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## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# I Do Not Buy Your Story! Understanding the Limits of Storytelling in Corporate Social Responsibility Communication

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## ABSTRACT

Storytelling is a popular approach for communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. However, its effectiveness in this context remains underexplored. This paper investigates the potential downsides of storytelling in CSR communication, particularly its capacity to backfire by evoking consumer skepticism. Across two field experiments ( $n_1 = 823$ ;  $n_2 = 5411$ ) with actual customers of a global retailer and one scenario-based experiment ( $n_3 = 1175$ ), we demonstrate that storytelling, compared to an expository message format, can increase perceptions of manipulative intent and extrinsic attributions regarding a company's CSR efforts. These effects, in turn, reduce consumer loyalty and purchase behavior. Notably, this backfire effect is pronounced in communication about peripheral CSR activities (e.g., philanthropy) but not embedded CSR initiatives (e.g., employee-focused programs). By integrating theories of persuasion knowledge, storytelling, and social-relational framing, our findings challenge the assumption of storytelling's universal efficacy and highlight its context-dependent outcomes. We offer actionable insights for CSR and communication managers to align storytelling strategies with CSR type and consumer expectations.

## 1 | Introduction

*“Ten year old Tchimada Abdoulaye is the only one of her siblings to go to school. Coming from a poor nomadic family, Tchimada is lucky to attend. Her mother has already received marriage offers for her but wants her to finish her studies instead. Tchimada is still on the right track – mostly because she was lucky enough to be enrolled in a ‘Child-Friendly/Girl-Friendly’ school. And with support from the IKEA Foundation’s*

*campaign, Tchimada’s story can become a reality for many more girls in Niger.”*

(IKEA Foundation: Soft Toys for Education)

As in the opening example, companies often use stories to communicate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages to consumers (e.g., see another example of Coca Cola in Supporting Information S1: 1). CSR can be broadly defined as business practices that go beyond legal requirements and account for social and/or environmental concerns (McWilliams and Siegel 2001; van Marrewijk 2003), and organizations must communicate these practices credibly to their external and

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internal stakeholders to create awareness and reap the benefits of their good deeds (Du et al. 2010). Here, CSR goes beyond economic, social, governance which is often used for monitoring organizations and their strategy along sustainability criteria (Li et al. 2023).

CSR stories typically feature real people like an employee or a disadvantaged child and describe how the company's CSR actions have contributed to their welfare (McAdams 1993). The use of CSR stories is pervasive: 83.5% of 1165 US consumers we surveyed recalled having seen or read CSR communication framed as a story (see Supporting Information S1: II for sample details). Moreover, among a group of European corporate communications managers ( $N=20$ ), 25% stated that they had previously used CSR stories and 90% would consider using storytelling in the future.

A wealth of scientific research underscores the rationale for using storytelling over a more factual, expository frame which lacks story-typical elements such as characters and narrative arcs (van Laer et al. 2014; Wentzel et al. 2010). For example, a recent systematic literature review on the impact of storytelling on consumers by Júnior et al. (2023) emphasizes, next to the impact of negative storytelling on hate-speech, mainly positive consumer outcomes, such as an enhanced identification of consumers with the brand, creation of emotional value, and increased support behavior. The primary theoretical mechanism underlying the beneficial effects of storytelling is “narrative transportation” (i.e., the audience immersing into a story's characters and plot). In line, meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews on narrative transportation (van Laer et al. 2014; 2019; Thomas and Grigsby 2024) reinforce the general effectiveness of storytelling across communication contexts. In their review of 91 articles, Thomas and Grigsby (2024) identify a plethora of antecedents and positive outcomes of narrative transportation—and only scarce research addressing potential downsides. However, they note perceptions of manipulative intent as an important boundary condition for the persuasiveness of stories. Specifically, the story format can activate persuasion knowledge in some consumers, rendering them to be more skeptical and critical of the message (Appel 2022; Wang & Shen 2019; Wentzel et al. 2010). Overall, while meta-analyses and literature reviews highlight the general effectiveness of storytelling, they show a fragmented understanding of its boundary conditions. This calls investigating the effectiveness of storytelling across different contexts to identify under which circumstances storytelling can be considered an effective marketing strategy (Júnior et al. 2023; Thomas and Grigsby 2024).

Especially within the context of CSR communication, a more granular insight into the impact of storytelling compared to factual information is needed. This is because the CSR context is characterized by inherently high skepticism as consumers suspect firms to abuse a good deed for ulterior motives, such as advertising reasons and reaping relational rewards (e.g., Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). On the same line, how consumers perceive and react to CSR activities strongly hinges on their evaluations of the organization in terms of trust and reputation (e.g., Du et al. 2007; Skard and Thorbjørnsen 2014). However, so far, only very few studies have compared storytelling to expository information in the CSR context, most of them showing positive outcomes, including enhanced message

credibility and more favorable evaluations of CSR activities (Boukes and LaMarre 2021; Anna Kim et al. 2022; Pérez et al. 2024; Xu and Kochigina 2021). As a notable exception, Dhanesh and Nekmat (2019) identify consumer involvement and skepticism as key moderating factors that could limit or even reverse storytelling's persuasive power.

In summary, previous research suggests that storytelling compared to an expository format can lead to more positive outcomes but that the effect may be subject to boundary conditions. However, these boundary conditions, the psychological mechanism, and their impact on real-world consumer behavior remain mainly unexplored. Thus, looking at the prevalent use of storytelling in the high-skepticism CSR context, we see an urgent need to remedy the following five unanswered research questions in the domain of CSR communication:

First, is there a backfire effect, such that storytelling within the high skepticism domain of CSR may promote consumers to perceive that the company engages in CSR activities for ulterior motives (i.e., “extrinsic attributions” for the CSR engagement)? Second, seeing that CSR engagement encompasses a broad set of activities and that context matters, does storytelling work differently in the context of peripheral CSR (i.e., actions that are not related to the core business such as philanthropic donations) than for CSR activities which are embedded in the value chain of the company (e.g., improving working conditions for employees)? Third, what psychological mechanisms underly storytelling's potential to backfire in CSR communication? Fourth, there are no field studies comparing the impact of storytelling versus expository (CSR) communication (please refer to Supporting Information S1: XIII for a detailed overview of comparative studies and their setting). What is the effect of storytelling in the real world, informing practical applications? Five, so far, the relationship between social exchange theory (Fiske 1991, 1992), persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), and CSR is not established. Can social exchange rhetoric trigger persuasion knowledge in the CSR context?

The purpose of this paper is to address these five research questions. We draw on theories of persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), storytelling (van Laer et al. 2014; Wentzel et al. 2010), and social-relational framing (Fiske 1991, 1992; McGraw and Tetlock 2005) to propose a conceptual framework that challenges the assumption of storytelling's universal effectiveness. Specifically, we theorize that CSR storytelling may backfire due to heightened perceptions of manipulative intent and extrinsic attributions.

To test our framework and answer the five research questions raised, we conducted three studies involving actual customers of a large international retail company. Following our theorizing, the first study investigates whether the use of storytelling in the CSR context can have a backfire effect (research Question 1) in the real world (research Question 4). Its results demonstrate that CSR storytelling can negatively affect consumer loyalty and real purchase behavior through heightened perceptions of extrinsic attributions. Study 2 explores whether the CSR type (peripheral vs. embedded) serves as a boundary condition for the effect of storytelling (research Question 2). It suggests that it does so, such that peripheral CSR (e.g., philanthropic activities) amplifies the negative effects of storytelling, whereas embedded



CSR (e.g., employee-focused initiatives) mitigates them. Study 3 aims to provide light into the underlying psychological mechanism of the suggested detrimental effect (research Question 3). It explicates the role of manipulative intent as the psychological mechanism driving adverse outcomes, revealing that consumers' beliefs about the company's intentions mediate the effects of storytelling. With support for our hypotheses, we find first evidence for the link between social exchange theory, CSR, and persuasion knowledge (research Question 5).

Our findings challenge the prevailing consensus that storytelling is an unequivocally effective communication tool in CSR. By highlighting the contextual and psychological factors that can reverse its effects, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of storytelling's role in CSR communication. Importantly, it underscores the need for practitioners to align storytelling strategies with the type of CSR activity and audience skepticism to maximize effectiveness and avoid potential backlash.

## 2 | Conceptual Development

### 2.1 | The Power and Perils of Storytelling

#### 2.1.1 | Storytelling and Its Consumer-Level Impact

The technique of storytelling centers on a story, comprising a specific setting, a (set of) character(s), a temporal sequence of events involving these characters (i.e., a plot), and a narrative arc that climaxes and ends in a denouement, typically through the resolution of some adversity or misfortune facing the character(s) (Edson Escalas et al. 2004; McAdams 1993; van Laer et al. 2014). A broad range of studies suggest storytelling's persuasive power when used to communicate to consumers: In their literature review, Júnior et al. (2023) provide a comprehensive overview of the consumer-level impact and synthesize the positive impact in three categories: stimulating brand identification, experiencing emotional value, and supporting engagement behaviors whilst identifying the promotion of hate speech as a singular downside. The main mechanism that is unique to storytelling over more factual presentations of content is the process of narrative transportation, which immerses consumers in the story and can result in narrative persuasion (van Laer et al. 2014, 2019). In contrast to discursive/analytical processing, narrative transportation is an experiential mode of processing, borne of the consumer's empathy for the story characters and active imagination of the focal events, causing the consumer to temporarily lose track of reality (Adaval and Wyer 1998; Chang 2009; Green and Brock 2000; Padgett and Allen 1997; van Laer et al. 2014).

Such transportation leads to narrative persuasion based on a holistic affective experience rather than careful consideration of arguments. For an in-depth study of the antecedents, consequences, and boundary conditions of narrative transportation, recent meta-analyses and literature reviews provide rich insights (van Laer et al. 2014; 2019; Thomas and Grigsby 2024). For example, narrative persuasion is associated with more favorable affect (Chang 2009; Edson Escalas et al. 2004; Júnior et al. 2023; Solja et al. 2018), fewer narrative-related overcritical

thoughts (Green and Brock 2000; Slater et al. 2002), and more story-consistent attitudes (Edson Escalas et al. 2004; Escalas 2004, 2007; Green and Donahue 2011; Wang and Calder 2006). Moreover, it causes consumers to ignore their preexisting beliefs and attitudes, making them more susceptible to those implied or promoted by the story (Dal Cin et al. 2004; Green 2004; Green and Brock 2000). Of course, the quality of a story can significantly influence its effectiveness. Good stories, as defined by McKee (2003), include a clear protagonist, antagonist, and narrative arc, creating emotional engagement and authenticity. In contrast, bad stories lack these elements, leading to inadequate engagement.

To gain deeper insights into the effectiveness of storytelling compared to expository formats, experimental studies comparing the two are particularly helpful. In Supporting Information S1: VIII, we identify a total of 16 experimental studies which are relevant to define the field of related work. The studies that observe consistently positive effects emphasize that storytelling enhances engagement, message involvement, and persuasiveness. For instance, narrative messages have been found to generate stronger affective responses, evoke positive emotions, and increase message credibility (Anna Kim et al. 2022; Krakow et al. 2018). The immersive nature of storytelling, particularly through mechanisms such as narrative transportation and character identification, plays a crucial role in enhancing attitudes and behavioral intent (Boukes and LaMarre 2021; Kaczorowska et al. 2024).

#### 2.1.2 | The Boundary Conditions of Storytelling and the Research Gap

However, storytelling is not universally effective. Perceptions of manipulative intent and high consumer skepticism significantly reduce a story's persuasive power and, in some cases, cause it to backfire (Appel 2022; Dhanesh and Nekmat 2019; Wentzel et al. 2010). This is because when audiences suspect that a story is deliberately crafted to manipulate their attitudes or behaviors, they tend to process the message more critically and defensively. Instead of eliciting narrative persuasion, consumers "elicit a more analytical form of processing in which consumers engage in a logical and piecemeal evaluation of the ad's argument" (Wentzel et al. 2010, 511). This is particularly evident in advertising contexts, where storytelling loses its advantage when consumers perceive a high degree of persuasive intent.

Seven of the 16 studies that compare the effects of narrative storytelling to those of an expository format highlight boundary conditions that may limit its effectiveness. Wentzel et al. (2010) found that when manipulative intent is salient, consumers evaluate both storytelling and expository ads more analytically and with greater suspicion, ultimately negating any narrative advantage. Similarly, Appel (2022) demonstrated that when manipulative intent is explicitly clarified—such as through a warning—storytelling can even reduce persuasion compared to expository formats. Skepticism, particularly in CSR and health communication, further exacerbates these negative effects. Dhanesh and Nekmat (2019) observed that CSR storytelling is only effective when consumer skepticism is low; in cases of high skepticism, storytelling can diminish the positive impact of CSR



initiatives. This suggests that skeptical audiences are less likely to engage with or believe in narratives, potentially perceiving them as mere corporate rhetoric rather than genuine commitments. Likewise, in health communication, Wang and Shen (2019) found that storytelling with a strong persuasive element decreases credibility and increases psychological reactance, leading to resistance rather than persuasion. Taken together, the findings of these experimental studies demonstrate that storytelling is not a universal remedy in communication. Instead, its effectiveness is highly context-dependent and influenced by psychological factors: Perceptions of manipulative intent and high consumer skepticism serve as critical boundary conditions that can neutralize or even reverse its intended persuasive effects.

### 2.1.3 | The Uniqueness of the CSR Context

The fact that perceptions of manipulative intent and consumer scepticism emerge as boundary conditions of storytelling's effectiveness, make the CSR context particularly interesting to study. CSR communications is a context consumers are skeptical about (e.g., Foreh and Grier 2003; Leonidou and Skarmeas 2017; Pomeroy and Johnson 2009; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013; Viererbl and Koch 2022) and in which consumers are questioning the companies' intent of actions and communications (e.g., Ginder et al. 2021). CSR encompasses a broad set of activities and can include engagement in the community, diversity initiatives, employee support such as safety at work, environmental protection, or work practices downstream in the supply chain (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). While these activities often lead to a more positive evaluation (e.g., reputation, warmth), attitude, and behavioral intentions (e.g., loyalty intentions) towards the organization (e.g., Du et al. 2010; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Shea and Hawn 2019), a large body of literature suggests that consumers can also react adversely, accusing the company of greenwashing practices or of being hypocritical (e.g., Leonidou and Skarmeas 2017; Scheidler et al. 2019; Wagner et al. 2009).

However, literature on the effectiveness of using storytelling compared to an expository format is largely one-sided. Most studies highlight storytelling's positive impact on consumer engagement, CSR fit, and perceptions of issue importance (Anna Kim et al. 2022; Pérez et al. 2024; Xu and Kochigina 2021). Only one study in the CSR context assesses boundary conditions and suggests consumer skepticism as a significant limiting factor, shaping whether CSR storytelling is perceived as authentic or as strategic corporate rhetoric (Dhanesh and Nekmat 2019).

This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of storytelling's role in CSR communication. Given that CSR messaging is often met with doubt regarding corporate motives, it is crucial to further investigate when and how storytelling can enhance persuasion—or backfire—in this domain. Table 1 illustrates the contribution our studies aim to make to the existing research on the impact of storytelling in the CSR context.

In the following section, we shift our focus to the darker side of CSR storytelling, arguing that while stories can enhance

engagement, they may also amplify extrinsic attributions for CSR initiatives, making them appear more strategic than genuine. This, in turn, increases perceptions of manipulative intent, which—when combined with preexisting skepticism—can neutralize or even reverse the persuasive benefits of storytelling in CSR communication.

## 2.2 | Hypothesis Development

### 2.2.1 | Potential Perils of Storytelling in CSR Communication

Van Laer et al. (2019) highlight in their meta-analysis that the domain of a story (i.e., whether it is commercial and persuasive or noncommercial and educational) significantly influences narrative transportation and its persuasive effects, with commercial stories generally being more effective. While the specific context of CSR communication inherently includes noncommercial elements aimed at societal good, it is often closely intertwined with commercial objectives. In the following, we will argue why, in the specific context of CSR communication, commercial objectives may enhance skepticism, thereby reducing the effectiveness of stories and even leading to backfiring.

We know from research on attribution theory in CSR that when consumers process CSR messages, they ask themselves “Why is a company telling me this?” (e.g., Bhattacharya and Sen 2004; Du et al. 2010), suggesting that the CSR context may trigger more analytical processing instead of narrative transportation, such that they may perceive the use of storytelling as an advertising tactic. When consumers see the use of advertising tactics to communicate about the organization's good deeds, they may perceive it as an attempt to mask economic motives and to misuse the deed for advertising reasons, heightening perceptions of manipulation and undermining trust. The accessibility of such ulterior motives likely activates or triggers consumers' persuasion knowledge (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Friestad and Wright 1994), which refers to the schema consumers develop over time about how, when, and why marketers try to influence them, and how to best respond to such persuasion attempts (Friestad and Wright 1994). This CSR-induced activation of consumers' persuasion knowledge is likely to cause consumers to interpret storytelling as a persuasion tactic, precipitating what Friestad and Wright (1994, 12) call a “change-of-meaning.” Specifically, consumers will focus on the power of “telling a story” (Friestad and Wright 1994, 4) as a persuasion attempt (Wentzel et al. 2010) instead of the story content. This likely disrupts their normal responses to storytelling: when consumers perceive stories to “ooze with commercial interest,” narrative transportation is less likely to occur, instead “generat[ing] critical thoughts” (van Laer et al. 2014, 810).

Thus, we propose that while storytelling is often lauded for its ability to emotionally engage audiences and create positive brand associations, its effectiveness is context-dependent. In CSR communication, where consumers may be predisposed to skepticism (Foreh and Grier 2003), the narrative structure of storytelling may inadvertently heighten critical scrutiny. Specifically, the emotional framing inherent in storytelling can trigger consumers' persuasion knowledge, making them more



**TABLE 1** | Comparing the use of storytelling against expository format in the CSR context.

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Main results</b>	<b>Psychological mechanism</b>	<b>CSR type</b>	<b>Direction of effect of storytelling on consumers' attitude/intent</b>	<b>Method</b>
Our study	Use of storytelling (vs. expository) format can backfire in the CSR context	Extrinsic attributions and manipulative intent inferences	Peripheral and embedded	Negative	Field and laboratory experiment
Boukes and LaMarre (2021)	Narrative richness has a positive effect on behavioral intent	Attitude, transportation, and identification	Peripheral	Positive	Laboratory experiment
Dhanesh and Nekmat (2019)	Episodic CSR messages may evoke more positive attitude with those less involved in the cause, while systematic CSR messages may evoke more positive attitudes with those more involved	—	Peripheral	—	Laboratory experiment
Hall et al. (2023)	Authors theorize a positive effect of storytelling on brand attitude and brand trust	—	—	Positive (theorized, not tested)	Literature review
Anna Kim et al. (2022)	Narrative (vs. nonnarrative) messages evoke more positive green evaluations	Message credibility	Embedded	Positive	Laboratory experiment
Pérez et al. (2020)	Storytelling (vs. expository format) is associated with higher issue importance, CSR impact, CSR fit, and CSR commitment, but not intrinsic motives	—	Peripheral	Positive	Laboratory experiment
Xu and Kochigina (2021)	Narrative (vs. nonnarrative videos) reduce CSR skepticism and increase intrinsic attributions	Message engagement	Embedded	Positive	Laboratory experiment



likely to question the company's motives (Friestad and Wright 1994). Unlike product-focused storytelling, where emotional engagement often leads to favorable outcomes, CSR stories are more likely to be perceived as disingenuous. Specifically, we argue that once consumers interpret the CSR story as a persuasion attempt, they evaluate the company's CSR efforts more negatively than if they would have heard about the CSR activities in an expository format. We do so even though existing studies in the product domain only showed that when consumers engage in analytical processing, advantages of storytelling (vs. an expository format) dissolve (i.e., there is no significant difference in company evaluations; Escalas 2007; Wentzel et al. 2010). So, why would one expect it to backfire, that is, causing unfavorable consumer responses, in the CSR domain?

We build our argument on research (e.g., Heyman and Ariely 2004; McGraw and Tetlock 2005) based on Fiske's social-relational theory (Fiske 1991, 1992), which suggests that consumers' reactions to a message depend on the social-relational frame in which it is cast. Specifically, we adopt the view as suggested by Heyman and Ariely (2004), who differentiate between two frames: the economic exchange where transactions are paid (e.g., receiving a service in exchange for money) and social exchange where transactions are not paid (e.g., helping a friend). They show that these two types of markets work fundamentally differently, such that individuals perceive and react to an exchange differently depending on the frame. Product and CSR messages are cast in different rhetorical frames: In contrast to conventional product-promoting messages that are cast in the rhetoric of economic-exchange, CSR messages are usually cast in the rhetoric of social-exchange, with accompanying ethical connotations (Fiske 1991, 1992; Heyman and Ariely 2004). Thus, once the "change-of-meaning" (Friestad and Wright 1994, 12) of the CSR story has occurred such that consumers perceive the CSR communication as a persuasion attempt, they may cast the communication into the logic of economic- instead of social-exchange. Because it strikes consumers as manipulative when social-exchange rhetoric like CSR communications is used to promote an economic-exchange context (McGraw and Tetlock 2005), they may interpret the use of CSR storytelling (i.e., social-exchange rhetoric) as a particularly "sneaky" attempt to persuade. Here, we do not argue that a story is necessarily cast in social-exchange (instead of economic-exchange) rhetoric. Instead, we suggest that once the "change-of-meaning" (Friestad and Wright 1994, 12) has occurred, consumers feel more manipulated when the story is about CSR rather than a product because social exchange language (CSR) has been misused for economic purposes (promoting an organization). Together, this suggests that the use of storytelling for CSR communication, instead of inducing narrative persuasion, is likely to make consumers interpret the message as a manipulative persuasion attempt (Campbell 1995; Kirmani and Zhu 2007; Wentzel et al. 2010).

When consumers perceive CSR communication as manipulative, they elaborate more on the firm's general motives for engaging in CSR (Marin et al. 2016). Attribution theory suggests that consumers attribute the reason for an organization's action to either extrinsic or intrinsic motives (Ginder et al. 2021). Extrinsic motives relate to self-serving motives, such that

companies use CSR to generate more profit or gain a competitive advantage; intrinsic motives relate to genuine, altruistic motives, like the belief that a company engages in CSR to do good (Becker-Olsen et al. 2006; Du et al. 2010; Foreh and Grier 2003). Thus, extrinsic motives refer to perceptions that a company's actions are driven by self-serving goals, such as profit generation or reputation enhancement, rather than altruistic intentions (Du et al. 2010; Foreh and Grier 2003). Storytelling in CSR can inadvertently heighten these perceptions by emphasizing emotional appeal, which consumers may interpret as manipulative. For instance, a narrative highlighting a single child benefiting from CSR efforts may evoke suspicion that the story is crafted solely to enhance the company's image, whereas an expository format focused on factual data might appear more transparent. Thus, given that consumers likely perceive the use of storytelling for CSR communication as a manipulative advertising attempt, they may believe that the firm engages in CSR for self-serving reasons (Yoon et al. 2006), and, as a result, may attribute extrinsic motives to its engagement. In sum, we suggest that in the CSR context, the use of storytelling, compared to an expository format, triggers consumers' extrinsic attributions:

**H1.** *The use of storytelling (vs. expository format) for CSR communication will cause consumers to attribute the company's CSR engagement to more extrinsic motives.*

These induced extrinsic attributions are likely to negatively affect consumers' loyalty. A substantial body of work (e.g., Du et al. 2007; Ellen 2006; Groza et al. 2011; Klein and Dawar 2004; Walker et al. 2010) on consumers' attributions of a company's CSR efforts suggests that extrinsic attributions result in lower company-specific beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, which are key precursors of consumer loyalty. Specifically, these studies suggest that after learning about a company's CSR activities, consumers have the desire to elaborate on its motives, ultimately affecting intentions and behavior (Ginder et al. 2021). We therefore propose that storytelling evokes consumers' extrinsic attributions, which, in turn, lower consumer loyalty:

**H2.** *There is a negative indirect effect of the use of storytelling (vs. an expository format) on consumer loyalty, mediated by extrinsic attributions.*

## 2.2.2 | The Moderating Role of CSR Embeddedness

Our basic argument is that consumers' general skepticism about CSR makes it more likely for storytelling to trigger their persuasion knowledge, and that the use of social-exchange rhetoric for an economic exchange may make the perception of manipulative intent more salient. However, research suggests that consumers' evaluations of a company's CSR engagement are likely to vary with the type of CSR activity communicated (Baskentli et al. 2019; Ginder et al. 2021; Nickerson et al. 2022; Öberseder et al. 2013). One relevant distinction is that between embedded and peripheral CSR: While embedded CSR activities address the core of a company's business and its processes (e.g., improving working conditions for employees), peripheral CSR



activities “are not integrated into an organization’s strategy, routines, and operations” (e.g., philanthropic activities; Aguinis and Glavas 2013, 315). Based on prior research on consumers’ distinct perceptions of embedded versus peripheral CSR (Aguinis and Glavas 2013; Pelozo and Shang 2011), we argue that the theorized negative effect of storytelling is weakened in the case of embedded, compared to peripheral, CSR.

This is so for two main reasons. First, consumers’ skepticism is, at least in part, rooted in the belief that firms exploit CSR activities for short-term tactical reasons, such as increasing profit (Leonidou and Skarmas 2017). Embedded CSR activities typically convey the company’s efforts to create substantive and core competencies-based shared value (Porter and Kramer 2006, 2011) for both its stakeholders and itself, rather than to just opportunistically serve its short-term interests (Vlachos et al. 2013). Thus, consumers may be less skeptical when learning about a company’s embedded (vs. peripheral) CSR activities. This is further underlined as we know that, when CSR actions are more substantive, involving a higher commitment of the firm and being less easy to reverse, consumers perceive these actions as more sincere (Nardi 2022; Schons and Steinmeier 2016). In line with our theorizing, this lower consumer skepticism (Leonidou and Skarmas 2017) is then less likely to trigger thoughts of storytelling being a persuasive device, making consumers less likely to infer extrinsic motives for the firm’s CSR engagement.

Second, peripheral CSR, such as philanthropy, is strongly cast in the rhetoric of social exchange (e.g., the company wants to give back to the community). In contrast, consumers may be more likely to view embedded CSR, in its strategic focus on creating longer-term shared value, through the lens of economic exchange (e.g., CSR as part of the long-term strategy). Thus, even when consumers suspect that the company is trying to persuade them through storytelling, they may, in the case of peripheral CSR, perceive the use of storytelling as more

manipulative. This is because the company “violates the norms expected of the relationship” (McGraw and Tetlock 2005, 14) by misusing social-exchange rhetoric to mask essentially economic motivations. In the case of embedded CSR, however, consumers may be less likely to perceive such a violation.

In summary, embedded CSR, which aligns with a company’s core operations, inherently carries greater credibility and is less likely to activate persuasion knowledge. Conversely, peripheral CSR, such as philanthropic donations, relies more heavily on emotional appeal, making it more susceptible to skepticism when presented as a story. For instance, the social-exchange framing of peripheral CSR stories may seem manipulative when consumers perceive them as masking economic motives (McGraw and Tetlock 2005). Overall, this suggests that consumers may make less format-induced inferences of manipulative intent on part of the marketer in the case of embedded (vs. peripheral) CSR, in turn, making extrinsic attributions less likely. In other words, we propose that the effect of storytelling, compared to the expository format, on extrinsic attributions and loyalty is weaker when the CSR communicated is embedded as opposed to peripheral.

**H3.** *The effect of storytelling (vs. expository format) on consumers’ extrinsic attributions is moderated by CSR type, such that the negative effect of storytelling on loyalty via extrinsic attributions is attenuated when the communication is about embedded (e.g., employee-focused), compared to peripheral (e.g., philanthropy-focused), CSR.*

We summarize our hypotheses and research model in Figure 1.

### 3 | Methodology

We conducted two main studies in cooperation with a large global furniture retailer to test our proposed relationships

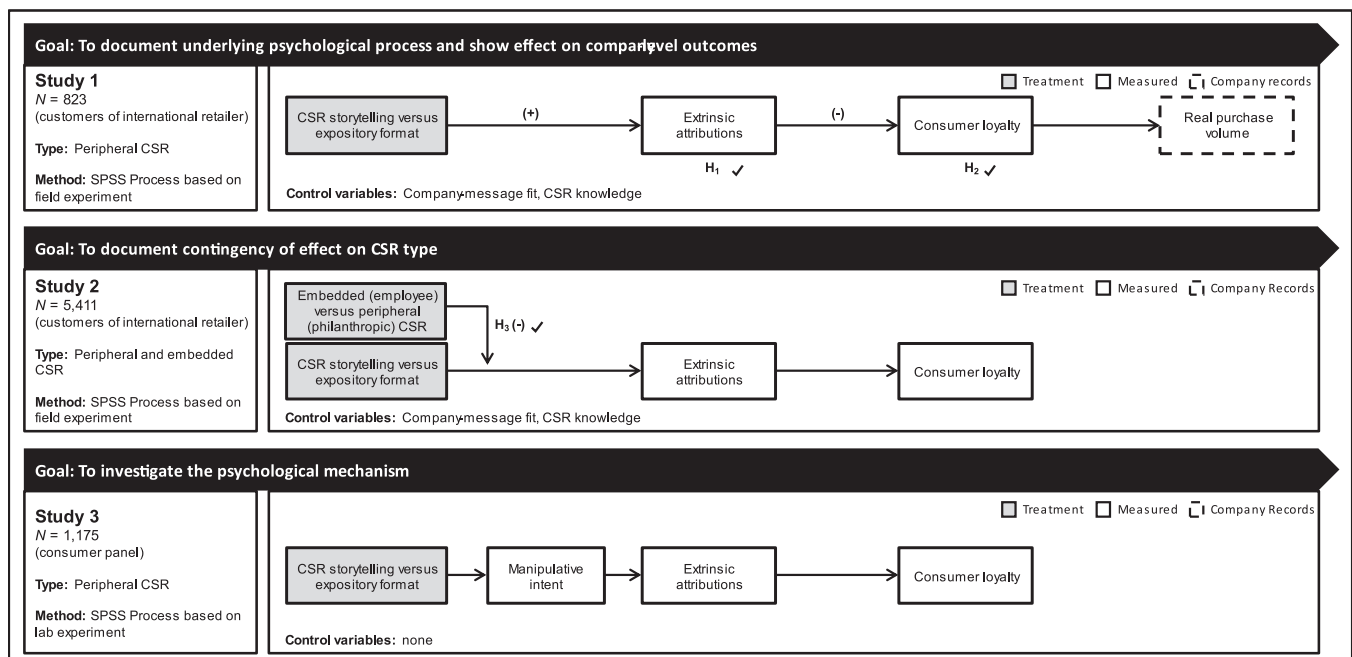


FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework and overview of studies.



employing responses of real customers to the retailer's actual CSR activities. This retailer engages in a variety of CSR activities that are typical of companies of its size and industry. For instance, at the time the study was conducted, the company donated money to its foundation to support children in need, recycled most of its waste across operations, reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, invested in renewable energy, and promoted diversity in manager positions. The retailer regularly reports about it in its CSR report and messages to its customers.

Our goal was to make the experiments as realistic as possible while allowing us to test our hypotheses. In both studies, we exposed German customers of the retailer to one of its actual CSR activities through the retailer's mailing list, which includes all customers that signed up for the retailer's loyalty program. We selected two types of social CSR: supporting children in need (peripheral CSR) and supporting employees (embedded CSR). We chose these two types as they have the same type of beneficiary (human beings) but at the same time allow us to vary in terms of CSR embeddedness. We randomly embedded the treatments in one of the retailer's real newsletter emails that was sent to the full mailing list; the survey to measure constructs was sent via the same mailing list but separate to the newsletter. We complemented these two field studies with a fully hypothetical laboratory experiment run with a consumer panel that allowed us to explore the psychological mechanism underlying the theorized backfire effect following the two field studies.

## 4 | Study 1

Study 1 tests our basic prediction that the use of storytelling for communicating CSR activities, compared to the use of an expository format, heightens consumers' extrinsic attributions (H1). Moreover, it examines the theorized indirect negative effect on consumer loyalty (H2) and purchase volume.

### 4.1 | Method

We exposed a group of the retailer's customers to one of its actual philanthropic CSR activities (support for children in Pakistan), using either an expository or a storytelling format (please see Supporting Information S1: [III](#) for the treatment texts and Supporting Information S1: [IV](#) for our pretests of the manipulation), measuring their subsequent extrinsic attributions, loyalty intentions, and real purchase behavior. Thus, this was a single-factor (format: storytelling vs. expository), between-subjects experiment.

#### 4.1.1 | Sample

From the 12,215 consumers contacted, we received 882 completed questionnaires (response rate of 7.22%). We eliminated 59 responses with very short response times (deviating more than 1 standard deviation from the mean;  $M_{\text{Before Cleaning}} = 1269.75$ ,  $SD_{\text{Before Cleaning}} = 572.06$ ), indicating that participants paid limited attention to the survey. The final sample included

**TABLE 2** | Demographic details, Studies 1, 2, 3.

% of respondents	Study 1 ( <i>n</i> = 823)	Study 2 ( <i>n</i> = 5411)	Study 3 ( <i>n</i> = 1175)
Age			
18–34 years	51.64	52.28	19.57
35–54 years	36.94	41.29	49.45
55 years or more	10.45	5.51	30.81
Missing value <sup>a</sup>	0.97	0.92	0.17
Gender			
Male	25.88	21.23	35.83
Female	72.54	76.38	63.49
Missing value <sup>a</sup>	1.58	2.38	0.68
Monthly net income, in €			
Less than or equal 1000	11.66	6.17	5.62
1001–2500	39.25	36.50	30.55
2501–3500	22.60	27.67	26.72
More than 3500	16.77	18.74	31.40
Missing value <sup>a</sup>	9.72	10.92	5.70
Education			
Certificate of secondary education	30.38	34.13	29.70
Baccalaureate	27.70	29.88	21.36
Academic degree	39.73	32.97	48.17
Missing value <sup>a</sup>	2.19	3.01	0.77

<sup>a</sup>Missing values due to incomplete company records or not disclosed information.

823 respondents ( $n_{\text{Storytelling}} = 403$ ;  $n_{\text{Expository}} = 420$ ). Table 2 contains the sample's demographic details.

To control for nonresponse bias, we compared the demographic data of respondents to those of non-respondents using data retrieved from company records. Results indicated that respondents and non-respondents were comparable on the demographic criteria of age, gender, and income, albeit a slightly higher level of education than non-respondents: 39.7% of respondents had a university degree (certificate of secondary education = 30.4%) versus 32.5% in the group of non-respondents (certificate of secondary education = 39.0%). These differences are rather minor, allaying concerns of a non-response bias.

#### 4.1.2 | Procedure

The treatment was included as part of the company's e-mail newsletter to ensure that participants perceive it as real company-issued CSR communication. Participants were



**TABLE 3** | Descriptive statistics and correlations, Study 1.

Construct	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Extrinsic attributions	1.00			
2. Consumer loyalty	−0.23**	1.00		
3. Company-message fit	−0.19**	0.19**	1.00	
4. CSR knowledge	−0.13**	0.16**	0.32**	1.00
Mean	4.30	6.37	3.77	2.73
Standard deviation	1.66	1.01	1.42	1.50
Cronbach's alpha	—	0.83	0.84	0.92

Note: Based on  $n = 823$  respondents.

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

asked to read the newsletter and then, at the same day, to respond to questions on the two focal constructs extrinsic attributions and consumer loyalty as well as the two controls perceived CSR message-retailer fit and knowledge about the retailer's CSR activities. We included perceived CSR message-retailer fit to control for its effects on consumer evaluations of the company (e.g., Peloza and Shang 2011). We did so because non-fit can evoke analytical processing and attributions of extrinsic motives (e.g., Du et al. 2010; Ellen 2006), our theorizing's key underpinning mechanism. Moreover, in line with the idea that disconfirmation of CSR information can evoke analytical processing (e.g., Du et al. 2010), we included knowledge about the retailer's CSR activities as a second control. At the same time, we expected consumers' reactions to differ by existing knowledge, because consumers aware of the retailer's CSR activities may be less skeptical about its CSR communications.

We measured extrinsic attributions following Du et al. (2007), consumer loyalty based on Homburg et al. (2009), and perceived CSR message-retailer fit adjusted from Menon and Kahn (2003). In addition, we measured consumers' perceived knowledge about the retailer's CSR activities (own development). All variables were measured on seven-point rating scales, and we used the average of each construct's items to aggregate them for the analysis. We display all measures in Supporting Information S1: VI and present the correlation matrix as well as descriptive statistics of all measures in Table 3.

We also tracked consumers' online and offline purchases 1–9 months after the treatment. We were able to match purchase to survey data because customers in the retailer's mailing list signed up to a loyalty program, which also tracked the offline and online purchases of these customers. To separate our treatment from our dependent variable, we accounted only for spendings in Months 8 and 9 after the treatment in our main dependent variable. We deemed this time-lag as appropriate, as large parts of the retailer's product portfolio include high involvement products with a rather lengthy decision-making process before purchase. Given the right skewness of the distribution of this purchase data, as it is typical for expenditure data (e.g., Banasiewicz 2013), we subjected the compound to natural log transformation before analysis.

## 4.2 | Results

### 4.2.1 | Hypothesis Testing

To test H1, we conducted a one-factor ANOVA. Means of extrinsic attributions across the two groups differed significantly [ $F(1, 821) = 5.90, p = 0.015$ ], such that extrinsic attributions were higher in the storytelling ( $M_{\text{Storytelling}} = 4.45, SD_{\text{Storytelling}} = 1.59$ ), compared to the expository format ( $M_{\text{Expository}} = 4.17, SD_{\text{Expository}} = 1.71$ ) group, supporting H1. To investigate the hypothesized indirect effect of storytelling on consumer loyalty, we first coded the two experimental conditions (storytelling vs. expository format) as a dummy variable (Bagozzi and Yi 1989); the expository format was the reference category (coded as 0), so the results refer to the effect of storytelling relative to the expository format. Then, we employed SPSS Process Model 4 (Hayes 2022; 5000 bootstrap samples) and found a positive direct effect of storytelling on extrinsic attributions ( $b = 0.255, p = 0.025$ ), a negative direct effect of extrinsic attributions on consumer loyalty ( $b = -0.118, p < 0.001$ ), as well as a negative indirect effect of storytelling on consumer loyalty through extrinsic attributions ( $b_{\text{Indirect on Loyalty}} = -0.030, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.060 \text{ to } -0.004]$ ). Moreover, we ran SPSS Process Model 6 (Hayes 2022; 5000 bootstrap samples) to find a negative indirect effect of storytelling on purchase volume through extrinsic attributions and consumer loyalty ( $b_{\text{Indirect on Purchase Volume}} = -0.010, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.022 \text{ to } -0.001]$ ). We included the two control variables company-message fit and CSR knowledge in all models. Overall, these findings confirmed H2: storytelling (compared to an expository format) increases respondents' extrinsic attributions concerning the company's CSR engagement, ultimately lowering consumer loyalty and purchase volume. We document results of our mediation models in Table 4.

### 4.2.2 | Robustness Check

To test the robustness of our indirect effect of storytelling (vs. expository format) on customers' real purchases, we again ran SPSS Process Model 6 (Hayes 2022; 5000 bootstrap samples), varying the dependent variable representing customers' purchases. We did so by varying the months of which customers' purchases were included in the log-transformed variable. The indirect effect remained significant for all variables tested, supporting the robustness of the observed effect. We report the effects in Supporting Information S1: VII. However, we acknowledge that while these results are promising and hinting towards the hypothesized effect, there are factors in the field that cannot be controlled or measured. We address this with randomization of the treatment, but we cannot rule out other non-measured confounds. We discuss this in detail in Section 8.

In sum, the first study provides support for our basic prediction that the use of the storytelling format for communicating CSR activities, compared to the use of an expository format, has a negative effect on consumer loyalty through heightened extrinsic attributions. The next study attempts to provide evidence for the moderating role of the CSR type.



**TABLE 4** | Regression results, Studies 1, 2, and 3.

	Study 1 ( <i>n</i> = 823)	Study 2 (replication) ( <i>n</i> = 2764)	Study 2 ( <i>n</i> = 5411)	Study 3 ( <i>n</i> = 1175)
Manipulative intent				
Storytelling				0.257 (0.101)*
Extrinsic attributions				
Storytelling	0.255 (0.113)*	0.138 (0.064)*	0.145 (0.064)*	−0.042 (0.077)
Manipulative intent	—	—	—	0.258 (0.022)**
CSR type: embedded	—	—	0.279 (0.065)**	—
Control variables				
Company-message fit	−0.186 (0.042)**	−0.141 (0.023)**	−0.103 (0.018)**	—
CSR knowledge	−0.092 (0.040)*	−0.053 (0.023)*	−0.078 (0.017)**	—
Interaction effects				
Storytelling x CSR-type: embedded	—	—	−0.192 (0.091)*	—
Consumer loyalty				
Storytelling	0.002 (0.068)	0.055 (0.032) <sup>+</sup>	0.025 (0.023)	0.118 (0.078)
Manipulative intent	—	—	—	−0.241 (0.024)**
Extrinsic attributions	−0.118 (0.021)**	−0.100 (0.010)**	−0.079 (0.007)**	−0.077 (0.030)*
Control variables				
Company-message fit	0.084 (0.026)**	0.120 (0.012)**	0.152 (0.008)**	—
CSR knowledge	0.067 (0.024)**	0.013 (0.012)	0.019 (0.008)*	—
Real purchase volume				
Storytelling	−0.029 (0.170)	—	—	—
Extrinsic attributions	−0.044 (0.053)	—	—	—
Consumer loyalty	0.319 (0.087)**	—	—	—
Control variables				
Company-message fit	−0.162 (0.064)*	—	—	—
CSR knowledge	0.028 (0.060)	—	—	—
Indirect effects of storytelling				
Storytelling → extrinsic attributions → consumer loyalty	−0.030 (0.015)*	−0.014 (0.007)*	—	—
Storytelling → extrinsic attributions → consumer loyalty → purchase volume	−0.010 (0.005)*	—	—	—
Storytelling → manipulative intent → extrinsic attributions → consumer loyalty	—	—	—	−0.005 (0.003)*
Conditional indirect effects of storytelling				
Peripheral: storytelling → extrinsic attributions → consumer loyalty	—	—	−0.012 (0.005)*	—
Embedded: storytelling → extrinsic attributions → consumer loyalty	—	—	0.004 (0.005)	—
Index of moderated mediation	—	—	0.015 (0.007)*	—

Note: Unstandardized path coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>*p* < 0.10.

\**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01.



## 5 | Study 2

Our second study was conducted with a different group of customers of the same retailer. To test for the moderating effect of the CSR type (H3), the study was designed as a 2 (format: storytelling vs. expository)  $\times$  2 (CSR type: embedded vs. peripheral) between-subjects design. We used the same treatments from Study 1 for the peripheral CSR type and created treatments based on the retailer's employee-related CSR activities for the embedded one (see treatment texts in Supporting Information S1: III).

### 5.1 | Method

#### 5.1.1 | Sample

We contacted 38,430 customers and received 5797 completed responses (response rate of 15.08%). We eliminated 21 responses with ones or sevens to all questions, and 365 responses with very short response times (deviating more than 1 standard deviation from the mean;  $M_{\text{Before Cleaning}} = 1325.45$ ,  $SD_{\text{Before Cleaning}} = 599.87$ ), indicating that participants paid limited attention to the survey. The final sample consisted of 5411 ( $n_{\text{Peripheral} \times \text{Storytelling}} = 1365$ ;  $n_{\text{Embedded} \times \text{Storytelling}} = 1255$ ;  $n_{\text{Peripheral} \times \text{Expository}} = 1399$ ;  $n_{\text{Embedded} \times \text{Expository}} = 1392$ ) completed questionnaires. Table 1 shows the demographic details of the sample.

As in Study 1, to check for nonresponse bias, we compared the demographic data of respondents to those of non-respondents using data retrieved from company records. The results indicated that respondents and non-respondents were comparable on the demographic criteria of age, gender, and income. In contrast to Study 1, we did not find any meaningful differences in educational levels.

#### 5.1.2 | Procedure

First, we randomly allocated participants to one of the four treatments. After they read the treatment text, they responded to the same measures for focal constructs and controls as in Study 1. We present the correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of these measures in Table 5, and the full list of items in Supporting Information S1: VI. As we were not able to measure real purchase volume in this study, and to still separate the treatment from our dependent variable, we measured loyalty intentions in a separate survey 6 weeks after the treatment.

## 5.2 | Results

### 5.2.1 | Replication of Study 1

To test whether our results from Study 1 replicate, we focused on the two groups which were exposed to the peripheral CSR type treatment. As in Study 1, a one-factorial (storytelling vs. expository format) ANOVA highlighted the difference in the means of extrinsic attributions [ $M_{\text{Storytelling}} = 4.19$ ,  $SD_{\text{Storytelling}} = 1.66$ ;

**TABLE 5** | Descriptive statistics and correlations, Study 2.

Construct	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Extrinsic attributions	1.00			
2. Consumer loyalty	−0.18**	1.00		
3. Company-message fit	−0.08**	0.26**	1.00	
4. CSR knowledge	−0.08**	0.10**	0.22**	1.00
Mean	4.15	6.51	4.94	2.30
Standard deviation	1.69	0.86	1.37	1.42
Cronbach's alpha	—	0.79	0.84	0.94

Note: Based on  $n = 5411$  respondents.

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

$M_{\text{Expository}} = 4.03$ ,  $SD_{\text{Expository}} = 1.70$ ;  $F(1, 2,762) = 6.51$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ], providing further support for H1. Furthermore, employing SPSS Process Model 4 (Hayes 2022; 5000 bootstrap samples), we again confirmed the positive direct effect of storytelling on extrinsic attributions ( $b = 0.138$ ,  $p = 0.030$ ), as well as the negative indirect effect of storytelling on consumer loyalty through extrinsic attributions ( $b_{\text{Indirect on Loyalty}} = -0.014$ , 95% CI =  $[-0.027 \text{ to } -0.002]$ ), providing further support for H2. Overall, the replication of results stresses the robustness of our findings. We report these results in Table 3.

### 5.2.2 | Hypothesis Testing

To investigate whether the effect of storytelling on extrinsic attributions is contingent on the CSR type, as theorized in H3, we coded the CSR type as a dummy variable (Bagozzi and Yi 1989); the peripheral type was the reference category (coded as 0), so the results of the moderating effect refer to the effect of the embedded relative to the peripheral type. We employed SPSS Process Model 7 (Hayes 2022; 5000 bootstrap samples) to test for the hypothesized moderated mediation, using storytelling (vs. expository format) as the independent variable, embedded CSR (vs. peripheral) as the moderator, extrinsic attributions as the mediator, and consumer loyalty as the dependent variable. In support of H1, we found a positive direct effect of storytelling on consumers' extrinsic attributions ( $b = 0.145$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ). Moreover, the interaction effect of message format and CSR type was negative and significant ( $b = -0.192$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ), indicating that the effect of storytelling on consumers' extrinsic attributions is weakened in the case of embedded, compared to peripheral, CSR. Moreover, the moderated mediation was significant (index of moderated mediation = 0.015, 95% CI =  $[0.001 \text{ to } 0.030]$ ), suggesting that the indirect effect of storytelling on consumer loyalty via extrinsic attributions was significantly different in the two CSR types. The indirect effect was significant when communicating about peripheral ( $b_{\text{Peripheral: Indirect on Loyalty}} = -0.012$ , 95% CI =  $[-0.021 \text{ to } -0.002]$ ), but not when communicating about embedded CSR activities ( $b_{\text{Embedded: Indirect on Loyalty}} = 0.004$ , 95% CI =  $[-0.006 \text{ to } 0.014]$ ). Overall, this supports H3. We included the two control variables company-message fit and CSR knowledge in all models. We summarize the study's results in Table 3.



Studies 1 and 2 investigated the hypothesized main and a conditional effect, suggesting that the use of storytelling can lower consumer loyalty in the case of peripheral, but not embedded CSR. Moreover, while these two studies also suggest that this effect can be explained through heightened extrinsic attributions, we wanted to further support our theorizing, suggesting that these beliefs of extrinsic motives are evoked given that consumers feel manipulated by the use of storytelling to communicate about CSR. We hence ran a third study, testing whether the extrinsic attributions are triggered through consumers' beliefs that the company intends to manipulate them.

As in the prior studies, we used a between-subjects experiment comparing a CSR story to an expository frame in a one-factorial design. In this study, we used a consumer panel and a hypothetical apparel retailer engaging in social peripheral CSR. We present the treatment in Supporting Information S1: V.

## 6.1 | Method

### 6.1.1 | Sample

We sent our questionnaire to 35,000 respondents from an online panel, of which 1175 respondents replied ( $n_{\text{Storytelling}} = 593$ ;  $n_{\text{Expository}} = 582$ ). We compared the two groups on the demographic criteria of age, gender, and income, suggesting no significant difference between the two.

### 6.1.2 | Procedure

We first exposed respondents to a short description of the hypothetical retailer followed by the treatment, to then measure their loyalty intentions, extrinsic attributions, and manipulative intent inferences. We used the same measures for loyalty intentions and extrinsic attributions as in Studies 1 and 2, and derived a measure for manipulative intent from Campbell (1995), using a single-item measure to ensure the survey does not become overly lengthy. We deem a single-item measure as appropriate, given manipulative intent is a concrete singular object and thus may not need a multi-level scale to ensure validity (Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007). We present the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for these measures in Table 6, and the full list of items in Supporting Information S1: VI.

## 6.2 | Results

The intent of the study was to support our theorizing that extrinsic attributions are triggered because consumers feel manipulated, such that storytelling (vs. expository format) evokes inferences of manipulative intent, which trigger extrinsic attributions, ultimately lowering consumers' loyalty towards the retailer. We tested this theorizing using SPSS Process Model 6 (Hayes 2022; 5000 bootstrap samples): Storytelling

**TABLE 6** | Descriptive statistics and correlations, Study 3.

Construct	1.	2.	3.
1. Manipulative intent	1.00		
2. Extrinsic attributions	0.32**	1.00	
3. Consumer loyalty	−0.32**	−0.17**	1.00
Mean	3.93	5.47	4.42
Standard deviation	1.74	1.39	1.42
Cronbach's alpha	—	—	0.89

Note: Based on  $n = 1175$  respondents.

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

(vs. expository format) was the independent variable, manipulative intent and extrinsic attributions the mediator, and loyalty intentions the dependent variable.

Results support our theorizing. We found a positive direct effect of storytelling on consumers' manipulative intent inferences ( $b = 0.257$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ), and a positive direct effect of manipulative intent inferences on extrinsic attributions ( $b = 0.258$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, the direct effect of extrinsic attributions on loyalty intentions was negative and significant ( $b = -0.077$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ). These effects all point towards the expected direction. Moreover, we tested for a serial mediation to investigate the effect of storytelling on consumers' loyalty intentions through manipulative intent inferences and extrinsic attributions. In line with our theorizing, the indirect effect was negative and significant ( $b_{\text{Indirect on Loyalty}} = -0.005$ , 95% CI =  $[-0.0124 \text{ to } -0.0002]$ ). This suggests that storytelling evokes manipulative intent inferences, which trigger extrinsic attributions that lowers consumer loyalty. We summarize the study's results in Table 3.

## 7 | General Discussion

This study provides a novel and nuanced perspective on the widely assumed effectiveness of storytelling in CSR communication. Across three complementary studies, two of which are field experiments with actual customers, we demonstrate that storytelling, while generally lauded as a persuasive technique, can backfire in CSR contexts. More specifically, we find that storytelling can fuel perceptions of manipulative intent and extrinsic attributions, ultimately reducing loyalty and even impacting real-world purchase behavior. These effects are not universal, however, but depend critically on the type of CSR being communicated. Table 7 summarizes our hypotheses and results.

Study 1 revealed that when a retailer used storytelling to communicate about peripheral CSR activities (e.g., philanthropic support for children), consumers were more likely to attribute the company's motives to extrinsic, self-serving goals. These extrinsic attributions were associated with significantly lower self-reported loyalty and actual purchase volume. This finding contrasts with the dominant narrative in storytelling literature, which emphasizes positive effects. Meta-analyses find storytelling boosts engagement and positive brand attitudes via narrative transportation (van Laer et al. 2014; Thomas and



**TABLE 7** | Summary of results, Studies 1, 2, 3.

Hypotheses	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
H1: The use of storytelling (vs. expository format) for CSR communication will cause consumers to attribute the company's CSR engagement to more extrinsic motives.	✓	✓	✓
H2: There is a negative indirect effect of the use of storytelling (vs. an expository format) on consumer loyalty, mediated by extrinsic attributions.	✓	✓	✓
H3: The effect of storytelling (vs. expository format) on consumers' extrinsic attributions is moderated by CSR type, such that the negative effect of storytelling on loyalty via extrinsic attributions is attenuated when the communication is about embedded (e.g., employee-focused), compared to peripheral (e.g., philanthropy-focused), CSR.		✓	
No hypothesis: There is a negative indirect effect of the use of storytelling (vs. an expository format) on consumer loyalty, mediated by perceptions of manipulative intent and extrinsic attributions.			✓

Grigsby 2024). Yet our finding of a backfire in CSR contexts echoes exceptions of studies identifying manipulative intent as a critical boundary condition (Wentzel et al. 2010; Appel 2022). Our results extend Dhanesh and Nekmat (2019) laboratory finding—skepticism as a boundary—to a real-world setting, demonstrating that when CSR is peripheral, narratives can amplify consumer doubts rather than reduce them. Furthermore, our study expands Foreh and Grier (2003) insights that showed that when consumers perceive a company's CSR as self-interested, they experience reactance and become more critical of the message by adding that the corporate communication tactic of storytelling can “pull the trigger” for extrinsic attributions.

Study 2 expanded on these findings by examining the moderating role of CSR type. It confirmed that the negative effects of storytelling are contingent on whether the CSR initiative is peripheral or embedded. When the CSR activity was embedded in the company's core business (e.g., employee-related programs), the storytelling format did not significantly increase extrinsic attributions or reduce loyalty. This supports theories suggesting embedded CSR is perceived as more authentic and aligned with company strategy (Aguinis and Glavas 2013; Pelozo and Shang 2011), and therefore less likely to activate consumers' persuasion knowledge. Our study contributes a finer-grained insight by directly comparing storytelling and expository formats across CSR types in a real-world setting—a design not yet reflected in existing studies that typically assess one message format or CSR type in isolation. Importantly, our findings suggest that storytelling's effectiveness does not lie in the format alone. Instead, it depends on its fit with the CSR activity's content and context. For example, storytelling may clash with expectations in peripheral CSR but aligns more smoothly in embedded CSR settings. In peripheral CSR, which is often cast in a social-exchange frame but perceived by consumers as less integral to the business, the mismatch between emotionally framed storytelling and consumers' skeptical expectations leads to increased manipulative intent perceptions. In contrast, embedded CSR initiatives, which are inherently closer to the economic-exchange logic of business, may buffer against this mismatch, making storytelling less likely to evoke suspicion or backlash. Thus, we do not merely replicate existing CSR fit literature; we identify storytelling format as an

overlooked variable that interacts with CSR type to shape consumer responses. Moreover, our findings help bridge a notable gap in the CSR storytelling literature. While Anna Kim et al. (2022) and Pérez et al. (2020) report positive effects of storytelling in embedded CSR contexts, and Boukes and LaMarre (2021) observe similar benefits for peripheral CSR, none of these studies have directly compared storytelling to an expository format across different CSR types in a field setting. Our research addresses this gap by demonstrating that it is the interaction between message format and CSR type that determines consumer responses—a critical nuance that has been largely overlooked in prior work.

Study 3 sheds light on the psychological mechanism driving the backfire effect. It confirmed that storytelling in CSR increases consumers' perceptions of manipulative intent, which in turn elevates extrinsic attributions, ultimately leading to lower consumer loyalty. This serial mediation model lends empirical support to Persuasion Knowledge Theory (Friestad and Wright 1994) and complements the social-relational framing perspective (Fiske 1991, 1992; McGraw and Tetlock 2005). It illustrates how the use of emotionally rich narratives—typically associated with communal sharing and prosocial intent—may clash with consumer expectations in the CSR domain, where skepticism is high, and motives are under scrutiny. Prior CSR storytelling research seldomly examines underlying psychological processes. By identifying manipulative intent as the pivot, we complement Appel (2022) and Wentzel et al.'s (2010) insights and extend Dhanesh and Nekmat (2019) speculative boundary conditions with concrete serial mediation evidence.

Together, these studies not only demonstrate a boundary condition of storytelling's persuasive power but also integrate and extend theoretical frameworks in CSR communication, persuasion, and social relational framing. They offer important implications for both scholars and practitioners.

## 8 | Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our research offers several theoretical contributions. First, it complements and extends Persuasion Knowledge Theory (Friestad and Wright 1994) by showing that narrative formats



can be perceived as manipulative in contexts characterized by skepticism, such as CSR communication. When consumers perceive a story as a persuasion attempt, they engage in more analytical, rather than narrative, processing (Escalas 2007). This critical evaluation disrupts narrative transportation and activates persuasion knowledge, making consumers more likely to question the company's motives and attribute extrinsic reasons to its CSR initiatives. This is particularly problematic in the CSR domain, where prior research has associated extrinsic attributions with skepticism (Du et al. 2010; Yoon et al. 2006). Second, it integrates this perspective with social relational theory (Fiske 1991, 1992), demonstrating that storytelling, when used in a CSR context, can violate the norms of social-exchange rhetoric and thereby trigger consumer resistance. Thereby, our results also support McGraw and Tetlock's (2005) theorization that consumers react negatively when social-exchange rhetoric (e.g., CSR messaging) is used for economic gain. Third, our study identifies the interaction between CSR type and message format as a novel boundary condition for narrative persuasion and thereby expands existing storytelling and CSR fit literature. Previous studies have shown that embedded CSR—initiatives integrated into a company's core business—tends to elicit less skepticism than peripheral CSR (Aguinis and Glavas 2013; Pelozo and Shang 2011). Our research builds on these findings by demonstrating that storytelling backfires primarily when used to communicate peripheral CSR, whereas its negative effects are attenuated in embedded CSR contexts. This suggests that when CSR initiatives are perceived as more authentic and aligned with a company's core operations, consumers are less likely to activate persuasion knowledge in response to storytelling. Lastly, by bridging the gap between embedded versus peripheral CSR communication and message design, our research highlights how the alignment (or misalignment) of content and format influences attributional reasoning and loyalty outcomes.

From a managerial standpoint, our results caution against the blanket use of storytelling in CSR communication. While stories are often praised for their emotional appeal, our findings suggest that this approach may elicit skepticism—particularly in the case of peripheral CSR. Managers should critically assess the nature of the CSR initiative they wish to communicate and consider using a more factual, expository format for peripheral efforts. Conversely, storytelling may still be suitable for embedded CSR initiatives, where alignment with the firm's core activities and values reduces the likelihood of triggering manipulative intent perceptions. Overall, CSR communication strategies should be context-sensitive, balancing emotional engagement with perceived authenticity and credibility.

## 9 | Limitations and Future Research

Our research setting and findings offer various opportunities for future research. First, with regard to methods our field setting came with several constraints. We exposed respondents to only a single communication and measured purchase volume at only one point in time, potentially affecting the impact of the communication (Paluck et al. 2021) and limiting insights in the long-term effect. Moreover, loyalty cards used to record purchases may be used by another consumer than the one

receiving the treatment, and individuals' purchase behavior may be restricted by the availability of comparable products at alternative retailers, potentially distorting the effect of the treatment on the real purchase volume. Similarly, as the study was conducted in the field, other noncontrollable factors (e.g., general news coverage on CSR, economic conditions, promotional campaigns) may confound the findings. While some of these concerns are addressed with Study 3 and with the between-subjects nature of the field experiments, future studies should implement a longitudinal design using a consumer panel, integrating multiple exposures to CSR communications with several time points of measurement and do so in both the field and fully controllable laboratory setting.

Second, we focused on the same industry and retailer (selling high involvement products) in both field studies. To further explore generalizability of our results and potential contingencies of the shown adverse response (e.g., varying skepticism across consumers and/or CSR contexts), we encourage replications in other industries and for specific product categories (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian), while accounting for the role of message-sender characteristics (Friestad and Wright 1994), and/or varying the CSR reputation of the company. Study 3 is a first attempt to do so, but we suggest replicating these results in the field setting, e.g., in low-involvement industries.

Third, it is worth exploring how other company-level characteristics moderate the adverse effect. Studies have shown that consumers' responses strongly vary by company-level characteristics such as trust (e.g., Du et al. 2010) or reputation of the organization (e.g., Nickerson et al. 2022; Skard and Thorbjørnsen 2014). While our study hints towards skepticism towards CSR overall (i.e., the context), the interplay between the context and consumer-level characteristics needs to be explored. Moreover, while favorable reputation drives loyalty (e.g., Caruana and Ewing 2010), some studies have suggested CSR activities as a means to build a favorable reputation (e.g., Park et al. 2014). It is hence worth exploring whether the backfire effect shown for consumer loyalty also hurts the corporate reputation or whether corporate reputation acts as a protection mechanism, such that the backfire effect would not even occur.

Fourth, for our main effect, we theorize an alternative path to the dominant narrative transportation mechanism (van Laer et al. 2014). Future research should explore these two competing psychological paths, examining whether they occur parallelly (e.g., extrinsic attributions counteracting narrative transportation) or whether narrative transportation is attenuated in the CSR context. This would further complement our understanding of consumers' responses to storytelling.

Fifth, we showed that what is communicated (e.g., CSR per se, CSR type) plays a crucial role in consumers' responses to storytelling, but we did not fully explore the theorized underlying psychological process. Hence, we encourage future research to investigate cornerstones of our theorizing, such as the role of situational skepticism (Foreh and Grier 2003), persuasion knowledge (Eisend and Tarrahi 2022), and message framing (e.g., varying rhetoric; McGraw and Tetlock 2005). Similarly, there is opportunity to study potential counter-mechanism to the observed backfire effect to understand how



storytelling can be an effective CSR communications tool. One potential avenue to explore is message-sidedness (as discussed by Anna Kim et al. 2022), specifically testing whether presenting both the CSR activity and the company's self-serving motives (e.g., employee retention benefits) could reduce skepticism and evoke more favorable consumer responses.

Lastly, we explored storytelling as one message format which can adversely affect consumers' responses through activating persuasion knowledge. Understanding which message formats work under what conditions will be crucial for unlocking the full potential of CSR communication. Future research should develop a typology of format-context congruence in high-skepticism domains.

## 10 | Conclusion

While research on the use of storytelling mainly points towards its persuasive power and favorable outcomes in terms of consumer attitudes and behaviors towards the organization (van Laer et al. 2014), a small set of studies started exploring the boundary conditions of the effect (e.g., Appel 2022). We are building on these studies as well as research on social exchange theory (Fiske 1991, 1992), persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), storytelling (e.g., van Laer et al. 2014), and CSR (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas 2013; Ginder et al. 2021) to argue that the use of storytelling has less favorable outcomes in the context of CSR.

In two large-scale field studies and one laboratory study we show that the use of storytelling in the CSR context can indeed backfire, such that the use of storytelling lowers consumer loyalty through heightened perceptions of extrinsic attributions that are triggered because consumers feel manipulated. However, the effect hinges on the type of CSR communicated about: Peripheral CSR (e.g., philanthropic activities) amplifies the negative effects of storytelling, whereas embedded CSR (e.g., employee-focused initiatives) mitigates them.

Our findings challenge the prevailing consensus that storytelling is an unequivocally effective communication tool in CSR. By highlighting the contextual and psychological factors that can reverse its effects, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of storytelling's role in CSR communication. Importantly, it underscores the need for practitioners to align storytelling strategies with the type of CSR activity and audience skepticism to maximize effectiveness and avoid potential backlash.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.