical, can actually stimulate critical and innovative thinking. Traditionally, CSR discourse has focused on managing organizational paradoxes from an internal paradoxes (Campbell 2006; Hahn et al. 2015; Waddock and Googins 2011; Wheeler et al. 2002), treating organizations as inherently conflicted environments. This tension-centric approach (Hoffmann 2018) sees these paradoxes as natural interactions between corporate goals and public expectations, aiding in theoretical development and practical understanding (Trethewey and Ashcraft 2004, p. 82).

However, this study contends that such paradoxes have evolved from dynamic forces to problematic elements, leading to widespread distrust and skepticism toward CSR. We analyze these paradoxes in the context of CSR messaging, examining their transition from voluntary to mandatory, private to public, silent to vocal, authentic to marketing-focused, and from actions to mere messages. This shift indicates a loss of the original, dynamic nature of these paradoxes, transforming them from sources of innovation into fundamental issues that challenge the validity and impact of CSR. The study aims to highlight how these paradoxes, now leaving consumers confused and ambivalent, represent critical challenges that CSR must address to maintain its relevance and effectiveness.

### The Authenticity/Communication Paradox

CSR theory, as Lock and Schulz-Knappe(2018) observe, hinges on communication for its legitimation, primarily because it is through communication that CSR messages are effectively conveyed, corporate responsibilities in a globalized world are addressed, and CSR itself is actualized. However, this emphasis on communication unveils a critical weakness in contemporary CSR: its reduction to mere messaging. The literature reveals a “self-promotion” paradox in CSR communication, where overt self-promotion can erode credibility (Sjovall and Talk 2004; Yoon et al. 2006).

Indirect communication strategies are often more effective (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990). Morsing et al. (2008) highlight a dilemma where companies are encouraged to engage in CSR but discouraged from overtly communicating about it, as such communication can trigger distrust and opposition (Smith and Lewis 2011).

Contrary to explicit messaging, CSR's essence lies in its performative nature (Carroll 1979), its spectrum of actions and behaviors (Mohr and Webb 2005), and its integration into business practice (Park et al. 2021). However, the current communication landscape, dominated by digital technologies and platforms like websites (Du and Vieira 2012; Lock and Schulz-Knappe 2018), has altered the way CSR is perceived and experienced. The ubiquity of digital devices and—recently—artificial intelligence in decision-making processes has led to a situation where CSR is more often experienced second-hand through technological mediation rather than first-hand.

This shift has brought forth a significant issue: the overemphasis on communicating CSR has overshadowed the authenticity of experiencing CSR. CSR activities often originate in marketing messages and reports rather than tangible real-world actions, leading to a disconnect between reported activities and their actual implementation (Macintosh et al. 2000; Mattessich 2000). This phenomenon has turned CSR communication into a form of online content marketing, with reports and messages resembling advertisements more than authentic narratives.

De Colle et al. (2014, p. 185) define this situation as the paradox of CSR standards. The more successful CSR standards are in shaping behavior, the less this behavior reflects morally responsible, ethical deliberation. In essence, the pursuit of fulfilling standards and compiling reports can diminish companies' ability to genuinely perceive and respond to societal needs. Therefore, there is a call for an “instrumental turn” in the CSR discourse, shifting away from the preoccupation with communication as the essence of CSR toward recognizing it as a means to an end. Rather than being predominantly about marketing communication, CSR should be primarily an experiential activity, with the communication aspect serving to share and amplify these real experiences. This approach would restore authenticity to CSR, ensuring that its practices are not only reported but genuinely enacted and experienced.

### The Legitimacy/Trust Paradox

Authenticity is essential in CSR communication, establishing a lasting bond and influence between sender and receiver. Without transforming from intention to practice, CSR activities risk remaining as mere media declarations, lacking credibility and real impact. Authentic experiences not only make CSR projects tangible and credible but also



address the CSR paradox of credibility, which emerges from the tension between legitimacy and trust. Credibility in CSR is seen from two perspectives: as legitimacy, rooted in normative procedures, and as trust, emerging from voluntary acts (Bentele and Nothhaft 2011).

However, these perspectives often contradict rather than complement each other. Legitimacy is based on mandatory norms, while trust is built on discretionary actions. In the context of CSR, the intersection of these concepts is crucial for success. Authenticity serves as a bridge between legitimacy's normative obligations and the voluntary nature of trust, mediating between a legitimate but impersonal statement and a relatable, engaging message. Corporate credibility is tied to consumer perceptions and beliefs about a firm's ability to meet needs and fulfill claims (Newell and Goldsmith 2001). It hinges on a firm's reputation for conforming to legal, societal, and individual norms, combining elements of both legitimacy and trust. However, the contemporary shift in understanding norms, standards, and the dynamics of CSR activities presents a credibility crisis.

The credibility crisis lies in the fundamental contemporary shift in understanding norms and standards and the dynamics of CSR activities. Carroll (1979) described the philanthropic, discretionary aspect of CSR, echoed by the Commission of the European Community (2001), which recognizes the voluntary basis of CSR activities. Yet, as González-González et al. (2019, p. 2) observe, the social and environmental actions of businesses are increasingly institutionalized and managed through CSR, transforming its voluntary dimension into an obligatory one. This shift from discretionary to mandatory dilutes the authenticity of CSR activities, making them a norm rather than a distinguishing factor.

Lock and Schulz-Knappe (2018, p. 2) also highlight that increased CSR communication can lead to more skepticism, not transparency or trustworthiness. This reflects the legitimacy/trust paradox in CSR discourse, emphasizing communication tools over the merits of CSR as a complex endeavor. Building trust through communication alone is increasingly challenging in an era of information overload. For CSR activities to be credible, a company must align its vision with legal and societal norms and ensure the authenticity of its actions, converting them into practices. Communication, in this context, is merely a tool that bridges these elements.

### Pay-Off/Non-Pay-Off Paradox

The third CSR paradox explored in this study focuses on bridging the gap between corporate rhetoric and practice, often labeled “corporate hypocrisy” (Wagner et al. 2009). This issue pivots on the lack of reflexivity from CSR message senders, which contributes to a perceived disconnect between a company's stated intentions and its actual actions.

Bentele's (1994) discrepancy thesis suggests that public trust erosion stems from perceived inconsistencies between corporate messaging and actions, often amplified by media coverage. These discrepancies, as Bentele and Nothhaft (2011, pp. 214–15) articulate, appear as contradictions between a company's public image and its underlying practices. Therefore, the root of such discrepancies lies within CSR's theoretical foundations and the stigma of corporate hypocrisy originates from internal inconsistencies and an identity crisis within CSR itself.

This notion arises from the discursive confusion surrounding the definition of CSR, which oscillates between two viewpoints: 1) CSR as discretionary philanthropic activity with no direct financial pay-off (Carroll 1979) and 2) CSR as a strategy for enhancing corporate image and financial performance (Smith and Lewis 2011). Practitioners with managerial backgrounds tend to view CSR as a cost, safe when complying with laws or meeting societal expectations, but risky if exceeding them (Martin 2002). Müller-Christ (2011) further highlights the incompatibility between economic rationality and social–environmental rationality in developing authentic CSR. This utilitarian approach contrasts strongly with CSR's original philanthropic and non-profit intent, leading to a perception of CSR as corporate hypocrisy. To consumers, this translates to a “willingness to pay more” perception. This “reduced” approach by corporations, which society has adapted to, exacerbates the growing divide between companies and consumers, making it increasingly challenging to establish a common understanding of terms and values.

The study identifies three paradoxes ingrained in CSR: the authenticity/communication paradox, the legitimacy/trust paradox, and the pay-off/non-pay-off paradox. The following chapter introduces an empirical study that aims to demonstrate these paradoxes by comparing the direct statements of focus group participants with results obtained through traditional CSR tools used to measure consumers' perceptions.

## Methods

This research aims to unravel the complexities and paradoxes in consumer perceptions of CSR, focusing on the gap between corporate rhetoric and practice, often perceived as 'corporate hypocrisy'. Consumers, often caught in these paradoxes, face confusion and doubt about CSR initiatives. This raises a methodological question: Can we as researchers trust consumers' accounts? If respondents' experiences of CSR are not authentic, can their accounts be valid?

To address this, a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (focus groups) research, was employed. The aim was not only to



gauge awareness of the CSR concept but also to understand its impact on consumers' purchasing decisions and their willingness to pay more for products from CSR-committed companies. The questionnaire responses were analyzed for statistical trends and idiosyncratic elements, such as logical inconsistencies and expressed ambivalence. The focus groups aimed to delve deeper into these paradoxes and ambivalences (Table 1).

Despite the popularity of questionnaire surveys, their efficacy in capturing respondents' true attitudes and perceptions is limited due to issues like social desirability bias and random responding (Osborne and Blanchard 2011). The pitfalls of questionnaires are all too often located not on the researchers' end but on the respondents'—respondents either do not reveal *what they think* but *what they think they should think*, or they respond randomly. Thus, the questionnaire, a research instrument initially developed to reveal respondents' opinions and attitudes, turns into a knowledge or personality test with low evidential value. This assumption was confirmed in our research by the occurrence of answers that were clearly copied and pasted from Google results. Thus, the two-phase mixed research was designed to both detect and eliminate, or better put, to reveal and address, respondents' ambivalence as an authentic perception of CSR—as a result of its paradoxical nature.

In the first phase, a semi-structured questionnaire, inspired by prior studies (Cone Communications 2015; Hume 2010; Luger et al. 2022; Pomeroy and Dolnicar 2009; Průša and Sadílek 2017), was distributed online, primarily through international student Facebook pages, to minimize cultural bias. The questionnaire's aim was not traditional quantitative analysis but to gain insight into respondents' true feelings about CSR and highlight the paradoxes involved. The results were then used to identify and explore inconsistencies and discrepancies in respondents' views.

The second research phase involved two focus groups, one at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and the other at Prague University of Economics and Business, Czech Republic. This phase, inspired by the qualitative research of Chatzopoulou and de Kiewiet (2021), aimed to explore millennials' attitudes toward CSR. The focus groups were designed to triangulate and deepen understanding of the data from the questionnaires. They provided a platform for spontaneous group dynamics, revealing individual inconsistencies and ambivalences that solitary questionnaire completion might miss. The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and coded for qualitative analysis, with a focus on understanding the paradoxes identified in the theoretical part of the study.

## Research Sample

This study focused on millennials, born between 1980 and 2000 (McGlone et al. 2011), who participated voluntarily in both a survey and focus groups. The survey, disseminated via social media, began by verifying the participants' birth year to confirm their millennial status, resulting in 235 complete responses from 237 collected questionnaires. Focus group participants were informed about the goals of the research, provided links and addresses with further information and the researcher's contact information, and ensured they could withdraw the survey at any time for any reason. The focus groups, following Fern (1982) and Tynan and Drayton (1988) guidelines, aimed for 8 to 12 participants to balance rich discussion and manageable facilitation. The first group included 10 individuals from various countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany, China, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain), while the second comprised eight participants from Germany, Norway, Peru, Spain, and Taiwan. Both sessions were led by the same researcher to maintain consistency in discussion dynamics. The diverse, international composition of the groups and the lack of prior relationships among participants ensured unbiased, honest, and spontaneous dialog (M. Thomas et al. 2000).

## Results

### Quantitative Phase

The responses were analyzed to detect inconsistent answers and provide deeper insight into the respondents' ambivalence. Thus, the analysis in this phase focused on the (in) consistency of respondents' answers, where the following findings were considered to indicate ambivalence:

- Respondents who do not know what CSR is but are willing to pay more for products offered by CSR-devoted companies.
- Respondents who are not willing to pay more for products offered by CSR-devoted companies but would be influenced in their purchasing behavior if they were aware of a company's devotion to CSR.
- Respondents who are willing to pay more for products offered by CSR-devoted companies but would not be influenced in their purchasing behavior if they were aware of a company's devotion to CSR.
- Respondents who are willing to pay more for products offered by CSR-devoted companies but also condition their support only when the products by CSR-devoted companies are of same or lower price.



**Table 1** Questionnaire design

How do you understand what corporate social responsibility is?	Open-ended question, evaluated by two experts (CSR and sustainability); if the experts disagreed on the evaluation, a third expert was invited to provide evaluation	adapted from Hume (2010)
Would you pay extra for a product from a company engaged in CSR activities?	Binary, Yes–No	adapted from Berens et al. (2005), Berens et al. (2005), and Průša and Sadílek (2017)
Would you be influenced in your purchasing if you were aware of a company's devotion to CSR?	Both, lack of information and price are true. If I had the information and it would not mean paying more for different products, my purchasing would be influenced No, the company's actions do not influence my purchasing Yes, but only when it does not mean buying more expensive products from different brands Yes, I already am most of the time when I want to buy some more expensive items (for example, electronics, automobiles...) Yes, I already am with most things I buy Yes, if I had the information, my purchasing would be influenced, but most of the time I don't have the information	Adapted from Luger et al. (2022), Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2009), and Průša and Sadílek (2017)
If you knew that some company does activities contrary to corporate social responsibility, would you avoid buying its products?	Both, lack of information and price is true. If I had the information and it would not mean paying more for different products, then I would avoid it If I knew that, then I would avoid it, but usually I do not have this information No, I do not care about CSR Yes, but only if products from different brands are not more expensive Yes, I already do	adapted from Cone Communications (2015), Luger et al. (2022), and Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2009)
Are you aware of any companies that engage in CSR activities?	Open ended; respondents provided lists of companies engaging in CSR activities (that they are aware of)	adapted from Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2009) and Nielsen (2015b)
Have you ever sought information on a company's CSR activities?	Binary, Yes–No	adapted from Hume (2010)



- Respondents who do not know what CSR is but would be influenced in their purchasing behavior if they were aware of a company's devotion to CSR.
- Respondents who do not know what CSR is but are aware of the CSR activities of companies.
- Respondents who are willing to pay more for products offered by CSR-devoted companies but do not care or would not avoid a product if a company engages in activities contrary to CSR principles.
- Respondents who are not aware of any CSR activities of companies but are influenced by a company's devotion to CSR in their purchasing behavior.
- Respondents who are not aware of any CSR activities of companies but already avoid products from companies that engage in activities contrary to CSR principles.
- Respondents who have sought information about the CSR activities of companies but cannot name any company engaged in CSR.

The results confirmed a statistically significant relationship between respondents' expressed interest in the CSR activities of companies and their willingness to pay extra for products from CSR-active companies— $\chi^2(1, N = 235) = 12.355, p = 0.001$ . However, only 46.8% of respondents reported that they actively seek information about CSR. Of these, only 51.8% (only 24.3% of all respondents) were willing to pay more for CSR-committed products and let this information influence (positively or negatively, that is, support or boycott) their purchasing behavior. Furthermore, there is a statistically significant relationship between respondents who previously sought CSR-related information about companies and those who could provide an example of such activities— $\chi^2(1, N = 235) = 25.463, p = 0.000$ , and between respondents who previously sought CSR-related information about companies and those whose purchasing behavior was influenced if they were aware of a company's devotion to CSR— $\chi^2(5, N = 235) = 27.447, p = 0.000$ . Paradoxically, although the respondents reported that they are actively interested in the CSR activities of companies and actively seek this information, only less than one-third of them (31.8%) were able to give an example of CSR-committed companies. Moreover, almost one-quarter (24.5%) of those who actively seek information on CSR make their support or boycott of products conditional on the price of competing products. A paradoxical situation also arises for respondents who indicate they do not actively seek information about companies' CSR activities (53.2%). Only slightly more than one-third of them (35.2%) were able to give examples of CSR-committed companies, and yet more than one-half of them (54.4%) declared their willingness to pay extra for products from CSR-active companies. Therefore, the availability of information about a company's CSR activities neither necessarily leads to knowledge or

recognition of these activities nor affects purchase decisions (the communication/authenticity paradox).

Only slightly more than half (55.3%) of those who declared their willingness to pay extra for products from CSR-active companies (64.7% in total), actively seek information about the companies' CSR activities, and similarly about a half of them (54.6%) could mention any such CSR-related activity. At the same time, 90% of those who declared their willingness to pay extra for products from CSR-active companies also indicated that they lack information about CSR activities. However, the fact that they are passive in seeking CSR-related information or do not have enough information does not necessarily reduce their (declared) willingness to pay extra for CSR-active companies' products.

Apparently, sufficient information about the CSR activities of companies is not necessarily a condition for willingness to pay extra for products from CSR-active companies. And vice versa, a lack of information about CSR activities is not necessarily reflected in reluctance to pay extra for products from CSR-active firms. Indeed, reluctance to pay a premium does not automatically imply a lack of interest in the CSR activities of companies in general but may also indicate a lack of trust in the CSR concept as such (the legitimacy/trust paradox).

More than one-third of the responses (37%) were inconsistent, suspicious, or ambivalent. However, subsequent insight into the data revealed that knowledge/information reduces the proportion of ambivalent responses in the sample. There was a statistically significant relationship between knowledge of the definition of CSR and willingness to pay extra for products from CSR-active companies— $\chi^2(1, N = 235) = 5.783, p = 0.021$ . Still, for respondents who could (correctly) define CSR and were also willing to pay extra for products from companies engaged in CSR (either unconditionally or conditionally, i.e., with respect to the price of competing products), these ambivalent responses were only slightly more than one-quarter (27.8%). For those who could (correctly) define CSR but do not want to pay extra for products from companies engaged in CSR, the proportion was even lower (21.1%). These respondents are suspicious of CSR, assuming that there are utilitarian motives behind these activities (the legitimacy/trust paradox).

Further analysis focused on the question of whether willingness to pay extra for products offered by companies engaged in CSR is unconditional or whether respondents condition it upon meeting other assumptions. There was a statistically significant relationship between willingness to pay extra for products from CSR-active companies and influence on purchasing if the respondents were aware of a company's devotion to CSR— $\chi^2(5, N = 235) = 85.529, p = 0.000$ . Almost two-thirds (64.7%) of all respondents expressed a willingness to pay extra for products from companies involved in CSR. However, only slightly more than



half of them (55.3% of those who expressed a willingness to pay extra and 35.7% of all respondents, respectively) are willing to do so without other conditions. At the same time, it appears that respondents would be able to quickly change their support for or opposition to products (i.e., willingness to pay extra for products from CSR-engaged companies) if new information becomes available. *However, it also depends on whether the information is positive or negative, as negative information has a greater impact.* Almost all of those who were willing to pay extra for products from companies involved in CSR (94.7%) would be influenced in their purchasing decisions by information that the company is involved in CSR (in the sense that it would be a factor supporting the purchase). On the other hand, almost all (97.4%) would be negatively influenced in their purchase intentions by information that the firm is not involved in CSR or is associated with a negative CSR cause. At the same time, almost three-quarters (73%) of them already do so and reported they have previously avoided a product (when they had information about a negative company cause or behavior).

Roughly half (51.8%) of those who were not willing to pay extra for the products offered by CSR-active companies indicated that information about the company's positive commitment to CSR would positively impact their purchase intentions. However, almost three-quarters (74.7%) of those who were not willing to pay extra for the products offered by CSR-active companies would be negatively influenced in their purchase intentions by information that the company is not involved in CSR or is associated with a negative CSR cause. Even among these respondents, there were more than one-third (40.1%) who would avoid a product in the case of negative causes, if they have this information about the company's behavior. At the same time, these respondents were the least likely to be labeled as inconsistent, suspicious, or ambivalent (about one-fifth, 21.3%, of them). Thus, the determination not to support (via a purchase) a company that is not involved in CSR or is associated with a negative CSR cause (if the respondent has this information) is "the most believable/credible" in the case of respondents unwilling to pay extra for products of companies involved in CSR (the pay-off/non-pay-off paradox).

Several key insights regarding consumer interactions with CSR emerged from the initial stage of our analysis. Firstly, access to information about CSR activities does not guarantee an increase in knowledge, recognition, or impact on purchasing decisions. While sufficient information about CSR does not necessarily foster a willingness to pay more, its absence does not always equate to reluctance in paying a premium. Interestingly, negative information about CSR activities tends to have a more significant influence on consumers' willingness to pay extra for products from companies engaged in CSR. The decision to pay extra for CSR

products is often conditional and does not imply ignorance or disinterest in CSR. Rather, reluctance to pay more can reflect skepticism or a lack of trust in the CSR concept itself. Notably, the most cautious respondents often provided the most consistent and credible responses, indicating that skepticism correlates with a deeper engagement with CSR issues. Knowledge about CSR tends to diminish ambivalence in responses. The analysis also exposed the methodological limitations of using questionnaire surveys in CSR research. A significant proportion of responses (37%) were ambiguous or inconsistent, raising questions about their reliability and authenticity. This suggests that ambivalence is a fundamental aspect is a defining feature of the consumer–CSR relationship. The second stage of the research aims to delve deeper into these ambiguities and inconsistencies, enhancing the understanding of the consumer–CSR relationship from both a triangulating and exploratory perspective.

### Qualitative phase

The purpose of the second phase was to reveal millennials' inner-herd dynamics in connection to CSR. Therefore, we did not use interviews but focus groups as the method of data collection. In a group session, a researcher initiates discussion and then becomes a note-taking observer—respondents spontaneously speak, discuss, and question each other. The following section of the paper thus presents respondents' opinions as a concerted discussion rather than as simply question–answer dialog. We believe that this way our study has reached the highest level of authenticity needed to reveal respondents' phenomenological disposition, which enabled us to decipher their paradoxical situation. Moreover, this reflective approach challenges simplistic ways of analyzing attitudes and perceptions regarding CSR as this exemplary statement demonstrates:

Maria: Like right now, I would say of course I am going to choose the "responsible product," but when I am in a shop, usually I just go for the cheapest.

Our first impression of the interviewees' understanding of CSR is that it pertains to everything "good" in society, issues such as the environment, eco-friendly products, organic products, green products, human relations, charity, sustainability, cooperation with non-governmental organizations, employing local sources in supply chains, transparent internal processes, paying extra taxes, fairness, safe and decent working conditions, children's' rights, animal rights, minority rights, the rights of the disabled, education, awareness-raising activities, education, team building, and family support. However, when asked whether they are aware of any companies engaged in CSR activities, only half of respondents answered "yes," and when queried why companies engage in CSR, their answers mostly revolved





around brand image, public relations, or profit. The “voices” of the focus group members confirmed our findings from the questionnaire survey: for millennials, CSR is everything and nothing at the same time, and this ambivalent attitude should be of our highest interest.

The following sections present the themes associated with the paradoxes articulated in the theoretical opening of our paper identified in the qualitative analysis.

### The Communication/Authenticity Paradox: “They Do It Because Everybody Else Does”

Millennials perceive CSR as extending beyond the firm itself and see it as a company’s responsibility for the activities of its suppliers, stakeholders, and customers.

**Sandra:** *CSR is also about taking care of the employees’ lives outside the workplace... Their everyday lives, families, children. Because every employer needs satisfied employees to do a good job... and these things are interwoven.*

**Peter:** *Yeah, there are also very big multinational companies. They have a big supply chain, a lot of suppliers. They also have responsibility for their suppliers acting according to the law and standards.*

**Mark:** *Also taking care of their supply chain. Not only what they do in house, but what their partners are doing and see if they are also responsible. Cause if they are not, then it all doesn’t make sense.*

When asked to sum up the purpose of CSR activities in one sentence, respondents gave similar answers:

**Tamara:** *Attract new customers.*

**Maria:** *Yeah, reputation.*

**Lucas:** *Advertising.*

**Simon:** *Marketing.*

**Sarah:** *PR purposes.*

**Thomas:** **I also think it’s self-interest.**

**Michael:** *They do it because everybody else does.*

If this is how most consumers understand CSR, it is no surprise that it is commonly seen as a means for increasing profit and as a marketing tool. Thus, CSR is trapped in a vicious circle in which (more) communication does not lead to (better) understanding:

**Katarina:** *Wait, so oil and gas are the most active companies in CSR? ... In a bad way or in a good way? I am surprised, really.... But of course, it is because they pollute the most. They have to promote that “yeah we do this as well.”*

**Michael:** *Also, I am maybe like [a] nasty realist in this thing, but whenever I see someone saying “We are planting trees,” I am just thinking about, they want to make profit, they want to affect me. And I feel like, no I don’t wanna be affected by them.*

These ambivalent statements capture the essence of the contemporary CSR crisis. From a practical point of view, respondents perceive CSR as a company’s strategy for

achieving profit. From a theoretical point of view, they tend to attach great importance to CSR, even greater than anticipated by the concept itself. The impossibility of complying with their idealistic views creates a gap between their ideas and perceived reality, which further leads to disappointment and raises doubts as to the functioning and sense of the whole CSR system. Millennials are trapped in this downward spiral, a common, day-to-day, shared situation they find themselves in. This downward spiral stems from a lack of knowledge—not to be confused with a lack of data or information. Millennials are in fact overwhelmed by information and data, but nevertheless—or perhaps for this very reason—they lack knowledge about CSR. Therefore, more information about CSR does not necessarily equate to better knowledge, and the less millennial consumers know, the more they expect (as they rely on their ideas and fantasies rather than on facts), and the more anxious, hence less satisfied (when facing reality or what is being served as reality, i.e., hyperreality), they are. In the last phase of the spiral, they become skeptical and indifferent, that is, not interested in improving their knowledge. In information-rich environments, too much information has the same consequences as a lack of information:

**Michael:** *There are so many companies, brands. We are not gonna go to their websites and see what they are doing about CSR. Usually, we lack information. Yes, but of course I try to consider these things, but sometimes it’s not that easy, or I am just too lazy to do something.*

As González-González et al. (2019, p. 3) point out, “as the external and internal contexts to which the organizations have to adapt become steadily more global, unstable, complex and self-contradictory, the paradoxical tensions spread and intensify, exerting a clear influence on all the organizational spheres.” In other words, in the contemporary information-overloaded, overcomplex context simply delivering a CSR message does not suffice. It must be experienced, otherwise it will be either not accepted or short lived, as it is superseded by newer content.

### The Legitimacy/Trust Paradox: “There Is Always A Hidden Agenda”

The credibility crisis embodied in the legitimacy/trust paradox lies in the fundamental contemporary shift in both understanding norms and standards and the dynamics of CSR activities consequently. As famously captured by Carroll (1979), one dimension of CSR practices is philanthropic, or discretionary, responsibility. In the same vein, the voluntary basis of CSR activities has been acknowledged by the Commission of the European Community (2001). At the same time, as González-González et al. (2019, p. 2) have noted, “the debate on the social, occupational and environmental actions and repercussions of big



business are being institutionalized, guided and managed through CSR.” What we are witnessing here is a fundamental change in one of the pillars of CSR, namely, its voluntary dimension, since CSR has been institutionalized and incorporated into legislation, it has become *obligatory*, meaning that it is no longer a discretionary and self-regulatory act (filled with authenticity) but a norm every firm must—to a certain, usually precisely determined, extent—conform with (lacking authenticity). Thus, today, doing CSR is “normal,” and in fact, not doing it may, on some occasions, be seen as a violation of law.

**Mark:** *I feel like it's a new way of doing business today. It's a part of the philosophy and essence of every practice of contemporary companies. The way they present themselves, how they operate.*

**Thomas:** *I think that companies engage in CSR simply because their customers expect it. They are pushing them to do CSR. So, if they don't, they can't compete. It is all about expectations. Like meeting the expectations of the customers. That is why they do it.*

**Michael:** *Well, it is trendy to be eco-friendly nowadays... in manufacturing and also these campaigns like “buy this because it is bio [organic],” or “plant a tree” or “donate to the ocean protection” or something. It is a trend, a norm, to respond to this kind of appeal.*

Thus, the CSR activities of a firm are no longer private philanthropic endeavors that distinguish it from other companies. CSR is no more an extraordinary feature of a company that builds consumer sympathy and trust. As such, the legitimacy of CSR practices is no longer a sufficient argument in the CSR narrative. On the contrary, in the eyes of many consumers, legitimacy, that is, the institutionalization and legal regulation of CSR projects, detracts from their authenticity and trustworthiness, as one discussion held in our focus groups demonstrates:

**George:** *Ok, I'm quite critical or, better, skeptical about CSR. I think that there are companies that do it because they want to be socially responsible, but I also think that nowadays it has become more like a trend and a lot of companies are doing it just because they are afraid of the decrease of sales on one hand and increase of their competitors' [sales] on the other hand. So, they just go like “yeah, we are socially responsible,” like H&M, but in fact they are not. I think it's just for public image and sooner or later, there is a scandal or something that just pops up, and you can tell, OK that's it, that is their CSR.*

**Michael:** *Companies' primary aim is making money for the owners, so is CSR. It is not here to lose owners money; there is always this hidden agenda.*

Qualitative methods enabled us to go deeper into the minds of our respondents; we not only recorded and collected data, but we also initiated respondents' reflections, which are indeed worth recording:

**Antonio:** *Just wanted to comment that when I am thinking about it now, the backpack I just bought, I have no idea who made it. I was just thinking, “Wow, it's recycled bottles, this is so good.”*

**Thomas:** *Yeah, mine is also recycled bottles, 50%. (Laughing.)*

**Antonio:** *Yeah, mine is 100%, but I don't know anything else. They make me think about recycling, but I don't know if children are involved.*

**Thomas:** *That's it... we just don't know this. We only find out when there is some scandal (everyone agrees), the bubble bursts, and it's all in the news, but otherwise...*

**Antonio:** *Yeah, and I think it's hard to trust the companies, because you don't know and they try to hide it, they try to... like get deals with other companies and so on... You know, it's hard because no one wants to take the responsibility even though it's their fault. Like H&M, they are trying all they can to say it's not their fault. Because it wasn't their factory.*

**Dorothea:** *I think that every big company does something like that ... Like child work [labor] or other stupid things... It's hard to choose something that is good.*

The emphasis on legitimacy, that is, meeting standards via corporate reporting, results in a loss of trust on the consumer's part, since the discrepancies between the firm's written reports and its actual performance are apparent due to digital technologies, which can show what is hidden behind CSR messages. The fact that the information stream today exceeds both the time and space obstacles along with the facts mentioned in the previous paradox, that is, the false premise that the more we communicate, the more credibility we gain, leads to an inevitable dead end: more self-reporting does not lead to more trust, but rather the opposite. As Lock and Schulz-Knappe (2018, p. 2) note, “more communication about CSR does not result in more perceived transparency and trustworthiness, but on the contrary in more skepticism.”

#### **The pay-off/non-pay-off paradox: “I would pay more... but not that much more”**

When it comes to price, the “paradox trap,” that is, the ambivalent situation of our respondents (CSR message receivers) reveals itself, for what respondents say is one thing, what they actually do is another. When asked if they would pay more for “responsible products,” the majority said “yes.” However, when asked if they would avoid “non-responsible products,” the situation was more complicated. Only a fraction of our respondents said they would certainly avoid “non-responsible” products. However, more than four out of five stated their refusal to buy such products would depend on two main factors: they would avoid these products if they either had information or if “responsible alternatives” were not more expensive.



**Sandra: I think that every millennial is very concerned about CSR, but we are students, we do support CSR as an issue. However, we are forced to choose cheaper options. So, it's like a trade-off.**

**Antonio:** *I am searching for products that are fair-made. For example, I just bought a backpack because it is recycled from plastic bottles, and that's very interesting. But I still buy H&M clothes even though I feel like I shouldn't do it, but financially I am not in the position to choose.*

**George:** *I would probably buy the eco-friendly brands. But man! It's so expensive (laughing). I cannot afford it. If I want to eat (everyone laughs and agrees), I cannot afford a jacket.... I would pay more for eco-friendly but not that [much] more. ...But there are street stores where you can buy second-hand clothes... I try to go to these places, too.*

**Sarah:** *I never do my own research, so I am choosing apparently the cheaper one, which is not usually the "CSR style" company. Sad story... I am neither searching for nor considering any underlying information... It's not relevant to me.*

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that, in the same way corporations reduce CSR to an economic project, consumers—as the prevalent receivers of firms' CSR messages—reduce their perception of CSR at large to a question of ethics and price. The third CSR paradox can therefore be defined as a situation in which the consumer's decision to grant trust, like a firm's decision to engage in what was originally a non-profit endeavor, is reduced to willingness to pay more—*living* and *producing* responsibly are pared down to consuming responsibly, which means buying “eco-friendly,” “zero-waste,” “fair-trade,” “organic,” or otherwise “responsible” products. Thus, the ethics/price paradox furtively and ingeniously passes on social responsibility to consumers, while corporations and their activities lay low in the mist. However, although CSR was essentially intended to build bridges between corporations and society, the “reduced” approach adopted by the former to which the latter have had to adapt contributes to a growing gap between producers and consumers as it becomes increasingly difficult for them to find common language and to agree on the very meanings of terms, words, and symbols.

CSR has become central to corporate activity but has changed in nature. CSR is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing. It is now transparent and redundant, its meaning disappeared; corporate reporting has metamorphosized into storytelling. Thus, CSR is now a myth-making instrument that no longer reflects reality but its own hyperreality as described by Baudrillard (1981). As Crowther and Seifi (2018, p. 87) aptly note, “the corporate report replaces the organisation itself as the real through this power assumed from its myth creation role and the organisation becomes in the minds of both the readers and the authors ... that which is presented through the corporate

reporting mechanism.” This situation, as Corazza et al. (2017, p. 417) observe, is akin to Plato's allegory of the cave, for “we suppose that organizations disclosing not the actual reality and neither its copy, but the simulacra of what they perceive as real, will end up generating a simulacrum effect.” Crowther and Seifi (2018, p. 90) continue in the same line, arguing that “CSR is a simulacrum which has adopted the guise of reality through its acceptance within management discourse. As such the appearance of reality has become more important than its actuality.” This idea brings us back to Baudrillard (1996, pp. 1–2) and his notion that reality has been replaced by simulacra. In their original form, simulacra both murder reality and exterminate a vital illusion of the world. In Baudrillard's words, “the real does not disappear into illusion; it is illusion which disappears into integral reality.” This argument seemingly completes the circle of our argumentation. Due to companies' exaggerated focus on creating images of themselves as socially responsible, CSR is now a mandatory part of “doing business” that is nearly obsessively communicated. CSR is an empty shell, just three letters that are omnipresent, yet meaningless, vague for consumers. The essence of CSR has “disappeared into integral reality,” rendering it empty, yet ubiquitous.

Respondents' expectations, based on their wrong assumptions (the downward spiral effect), do not reflect reality but hyperreality. As such, they are difficult for companies to meet. One way to do so is to communicate CSR messages within a hyperreal frame, that is, fuel hyperreality through proper storytelling, providing the right image, maintaining the system, blowing up the bubble. However, this strategy is hard to sustain. The bubble will eventually burst, revealing the company's failings and cover-ups, which are then immediately communicated by the media and on social networks, thus reinforcing consumers' conviction that CSR as a concept might be needed, but in the hands of big companies (and as a practice) it only serves one purpose—profit.

## Discussion

### Careful with the Media(Tion)

While discussing the pointlessness of never-ending debates over defining what CSR is, Bentele and Nothhaft (2011, p. 209) conclude that it is “more fruitful to start where a company's responsible actions and the society's perception of corporate responsibility appear as a tangible, ‘real’ phenomenon, where society's expectations are shaped: in popular mass media.” We cannot but endorse the first part of this statement. However, we strongly disagree with the authors' conclusion. Contemporary live-streaming, social, ubiquitous media is everything but real. The media constitutes reality according to the expectations and needs of its audience



(and owners); media truly *mediates*, by adjusting, editing, and shaping records and fragments of reality. Media, be it traditional or digital, is the basic component of the simulacra effect and should be treated as such, but with caution; we should always keep the big picture in view. Transmission loss must be expected, namely at the expense of authenticity. Although many current technologies strive to provide true, first-hand *evidence*, they are no match for authentic *experience*.

### Gaining Trust Through Authentic Experiences

To gain credibility, CSR should maintain balance between its *legitimacy* and *trust* in both theory and practice. Trust is an essential component of abstract systems and a central mechanism of modern societies (Giddens 1991), since it serves as a communicative mechanism for reducing complexity (Bentele 1994). Once the complexity of a system surpasses human cognitive abilities, as is the case of our contemporary world, trust is often the only thing we can rely on when making decisions. Given this complexity, it is unrealistic to expect consumers to independently verify the truthfulness of CSR communications. The perception of CSR as credible hinges on first-hand experiences, linking back to the concept of authenticity. As posited by the Thomas theorem (Thomas and Thomas 1928), reality is subjectively experienced and interpreted, with social acceptability often supplanting factual truth in abstract systems (Giddens 2020). This paradigm shift intensifies in the transition from modernity to post-modernity, or the post-truth era. Here, the continuous, multidirectional flow of information makes it increasingly challenging to establish or accept trustworthiness. The adage “trust is hard to earn, easy to lose” is particularly pertinent in this context.

For millennials, within CSR discourse, attention should be paid within the CSR discourse to the processes of *trust gain* (and trust loss) and *trust maintenance*, and especially to *trust mediators*, since in the era of ubiquitous computing and mobile internet their roles and characteristics have changed fundamentally. Coleman (1994; 1982) describes trust as involving two parties: the trustor and the trustee, where trust is based on knowledge from personal experiences or mediated information (Deutsch 1958; 1977). In our complex information society, mediators play a vital role. Historically, this role was filled by traditional media and public relations (Bentele and Nothhaft 2011), but the advent of mobile technologies and social media has transformed the landscape. New mediators, like bloggers, YouTubers, and Instagrammers, now construct perceived reality and significantly influence digital natives' decisions. They not only utilize advanced communication technologies and skills but also evoke sentiments and feelings, essential elements of trust in today's intricate world. Their ability to convey

stories and emotions in real-time lends an added layer of authenticity to their messages.

### Careful with the Media(Tors)

Addressing the credibility/trust paradox in CSR communication, this analysis focuses on the evolving role of trust mediators, shifting from traditional media outlets to influential social media personalities like Selena Gomez with her 144 million followers. This shift reflects Coleman's (1994, 1982) theory that trust is grounded in a mediator's knowledge of the trustee. However, in the realm of influencers, this logic is inverted; their influence derives not from their knowledge of the trustee (the company), but their understanding of and connection to the trustors (the audience). Influencers, adept at engaging specific, vast audiences, have become pivotal in generating trust for companies, particularly in CSR communications. This inversion of Coleman's logic addresses a longstanding dilemma in CSR communication: direct self-promotion often undermines credibility (Yoon et al. 2006), while subtler approaches tend to be more effective (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990). Influencers, acting as independent external sources, mediate corporate messages to build trust, as recommended by managerial research (Yoon et al. 2006).

Incorporating influencers into organizational communication strategies aligns with all parties in the trust process. However, this approach limits consumers' choices regarding trust. As Mohr and Webb (2005, p. 143) note, consumer responses to CSR hinge on access to valid information and the ability to evaluate CSR programs effectively. Given the impracticality of this for most consumers, influencers emerge as “consumer educators,” guiding audiences in evaluating companies' social responsibility records. Thus, consumers face a binary decision: either trust the mediators and the perceptions they shape or withhold trust due to concerns about their credibility and independence. In this scenario, echoing Deutsch (1977), authenticity, derived from personal experience, becomes the foundation upon which consumers build their trust.

### Whose Responsibility? From Responsibility to Solidarity

Although it is believed that CSR standards contribute to improving CSR implementation, their automatic adoption by managers and executives leads to a paradoxical situation described by Petersen (2002, p. 86) that the adherence to standards can lead to a loss of personal investment in the process, raising the question of who truly holds responsibility for CSR. The traditional concept of CSR, with corporations at its center, is evolving as consumers increasingly share in this responsibility. Our research reveals that consumers often experience guilt when their actions do not align with their



beliefs yet feel gratified when making responsible choices. As one of the respondents in our research noted, given a choice between two similar products, they would opt for the more responsible or eco-friendly option if priced the same, as it imparts a sense of personal satisfaction. This shifting dynamic indicates a gradual transfer of the 'Responsibility' aspect of CSR from corporations to consumers. Consumers are now seen as the real drivers of responsibility, supporting responsible companies and products.

The present study aimed to explain the cause of the emptying of the meaning of the CSR concept, of which only three letters remain. However, it has indicated another trend, namely the gradual shift of R (responsibility) to the consumer. After all, it is the consumer who is supposed to be truly responsible, to buy responsible products, to support responsible companies, to believe in a responsible mission. If the meaning of CSR is to be restored, through authenticity, the balance between the letters C and S must be re-established. Both parties must be responsible. The essence of this new balance is, in our view, better captured by the word solidarity than responsibility.

## Conclusion

This study delves into the paradoxical nature of contemporary CSR, examining the complex dynamics influencing consumer perceptions of CSR as contradictory and confusing. The standardization of CSR gives rise to a paradoxical situation: although CSR is everywhere, it has become harder and harder for consumers to decipher. From a managerial perspective, the paradoxes of CSR have been thoroughly discussed. However, today we witness the spillover of these paradoxes into the realm of consumers. It is the consumer as a receiver of the CSR message who faces the tensions stemming from the complex and contradictory nature of our digitally mediated world. This is why the present study pays particular attention to the consumer's perspective. Not the image sent, but the image received and perceived should be of supreme interest within the CSR discourse.

The paradoxes of CSR are not just theoretical constructs but are realized through the feelings and attitudes of real consumers. Consumers are overwhelmed by information and marketing communication. They doubt, they do not know what to think, they do not know what they can trust. This brings us to a methodological question: can we as researchers trust consumers' accounts? If the respondents' experience of CSR is not authentic, can their accounts be valid? This is why this study applies a mixed methods design (questionnaire and focus groups) to detect customers' true attitudes toward CSR and to reveal what often remains hidden because it is not asked about.

To unravel this problem, we explicated the authenticity/communication paradox, the legitimacy/trust paradox, and the pay-off/non-pay-off paradox, which define the current perception of the CSR concept, and conducted an empirical study that explored these paradoxes by comparing and intermingling the questionnaire data with the direct statements of focus group participants. To provide a deeper understanding of respondents' ambivalences (as a consequence of CSR paradoxes), data analysis focused on detecting inconsistent answers.

Our findings confirmed the paradoxes explicated in the theoretical section leading to respondents' ambivalent perceptions of CSR. The empirical study also verified the hypothesis that respondents' expectations based on their wrong assumptions do not reflect reality, but hyperreality, and are therefore difficult for companies to meet. CSR is at a crossroads. Thus, the last part of the study identifies further directions for the concept if it is to survive—CSR must transform from a mediated report into a shared, authentic experience.

## References

- Ashforth, Blake E., and Barrie W. Gibbs. 1990. The Double-Edge of Organizational Legitimation. *Organization Science* 1 (2): 177–194. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1.2.177>.
- Barthes, Roland. 1994. *The Semiotic Challenge*, 1st ed. Berkeley, MA: University of California Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1981. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 1st ed. St. Louis, MO: Telos Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1996. *The Perfect Crime*. Verso.
- Bentele, Günter. 1994. Öffentliches Vertrauen — Normative Und Soziale Grundlage Für Public Relations. In *Normative Aspekte Der Public Relations: Grundlegende Fragen Und Perspektiven. Eine Einführung*, edited by Wolfgang Armbrrecht and Ulf Zabel, 131–58. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-97043-5\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-97043-5_7).
- Bentele, Günter, and Howard Nothhaft. 2011. Trust and Credibility as the Basis of Corporate Social Responsibility. In *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Social Responsibility*, edited by Ø Ihlen, J.L. Bartlet, and S. May, 208–30. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118083246.ch11>.
- Campbell, John L. 2006. Institutional Analysis and the Paradox of Corporate Social Responsibility. *American Behavioral Scientist* 49 (7): 925–938. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205285172>.
- Carroll, Archie B. 1979. A Three-Dimensional Conceptual Model of Corporate Performance. *Academy of Management Review* 4 (4): 497–505. <https://doi.org/10.2307/257850>.
- Carroll, Archie B. 2008. *A History of Corporate Social Responsibility: Concepts and Practices*. Edited by Andrew Crane, Dirk Matten, Abigail McWilliams, Jeremy Moon, and Donald S Siegel. Vol. 1. The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility. Oxford University Press.
- Carroll, Archie B. 2015. Corporate Social Responsibility: The Centerpiece of Competing and Complementary Frameworks. *Organizational Dynamics* 44 (2): 87–96. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2015.02.002>.
- Chaffee, Eric C. 2017. The Origins of Corporate Social Responsibility. *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 85: 353.



- Chatzopoulou, Elena, and Adrian de Kiewiet. 2021. Millennials' Evaluation of Corporate Social Responsibility: The Wants and Needs of the Largest and Most Ethical Generation. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 20 (3): 521–534. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1882>.
- Coleman, James S. 1994. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Harvard University Press.
- Coleman, James Samuel. 1982. Systems of Trust. A Rough Theoretical Framework. *Angewandte Sozialforschung Anc AIAS Informationen Wien* 10 (3): 277–307.
- Commission of the European Communities. 2001. *Green Paper: Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility*. Commission of the European Communities.
- Cone Communications. 2015. “2015 Cone Communications Millennial CSR Study—Cone.” 2015. <https://conecomm.com/2015-cone-communications-millennial-csr-study/#download-research>.
- Corazza, Laura, Simone Domenico Scagnelli, and Chiara Mio. 2017. Simulacra and Sustainability Disclosure: Analysis of the Interpretative Models of Creating Shared Value. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* 24 (5): 414–434. <https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.1417>.
- Crowther, David, and Shahla Seifi. 2018. “Against Theory: Redefining Corporate Social Responsibility Using a Lacanian Perspective.” In *The Goals of Sustainable Development: Responsibility and Governance*, edited by David Crowther, Shahla Seifi, and Abdul Moyeen, 77–93. Singapore: Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5047-3\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5047-3_5).
- Colle, De., Adrian Henriques Simone, and Saras Sarasvathy. 2014. The Paradox of Corporate Social Responsibility Standards. *Journal of Business Ethics* 125 (2): 177–191. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1912-y>.
- Deutsch, Morton. 1958. Trust and Suspicion. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2 (4): 265–279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200275800200401>.
- Deutsch, Morton. 1977. *The Resolution of Conflict: Constructive and Destructive Processes*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Du, Shuili, and Edward T. Vieira. 2012. Striving for Legitimacy through Corporate Social Responsibility: Insights from Oil Companies. *Journal of Business Ethics* 110 (4): 413–427. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1490-4>.
- Fern, Edward F. 1982. The Use of Focus Groups for Idea Generation: The Effects of Group Size, Acquaintanceship, and Moderator on Response Quantity and Quality. *Journal of Marketing Research* 19 (1): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224378201900101>.
- Fry, Richard. 2020. “Millennials Overtake Baby Boomers as America's Largest Generation.” *Pew Research Center* (blog). 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/28/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers-as-americas-largest-generation/>.
- Gapper, John. 2018. How Millennials Became the World's Most Powerful Consumers | Financial Times. 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/194cd1c8-6583-11e8-a39d-4df188287ff>.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *The Consequences of Modernity*, 1st ed. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 2020. Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. In *The New Social Theory Reader*, ed. S. Seidman and J.C. Alexander, 354–61. Abingdon: Routledge.
- González-González, José María., Francisco D. Bretones, Rocío González-Martínez, and Pedro Francés-Gómez. 2019. ‘The Future of an Illusion’: A Paradoxes of CSR. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 32 (1): 2–14. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-01-2018-0018>.
- Hahn, Tobias, Jonatan Pinkse, Lutz Preuss, and Frank Figge. 2015. Tensions in Corporate Sustainability: Towards an Integrative Framework. *Journal of Business Ethics* 127 (2): 297–316. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2047-5>.
- Hoffmann, Jochen. 2018. Talking into (Non) Existence: Denying or Constituting Paradoxes of Corporate Social Responsibility. *Human Relations* 71 (5): 668–691. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717721306>.
- Hume, Margee. 2010. Compassion without Action: Examining the Young Consumers Consumption and Attitude to Sustainable Consumption. *Journal of World Business* 45 (4): 385–394. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2009.08.007>.
- Agudelo, Latapí, Mauricio Andrés, Lára Jóhannsdóttir, and Brynhildur Davídsdóttir. 2019. A Literature Review of the History and Evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility. *International Journal of Corporate Social Responsibility* 4 (1): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40991-018-0039-y>.
- Lock, Irina, and Charlotte Schulz-Knappe. 2018. Credible Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Communication Predicts Legitimacy: Evidence from an Experimental Study. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 24 (1): 2–20. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-07-2018-0071>.
- López-Fernández, Andrée Marie. 2020. Price Sensitivity versus Ethical Consumption: A Study of Millennial Utilitarian Consumer Behavior. *Journal of Marketing Analytics* 8 (2): 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41270-020-00074-8>.
- Luger, Michaela, Katharina Maria Hofer, and Arne Floh. 2022. Support for Corporate Social Responsibility among Generation Y Consumers in Advanced versus Emerging Markets. *International Business Review* 31 (2): 101903. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2021.101903>.
- Macintosh, Norman B., Teri Shearer, Daniel B. Thornton, and Michael Welker. 2000. Accounting as Simulacrum and Hyperreality: Perspectives on Income and Capital. *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 25 (1): 13–50. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0361-3682\(99\)00010-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0361-3682(99)00010-0).
- Martin, Roger L. 2002. The Virtue Matrix: Calculating the Return on Corporate Responsibility. *Harvard Business Review* 80 (3): 68–75.
- Mattessich, Richard. 2000. *The Beginnings of Accounting and Accounting Thought: Accounting Practice in the Middle East (8000 BC to 2000 BC) and Accounting Thought in India (300 BC and the Middle Ages)*, 1st ed. New York: Routledge.
- McGlone, Teresa, Judith Winters Spain, and Vernon McGlone. 2011. Corporate Social Responsibility and the Millennials. *Journal of Education for Business* 86 (4): 195–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2010.502912>.
- Mohr, Lois A., and Deborah J. Webb. 2005. The Effects of Corporate Social Responsibility and Price on Consumer Responses. *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 39 (1): 121–147. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6606.2005.00006.x>.
- Morsing, Mette, Majken Schultz, and Kasper Ulf Nielsen. 2008. The ‘Catch 22’ of Communicating CSR: Findings from a Danish Study. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 14 (2): 97–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527260701856608>.
- Müller-Christ, Georg. 2011. *Sustainable Management: Coping with the Dilemmas of Resource-Oriented Management*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Neugebauer, Friederike, Frank Figge, and Tobias Hahn. 2016. Planned or Emergent Strategy Making? Exploring the Formation of Corporate Sustainability Strategies. *Business Strategy and the Environment* 25 (5): 323–336. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1875>.
- Newell, Stephen J., and Ronald E. Goldsmith. 2001. The Development of a Scale to Measure Perceived Corporate Credibility. *Journal of Business Research* 52 (3): 235–247. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963\(99\)00104-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(99)00104-6).
- Öberseder, Magdalena, Bodo B. Schlegelmilch, and Verena Gruber. 2011. ‘Why Don't Consumers Care about CSR?’: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Role of CSR in Consumption Decisions. *Journal of Business Ethics* 104 (4): 449–460. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-0925-7>.



- Osborne, Jason W., and Margaret R. Blanchard. 2011. Random Responding from Participants Is a Threat to the Validity of Social Science Research Results. *Frontiers in Psychology* 1: 220. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2010.00220>.
- Park, Sun-Young., Moonhee Cho, and Soojin Kim. 2021. The Effect of CSR Expectancy Violation: Value from Expectancy Violation Theory and Confirmation Bias. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 27 (4): 365–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2019.1671478>.
- Pérezts, Mar, Jean-Philippe. Bouilloud, and Vincent De Gaulejac. 2011. Serving Two Masters: The Contradictory Organization as an Ethical Challenge for Managerial Responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics* 101 (1): 33–44. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-1176-3>.
- Petersen, Verner. 2002. *Beyond Rules in Society and Business*. Northampton, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Pomeroy, Alan, and Sara Dolnicar. 2009. Assessing the Prerequisite of Successful CSR Implementation: Are Consumers Aware of CSR Initiatives? *Journal of Business Ethics* 85 (2): 285–301. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9729-9>.
- Porter, Michael E., and Mark R. Kramer. 2006. The Link between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility. *Harvard Business Review* 84 (12): 78–92.
- Průša, Přemysl, and Tomáš Sadílek. 2017. Green Marketing and Its Perception by Young Consumers of the ‘Generation Y.’ In *Global and National Business Theories and Practice: Bridging the Past with the Future*, 1289–1298. Rome: Italy.
- Quinn, Robert E, and Kim S Cameron. 1988. *Paradox and Transformation: A Framework for Viewing Organization and Management*. Ballinger Series on Innovation and Organizational Change. Ballinger Pub Co.
- Sjovall, Andrea M., and Andrew C. Talk. 2004. From Actions to Impressions: Cognitive Attribution Theory and the Formation of Corporate Reputation. *Corporate Reputation Review* 7 (3): 269–281. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1540225>.
- Smith, Wendy K., and Marianne W. Lewis. 2011. Toward a Theory of Paradox: A Dynamic Equilibrium Model of Organizing. *Academy of Management Review* 36 (2): 381–403. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2009.0223>.
- Thomas, Michelle, Jane Frankland, and Michael Bloor. 2000. Focus Groups in Social Research. *Focus Groups in Social Research*, 1–120.
- Thomas, William Isaac, and D.S. Thomas. 1928. *The Child in America*. Oxford: Knopf.
- Trethewey, Guest editors Angela, and Karen L Ashcraft. 2004. Special Issue Introduction: Practicing Disorganization: The Development of Applied Perspectives on Living with Tension. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 32 (2): 81–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0090988042000210007>.
- Tynan, A Caroline, and Jennifer L. Drayton. 1988. Conducting Focus Groups—A Guide for First-time Users. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 6 (1): 5–9. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb045757>.
- der Byl, Van, A. Connie, and Natalie Slawinski. 2015. Embracing Tensions in Corporate Sustainability: A Review of Research from Win-Wins and Trade-Offs to Paradoxes and Beyond. *Organization & Environment* 28 (1): 54–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026615575047>.
- Waddock, Sandra, and Bradley K. Googins. 2011. The Paradoxes of Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility. In *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Social Responsibility*, 23–43. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118083246.ch2>.
- Wagner, Tillmann, Richard J. Lutz, and Barton A. Weitz. 2009. Corporate Hypocrisy: Overcoming the Threat of Inconsistent Corporate Social Responsibility Perceptions. *Journal of Marketing* 73 (6): 77–91. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.73.6.77>.
- Wheeler, David, Heike Fabig, and Richard Boele. 2002. Paradoxes and Dilemmas for Stakeholder Responsive Firms in the Extractive Sector: Lessons from the Case of Shell and the Ogoni. *Journal of Business Ethics* 39 (3): 297–318. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016542207069>.
- Yoon, Yeosun, Zeynep Gürhan-Canli, and Norbert Schwarz. 2006. The Effect of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Activities on Companies with Bad Reputations. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 16 (4): 377–390. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1604\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1604_9).

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.

**Klára Šimůnková** is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Management, University of Economics, in Prague. Her areas of interest are mainly (post)phenomenology, posthumanism, consumer culture, consumption practices, mobile technologies, and qualitative methods. She completed her PhD study in 2022. Her studies have been published in the Journal of Marketing Management or the International Journal of Consumer Studies.

**Tomáš Kincl** is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Management, University of Economics, in Prague. His academic pursuits are primarily focused on marketing strategy and consumer behaviour. He is also interested in sustainable consumers' behaviour. Under his supervision, four students have completed their Ph.D. He has contributed articles to notable publications such as the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, Computer Speech and Language, and Behaviour & Information Technology.

**Daria Gunina** is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Management, University of Economics, in Prague. Her areas of interest are mainly digital advertising, social media marketing. She completed her PhD study in 2024.

