

“We care, and we mean it”: Psychological mechanisms influencing perceptions of sincerity in CSR communication

PhD dissertation by Mads Nordmo, submitted 04.03.2016

The department of Strategy and Management

NHH

## Preface

As a trained psychologist with a passionate interest for any scientific inquiries that combine topics relating both to psychology and business, I found the task of deciding on a single topic for a PhD dissertation excruciatingly difficult. The decision to explore psychological variables in a CSR communication setting arose from three related factors. Firstly, the field of moral psychology gained popularity in the years preceding my PhD period. While moral psychology is mainly concerned with basic questions regarding human nature, I felt that the conclusions from many of the findings in moral psychology could hold promise for applied knowledge. Secondly, as a PhD student, I gained knowledge about CSR research. I found that while the field was steadily growing, the CSR literature was fragmented, and several gaps were identifiable. Moral and social psychology seemed to offer some insights that could carry theoretical and managerial implications for CSR. Lastly, through countless discussions with colleagues and friends about CSR, I realized that my attitudes towards the idea were characterized by elevated levels of skepticism and cynicism. Many of the research ideas that led up to the making of this dissertation can thus be said to have arisen from my cynical attitude towards CSR, combined with hypothetical thinking about how cynics such as myself could become persuaded to support and even engage with CSR.

Many individuals have contributed to my work on the dissertation, and made it possible for me to contribute to the research community. I therefore would like to express the following gratitude:

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my main supervisor Marcus Selart. I find it hard to imagine how this dissertation could have gotten made without his supervision, positive attitude, and trust. Apart from being my main supervisor, Marcus is also co-author on Paper 1 in the present dissertation.

I would also like to give my most sincere gratitude to my co-supervisors Helge Thorbjørnsen (NHH) and Elisabeth Norman (UiB). Their helpful guidance has proven extremely important throughout the entire research process.

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I would also like to thank the Centre for Ethics and Economics for funding parts of the research in this dissertation.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for being kind, curious and understanding throughout my PhD period. My fiancé, Ingrid Arnestad, is particularly deserving of praise and gratitude, for continuing to put up with me.

## Abstract

The overarching topic in this dissertation is psychological mechanisms involved in the perceptions of sincerity in CSR communication. The dissertation consist of three papers, all revolving around sincerity-perceptions in different types of CSR communications. The first paper presents an experiment exploring the effects of positive and negative framing on persuasion and persuasion knowledge in CSR communication. The conclusion of that paper is that negativity bias affects the processing of negative CSR communication, which makes the number and quality of claims less important, and elevates the level of persuasion knowledge. The second paper presents two experiments demonstrating that a decision maker can come across as more motivated by intrinsic values, and less by extrinsic factors, if she seems particularly aware of her own mortality at the time she makes the decision. The third paper explores the role of cognitive decision style as signal of sincerity in CSR communication. The experiment demonstrates that a leader who claims to have made a CSR decision in a partially spontaneous manner is perceived as having less persuasive intent than a leader who made the same decision through willful deliberation. The reduction in persuasion knowledge associated with a somewhat spontaneous decision style is found to be indirectly associated with sincerity in motivational attribution, and positive evaluation of the leader. However, the third paper also demonstrates that claiming complete cognitive spontaneity as decision style leads to unfortunate results in terms of persuasive appeal and motivational attribution. All in all, the three papers represent attempts at combining novel findings from social and moral psychology into the applied setting of CSR communication. A common conclusion from all three papers is that attributions, both regarding communicative intention and behavioral motives, are the mechanisms through which CSR communication is processed. Aside from increasing our general understanding of persuasion mechanisms, the results carry managerial implications for individuals and organizations who wish to portray themselves as socially responsible and morally virtuous.

## Contents

Preface.....	2
Abstract .....	3
List of appended papers .....	5
Part I: Dissertation summary.....	6
1. Research question and purpose.....	6
2. Conceptual framework.....	8
3. Ultimate outcome variables: .....	9
4. Perceived sincerity .....	10
4.1 Perception of communicative intention.....	12
4.2 Perception of motive.....	13
5. Moderators: Dispositional cynicism and reactance .....	14
5.1 Dispositional reactance .....	15
5.2 Dispositional cynicism .....	15
6. Manipulated variables:.....	15
6.1. Framing, number, and quality of claims.....	16
6.2. Mortality awareness.....	19
6.3. Cognitive decision style .....	21
7. Research setting and materials .....	24
8. Presentation of procedure and results.....	26
Paper 1: Framing and perceived sincerity .....	26
Paper 2: Mortality awareness and perceived sincerity .....	28
Paper 3: Cognitive decision style and perceived sincerity .....	30
9. Overall contributions and implications .....	33
9.1. Framing, number, quality and sincerity .....	34
9.2. Mortality awareness and sincerity .....	34
9.3. Cognitive decision style and sincerity .....	35
9.4. Limitations and future research .....	35
10. Conclusion .....	38
References.....	39
Appendix A .....	48
Appendix B .....	51
Part II: Papers .....	53

## List of appended papers

### Paper 1: Framing and perceived sincerity

Nordmo, M., & Selart, M. (2015). The asymmetrical force of persuasive knowledge across the positive–negative divide. *Frontiers in Psychology, 6*, 1324.  
<http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01324>

### Paper 2: Mortality awareness and perceived sincerity

Nordmo, M., & Norman, E. (2016). Perceived mortality and perceived morality: Perceptions of value-orientation are more likely when a decision is preceded by a mortality reminder. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00233

### Paper 3: Cognitive decision style and perceived sincerity

Nordmo, M., & Norman, E. (2016). “And then it hit me...”: The relationship between claimed decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication. Manuscript submitted for publication.

## Part I: Dissertation summary

### 1. Research question and purpose

The ethical claim that corporations have responsibilities beyond value-creation has been somewhat contested (Jørgensen & Tynes Pedersen, 2012). Free-market libertarian scholars have argued that the clear and limited responsibility of businesses is to conduct profitable operations within the framework of the law, in order to create value that benefits society (e.g. Friedman, 1970; Jensen, 2001). At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, academics have argued that businesses have an unreserved and unrestricted responsibility to conduct their operations in a way that is consistent with sustainable social and ecological systems (e.g. Zsolnai & Ims, 2006). The more moderate ethical stance, that businesses have a substantial responsibility to take care of all legitimate stakeholders that are affected by business operations (i.e. Freeman, 1984), has become common in organizational theory and practice (Moir, 2001). Although these discussions seem far from over, a prevailing notion is that although the academic community has failed to achieve consensus regarding the definition of corporate social responsibility (hereafter CSR) (Lindgreen, Swaen, & Maon, 2009), corporations are commonly considered to have social responsibility to serve individuals, communities, society and the environment above and beyond what is legally required (Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001; Wood, 1991).

The concept of CSR has received increasing attention from researchers (Serenko & Bontis, 2009). The CSR literature ranges across multiple levels of analysis, and multiple research disciplines. As such, it's current state is one of fragmentation (Waddock, 2004). Aguinis and Glavas (2012) divide the CSR literature into three levels of analysis; *institutional*, *organizational*, and *individual*. CSR research which focuses on the institutional level is primarily concerned with forces external to the organizations, such as laws, standards and other normative and regulatory elements (Scott, 1995). CSR research targeting the organizational level is primarily concerned with predictors of which companies will engage in what kinds of CSR practices, and what the outcomes of those practices are. The unit of analysis in this stream of research is typically treated conceptually at a macro level. The focus of the present dissertation can be said to be on the individual level of analysis, more specifically, in the intersection where CSR meets social marketing and organizational behavior. The field of social marketing has specialized in the contribution of marketing activities to socially desirable behaviors and goals (Andreasen, 1994), while the limited CSR literature in organizational behavior has been concerned with the link between CSR activities and employee attraction, engagement, commitment and retention (Aguinis, 2011; Morgeson, Aguinis, Waldman, & Siegel, 2013). The common goal of both social marketing research and CSR research in the domain of organizational behavior is to better understand how CSR initiatives can attract and retain the support of consumers and employees (Enderle & Murphy, 2009). This is not peripheral to the general CSR literature, as the fundamental goal of most CSR initiatives is to achieve sustained competitive advantage by attracting and retaining support from consumers and other stakeholders (Devinney, 2009; McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Waddock, 2008). Most people want corporations to act as good corporate citizens, but research shows that people are also quite skeptical of corporations who promote their social responsibility (Brønn & Vroni, 2001; Lii & Lee, 2012; Webb & Mohr, 1998). An important source of skepticism may be that all CSR activities are motivated by both a corporate logic and a socially responsible logic. CSR initiatives often involve activities and goals that appear to be motivated by a socially responsible logic, such as philanthropy, community development, environmental conservation or social justice (Van Marrewijk, 2003). Other aspects of CSR are more in line with ordinary corporate logic, such as saving resources, limiting

waste, and evoking positive associations among employees and consumers. This tension between corporate and social logic is central to the present dissertation.

The overarching research aim was to obtain more knowledge about variables that may influence the extent to which CSR communication is perceived as sincere. In our modern society, it seems more important than ever before for companies to be perceived as respectable and socially responsible organizations in modern society, i.e. to build a corporate reputation of social commitment (Fombrun & van Riel, 2003; Hooghiemstra, 2000). Nevertheless, companies that communicate their social responsible position face increased scrutiny and cynicism from observers (Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). Research indicates that the companies who communicate most about their social responsibility are also more prone to criticism of social irresponsibility, whereas companies who refrain from portraying themselves as socially responsible are correspondingly less criticized (Valentin, 2003). One of the reasons why increased attention to an organization's social responsibility represents an increased risk of public criticism may be that people respond very negatively to organizations who come across as deliberately false in their self-portrayal (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006; Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009). However, by refraining to communicate their socially responsible endeavors, a company faces the risk of consumers never learning about them, and possibly also assuming that no such efforts have been made. This represents a substantial opportunity cost for socially responsible organizations. A key challenge is to make it known, and acknowledged by the public, that the company is dedicated to a path of social responsibility, and that this dedication is really felt by the members of the organization, rather than just being a marketing tactic. Put differently, the challenge of CSR communication is to come across as sincere.

Past research has indicated that perceptions of sincerity are among the most important factors that mediate the relationship between CSR initiatives and the public's response to them (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Nevertheless, the research on how perceptions of sincerity can be elicited in CSR communication settings is very limited (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Andreasen, 1994). The present dissertation does not attempt to provide a comprehensive list of all antecedents to perceptions of sincerity in CSR communication. Rather, it explores three selected variables hypothesised to be relevant to perceptions of sincerity but which are yet underexplored in research on CSR communication and persuasion. One of these variables relates to the *message* itself (i.e., "framing and numerosity and quality of claims", Paper 1), one relates to the *life circumstances* of the leader (i.e., "mortality awareness", Paper 2), and one relates to the perceived *decision style* of the leader (i.e., "cognitive decision style", Paper 3).

The main research question was:

- How is the perception of CSR initiatives influenced by variables relating to properties of the message itself, the life circumstances of the leader, and the perceived decision style of the leader?

The three research questions explored in the three respective papers were:

1. How is the perception of CSR initiatives influenced by framing and numerosity and quality of claims? (Paper 1)
2. How is the perception of CSR initiatives influenced by the perceived motive of the leader, when this is presented as being related to mortality awareness? (Paper 2)
3. How is the perception of CSR initiatives influenced by the extent to which the decision style of the leader is presented as being characterized by different levels of cognitive spontaneity? (Paper 3)

The main purpose was to test whether and how each of the selected variables can increase or decrease perceptions of sincerity in CSR communication, and thus improve or deteriorate the general impression of the CSR initiatives, and the organization that implements them. The most important common message from all three studies is that perceived motives are key psychological mechanisms through which CSR communication is processed. Both attributions regarding communicative intentions (i.e. 'why is this person telling me this') and organizational motives (i.e. 'why are they doing this'), play an important role in the relationship between communicated CSR initiatives and people's reception of them. However, the known metaphorical 'toolkit' for adjusting people's attributions is very limited. While it seems fair to conclude that these attributions matter (Ellen, et al., 2006), less is known about how negative attributions can be avoided, and positive attributions can be achieved. Each of the papers in this dissertation present a mechanism for adjusting people's attributions of communicated CSR initiatives.

The three papers draw on literature from both social, - and moral psychology, as well from the areas of marketing and management. Including research from psychology in CSR communication does not only result in improved knowledge about how to successfully communicate CSR initiatives, it also allows for testing of psychological theories in novel settings. The three psychological variables that are tested in this dissertation have not yet been fully explored in persuasion settings. The first paper that makes up this dissertation explores the role of positively versus negatively framed arguments about CSR. While the difference between positively and negatively framed information has been studied extensively within the judgement and decision making tradition (see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), the implications of this knowledge in persuasion settings are not fully understood. Paper 2 is concerned with how presenting oneself as acutely aware of one's mortality may increase sincerity perceptions. While a substantial literature has explored how reminders of mortality and death affects human beings (see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010), less is known about how we perceive and interpret the decisions of others, in cases where we believe that the person we are observing is acutely aware of her own mortality. Put differently, even though the effects of mortality primes are fairly well understood, people's lay theories about the relationship between mortality and motivation have received less attention. Paper 3 explores how claiming to have reached a decision through different cognitive styles may affect sincerity perceptions. While some recent studies suggest that we perceive spontaneous thoughts to be more revealing of sincerely held values and beliefs, relative to deliberate thoughts (see Morewedge, Giblin, & Norton, 2014), the persuasive appeal generated by a leader who makes decisions in a cognitively spontaneous manner is underexplored. Thus, a secondary purpose of the dissertation was to increase our theoretical understanding of these psychological constructs from the point of view of persuasion research. However, the most important contribution of all the papers is to include findings from social and moral psychology into our understanding of how perceptions of sincerity can be elicited in CSR communication. This is not merely an academic endeavor. As companies are investing more and more in CSR activities (Olsen, Slotegraaf, & Chandukala, 2014), combined with the fact that sincerity perceptions have been established as a key condition for success with such activities (Beckman, Colwell, & Cunningham, 2009; Fassin & Buelens, 2011), it is important to explore how CSR communication can be conducted in a manner that evokes sincerity perceptions. The present dissertation combines the lessons from three such explorations.

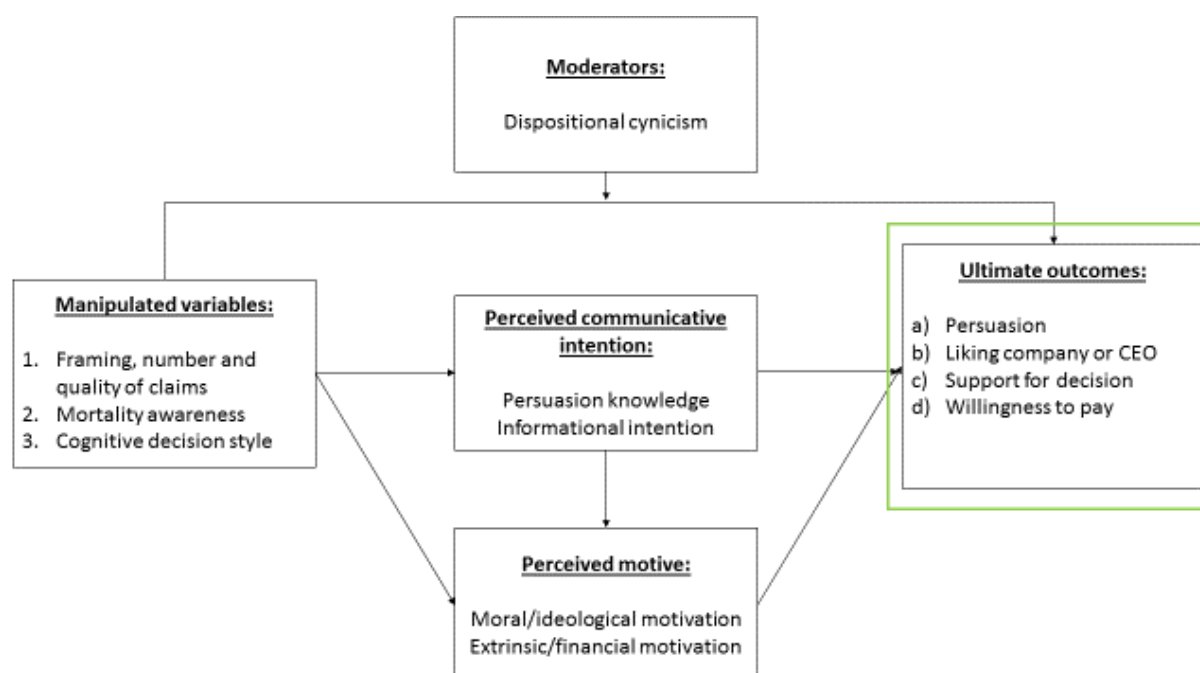
## 2. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 displays the conceptual framework that visualizes the different variables and their relationships in this dissertation. This framework consists of all the variables included across all three papers. As such, it is not to be interpreted as a directly testable, statistical model, but rather a descriptive visualization of the overall contribution of the dissertation. On the very left in the



framework are the manipulated variables that were explored in the three papers. On the very right are the ultimate outcome variables, namely the ones that relate directly to the concept of attracting and retaining support from consumers and other stakeholders. In the lower part of the middle are the two attribution concepts; perceived communicative intention and motivational attribution. As mentioned, the three papers present evidence suggesting that these attributions are the psychological mechanisms through which the differently communicated CSR initiatives are processed. In the top middle of the figure are the proposed moderators. As the proposed communicative tactics (i.e. manipulated variables) were expected to produce effects conditional on the personality traits of the observers, two dispositional traits are positioned as moderators between the manipulated variables and the ultimate outcome variables. The conceptual framework of this dissertation is represented in figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework



The conceptual framework displays all the central concepts/variables addressed in this dissertation, and the proposed relationship between them. In the following I present and explain these concepts, as well as their role in the conceptual framework. The constructs will be explained from right to left, starting with ultimate outcome variables, mediating psychological mechanisms, moderating dispositional traits, and finally, the manipulated variables.

### 3. Ultimate outcome variables:

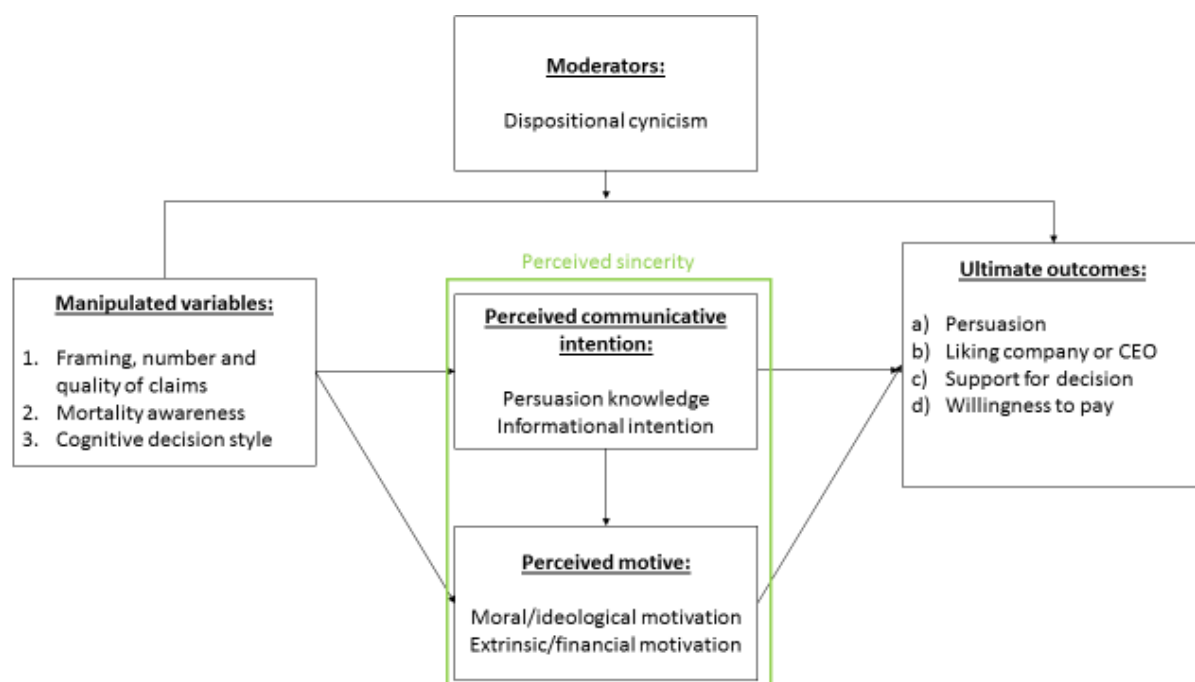
The ultimate outcome variables are highlighted by the green square in Figure 1. The ultimate outcome variables in all three experiments were different varieties of *persuasion*. Persuasion, and the related concept of *compliance gaining*, refers to the process whereby one person attempts to alter the thoughts, feelings, attitudes and/behavior of another person. Historically, the literature on persuasion has focused mostly on mass-communications, such as advertising and propaganda, whereas the compliance-gaining literature has explored the same phenomenon within a smaller-scale interpersonal setting. Historically, many researchers have agreed that the compliance gaining literature in psychology started with the pioneering work of Gerald Miller (Wilson & Greene, 1997). Other infamous researchers, such as Stanley Milgram, Solomon Asch and Robert Cialdini has furthered this line of inquiry into the dynamics of interpersonal influence (Kruglanski & Stroebe,

2012). The essence of compliance gaining is to make other people perform or reject certain behaviors by using different behavioral, social or strategic tactics (Wheeless, Barraclough, Stewart, & Bostrom, 1983). Focusing more on mass-communications, the persuasion literature has been more concerned with how different characteristics of the message, the sender, the channel, and the receivers of the message interact to produce different evaluative outcomes (Perloff, 2010). This dissertation can be placed partly within the fields of compliance gaining and persuasion, as Paper 1 explores evaluative artifacts in a hypothetical one-on-one interaction. However, it can also be placed within the general persuasion tradition, as Papers 2 and 3 use fictitious interview settings as the backdrop. According to Elsbach and Sutton (1992), organizations use a variety of impression management techniques to project images, and to reinforce and build reputations and identities to create an impression of social responsibility towards social groups and stakeholders to legitimize their actions. These techniques include verbal accounts, categorizations, symbolic behavior and physical markers (Elsbach, 2003). This dissertation aims to add a further contribution to our understanding of how psychological variables influences the efficacy of such verbal accounts and symbolic behaviors.

#### 4. Perceived sincerity

It has long been established that human beings have an innate and automatic tendency to interpret and attempt to understand the cause of behavior, both that of others and our own (Bem, 1967; Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 1985). This kind of causal ascription, termed attribution, is central to this dissertation. Specifically, attributions regarding communicative intentions and attributions regarding motivation for the CSR initiatives themselves, were hypothesized to be the central mechanisms through which CSR initiatives would lead to different evaluations. I have labeled the combination of these two sets of attributions; *perceived sincerity*. The content of the green square in Figure 2 is a visual representation of the combined construct of perceived sincerity in this dissertation.

Figure 2. Communicative intention and perceived motive make up the concept of perceived sincerity



There are several definitions of sincerity. According to the Oxford Dictionary, sincere can be defined as; “free from pretense or deceit; proceeding from genuine feelings”, or, when stated of a person; “saying what they genuinely feel or believe; not dishonest or hypocritical”. Merriam-Webster defines sincere as; “free of dissimulation (honest); free from adulteration (pure), marked by genuineness (true)”. Trilling (1972, p. 2) defines it as “congruence between avowal and actual feeling”. The common denominator in all these definitions is the notion of being genuine, true, and pure of mind. Sincerity, and the related concept of authenticity, have become widely used concepts in the marketing literature. Although consensus regarding definition remains absent, both constructs relate to the perception that an object, person, message or action is real, genuine or true. Attempts have been made to define and measure authenticity in communication (Molleda, 2010). Perceptions of sincerity entail believing that a persons’ behavior is in accordance with their actual belief system. Popular culture is replete with tropes relating to the concept of sincerity, such as *saying what you believe and believing what you say*, *being/keeping it real*, and the ubiquitous ‘*we care*’. A vast literature, stretching across philosophy (C. Taylor, 1991), literature (Trilling, 1972), folk-lore studies (Bendix, 2009), social anthropology (Lindholm, 2008) and moral and social psychology (Baumeister, 1982; Gecas, 1986), suggests that human beings have a natural tendency to favor people who act in accordance with their own values, and distrust people who display inconsistencies between values and behavior, or whose values can be easily bent or usurped by external forces.

As mentioned, our knowledge regarding the mechanisms through which CSR initiatives lead to different outcomes for the organization is still quite limited (Enderle & Murphy, 2009; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Peloza, 2009; Peloza & Shang, 2011). Perceptions of sincerity is arguably one of the few known mediators between CSR initiatives and public reactions (Du, et al., 2010; Fassin & Buelens, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2012; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006). An increasing number of research findings indicate that CSR initiatives that are seen as insincere are reacted upon negatively, while those that appear to stem from sincere caring produce positive reactions. The literature on CSR perception has identified some of the key drivers of sincerity perceptions. Two of the major drivers are *company reputation*, and the *quality of fit* between the company and the CSR activities (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006; Elving, 2013; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). In general, CSR activities that are perceived as congruent with the company values, and centered within the company sphere of interests, are seen as more sincere, and evaluated more favorably than incongruent CSR platforms (Ellen, et al., 2006). Furthermore, companies with good corporate reputations are perceived as more sincere in their CSR endeavors than companies with bad reputations, and/or companies in so-called ‘sinful industries’ such as weapons and tobacco (Frynas, 2005; Palazzo & Richter, 2005; Yoon, et al., 2006). Conditioned on the presence of available informational cues, *low resource-commitment*, *low emotional engagement* and *lack of embeddedness* of CSR perspective in the day to day operations of the company are all known antecedents of negative evaluations of CSR, presumably because these factors indicate that the CSR initiatives are not sincerely believed in by the company (McShane & Cunningham, 2012). *Acquiring or imitating* best practice CSR measures from other actors may also lead to perceptions of insincerity, especially at the early stages of implementation (Debeljak, Krkac, & Bušljeta Banks, 2011; Windsor, 2013). Focusing on cultivating positive CSR attitudes among employees in order to ensure that the corporation comes across as *unified in their CSR approach*, is another way to potentially increase perceptions of sincerity among observers in the general public (Morsing, et al., 2008). Similarly, organizational behavior studies have demonstrated that *commitment from supervisors* to CSR is an important predictor of CSR engagement (Greening & Gray, 1994; Muller & Kolk, 2010). One of the reasons why CSR fails to produce engagement in cases where managers seem uncommitted to the CSR platform may be that the employing organization comes across as insincere in their CSR communication. *Reactive* CSR initiatives, that is initiatives that seem

to be motivated by external forces and expectations rather than intrinsic values, do not lead to positive evaluation (Groza, Pronschinske, & Walker, 2011). Similarly, CSR initiatives that seem to be *profit-motivated* receive negative evaluation (Becker-Olsen, et al., 2006). Corporations who communicate environmentally friendly CSR policies that come across as mainly profit-motivated also face the risk of coming across as less sincere, and thus receive negative reactions (de Vries, Terwel, Ellemers, & Daamen, 2013).

In this dissertation, sincerity is operationalized specifically to perceptions of CSR communication. The combined construct consists of two sets of attributions made by the receivers of CSR communication. The first set of attributions pertains to *perceived communicative intention*. Put in plain terms, this attribution is represented by the implicit question ‘why are they telling us this?’, or ‘why is she telling me this?’, depending on context. When faced with a corporate communication, people will often attempt to understand whether or not the deliberate intention of the communicator is to persuade them in any direction (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In some cases, receivers of CSR communication may realize that the communicators’ intention is to persuade them. That realization is typically referred to as persuasion knowledge. In other cases, the receivers may perceive that the intention of the communicator is merely to inform. These evaluations, i.e. persuasion knowledge and perceived informational intent, are strongly associated with different overall evaluations (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). The second set of attributions pertain to *perception of motive*, with regards to the CSR decision itself. Put in plain terms, this set of possible attributions is represented by the implicit question ‘why are they doing this?’. When a leader makes a decision that serves multiple ends, aspects pertaining to the leader, setting, medium and style of communication may affect the saliency of different motivations. Sincerity of motivation will in this sense entail that followers believe that the managerial decision is primarily motivated by the socially responsible logic that the leader communicates. Perceptions of insincerity, on the other hand, is manifest when followers attribute the decision to ulterior motives. The next two sections provide a presentation of the past theoretical and empirical work that describes the two sets of attributions that make up the concept of sincerity perceptions according to the theoretical perspective presented here.

#### 4.1 Perception of communicative intention

The first psychological mechanism described in this dissertation is perception of communicative intention. In order to convey a sense of sincerity when communicating about CSR, the individual needs to be adept at psychologically strategic communication. The ability to communicate strategically is a significant social-cognitive skill. In order to successfully engage in strategic communication, individuals not only need access to the information that is to be communicated, but also access to ideas regarding how others will perceive this information, and how different presentations of the information may elicit different impressions in others. Developmental psychologists refer to this meta-representational capacity as ‘theory of mind’ (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985). As children grow older, they develop their ability to understand the workings of other people’s minds in a more sophisticated manner. As a consequence, they acquire the ability to deceive and lie, as well as the understanding that others may lie or misrepresent the truth (McAlister & Cornwell, 2009; Sodian, 1991; Wright, Friestad, & Boush, 2005). Understanding deception, both in terms of using it and realizing that others may have deceptive intentions, is one of the important factors when learning to communicate persuasively and strategically (Slaughter, Peterson, & Moore, 2013). It should be noted that although in this dissertation, the antecedents and consequences of different strategic communications are studied through carefully executed experiments, real-life development and maintenance of strategic communication skills presumably comes about through experience and mental simulation, to the point that it becomes an automatized social skill (Bargh & Williams, 2006).

A natural consequence of learning that other people are able to deliberately hide or misrepresent their true mental content, is *skepticism* (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994). Skepticism entails the tendency to doubt the truthfulness of the claims put forth by others. There is substantial variation between individuals in how pronounced this tendency is (Calfee & Ringold, 1994; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). The degree of skepticism people exhibit also depends on their views of the source of the communication. When subjected to traditional marketing, people are especially aware of the persuasive intentions of the source of the message, and they therefore attempt to include their knowledge of this intention in their overall evaluation of the object (Friestad & Wright, 1994). According to the persuasion knowledge model, people attempt to hold valid attitudes towards all evaluated objects. When the source of a message is perceived as having persuasive intentions, people attempt to cope with the persuasive content by adjusting their impression accordingly. This type of psychological coping reaction is simply formulated by Campbell and Kirmani (2008, p. 549) as “I know what you’re doing and why you are doing it”. A more exhaustive list of factors pertaining to persuasion knowledge can be paraphrased from Friestad and Wright (1994). According to the authors, persuasion knowledge can be surmised as a set interrelated beliefs about; (a) the causes and effects of psychological events that are instrumental to persuasion, (b) the importance of those events, (c) the extent to which people believe they can control their responses, (d) the temporal course of the persuasion episode, and (e) the perceived effectiveness and appropriateness of the particular persuasion tactic. Friestad and Wright (1994) highlight that a complete theory of persuasion is one that takes into account aspects of a persuasion tactic that reveals or hides the persuasive intentions of the agent. So far, marketing research has identified several factors in the execution of a persuasion attempt that may make the effort seem heavy-handed or transparent, and thus elicit and increase persuasion knowledge and coping. For instance, prevention-focus or regulation focus in the framing of the message (Kirmani & Zhu, 2007), forced exposure (Edwards, Li, & Lee, 2002), attention-getting tactics (Campbell, 1995), advertising repetition (Kirmani, 1997), overly personalized solicitations (White, Zahay, Thorbjørnsen, & Shavitt, 2008) among others, have all been identified as factors that increase persuasion knowledge in targets. In CSR communication as well, several lessons from the persuasion knowledge literature have been adopted. For instance, relying on an objective third party to communicate the efforts to be socially responsible is more effective than having the corporation communicate the efforts directly (Doh, Howton, Howton, & Siegel, 2010). Part of the benefit from this approach is that the third party endorsement evokes less persuasion knowledge and more perceived informational intent among the observers. Another benefit with the endorsement model of CSR communication is that the general public may view the third party endorsement as stemming from an ‘elite reader’, with privileged access to information regarding the company’s activities, and special knowledge regarding the efficacy of different environmentally oriented CSR policies (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

#### 4.2 Perception of motive

The second part of the two-fold concept of sincerity is perception of organizational motives, i.e. perceptions of what the organization is hoping to achieve by implementing the CSR initiatives. In many cases, there are multiple potential motivations underlying an observed behavior. General management literature has noted that leaders often make decisions where the guiding motivation may seem ambiguous or mixed (Calder, 1977; Di Norcia & Larkins, 2000). When evaluating an observed decision or behavior, people not only care about what people do, but also the reasons for why they are doing it (Reeder, 2009; Reeder, Vonk, Ronk, Ham, & Lawrence, 2004). Past research has demonstrated that employees and consumers often scrutinize the way managerial decisions are communicated, in order to understand what the real purpose of the decision may be (Weick, 1995). In some cases, peripheral cues related to how the decision is communicated may affect this

attribution process. Recent research within social and moral psychological has demonstrated that peripheral cues related to the decision maker's behavior may signify different motives, and thus elicit different evaluations of a decision. A common finding is that for a behavior to be considered morally praiseworthy, the agent must not only have intended and brought about the action and its consequence, she must also have performed the act for reasons that are in themselves praiseworthy (Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012). One colorful example of this tendency can be found in research on the ethical thought experiment called the "trolley problem" (see Hauser, Cushman, Young, Kang-Xing Jin, & Mikhail, 2007), wherein people are asked to make a choice as to whether or not to kill one person in order to save five people who would otherwise die. In general, most people sympathize with the decision to sacrifice one in order to save five. However, if the decision maker states that he did not care about the five people he saved, he simply wanted to kill the one person, people's approval of the same decision can be expected to drop substantially (Thaler, 2015). Critcher, Helzer, Tannebaum and Pizarro (in prep) proposed a mindreading moral principles account of evaluating moral character. The authors demonstrated that people attempt to mind-read agents' moral principles by evaluating the mental antecedents that precede a morally motivated action. In their study, the amount of praise the agents received for their decisions was dependent on the extent to which the agents were assumed to appreciate the moral principle that would justify their decision. The task of identifying people's underlying reasons and motives for their decisions is neither easy nor exact in nature. The contents of another person's mind are not directly observable to us, and as a consequence, we tend to rely on external, observable cues when trying to infer motives (Pronin, 2008). Although individuals and organizations sometimes make their reasons for acting explicit and clear (i.e. "We use energy-efficient airplanes in order to combat climate change"), such explicit statements do not necessarily aid the attributional process of employees and consumers, because the source of the statement may be considered to have a strong persuasive intention (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). As such observers must engage in mindreading (Critcher, et al., in prep) to make sense of why a person behaved as she did.

The same processes that guide motivational attribution in social and moral situations are relevant when people observe CSR communication. CSR initiatives are often, by their very nature, ambiguously motivated (Morsing, et al., 2008), as they may bring about positive consequences to both the company and external parties. In some cases, spectators will see the initiatives as indications of authentic and underlying values (see Beckman, et al., 2009). In other cases, people might interpret the initiatives as financially motivated strategic policies, cloaked in an insincere claim of social responsibility (Laufer, 2003; Vos, 2009). Attribution to ordinary corporate motives represents a problem for any individual or organization wanting to promote the impression that they are motivated by moral values, if and when such behavior also leads to financial gain. In a capitalist society facing the challenge of global warming caused by CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, and the corresponding regulatory consequences, the first measures that organizations can, will and should implement, are measures that are both financially and environmentally beneficial (Jørgensen & Pedersen, 2013). However, in all CSR communication, observers are left with the challenge of motivational attribution, i.e. ascribing the real reason why these initiatives are made. A main finding from CSR research thus far is that both the public as well as employees, prefer endeavors that seemingly stem from sincere, appreciation of the logic of social responsibility (Beckman, et al., 2009; Debeljak, et al., 2011; McShane & Cunningham, 2012).

## 5. Moderators: Dispositional cynicism and reactance

Aside from measuring the perceptions of sincerity, all three papers included measures of individual difference variables, that were hypothesized to be relevant. As people are known to differ in their propensity for different thoughts and behaviors, the inclusion of personality constructs is an important part of a complete psychological theory (Lewin, 1939). It follows from this assertion that

any study of psychological phenomena may benefit from the inclusion of measurement of personality traits. The traits measured in the experiments that make up this dissertation were expected to function as moderators. In other words, I hypothesized that certain manipulations would make people with a high score on a trait measure more prone to certain outcomes, while people with a low score on the same trait measure would be prone to the opposite outcome. This general assertion is in line with past research, suggesting that differences in psychological needs determine individual engagement in CSR (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007). The next two sections provide a description of the traits that were presumed to act as moderators of the relationship between differently communicated CSR initiatives and subsequent reactions and evaluations.

### 5.1 Dispositional reactance

In Paper 1, the outcome measures could be seen as falling within the category of compliance gaining. As such, we predicted that the different approaches would lead to different outcomes, depending on the participants level of dispositional reactance (Hong & Page, 1989). Reactance is defined as a motivational drive directed toward the reestablishment of threatened or eliminated personal freedoms (Brehm, 1966). Individuals have been found to vary substantially with regards to how prone they are to experience such threats, and how strongly they react towards them (Miron & Brehm, 2006). We predicted that this individual difference would prove important when understanding the mechanisms that lead to successful CSR communication in a compliance gaining setting.

### 5.2 Dispositional cynicism

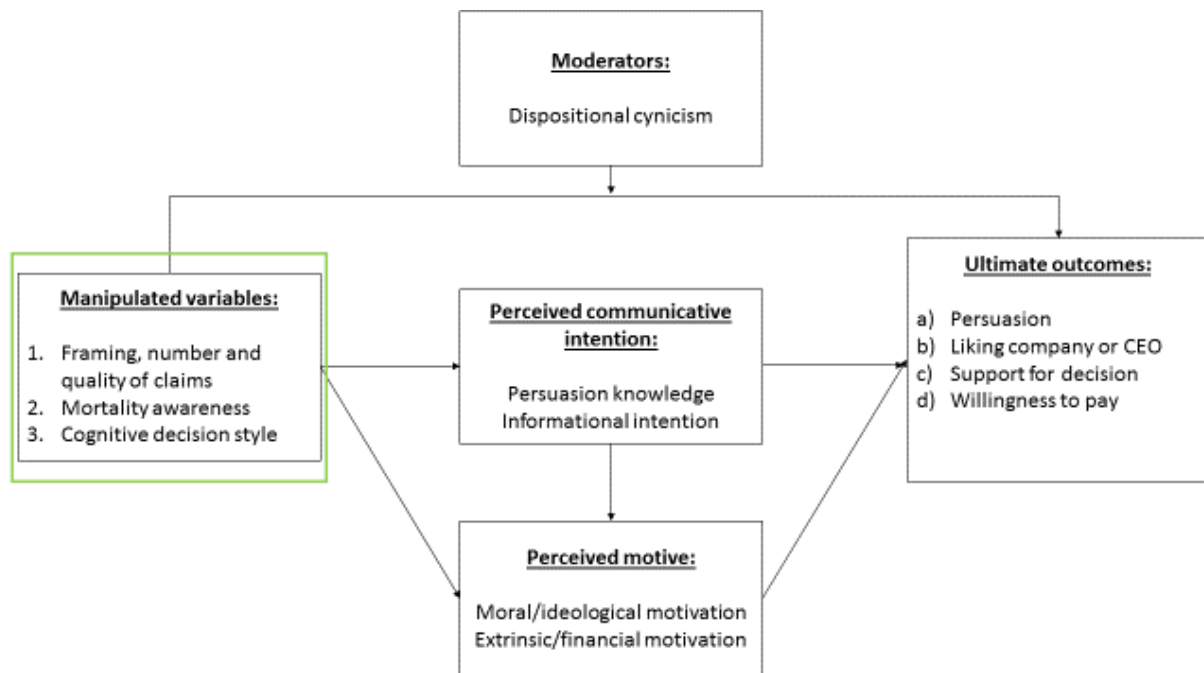
The tendency to attribute seemingly value-oriented behaviors to ulterior motives can be referred to as *cynicism* (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). Cynical attribution styles are characterized by suspecting self-serving and egocentric motivations to be the cause of seemingly noble and value-oriented behaviors. One example of such attributions may be how people think about the motivation of politicians. While some might infer that a given politician is motivated by ideological conviction, sense of responsibility and a desire to improve society, others may infer that salary, power-hunger, possible fame and a subsequent career as a highly paid consultant are the key motivations behind the decision to go into politics. A possibly more banal example could be a person donating money to a homeless person on the street. While some bystanders may view the behavior as heartfelt altruism, a more cynical attribution would be that the giver is merely 'window-dressing' her kindness and moral character in order to obtain other benefits. Kanter and Mirvis (1989) claim that the tendency to infer such ulterior motives varies substantially between individuals and cultures.

## 6. Manipulated variables:

The outcome variables, psychological mechanisms and dispositional traits constitute the common factors in the three papers. Lastly, I will present and elaborate on the manipulated variables in the dissertation (see Figure 3). As mentioned, the list of manipulated variables was never intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it lists three separate variables that have been explored within social psychology, but never explored in a CSR communication setting. Each presentation of manipulated variables will be followed by a table summarizing the past key findings, and the specific research questions that were addressed and answered.



Figure 3. The manipulated variables



### 6.1. Framing, number, and quality of claims

The manipulated variable in Paper 1 was framing, i.e. positive vs. negative persuasion. Positive persuasion, was defined as endeavors to make someone or something appear good or virtuous. Conversely, negative persuasion was defined as attempting to make other people believe that someone or something is bad or immoral. In the first paper, we explored how the numbers of claims (i.e. the number of arguments, claims or pieces of relevant information), plays different roles in positively and negatively framed persuasion attempts. We also explored the persuasion effects of different qualities of claims in positive and negative persuasion.

A large number of studies have addressed how the number of claims affect the outcome of a persuasion attempt. The idea that additional positive information increases liking has been largely supported in psychological research impression formation. Stewart (1965) found that when participants are presented with a description of a person consisting of one, two, three or four positive traits, the liking of the person increased monotonically with each positive trait. This finding and others led to the conclusion that the impression of a person becomes more favorable with each positive claim. Anderson (1967) referred to this effect as the “set-size effect”. In persuasion research, studies of the effect of different amounts of persuasive information has generally confirmed the finding made by Stewart (1965) and Anderson (1967). Pelham, Sumatra et al. (1994) refer to the positive relationship between amount of persuasive information and persuasion as the *numerosity effect*. The numerosity effect states that as a default, the more persuasive information a message contains, up to some reasonable limit, the more persuaded people tend to be (see Calder, 1978; Calder, Insko, & Yandell, 1974; Chaiken, 1980; Maddux & Rogers, 1980; Norman, 1976). In Paper 1, we referred to this inflection point, after which more information of the same valence no longer causes changes in attitude, as the point of “satiety”. The key question in the research on the optimal number of claims in persuasion is how many claims are needed before informational satiety is achieved. Shu and Carlson (2014) demonstrated that the point of “satiety”, i.e., the optimal amount of claims used in persuasion, was three. In all their reported experiments, persuasion attempts that consisted of three claims outperformed persuasion attempts consisting of one, two, four, five or six



claims. The authors argued that the reason why the point of satiety was found to be at three claims, was that three is a psychologically satisfying number. The authors noted that the observed drop in persuasiveness that followed the introduction of a fourth claim was due to a corresponding increase in persuasion knowledge.

Part of the reason why over-communication can hamper persuasion may be that when more claims are added, some of the claims are perceived as relatively weak, or less relevant than the others. Including irrelevant information has been proven to reduce the persuasiveness of a message. Nisbett, Zukier et al. (1981) refer to this phenomenon as the *dilution effect*. Dilution effect is defined as: “A judgment bias in which the presence of non-diagnostic cues, when processed along with diagnostic cues, causes a judge to under-weigh the diagnostic cues” (Waller & Zimbelman, 2003, p. 254). Dilution effects have been documented across many disciplines and research-settings (see Ettenson, Shanteau, & Jack, 1987; Meyvis & Janiszewski, 2002; Smith, Stasson, & Hawkes, 1998; Tetlock & Boettger, 1989). Field experiments in economics have documented similar phenomena, referred to as “less is better” or “more is less” effects (Hsee, 1998; List, 2002). In these experiments, bundles of high-quality objects have been shown to elicit higher willingness to pay than the same bundles are presented, but with the addition of some lower quality objects. The use of relatively low-quality/low-relevance claims in conjunction with high-quality claims may be one factor that makes persuasive intent seem more heavy-handed and transparent, which in turn may increase persuasion knowledge, and thus reduce overall persuasion. In a CSR communication study, De Vries, Trewel et al. (2014) demonstrated that dilution effects were only manifest in positive persuasion, and only when combining highly relevant and irrelevant information.

Taken together, the literature on the number and quality of claims in persuasion can be summarized in terms of four main findings. Firstly, increasing the number of claims leads to incremental increase in persuasion, up to a point of satiety. Secondly, the point of satiety, after which further claims no longer increases persuasion, is reached earlier when the target perceives the agent as having persuasive intent. Thirdly, increasing the number of claims can increase the likelihood that the agent is perceived as having persuasive intent. And finally, adding weak claims to bundles of strong claims can dilute the overall persuasiveness of the communication. An important gap in this research is that almost all these findings stem from experiments in positive persuasion, i.e. persuading others to believe that something or someone is good. Less is known about the effect of different numbers and qualities of claims in negatively framed persuasion.

Demonstrations of an asymmetry between positive and negative in perception and judgment has long been a topic of interests in psychology (for example Peeters, 1971). The work of Kahneman and Tversky (1979) on this topic was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics in 2002. One of the novelties of their Prospect Theory was that it stated an explicit asymmetry in the perception of positive and negative events. In human judgement, small losses are perceived as subjectively more painful than corresponding gains are perceived as pleasurable, relative to a neutral baseline. This general pattern has later been observed in a number of research findings, across a wide range of settings (Peeters & Czapinski, 1990; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). The tendency to put more emphasis on negatively framed stimuli has been dubbed the negativity effect, positive-negative asymmetry and negativity bias. Baumeister, Bratslavsky et al. (2001) summarized the findings on the asymmetry between positively and negatively framed information as “Bad is stronger than good”. Considering the body of research on good vs. bad perception and judgments (for reviews, see Baumeister, et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001), there is good reason to suspect that the dynamics of evaluating negative claims are different from those of positive claims. In terms of evolutionary psychology, individuals who spend less time and require less information in order to classify an event, person or object as bad may have an adaptive advantage. The consequences of failing to detect a pattern in the negative domain are often more severe than the consequence of type 1 errors perceiving a pattern where there is none. For instance, people who required great persuasive efforts to believe certain

foods are dangerous would historically have had an adaptive disadvantage, compared to those who were more easily persuaded. The consequences of not being persuaded in such a setting could be a serious health risk, while the consequences of being persuaded would normally only involve the removal of one of many sources of nutrition from the environment. As such, it can be argued that evolution has favored the general human tendency to be more easily persuaded by negatively framed persuasive appeals than positively framed persuasion. There are also cultural traces of negativity bias. In literature-studies, the “tragic flaw”, or Hamartia, has been a familiar concept since the Greek dramas. The tragic flaw typically consists of a single failing or moral transgression that brings about the demise of the otherwise admirable character (Sherman, 1992). Social anthropologists studying notions of purity and contamination in different cultures have noted a negativity bias in that purity is conceived of as difficult to reach and maintain, while a single act of contagion will instantly render the entire person contaminated (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Research in social and moral psychology has demonstrated that evaluative negative information is weighted more heavily than positive information in overall evaluations (Kanouse & Hanson, 1971). This effect is especially relevant when evaluations entail affective reactions (Lewicka, Czapinski, & Peeters, 1992). Continuing the general ‘bad is stronger than good’ finding into corporate ethics research, Creyer (1997) found that consumers are willing to purchase from unethical companies, but they expect a substantial reduction in prices. The willingness to pay for products from unethical, normal and ethical companies respectively, correspond to the curve of prospect theory, in which minor ethical violations are weighted more heavily than corresponding minor ethical advances.

If humans generally pay more attention to negative events and react with stronger emotion towards negative events (both compared to a positive event of the same impact), it stands to reason that the role of numbers and quality of claims could be different in positive and negative persuasion. Paper 1 tests this prediction. The main research question raised in this paper was how the perception of CSR initiatives is influenced by framing, amount, and quality of claims. Table 1 displays a summary of the key past findings, and the research questions (RQ) that are motivated by this research.

*Table 1. Key findings and corresponding specific research questions*

<u>Past key findings:</u>	
In positive persuasion, messages consisting of three claims is more persuasive than messages consisting of less or more than three claims.	Shu & Carlson, 2014
In positive persuasion, persuasion knowledge increases when more than three claims are used.	Shu & Carlson, 2014
Negative events are more painful than corresponding positive events are pleasurable.	Kahneman & Tversky, 1979
People pay more attention to negative information than positive information.	Baumeister, et al., 2001
People place a higher emphasis on negative information than positive information.	Rozin & Royzman, 2001
<u>Specific Research Questions:</u>	
1. What are the effects of different numbers of claims in negative persuasion?	
2. What are the effects of adding diluting (poor quality) claims in negative persuasion?	

## 6.2. Mortality awareness

In existential psychology, scholars such as May (1999; May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1994) and Yalom (1980, 2008) have long promoted the philosophical connection between mortality and authenticity. Put crudely, their argument states that as humans are faced with awareness of their own mortality, they face ontological anxiety and sense of isolation. The solution to this anxiety is ontological freedom, and the search for authenticity in life. This line of thinking has inspired terror management theory (TMT), a literature that empirically explores the consequences of thinking about death and dying (see Burke, et al., 2010). As sincerity and authenticity can be said to be overlapping constructs (Trilling, 1972), and authenticity has been linked to mortality across several fields, Paper 2 represents an experimental exploration into how mortality awareness can alter perceptions of sincerity in CSR communication.

Most of the research on mortality salience has been conducted within the framework of terror management theory (Burke, et al., 2010). A typical terror management experiment involves presenting a mortality salient prime to the participants in the experimental condition, a valid control stimulus to the participants in the control condition, and then looking for differences between the groups on relevant outcome measures. One of the key goals of terror management theory is to identify those defense mechanisms that allow human beings to live most of their lives seemingly unaffected by their knowledge of inevitable mortality, both their own and that of others. Put differently, terror management theory is less concerned with death-anxiety per se, than with the question of why and how most human beings do not succumb to constant death-anxiety. While this

theoretical angle may seem backwards at face value, its logic is firmly rooted in evolutionary psychology. The most basic tenet in evolutionary psychology is that humans have evolved to fear death, and have a strong desire to live. The concept of inclusive fitness (see P. D. Taylor, 1988) further states that humans have also evolved to dread the thought of close kin dying. At the same time, almost all human beings agree that our current life will end at the point of our biological death. The emotion of fear is a natural reaction towards any real or imaginary threat, and it is usually alleviated once the threat is removed (Buss, 2016). As our mortality can never be removed, only the momentary awareness of it, terror management claims that one or more defense mechanisms must be in place in order for us to be able to remove this momentary awareness (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997). Terror management theory has uncovered two, semi-related, central defense mechanisms. The first is an increased investment in one's own cultural worldviews. Across a vast majority of terror management experiments, an increase in the upholding of one's own cultural worldviews is an observed consequence of a mortality reminder (Greenberg et al., 1990). The other observed consequence of mortality reminders is increase in the need for self-esteem (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). A third typical reaction towards death-cognitions observed in terror management experiments is an increase in political and ideological conservatism (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Personality studies in political psychology indicate that a high need for order and predictability predicts conservative political attitudes. It is thus theorized that the anxiety caused by momentary mortality awareness increases the need for order and predictability, causing a stronger embrace of conservative values.

The main prediction of Paper 2 was that a leader who seems aware of her own mortality when she decides to impose financially and environmentally beneficial corporate policies, will come across as less motivated by the corporate logic associated with CSR, and more motivated by the social responsibility logic associated with CSR. The idea that awareness of mortality may be related to changes in the priority of financial gains is far from novel. All five major religions present reminders of how material riches lose meaning in the face of mortality. The classical literary character Ebenezer Scrooge, as described by Charles Dickens, illustrates how material riches lose value in the face of mortality. Terminal patients, and people who have had near-death experiences, typically report experiences of devaluing the meaning of material possessions (Kinnier, Tribbensee, Rose, & Vaughan, 2001; Ware, 2011). However, while philosophy and literature point solely towards a decrease in extrinsic motivation as consequence of mortality reminders, TMT experiments offer more complex results. In general, TMT research suggests that mortality primes typically produce an amplification in the defense of whatever themes that are considered personally and/or culturally important by the person exposed to the mortality prime (Arndt, et al., 1997; Fritzsche & Häfner, 2012; Fritzsche, Jonas, Kayser, & Koranyi, 2010; Vess & Arndt, 2008). Kosloff and Greenberg (2009) found that participants exposed to a mortality prime gave higher importance ratings for a high priority extrinsic goal. The authors argued that such effects may arise because the affirmation of personally important extrinsic goals can lead to higher self-esteem and defense of the sources of meaning in life. For people who see extrinsic pursuits as the central theme in their cultural worldview, and/or the prominent source of positive self-esteem, mortality primes typically induces an increased investment in those extrinsic pursuits (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004).

While some research has focused on the link between mortality salience and the elicitation of different motivations, I was able to find no empirical studies of whether and how mortality salience can affect the motivational attribution of other people's behavior. Whereas most TMT research focuses on how people respond when primed with reminders of their own mortality, Paper 2 explored how an CEO is perceived, when that CEO claims to have been made more acutely aware of her own mortality. To the very best of my knowledge, people's attributional tendencies towards people with elevated mortality awareness had not previously been described in the literature. However, past research has demonstrated that people often infer that the motivational processes they experience, mirror the motivational processes that govern the behavior of others (Reeder &

Trafimow, 2005). Accordingly, the predictions made in Paper 2 were based on TMT research. The main research question raised in this paper was how the perception of CSR initiatives is influenced by the life circumstances of the leader, when this is presented as being related to mortality awareness vs. not. Table 2 displays a summary of the past key findings and corresponding specific research questions that are motivated by this research.

*Table 2. Key findings and corresponding specific research questions*

<u>Past key findings:</u>	
When reminded of their own mortality, people are more inclined to defend their cultural values and self esteem	Pyszczynski, et al., 1999
When reminded of their own mortality, people have a tendency to imbue everyday actions with personal meaning	Burke, et al., 2010
Just after a mortality reminder, people trivialize the pursuit of material/financial gains	Kosloff & Greenberg, 2009
People who place a high priority on material/financial goal attainment will increase their investments in those pursuits after a mortality reminder	Arndt, et al., 2004
<u>Specific Research Questions:</u>	
4. Does mortality awareness make a leader come across as more sincere?	
5. Will a leader who seems aware of her mortality come across as more sincere, even if she is known to place a high emphasis on financial gains?	

### 6.3. Cognitive decision style

The topic of inquiry in Paper 3 was how different levels of perceived sincerity are elicited by different claimed cognitive decision styles. Accumulated evidence from cognitive psychology, developmental psychology and social psychology suggests that there must be at least more than one system of thought and mental events (Gilbert, 1999). According to Kahnemans (2011) 2-system theory, there are two distinct systems of thought, one fast and automated (i.e. System 1), and one slow and deliberate (i.e. System 2). Mental processes such as perception, heuristic-based decision-making and automated behaviors are typically thought to be governed by System 1, while willful deliberation is thought to be governed by System 2. While System 1 usually produces behaviors and decisions that are correct and adaptive (Gigerenzer & Dahlem, 2001), it is prone to systematic bias in some cases. System 2 is thought to be less prone to unconscious bias, but using this system is resource demanding.

Rational deliberation is typically thought of as the best approach to decision making (Norton, Kupor, Tormala, & Rucker, 2013). In traditional economics, the decision maker is expected to carefully weigh

all relevant factors, in order to come up with the decision that maximizes utility (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). Similarly, in the academic field of law, actors are urged to carefully deliberate on the application of a multitude of higher,- and lower order legal principles to the concrete case at hand (Frank, 1931). Although some research has been done to explore the potential for making better or worse decision through different cognitive styles, little is known about how people perceive decisions that stem from different types of cognition. In Paper 3, the manipulated variable was how spontaneous or deliberate the thinking that allegedly preceded a decision was claimed to have been. The decision in question was the implementation of CSR initiatives that were both financially and environmentally beneficial.

People are generally able to control only a part of their cognitive processes. Willful deliberation is an example of a consciously controlled form of cognition. In the opposite end of the perceived controllability spectrum, are spontaneous thoughts, dreams, mental content elicited by hypnosis or under intoxication, and other forms of seemingly uncontrollable mental events (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). Spontaneous thoughts occur frequently in everyday life. They are the output of a broad category of uncontrolled and inaccessible higher-order mental processes (Morewedge, et al., 2014). Although they seem to arise randomly, people tend to believe that their random thoughts and intuitions reveal more meaningful self-insights than their deliberate thoughts. People also seem to trust their spontaneously occurring intuitions and gut feelings to a very high degree (Kahneman & Frederick, 2002; Morewedge & Kahneman, 2010), even in cases where there is considerable evidence to suggest that these intuitions are wrong (Frederick, 2005; Kruger, Wirtz, & Miller, 2005). History provides ample examples of decisions accredited to spontaneous forms of cognition. For instance, many important events and discoveries have been accredited to dreams. Examples include, but are not limited to, Descartes scientific method, Kekulé's discovery of the chemical structure of Benzene, and James Watson's discovery of the double-helix shape of DNA. Similarly, intuition is allegedly the precursor of several events with profound historical ramifications. The first line in the second paragraph of the United States' Declaration of Independence contains what some scholars interpret as an admission of relying on intuition, as it details what the authors consider "self-evident" truths regarding human rights (Haidt, 2013). So accrediting decisions to other kinds of thinking than willful deliberation is not a novel approach. Research demonstrates that people make use of spontaneous thoughts in their own judgement and decision making, and that they place a great deal of confidence in the decisions that derive from spontaneously arising forms of cognition.

As spontaneous thoughts are often considered less strategically oriented than willful deliberation, people often perceive them as revealing honest and meaningful characteristics (Morewedge, Giblin, & Norton, 2014). Morewedge, et al., (2014) demonstrated that people experience a higher degree of self-insight from spontaneous thoughts than from deliberate cognition. The authors claimed that it is the lack of control over,- and access to the processes by which they arise that leads people to perceive spontaneous thoughts as revealing meaningful self-insight. The tendency to see spontaneous thoughts as indicative of sincerely held values may work similarly in the perception of others as it does in self-perception (Merritt & Monin, 2011). Recent research has demonstrated that we think we learn more about other peoples' preferences from their speedy decisions, relative to their slow decisions (Van de Calseyde, Keren, & Zeelenberg, 2014). For instance, Critcher, Inbar and Pizarro (2013) found that when participants observed decision makers, quick decisions were taken as indications of certainty. Perceptions of certainty in decision making led observers to infer that more unambiguous motives drove the observed behavior. Similarly, Evans, Dillon and Rand (2014) found

fast responses in economic games to be associated with extremes of motivations, whereas slower responses were associated with combinations of motivations. Although these studies used decision-time rather than decision style as the manipulated variable, they still inform the theoretical basis of Paper 3.

Based on the presented research, we hypothesized that when a leader presents ambiguously motivated CSR initiatives, different claims of cognitive spontaneity may increase or decrease followers tendency to attribute the decision to different motivations, and perceive different communicative intentions. Although academic work in this area remains limited, it is conceivable that people perceive spontaneous thoughts as signaling sincere and unfiltered motivations (Giblin, Morewedge, & Norton, 2013; Inbar, Cone, & Gilovich, 2010; Merritt & Monin, 2011; Morewedge, et al., 2014). We therefore expected that a decision maker who claimed to have relied on a somewhat spontaneous decision style to come across as more sincere. If peoples' lay theories about the nature of different styles of thinking suggests that the social responsibility logic behind CSR is intuitively accessible, while the appreciation of the corporate logic behind such initiatives are thought to require a more strategic and deliberate kind of thinking, different cognitive decision styles could elicit different attributions to the same CSR decision. However, there are inherent limits to the amount of cognitive spontaneity a CEO can claim to have preceded her decision, while still coming across as credible. For instance, a CEO who claims to have made a big and consequential decision based on a 'whim', may face the risk of coming across as less truthful when presenting the account of her own mental processes. Increasing the amount of claimed cognitive spontaneity past a certain point, the account of decision style may become unrealistic, which we suspected would induce a general suspicion of falsehood. Past this point, furthering the claim of spontaneity would only further the perception of insincerity. The main research question raised in Paper 3 was how the perception of CSR initiatives is influenced by the extent to which the decision style of the leader is presented as being characterized by different levels of cognitive spontaneity. Table 3 displays an overview of the past key findings, and the corresponding specific research questions (RQ) that are motivated by this research.

*Table 3. Key findings and corresponding specific research questions*

<u>Past key findings:</u>	
People perceive higher degree of self-insight in their spontaneous vs. deliberate thoughts	Morewedge, et al., 2014
People expect that the intuitive choices of others reveal meaningful characteristics	Inbar, et al., 2010
People perceive quick decisions to signal sincere, unfiltered motivations	Critcher, et al., 2013
People attempt to mind-read the extent to which a decision maker understands the underlying principle guiding a positive behavior.	Critcher, et al., in prep.
People dislike deliberation when making judgements about moral taboos	Merritt & Monin, 2011
<u>Specific Research Questions:</u>	
5. Will using different decision styles make a leader come across as more sincere?	
6. Will a more spontaneous decision style always lead to higher perceptions of sincerity?	

## 7. Research setting and materials

We carried out six experiments to explore the six specific research questions outlined above. RQ1 and 2 were explored in Paper 1, while RQ3 and 4 were explored in Paper 2. Finally, Paper 3 addressed RQ5 and 6. Table 4 presents a summary of the specific research questions that were posed in chapter 6.



*Table 4. Summary of specific research questions*

<u>Research question</u>	<u>Paper</u>	
RQ1	1	What are the effects of different numbers of claims in negative persuasion?
RQ2	1	What are the effects of adding diluting (poor quality) claims in negative persuasion?
RQ3	2	Does mortality awareness make a leader seem more sincere?
RQ4	2	Will a leader with mortality awareness come across as more sincere, even if she is known to place a high emphasis on financial gains?
RQ5	3	Will using different decision styles make a leader come across as more sincere?
RQ6	3	Will a more spontaneous decision style always lead to higher perceptions of sincerity?

All the research questions are concerned with causal relationships. In order to explore causal relationships directly, it is necessary to conduct controlled experiments, wherein the independent variable is manipulated, the outcome measures capture the effect in question, and all other factors are kept constant. Therefore, all studies that make up this dissertation consist of experiments in which participants were randomly allocated to different experimental conditions. However, even though an experimental approach can be used to demonstrate causality (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002), a disadvantage is the risk of low external or ecological validity. In order to increase ecological validity, the experiments were designed to be as realistic as possible, while attempting to exclude potential confounding variables as thoroughly as possible (see C. A. Anderson, Lindsay, & Bushman, 1999 for a discussion of the issues pertaining to the external validity of psychological experiments). In order to explore RQ1 through 6 in with controlled experiments, it was necessary to first come up with a set of stimuli that did not violate any concerns pertaining to external and internal validity. The process of validating stimuli is too detailed to be presented here, but a comprehensive overview of the stimuli, as well as pre-test procedure and results can be found in Appendix A.

Paper 1 is concerned with positive and negative framing of CSR communication. The research question we wanted to explore was how the perception of CSR initiatives is influenced by framing, amount, and quality of claims. Our hypotheses made direct claims regarding how effective positively and negatively framed CSR related persuasion attempts would be, and how sincere the communicator would be perceived, in terms of perceived communicative intention. We wanted to test our hypotheses in a hypothetical choice setting, in order to use outcome measures that not only capture preferences and general attitudes, but also behavioral attitudes and hypothetical intentions. The reasoning behind this choice is that a substantial literature in psychology, organizational behavior and consumer behavior indicate that behavioral attitudes and intentions predict actual behavior, while measures of general attitudes often fail to make equally accurate predictions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Barden & Tormala, 2014; Krosnick & Petty, 1995; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). As such, we decided to instruct participants to envision that they were considering a job opening, and that a friend attempted to persuade them to apply or not apply. As the participants in these experiments were students, they were presumably able to comply with these instructions.

In exploring RQ3 through RQ6, we wanted to make the issue of motivational attribution more salient in the conceptual model. This adjustment implied that the communicative setting of the experiments had to be changed from the word-of-mouth setting of the first experiment, to a communicative setting in which a leader of an organization communicates to a hypothetical audience in a press conference. This change in communicative setting was necessary in order to include not only perceptions of communicative intentions, but also perceptions of the motivation behind the CSR initiatives themselves. The setting of the experiments was therefore a description of a fictitious company that had recently decided to implement CSR measures that were not only environmentally beneficial, but also cost saving for the company, as the customers would bear the cost of the initiatives. In this particular case, the setting was a hotel chain manager who decided to reduce the size of plates and glasses at the buffet, install water saving showers, and adopt a more restrictive policy regarding changing of towels and linens. These initiatives were all clearly environmentally friendly, as they would lead to reduced waste of food and drink, reduced energy consumption, and reduced use of detergents and emission of wastewater. They were also certainly financially beneficial, as they would reduce costs on behalf of the hotel. The CEO in question claimed that the new initiatives were motivated by her sincere appreciation for the importance of environmental care and climate change mitigation. However, as all these cost-saving measures were to be ultimately carried by the consumer, and directly and positively influencing the company cash flow, the sincerity of the CEO's motivation and communicative intention was clearly questionable. Details pertaining to the production and validation of video stimuli used to explore RQ3 through 6 can also be found in Appendix A.

As all the experiments were concerned with scenarios in which the potential outcomes were relatively similar, the experiments also made use of similar outcome measures. Appendix B presents the outcome measures used, as well as a brief discussion of how well these measures can be said to map onto their ontological constructs. One notable aspect of this discussion is the operationalization of persuasion knowledge in particular, and perceived sincerity in general, across all six experiments. Persuasion knowledge was measured as a form of knowledge, in accordance with past research on this construct (Ham, Nelson, & Das, 2015). However, it may be the case that the evaluation that someone has persuasive intent is better described as a feeling or intuition. This potential limitation is discussed further in chapter 9. All studies that make up this dissertation were carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the Research Council of Norway, The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, and in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

## 8. Presentation of procedure and results

The following section will present the experimental procedure and results on all specific research questions that make up the dissertation. The procedure will be presented in accordance with the paper that it pertains to, while the results will be presented along the specific research questions.

### Paper 1: Framing and perceived sincerity

In order to address the first two research questions, 198 students from a large Norwegian business-school were recruited to the experiment. Participants used their smartphone, tablet or pc/mac to read instructions and indicate responses. Web-based experiment-software ensured an even and random distribution of participants to either positive or negative persuasion. In the positive persuasion setting, participants were exposed to the following vignette (translated by the authors):

*"Imagine that you are applying for your first job, and that corporate environmental care is of great importance to you. You consider applying at Marine Farming, a large ocean-farming company. A*

*friend of yours already works at the company. In order to convince you that Marine Farming is environmentally friendly, your friend presents the following claims:”.*

The software further randomized these participants into three subgroups; One group was exposed to two of the strong positive claims, another group to three strong positive claims, and a third group to four strong positive claims. The claims were all drawn from the pool of four positive claims presented in Appendix A. The software ensured that which claims, and the rank order of presentation of claims, was randomized across participants.

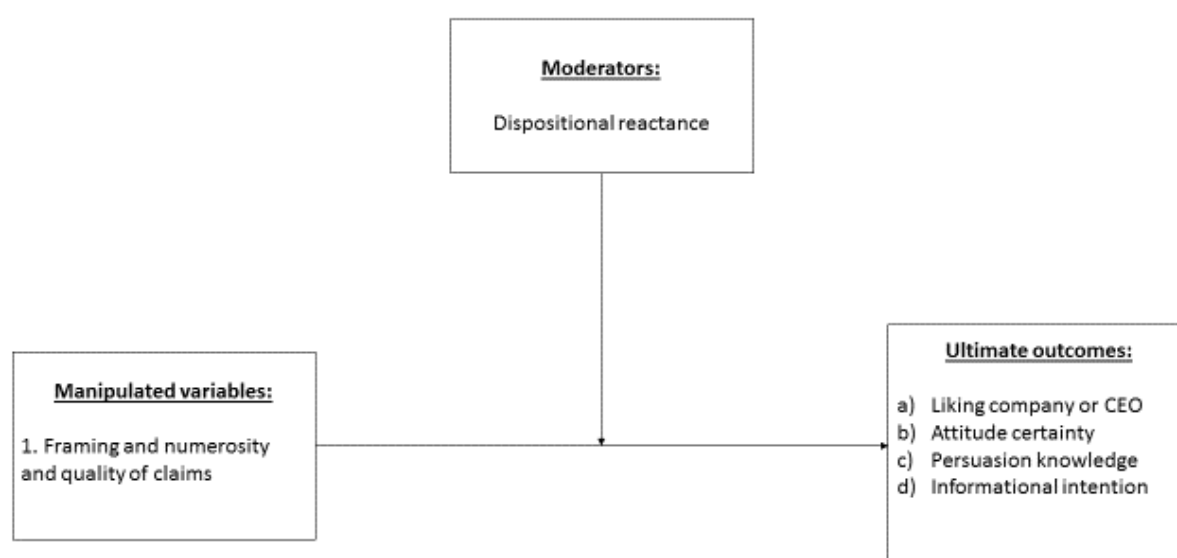
The other half of the sample was randomly allocated to the negative persuasion setting. They were firstly presented with the following vignette:

*“Imagine that you are applying for your first job, and that corporate environmental care is of great importance to you. You consider applying at Marine Farming, a large ocean-farming company. A friend of yours works at a competing company. In order to convince you that Marine Farming is environmentally harmful, your friend presents the following claims:”.*

The software further randomized these participants into three subgroups, similar to the randomization pertaining to the half of the sample that were exposed to a positive persuasion attempt. One group was exposed to two of the strong negative claims, another group to three strong negative claims, and the third group was exposed to four strong negative claims. The claims were all drawn from the pool of four negative claims presented in Appendix A. The software ensured that which claims, and the rank order of presentation of claims, was randomized across participants

After having been exposed to both the vignette and the claims, each participant indicated how much they liked the company, how certain they felt about their liking of the company, how believable the claims were perceived, and how relevant they felt the claims were. The participants also gave scores on persuasion knowledge and perceived informational intent. Additionally, each participant completed the 11-item Hong reactance-scale (see Hong & Faedda, 1996; Hong & Page, 1989). Figure 4 displays the parts of the conceptual framework that was explored by Research Questions 1 and 2.

Figure 4. Conceptual framework via RQ1 and RQ2



#### *RQ1. What are the effects of different numbers of claims in negative persuasion?*

In order to explore this question, we performed planned contrasts between each of the groups in positive persuasion, and each of the groups in negative persuasion, with different outcome variables.

In summary, the answer to RQ1 was that the number of claims play a significant role in CSR communication in terms of liking company, certainty and persuasion knowledge. However, different numbers of claims only produced differences in positive persuasion. In negative persuasion, the use of two, three or four claims produced reactions and evaluations that did not differ significantly from each other.

#### *RQ2. What are the effects of adding diluting (poor quality) claims in negative persuasion?*

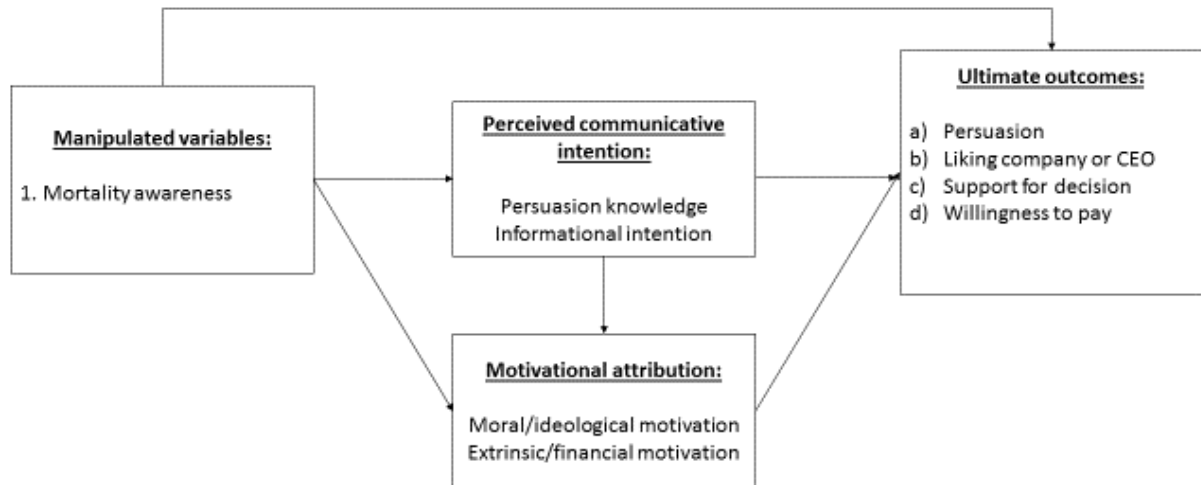
We also wanted to explore the role of different quality or subjective strength of claims in positive and negative persuasion. 86 students from a large Norwegian business-school were recruited to an experiment. Participants were first exposed to either the positive or negative persuasion vignette, and were subsequently exposed to the sets of claims. In all conditions, two of the claims were randomly collected from the list of four claims used in the previous experiment, and one came from the list of diluting claims presented in table 7 in Appendix A. The experimental procedure was otherwise identical to the experiment exploring RQ1.

In order to explore RQ2, we compared the responses of participants exposed to three claims wherein one of the claims were weak/diluting, to the responses of participants exposed to three strong claims. The results indicated no dilution effects. However, moderation analyses revealed that diluting a set of strong claims with one moderate claim led to higher levels of persuasion knowledge, but only for high-reactance individuals who were exposed to negative persuasion. Low reactance individuals, and individuals subjected to a positive persuasion attempt, did not indicate dilution effects.

#### *Paper 2: Mortality awareness and perceived sincerity*

Research questions 3 and 4 were both explored in the Paper 2. This paper represents an exploration of how lessons from terror management theory (TMT) can be translated into social perception and manager-perception. We predicted that mortality awareness would serve as a mind-reading cue, highlighting that a demonstrated decision is motivated by moral values such as a sincere appreciation for the importance of sustainability and environmental protection, and less by financial gain and external expectation. Figure 5 displays the parts of the conceptual model that were explored via RQ3 and RQ4.

Figure 5. The conceptual model via RQ3 and RQ4



Our first prediction, derived from TMT, was that the decision maker who decided to implement an ambiguously motivated CSR decision would come across as having less persuasive intent, less extrinsic motivation if she came across as aware of her own mortality. Furthermore, we predicted that these sets of different attributions would lead to an overall improved evaluation of the CSR decision, as well as improved evaluation of the leader. In order to test this prediction, participants (N=87) were recruited from a Norwegian university law school. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups and one passive control group. The participants were exposed to one of three different versions of a video wherein a CEO announced the implementation of ambiguously motivated CSR initiatives (see Appendix A for a more detailed description of the video stimuli). The independent variable, i.e., the justification for the decision, was introduced at the end of the video. Participants in the *passive control group* (N=27) saw a version of the video that ended before justification was asked for. Participants in the *active control group* (N=29) saw a version of the video wherein the CEO attributed her decision to a non-lethal health-scare. Participants in the *mortality awareness group* (N=31) saw a version of the video wherein the CEO attributed her decision to a potentially lethal health-scare (see the appendix of Paper 2 for exact wording in these videos). Having seen their respective video, all participants were instructed to complete a survey, detailing their attitudes towards the decision and the decision maker, as well as perceived communicative intention and perceived motivate pertaining to the decision.

We also predicted that in cases where a decision maker is known to place a high private importance on financial goal attainment, mortality awareness would lead to increased attributions to extrinsic and financial factors, and decreased attribution to intrinsic values. In order to test this prediction, we recruited 180 students to participate in an experiment. The experimental procedure differed from the previously described mortality awareness experiment only in that all participants were told that

the CEO in question was known for placing a high personal priority on financial goal attainment. Apart from this, the procedure was identical to the previous experiment. The *passive control condition* participants (N=57) saw the video wherein no justification is asked for, and went on to complete the survey. The second group saw the *active control video* (N=55), and continued to give their responses on the outcome measures. The third group saw the *mortality awareness video* (N=68), and continued to give their responses on the outcome measures. All participants had to view the entire designated video before they could move on in the experiment. Once the video was done, the participants provided their responses to a survey. The measures in the survey were identical to those used in RQ3. Additionally, in order to better capture the motivational attributions of interest in this study, the measurement model in the second experiment was supplemented with more attribution measures, and more items detailing evaluation of the decision itself.

#### *RQ3. Does mortality awareness make a leader seem more sincere?*

We performed planned contrasts of between groups differences, and mediation analyses, in order to fully explore RQ3. In summary, the answer to Research Question 3 was found to be that mortality awareness makes decision makers come across as significantly more motivated by intrinsic values, and less by extrinsic factors. The increase in value-based attribution, caused by mortality awareness, was furthermore found to be indirectly associated with positive evaluation of decision maker, as well as increased willingness to pay.

#### *RQ4. Will a leader with mortality awareness come across as more sincere, even if she is known to place a high emphasis on financial gains?*

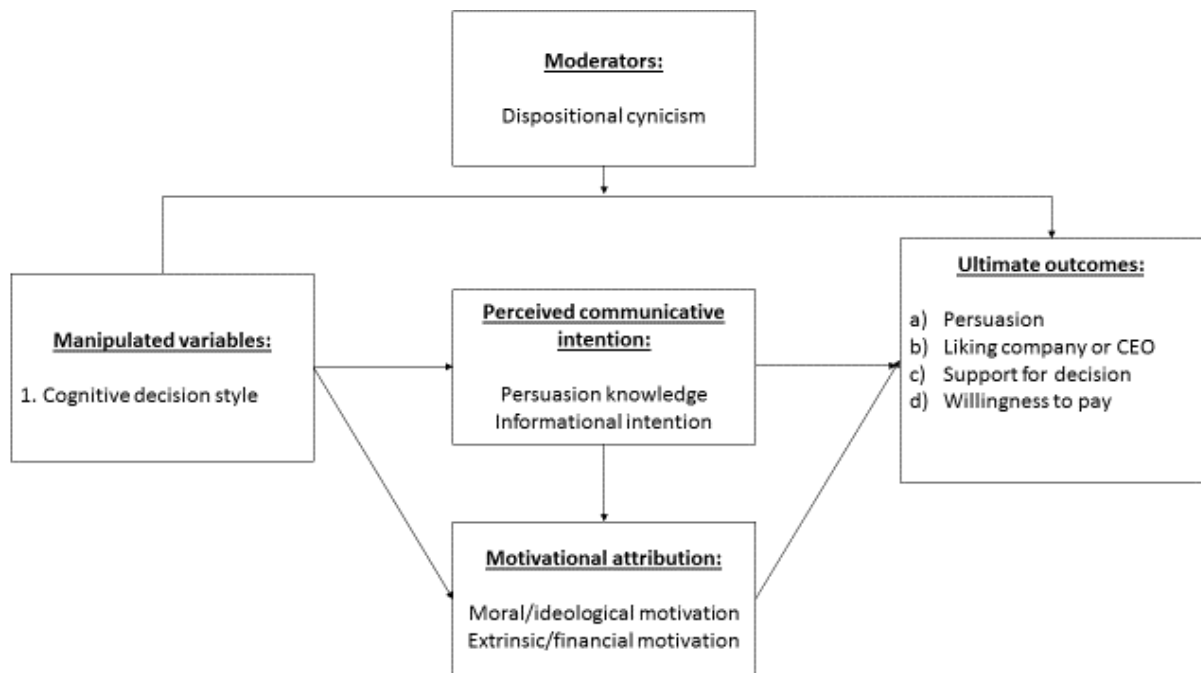
Having demonstrated that mortality awareness can alter attributions, we opted to explore the extent to which mortality awareness may serve as an indicator of value-driven motivation in cases where the observed decision maker places a high importance on the attainment of financial goals. As mentioned, TMT research indicates that mortality primes mainly tend to amplify investments in whatever themes are personally and/or culturally important to the decision maker (Burke et al., 2010). Building on the assumption that people's perceptions of the motivation of other people largely parallels their own motivational processes (Reeder & Trafimow, 2005), we wanted to explore whether and how social perception would encompass this general amplification tendency. If people perceived others in line with relevant results from TMT research, an ambiguously motivated decision made by a recently mortality reminded decision maker who is known to place a high priority on financial goal attainment should generate the opposite attributional pattern from the one demonstrated in RQ3.

We performed a series of t-tests in order to test our predictions. In summary, the answer to Research Question 4 was found to be that the tendency to expect mortality-reminded individuals to be less motivated by external factors persisted, even when the decision maker in question was known for placing a high priority on financial goal attainment.

#### *Paper 3: Cognitive decision style and perceived sincerity*

RQ5 and RQ6 were addressed in the Paper 3. Figure 6 displays the parts of the overall conceptual model that were explored in this paper.

Figure 6. The conceptual model via RQ5 and RQ6



In order to explore RQ5, we employed an experiment, using the video manipulation described earlier. A convenience sample of 81 law school students at a large Norwegian University (46 female, mean age 23) were recruited. Participants were randomly assigned to three experimental conditions. After indicating their responses on dispositional measures, the participants were exposed to one of three different versions of the video wherein a CEO announces the implementation of ambiguously motivated CSR initiatives (see Appendix A for a description of the video). The manipulated variable was the CEO's response when asked how she got the idea for the new initiatives. This was introduced at the very end of the video.

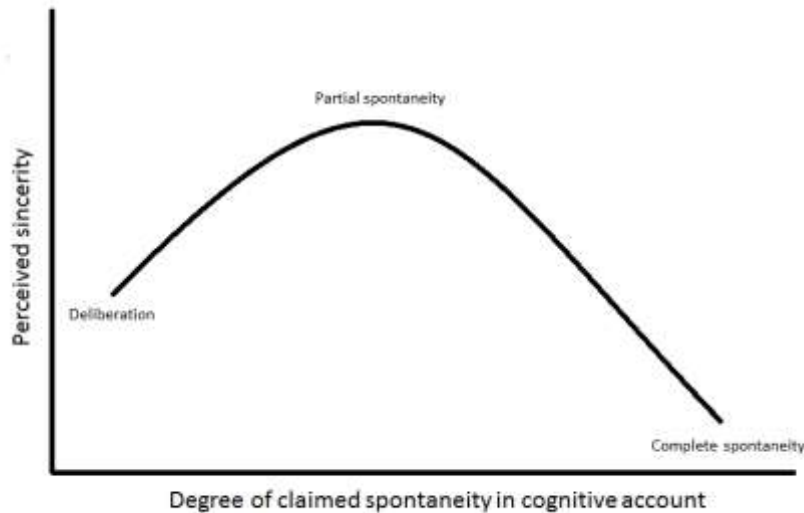
The experiment tested three different conditions. In the *willful deliberation condition* (N=27), the CEO explained that the idea had come about through deliberate and goal-directed cognition. In the *partial spontaneity condition* (N=27), the CEO explained that the idea had come about through a spontaneous allegory, whereby the initial idea came about spontaneously, and the consequent cognitive work was done deliberately. Finally, participants in the *passive control condition* (N=27)<sup>1</sup> saw a video that presented the same CEO and CSR initiatives, but contained no account of decision style. Having seen their respective video, participants went on to complete the questionnaire. See the Appendix in Paper 3 for the exact wording in all conditions, as well as a screenshot of the video.

In the experiment exploring RQ6, we predicted that claiming too much cognitive spontaneity would lead to reduced perceived sincerity. We proposed an inverted U-shaped model in the relationship between claimed spontaneity and perceived sincerity (see Figure 7). The proposed model depicts the degree of claimed spontaneity in cognitive account along the x-axis, and perceived sincerity of the leader on the y-axis. Up to a certain point, the more cognitively spontaneous the leader claims to have been, the more sincere the leader comes across. However, past a certain point, the account of decision style may become unrealistic, which may induce a general suspicion of falsehood. Past this

<sup>1</sup> As data collection for multiple studies was conducted simultaneously, and we failed to see the need to run these studies with two, identical, passive control groups, this group is the same as the one reported in the first mortality awareness experiment, under RQ3. The targeted journal was notified of this.

point, we predicted that furthering the claim of spontaneity would only further the experience of insincerity.

*Figure 7. The predicted relationship between claimed spontaneity and perceived sincerity*



In order to explore RQ6, we used the video of the hotel-chain CEO announcing ambiguously motivated CSR initiatives. The manipulated variable was the CEO's description of the cognitive process that led up to the decision (i.e. her cognitive decision style). The experimental condition in this experiment was a CEO reporting to have relied completely on spontaneous thought as decision style. In this condition, participants saw the CEO who, upon questioning from the interviewer, replied that the idea behind the new plan came to her completely out of nowhere, and in a situation that was unrelated to the CSR initiative. It is important to note the difference between the partial spontaneity condition tested in RQ5 and complete spontaneity condition tested in RQ6. The claim of partial spontaneity is more realistic, as it entails getting the initial idea through a spontaneous cognitive process, and then using willful deliberation to come up with the rest of the CSR initiatives. By contrast, the complete spontaneity claim entails coming up with an entire set of CSR initiatives, which encompass different parts of the day-to-day operations of the organization, completely spontaneously. Our main prediction was that the claim of complete spontaneity as decision style would come across as implausible, and induce an overall negative effect in terms of persuasive appeal. As control condition, we chose willful deliberation rather than no account of decision style (i.e. passive control). The willful deliberation condition represents a more valid point of comparison than the passive control condition, because it indeed contains a cognitive account, and because this ensures that the videos used are similar in length.

The procedure in the experiments designed to answer RQ6 was otherwise identical to the one designed to answer RQ5. The willful deliberation group (N=33) saw an account identical to the willful deliberation group in the previously reported experiment. The complete spontaneity group (N=34) saw the CEO claiming that the idea had come about completely spontaneously (see the Appendix of



Paper 3 for a comprehensive description of the video stimuli). Having seen their respective video, participants in both conditions moved on to provide answers to the outcome measures.

*RQ5. Will using different cognitive decision styles make a leader come across as more sincere?*

In order to explore RQ5, we performed a series of t-tests comparing mean group differences. We also conducted mediation and moderation analyses, in order to test the proposed framework. In summary, the answer to RQ5 was found to be that a decision style characterized by partial spontaneity did increase perceptions of sincerity, in as much as it induced lower levels of persuasion knowledge than was elicited when the decision style was not mentioned, or that of willful deliberation. This effect was found to be indirectly associated with higher levels of support for the decision. Reduced persuasion knowledge was also found to be associated with higher levels of value-based attribution, the combined effect of which was associated with improved evaluation of the CEO. This finding lends support to the overall conceptual framework of this dissertation. We also identified that decision styles characterized by partial cognitive spontaneity lead to improved evaluation of the CEO, for high-cynicism participants. For low cynicism participants, the opposite was true, partially spontaneous decision style led to worse CEO evaluation.

*RQ6. Will a more spontaneous cognitive decision style always lead to higher perceptions of sincerity?*

In order to explore RQ6, we performed a series of t-tests comparing between group means. In order to further explore the proposed model, we also performed mediation analyses. In sum, the results indicated that claiming complete spontaneity of thought preceding a decision lead to overall less perceived sincerity. A significant drop in perceived informational intent associated with the CEO who claimed to have come up with the CSR measures from thin air, indicated that the participants may have suspected that she was not willing to give correct and valid information. This sense of hiding or misrepresenting relevant information was demonstrated to be indirectly associated with less favorable motivational attribution, as well as with less favorable evaluation of the CEO. These findings were in line with the predictions, and confirmed the assertion that claiming cognitive spontaneity will lead to improved sincerity-perceptions up to a certain point. Claiming complete spontaneity in one's cognitive account produced overall less perception of sincerity, compared to the willful deliberation condition. This lack of perceived sincerity was found to be indirectly associated with unfortunate motivational attribution, and worse evaluation of the CEO.

## 9. Overall contributions and implications

The main research question of this dissertation was how the perception of CSR initiatives is influenced by variables relating to properties of the message itself, the life circumstances of the leader, and the perceived decision style of the leader. This overarching research question was addressed along three Papers, all comprising of two specific research questions each. Taken together, the presented conclusions to all the specific research questions offer some common contributions. Firstly, the results indicate that the same set of CSR initiatives can elicit very different reactions, based on how they are communicated. This highlights the crucial role of CSR communication in the relationship between the initiatives and the publics reactions to them (Du, et al., 2010). Secondly, all three papers underline the notion that attributions, both regarding communicative intention and behavioral motives are the mechanisms through which CSR communication is processed (Beckman, et al., 2009; de Vries, et al., 2013; Groza, et al., 2011; McShane & Cunningham, 2012). People do not merely judge actions based on their consequences, but are also concerned with the intentions of the observed agent (Critcher, et al., in prep; Gray, et al., 2012; Reeder & Trafimow, 2005). A third overall take home message from the three papers combined, is that dispositional traits matter. In compliance gaining scenarios, the participants psychological reactance (Hong & Page, 1989) may determine the efficacy of a given persuasive

approach. In mass-audience persuasion scenarios, wherein the attribution of motives is a central mediator, a given participants dispositional cynicism (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989) was found to determine the outcome of a certain communicative tactics. Finally, it is also important to note that although the present research was conducted in a CSR setting, the conclusions are not necessarily confined to CSR communication alone. Organizational life is replete with positively and negatively framed persuasion, as well as ambiguously motivated decisions. Peripheral cues related to how behaviors and decisions are communicated may influence how the decisions are interpreted, which in turn may influence the general sense-making process conducted by consumers and employees (Weick, 1995). There are also notable theoretical and managerial implications that are idiosyncratic to the specific research questions. As the manipulated variable in the reported experiments differed substantially, and in order to ensure clarity, these contributions will be presented separately.

### 9.1. Framing, number, quality and sincerity

The conclusions to RQ1 and RQ2 suggested that the number of claims played a different role in positive persuasion than in negative persuasion. In positive persuasion, across multiple outcome measures, more variance was observed when changing the persuasion attempt from one that includes two positive claims to one that includes three or four positive claims, compared with the corresponding manipulation of amount of negative claims. This finding resonates with the aforementioned literature on the asymmetry of positive and negative framing (Baumeister, et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). The studies reported in Paper 1 are among the few to investigate persuasion in both positive and negative directions. Whereas the psychological and perceptual effects of positive and negative framing is fairly well understood in judgement and decision making, the implications for persuasion and corporate communication are not yet equally well understood. The exploration of RQ1 and RQ2 increased this understanding, by assessing in particular how persuasion knowledge is elicited by positive vs negative persuasion. Our main finding, that positive framing of one's employers' environmental activities generates far less persuasion knowledge than negative framing of competing firms irresponsibility, is of both theoretical and managerial value, as it deepens our understanding of the interaction between the number of claims, dilution effect, and the negativity bias.

### 9.2. Mortality awareness and sincerity

Taken together, the results from RQ3 and RQ4 confirm that communicating mortality awareness when justifying ambiguously motivated CSR initiatives alleviates suspicions of extrinsic motivation, and may leave observers with a stronger perception that the decision is motivated by sincerely held values. This attributional effect holds true even in cases where the observed decision maker is known to place a high priority on the pursuit of financial goal attainment.

Both experiments demonstrated that ambiguously motivated CSR measures were met with more favorable attribution when the CEO explained that the decision was preceded by a mortality reminder. The results indicate that people suspect behaviors to be less motivated by extrinsic and financial factors, when the person they evaluate attributes her decision to a recent mortality reminder. This change in attribution is likely not due to pity alone, as the active control condition, which presumably also induces pity, produced attributions more similar to that of the passive control condition than that of the mortality awareness condition. Furthermore, the improved motivational attribution is demonstrated to be indirectly associated with evaluation of decision maker and willingness to pay. This finding highlights the importance of perceived sincerity of motives when communicating CSR policies, which resonates concordantly with other findings in CSR communication (de Vries, et al., 2013; Du, et al., 2010; Groza, et al., 2011).

The results also offered some careful practical implications. Motivational ambiguity is ubiquitous in both general management and marketing. The main result from this study is that mortality awareness can function as a factor that alleviates some of that ambiguity, and induces a sense of

sincerity on behalf of the observed decision maker. Perhaps other ways of conveying mortality awareness, other than recapping one's own recent mortality reminders, can produce similar attributional patterns.

### 9.3. Cognitive decision style and sincerity

The findings presented in RQ5 and RQ6 suggest that different decision styles may influence the level of perceived sincerity in CSR communication. Claiming a partially spontaneous decision style made the participants less aware that they were subject to a persuasion attempt. The reduction in persuasion knowledge was found to be associated with more favorable motivational attribution, which was further associated with a more positive evaluation of the CEO. The CEO who claimed complete spontaneity of thought, however, was perceived as less sincere than her deliberative counterpart. The seemingly implausible cognitive account produced significantly lower levels of perceived informational intent, and generally a worse evaluation of the CEO. This suggests that the participants in this condition felt that the CEO was not attempting to give them valid information, on the basis of which they could make their decisions. The results demonstrated that cognitive decision style can serve as a mind-reading cue, and influence these evaluations favorably, but also adversely, if the account of the decision making process comes across as unrealistic. The findings may also offer general support for past research suggesting that people see spontaneous thoughts as revealing sincerely held values and beliefs (Inbar, et al., 2010; Merritt & Monin, 2011; Morewedge, et al., 2014). While willful deliberation may be perceived as a more strategic and filtered form of cognition, a spontaneous thoughts may seen as indicative of sincerity. The reported findings also fit the literature on CSR communication, where perceived sincere caring has been identified as a key success factor (Beckman, et al., 2009; de Vries, et al., 2013; Du, et al., 2010; McShane & Cunningham, 2012).

### 9.4. Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to the studies that make up this dissertation. As is the case for almost all lab-experiments in social sciences, the results stem from hypothetical scenarios, and are therefore free from circumstantial factors that may be crucial to any real-life scenario. Even though the experiments made use of vivid, realistic and motivationally congruent vignettes and/or video-stimuli, with the aim of increasing ecological validity, the generalizability of the conclusions can nevertheless be questioned.

There is a noteworthy theoretical limitation pertaining to the conceptualization of sincerity in this dissertation. Sincerity perceptions was measured as a “cold” construct, consisting of attributional inferences regarding the intentions of an observed person or organization. One could easily make the case that perception of sincerity may also be a “hot” construct, consisting of emotions or intuitions regarding something or someone coming across as genuine and true. The same criticism is relevant when assessing how the measurement of persuasion knowledge maps onto its ontological construct. While persuasion knowledge was measured as a type of factual realization, real-life sense of persuasive intent and the coping dynamics thereof may be better described as an intuitive sense or feeling. According to the social-intuitionist viewpoint, sincerity perceptions arise initially as intuitive, non-verbal, gut feelings about the truthfulness of another person, and the cognitive inferences about intentions are post-hoc rationalizations of that intuition (see Haidt, 2001). According to such an approach, the hereby presented conceptualization of sincerity perception, and the corresponding measures of different perceived communicative intentions and perceived motives only captures the cognitive consequences of the ontological construct. However, measuring non-verbal emotions and intuitions directly, and in a reliable manner, poses a challenge in all behavioral science (Bradley & Lang, 2002). The development of more reliable measures of intuitions and emotions may aid in the

development of our understanding of the concept of sincerity, from a strictly cognitive concept to a socio-emotional concept.

Paper 1 suffered from some specific limitations that offer directions for future research. The most powerful finding in this study was the large difference in the amount of persuasion knowledge generated by negative claims, relative to positive claims. This finding was reported as being theoretically interesting, as past research on the effects of negative persuasion is limited. However, the design of the experiments exploring RQ1 and RQ2 did not allow for certain interpretation regarding the mechanism through which negative persuasion lead to higher levels of persuasion knowledge. We interpreted the finding in the light of negativity effect. A different but valid interpretation would be that the positioning of the persuasive agent caused the observed differences in persuasion knowledge between positive and negative persuasion. We could only conclude that positive claims made from someone within a company generates far less persuasion knowledge than negative claims made from someone at a competing company. Although we were unable to pinpoint the cause of this difference, the finding is nevertheless theoretically and pragmatically interesting, as it arose from a motivationally congruent description of events. I recommend that future research should attempt to further explore the reported positive-negative asymmetry in persuasion knowledge, while maintaining realism in the design of stimuli.

The results from RQ3 through RQ6 also offered some further directions for future research. Firstly, neither of the ultimate outcome variables differed directly between the groups in any of the experiments, even though the attributional patterns differed significantly between the groups. This finding goes against the importance placed on motivational attribution in past research, both in CSR communication (see de Vries, et al., 2013; Du, et al., 2010; Groza, et al., 2011; McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Yoon, et al., 2006), and in moral psychology (see Fedotova, et al., 2011; Gray, et al., 2012). The results thus seem to indicate that while attributions matter, they are not all that matters. A possible explanation for why the changes in motivational attribution were not accompanied by direct changes in evaluation of decision maker, support for decision, or willingness to pay, may be that the described scenario involved removing hedonic value for the customer. Past research has indicated that consumers often dislike CSR measures that impedes the organizations ability to deliver value to the consumer (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). As such, it may be that the participants responses to the question of whether or not they liked the decision was primarily focused on the removal of hedonic value. Another explanation for the lack of direct effects may be that other mediating variables, not measured in the experiments, may also have influenced the outcomes. One non-measured variable that may have been affecting the outcome in all three studies is perceptions of norm-violation. It is possible that some of the participants perceived the negatively framed persuasion attempt in RQ1 and RQ2 as a norm-violation. It is even more plausible that referencing personal health issues, or testifying to unusual cognitive decision styles may be seen as a norm-violation. The mediated findings from RQ3 and RQ5 suggest that a suppressor variable may be opposing the demonstrated relationships, as only the mediated effects are statistically significant, while the direct effects are not (see Hayes, 2009). It may be the case that mortality awareness and partially spontaneous decision style improved attributions, while violating supposed social or professional norms. The combined indirect effect of attributions and norm violation may be the reason why the manipulated variables in RQ3, RQ5 and RQ6 had no direct effect on liking the decision or CEO. This interpretation may also explain why low-cynicism

participants in the experiment that addressed RQ5 liked the partial spontaneity CEO less than the control CEOs. If individuals low in cynicism are less concerned with sincerity of motivation, but equally concerned with the presumed norm-violation of claiming to have come up with an executive decision partially via spontaneous thinking, they may have perceived the partially spontaneously thinking CEO as worse than the control conditions. However, these are merely speculative interpretations, and more research is needed in order to better understand the antecedents of consumer support for CSR initiatives.

Finally, it is worth noting the issues related to the measure of dispositional cynicism used that was used to explore RQ5. Although Kanter and Mirvis' (1989) analysis suggest that cynicism, both as a state and trait, have profound influences on choices and behavior, the validity and reliability of their measurement scale is somewhat underexplored. Even though this threat to construct validity was mitigated somewhat by the use of factor analysis and reliability tests, it remains a noteworthy limitation to the moderation analysis conducted in RQ5. Among 321 listed citations of Kanter and Mirvis (1989), I found no peer reviewed papers that tested the scale. However, competing scales related to the same construct also would have carried inherent threats to the construct validity. The organizational cynicism scale (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 1994) measures cynicism in organizations specifically, not as a global trait. Niederhoffers Police Cynicism scale (1967) has been tested rigorously (Anson, Mann, & Sherman, 1986). However, it does not measure cynicism as a global trait, but rather attitudes particularly relevant for law enforcement. Future studies may consider testing the reliability and convergent validity of Kanter and Mirvis (1989) measure of dispositional cynicism.

## 10. Conclusion

The dissertation consist of three papers, all demonstrating that different ways to communicate CSR initiatives can lead to different sincerity perceptions, which in turn affects the overall evaluation of the CSR initiatives and organization that implements them. Overall, the three papers represent attempts at combining novel findings from social-, and moral psychology into the applied setting of CSR communication. A common conclusion from all three papers is that attributions, both regarding communicative intention and behavioral motives are the mechanisms through which CSR communication is processed. The results carry managerial implications for individuals and organizations that wish to portray themselves as socially responsible and morally virtuous, while still being motivated by financial gain. The results also have theoretical implications for social psychology, moral psychology, and marketing research.

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## Appendix A

This section provides a description of the process of designing and validating experimental stimuli. In order to answer RQ1 and RQ2, we needed to pre-test different positive and negative claims, so that we could compare and contrast the effects of using different amounts of them in a valid manner. Conducting the experiment without pre-testing how relevant and strong the claims were would have rendered quality of claims as a potential confounding variable in our experiments. For example, if we had discovered that the inclusion of a third positive claim led to significant increase in persuasion, but we did not pre-test the claims out of context, we would not be able to pinpoint whether it was the number of claims, or the quality of that third claim, that led to the observed increase in persuasion. In order to avoid this confounding variable, it was thus necessary to come up with two sets of claims that were a) similar in terms of subjective quality, and b) substantial in subjective quality. We used CSR-related claims pertaining to an ocean-farming company as setting. Ocean-farming has been both hailed as one of the industries that may potentially be part of the solution to global warming (Asche & Khatun, 2006), as well as criticized for being unsustainable in its current form (Folke & Kautsky, 1992). Our setting thus provides the basis for a plausible and realistic persuasion-attempt, both in favor and against the actions of a company. The participants in the pre-test were exposed to a list of either ten claims in favor of an ocean-farming corporations' social responsibility (positive claims), or ten claims in favor of an ocean-farming corporations' social irresponsibility (negative claims). Participants were told that all the claims were candidates to be used in a persuasion setting, but that it was up to the participant to rate how strong they felt each claim was. The participants were instructed to allocate 100 points selectively among the claims. Claims perceived as strong were to be awarded more points, and claims perceived as weak were to be awarded few or no points. All 100 points had to be allocated by each participant. The rank order of the presentation of the claims were randomized across trials, to ensure that primacy-, and recency effects did not affect the outcome of the test. A total of 32 student participants rated the positive claims, and 29 student participants rated the negative claims. The four positive and four negative claims with the highest score were chosen to be used in the experiments. Tables 5 and 6 display these claims (translated to English by the author), and their mean and median rating.

*Table 5. Evaluation of positive claims*

Claim:	The company has paid to restore 10 km <sup>2</sup> of destroyed ocean-floor	The company has switched to solar-powered energy	Without reducing the quality in the end-product, the company only uses recycled materials in fodder-production	The company has committed itself to invest 20 % of all earnings in technology that will help protect wild salmon and trout
Mean points:	13.43	17.22	13.25	22.78
Median points:	12.5	15	14.5	22.5



Table 6. Evaluation of negative claims

Claim:	The company's activities has destroyed 10 km <sup>2</sup> of ocean-floor	The company emits over 100 metric tonnes of CO <sup>2</sup> each year	The company is unwilling to invest in new facilities. As a consequence, many of the farmed fish escape, increasing the spread of lice, and harming the wild salmon in nearby areas	The farming activities cause the emission of nutrient salts and organic matter, which increase the algae-growth and eutrophication in the inner fjords
Mean:	16.37	12.66	17.23	18.17
Median:	20	10	15	20

The purpose of this pre-test was not to answer RQ1, but to construct a set of stimuli that could be used in the experiment that was designed to answer RQ1. The four positive and four negative claims were chosen because they were given substantial ratings in the pre-test. The difference in median between the strongest and weakest claim was also found to be the same (10 points). This brought us even closer to being able to pinpoint the effect of different numbers of claims while controlling for the strength/quality of the claims. In order to answer RQ2 we also needed pre-tested diluting claims. Based on the results from the mentioned pre-test, two positive and one negative claim were chosen as moderately diluting claims, to be used in order to answer RQ2. Two different diluters of positive persuasion were used, and one diluter of negative persuasion. The negative diluter used was that the company car-fleet consisted of only high-emission SUV's. This claim was selected because results from the pre-test indicated that this was the one that best fitted the purpose of being a moderately diluting claim. The two positive diluters were chosen on different grounds; the "lightbulb"-claim was chosen because the results from the pre-test indicated that it received a score almost identical to the negative diluter. The "electric cars" claim was chosen because it represents a semantic comparable contrast to the negative diluter; "high emission SUV's". Table 7 displays the diluting claims used to answer RQ2.

Table 7. Moderately diluting claims

Claim:	The company has switched to slightly costlier but more eco-friendly lightbulbs in all offices	The company has replaced all its cars with electric cars	The entire company car-fleet consists of high-emission SUV's
Mean:	2,44	4,28	2,77
Median:	,5	1	0

In order to maintain a high degree of vividness and realism, participants in studies that explored RQ3 through 6 were shown video footage of an actress portraying a CEO in an interview setting. The actress was instructed to portray her character in a realistic manner, while maintain identical postures, facial expressions and tone of voice in all recordings. The video started with a rolling text stating: "Ellen Hansen is the CEO of a large Nordic hotel chain. She has just approved a new plan to make the hotels more environmentally friendly. Among the measures are reducing the size of plates

*and glasses at the breakfast buffet with 20 percent, in order to reduce waste of food. Furthermore, the hotels have been equipped with water-saving showers. Additionally, the hotels have adopted a more restrictive policy on changing of towels and linens on shorter stays.* [New paragraph] *In an interview, Ellen explained the background for the decision:” Here, the video continued to a fictitious interview, wherein the actress portraying the CEO, stated: “We are now taking measures in order to become more socially responsible. The climate threat is one of the biggest challenges that humanity has ever faced, and our chain has to be a part of the solution”. This part of the video constituted the passive control condition, and was identical for all conditions in both studies. The independent variable was the subsequent explanation of the psychological circumstances under which the idea for these ambiguously motivated CSR initiatives came about. These differed in accordance with their respective research question. As such, they are described in the presentation of results of RQ3 through RQ6.*

Before the experiments were performed, all video stimuli was pre-tested on a student sample. A total of 11 participants saw all versions of the video, in random order, producing a total of 55 observations. The purpose of the pre-test was not to answer RQ3-6, but to validate the stimuli that would be used in the experiments that were designed to test these research questions. If the different versions of the videos produced very different reactions in the pre-test, this difference would represent a confounding variable in the subsequent experiment. The pre-test examined how the actress was perceived in each video in terms of how enthusiastic and interpersonally warm she was found to be. Across the observations, no significant differences between the versions were found. After the test, the participants were told how the stimuli were to be used, and asked if any of the videos stood out as different from the other, aside from the different words the actress conveyed. None of the participants indicated that any of the videos differed from the others in such a way.

## Appendix B

This section provides a description of outcome measures. Persuasion was mainly measured as attitudes in the experiments that make up this dissertation. This approach carries advantages, as well as disadvantages. Conceptualizing persuasion as attitudes allows for standardized measures that are resource efficient to apply. This approach poses a threat to the constructs validity (see Cook & Campbell, 1979), as these variables are imperfectly related to the construct of interest. However, every operationalization is flawed relative to the construct on which it is based (Shadish, et al., 2002). The goal of most CSR initiatives is to achieve sustained competitive advantage by attracting and retaining support from consumers and other stakeholders. Such support could be measured more directly through behavioral outcomes, such as actual consumer behavior and actual organizational behavior. However, measuring choices in a real life setting often precludes randomized controlled experiments, which would reduce the ability to infer causal relationships. In order to maximize construct validity, persuasion was measured as with multiple survey items, detailing support for decision and support for decision maker. In cases where the experiment group and control group differed in these attitudes, it is logical to infer that the approach to persuasion in one of the treatments was found to be superior to its counterpart. As past research has demonstrated that measures of attitudes alone has limited predictive value on actual behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), I attempted to also measure behavioral intentions and attitude strength, as these constructs seem to be more directly related to behavior (Barden & Tormala, 2014). Specifically, I included measures of willingness to pay, as this, together with the other measures of persuasion, may have increased the construct validity of the ultimate outcome variables.

Communicative intention was measured as a twofold construct consisting of persuasion knowledge and perceived informational intent. Despite having been an important construct in marketing and consumer psychology for over two decades, a clear consensus on how to measure persuasion knowledge has yet to emerge (Ham, et al., 2015; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). The concept is typically measured as a state in surveys and experiments. The exact wording in the measurement items are often tailored to the research-specific context. In the studies that make up this dissertation, persuasion knowledge was measured by two items, consisting of ‘behavioral persuasion knowledge’ (i.e. I feel that the person is attempting to influence my future choices), and ‘attitudinal persuasion knowledge’ (i.e. I feel that the person is attempting to influence my attitudes). A single item measure of ‘perceived informational intent’ was also used (i.e. I feel the person is attempting to provide me with information).

Measures of motivational attribution were only used in order to explore RQ3-6. The main measurement scale applied in these studies was the Perceived Organizational motives scale from Groza, et al. (2011). As the data collection progressed, we learned that motivational attribution seemed very central as a psychological mechanism. We also learned that the items making up the scale often failed to conform to expectations in factor analyses. As such, some of the later studies made use of additional measurement items intended to capture participants’ attributions regarding perception of motive.

As mentioned, we also suspected that dispositional differences could affect the relationships we uncovered. We therefore had each participant in Paper 1 complete the 11 item Hong reactance scale (see Hong & Faedda, 1996; Hong & Page, 1989). As Papers 2 and 3 were more concerned with motivational attribution, and less with compliance, we opted to measure participants dispositional cynicism, using Kanter and Mirvis (1989) Cynicism Scale. This is a seven item scale originally derived from Wrightsman Jr (1964). The scale measures dispositional cynicism, defined as a tendency to

distrust the underlying motives of others, and expect selfishness to be the most influential factor in individual and organizational decision making.

## Part II: Papers

The papers are displayed in accordance with the time of submission to publication. Paper 1 was the first to be submitted, and Paper 3 was the last to be submitted. This rank order of presentation of papers also capture some of the logic between papers. The first paper was set in a different setting than Papers 2 and 3, and as such, it represents a different conceptualization of perceived sincerity, consisting only of measures of communicative intention. On the other hand, Papers 2 and 3 build on the same internal logic, even though they explore relatively dissimilar independent variables. The two published papers are presented in their published form, whereas the submitted paper is appended in the format required by the journal to which it was submitted

## Paper 1: Framing and perceived sincerity

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# The asymmetrical force of persuasive knowledge across the positive–negative divide

Mads Nordmo\* and Marcus Selart\*

Department of Strategy and Management, The Norwegian School of Economics, Bergen, Norway

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Eriko Sugimori,  
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Japan

### \*Correspondence:

Mads Nordmo and Marcus Selart,  
Department of Strategy  
and Management, The Norwegian  
School of Economics, Helleveien 30,  
Bergen, Norway  
mads.nordmo@nhh.no;  
marcus.selart@nhh.no

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In two experimental studies we explore to what extent the general effects of positive and negative framing also apply to positive and negative persuasion. Our results reveal that negative persuasion induces substantially higher levels of skepticism and awareness of being subjected to a persuasion attempt. Furthermore, we demonstrate that in positive persuasion, more claims lead to stronger persuasion, while in negative persuasion, the numerosity of claims carries no significant effect. We interpret this finding along the lines of a satiety-model of persuasion. Finally, using diluted, or low strength claims in a persuasion attempt, we reveal a significant interaction between dispositional reactance and dilution of claims on persuasion knowledge. The interaction states that diluted claims increase the awareness of being subjected to a persuasion attempt, but only for those with a high dispositional level of reactance.

**Keywords:** persuasion, resistance, CSR, negativity bias, persuasion knowledge, attribute framing, numerosity, dilution effect

## Introduction

The purpose of this research is threefold: Firstly, it demonstrates that resistance and skepticism to persuasion is not symmetrical across the positive–negative divide. Secondly, it demonstrates that the number of claims have different effects in positive and negative persuasion. Thirdly, it brings about important managerial implications for corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication in particular, and persuasion in general. The main research-question addressed by this paper is: What are the effects of different numbers of claims in positive and negative persuasion? The second, related research-question is: how do different qualities of claims affect the outcomes in positive and negative persuasion? These questions are explored in two experiments, using CSR communications as stimuli.

In CSR research in particular, and in psychology in general, there is a heightened need to better understand the evaluative artifacts of positive and negative persuasion. Corporations today are commonly considered to have social responsibility to serve the people, communities, society, and the environment in ways that go above and beyond what is legally required (Wood, 1991; McWilliams and Siegel, 2001; Lockett et al., 2006). As a consequence, corporations now face the opportunity to communicate all their socially and environmentally laudable efforts in order to increase their likeability. However, they also face the risk of negative attention reaching their less prize-worthy activities. Individuals and organizations thus face a perilous and delicate situation. By under-communicating CSR activities, one faces the risk of people never learning about the activities, and possibly assuming that no CSR initiatives have been made. By over-communicating CSR activities, one faces the risk of skepticism and cynicism on behalf of weary consumers, who

disbelieve the accuracy and sincerity of the claims. There is a far-reaching string of literature regarding how the number of claims, or arguments, affect the outcome of persuasion. The idea that additional positive information increases liking has been largely supported in psychological research on attribution and impression formation. Stewart (1965) found that when participants are presented with a description of a person consisting of one, two, three or four positive traits, and subsequently four negative traits, the liking of the person increased monotonically with each positive trait. This finding and others led to the conclusion that the impression of a person becomes more favorable with each new positive trait. Anderson (1967) referred to this effect as the “set-size effect.” Broadening the scope from impression formation to general persuasion, further research on the effect of amount of persuasive information has generally confirmed the finding made by Stewart (1965) and Anderson (1967). Pelham et al. (1994) refer to the broad positive correlation between amount of persuasive information and persuasion as the numerosity effect. The numerosity effect states that as a default, the more persuasive information a message contains, up to some reasonable limit, the more persuaded people tend to be (see Calder et al., 1974; Norman, 1976; Calder, 1978; Chaiken, 1980; Maddux and Rogers, 1980). Thus, the numerosity effect, whereby presenting more persuasive information leads to more persuasion is quite pervasive (see also Tormala and Petty, 2007). We refer to the inflection-point, after which more information of the same valence no longer causes changes in attitude, as the point of “satiety.” A key question in the research on the optimal number of claims in persuasion is how many claims are needed before informational satiety is achieved.

Recently, the numerosity effect has been related to the elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986a,b) such that participants’ judgments based on the number of considered arguments are observed to differ between high and low elaboration conditions (Tormala et al., 2002). The point of “satiety” might thus differ depending on the cognitive load connected to the attribute information. Elaboration might also impact on the point of “satiety” in that attribute numerosity has been observed to benefit hedonic more than utilitarian options (Sela and Berger, 2012).

An important caveat to the set-size effect or numerosity effect lies in the difference between communication with perceived informational intention, and communication with perceived persuasive intention. There is a crucial difference between the research demonstrating the set size-effect, and marketing studies. In the impression formation literature, the source of the communication, typically referred to as “agent,” has no persuasive intention, only informational intent. The degree to which a target is aware of the agents persuasive intention is referred to as the targets persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994). As consumers have gotten more accustomed to marketers persuasion-intention, they have developed a slightly different way of dealing with information with persuasive intent (Campbell and Kirmani, 2008). Specifically, when dealing with information from a source that has a perceived persuasive intent, subjects will engage in coping-cognitions, in an attempt to

maintain a sense of independent and dissuaded view of the product, service or person they are evaluating. The persuasion knowledge model (Friestad and Wright, 1994) is important in this respect, as it changes the focus from message design to message receiver. In doing so, it conveys the notion that the perception of the message is more important than its objective design. The model states that all targets will attempt to hold valid product-, or service-attitudes when faced with a persuasion attempt. In order to maintain a valid attitude toward the product, the target will analyze the persuasion tactics, the effectiveness and the appropriateness of the persuasive agent, and adjust their impression accordingly. Put in terms of CSR marketing, this entails that the perceived social responsibility is more important than the actual or objective social responsibility. Effective CSR communication can be achieved only when the coping efforts of the target is taken into account. It is also important to note that individual differences in skepticism and reactance are likely to induce different levels and styles of coping-cognitions (Clee and Wicklund, 1980; Hong and Page, 1989; Campbell and Kirmani, 2000). Friestad and Wright (1994) call for more research exploring these persuasion dynamics: “An important part of a complete theory of persuasion is, therefore, an explanation of [...] aspects of an agents overall behavior that disguise a tactic or that makes its execution seem heavy-handed or transparent to targets.” There are many identified factors in the execution of a persuasion attempt that may make the effort seem heavy-handed or transparent, and thus elicit and increase persuasion knowledge and coping. For instance, prevention-focus or regulation focus in the framing of the message (Kirmani and Zhu, 2007), forced exposure (Edwards et al., 2002), attention-getting tactics (Campbell, 1995), advertising repetition (Kirmani, 1997), and others, have all been identified as factors that increase persuasion knowledge in targets. Increasing the number of claims in a persuasion attempt is another factor that may induce increased persuasion knowledge, as the persuasion-attempt is perceived as more transparent or heavy-handed if the number of claims is perceived as too high (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; DeCarlo, 2005). It is not all together clear how many claims are optimal for persuasion. Recent research on the optimal number of claims in motivated persuasion has shown that the persuasive effect increases only up to three claims (Shu and Carlson, 2014). Including a fourth claim was shown to increase skepticism and persuasion knowledge rather than persuasion, when consumers know that the message source has a persuasion motive. Through several experiments, Shu and Carlson (2014) demonstrate that three claims produced a more favorable evaluation than two or four claims. They also suggest that coping is the cause of the fall in persuasiveness when a fourth claim is presented, by demonstrating that respondents under high cognitive strain show increased persuasion when being presented with a fourth claim, whereas the non-strained control-group show most favorable evaluation after only three claims. By depleting cognitive resources from the research-subjects, the ability to cope with the persuasive content was reduced.

Part of the reason why over-communication sometimes hampers persuasion may be that when more claims are added,



some of the claims are perceived as weaker, or less relevant than the others. Including weak or irrelevant information has been proven to reduce the persuasiveness of a message. Nisbett et al. (1981) refer to this phenomenon as dilution-effect. Dilution-effect is defined as: “A judgment bias in which the presence of non-diagnostic cues, when processed along with diagnostic cues, causes a judge to under-weight the diagnostic cues” (Waller and Zimbelman, 2003, p. 254). Dilution effects have been documented across many disciplines and research-settings (see Ettenson et al., 1987; Tetlock and Boettger, 1989; Smith et al., 1998; Meyvis and Janiszewski, 2002). Field experiments in economics have documented similar phenomena, referred to as “less is better” or “more is less” effects (Hsee, 1998; List, 2002). In these experiments, bundles of high-quality objects elicit higher willingness to pay than the same bundles, with the addition of some lower quality objects. The use of relatively low quality/low importance claims in conjunction with high quality claims thus appears to be one factor that makes persuasive intent seem more heavy-handed and transparent, which in turn may increase coping, and thus reduce persuasive effect. De Vries et al. (2014) conducted three experiments to explore the role of dilution-effects in communication for and against carbon dioxide capture and storage. They used combinations of highly relevant, moderately relevant and irrelevant claims. Dilution effects were only manifest in positive persuasion, and only when combining highly relevant and irrelevant information. However, interesting, these experiments did not include measures of persuasion knowledge. Experiment 2 in the present research thus represents a partial replication and attempted exploration of the mechanisms behind the findings presented in De Vries et al. (2014).

Summarized, the literature on the number of claims in persuasion suggests four main findings: (a) Increasing the number of claims leads to incremental increase in persuasion, up to a point of satiety. (b) The point of satiety, after which further claims no longer increases persuasion, is reached earlier when the target perceives the agent as having persuasive intent, and later when elaboration and scrutiny is low. (c) Increasing the number of claims can increase the likelihood that the agent is perceived as having persuasive intent. (d) Adding weak claims to bundles of strong claims can dilute the overall persuasiveness of the communication. An important gap in this research is that almost all these findings stem from experiments in positive persuasion, i.e., persuading others to believe that something or someone is good. Whether the same effects would emerge in negative persuasion, i.e., persuading others to believe that something or someone is bad, is largely unknown. This gap is not only of theoretical relevance to psychology. As CSR is becoming an increasingly important part of brand strategy, it is of tantamount importance to understand how consumers perceive different CSR-strategies, how they cope with the persuasive intent of CSR communication, and what evaluative artifacts these coping processes produce (Olsen et al., 2014).

Considering the body of research on good vs. bad perception and judgments (see Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin and Royzman, 2001), there is good reason to suspect that the dynamics of evaluating negative claims are qualitatively different from those

of positive claims. For instance, individuals who spend less time and require less information in order to classify an event, person, or object as bad may have an adaptive advantage. Thus, the consequences of type 2 errors (failing to detect a pattern) in this domain are often more severe than the consequence of type 1 errors (perceiving a pattern where there is none). In literature-studies, the “tragic flaw”, or Hamartia, has been a familiar concept since the Greek dramas. A tragic flaw typically consists of a single failing or transgression that brings about ruin to the otherwise admirable character (Sherman, 1992). Social anthropologist studying purity and contamination in Hindu cultures have noted a negativity bias in that purity is difficult to reach and maintain, while a single act of contagion (like touching a person of lower caste) will instantly contaminate the entire person (Rozin and Royzman, 2001). In social and moral psychology, the negativity effect states that evaluative negative information is weighted more heavily than evaluative positive information in overall evaluations (Kanouse and Hanson, 1971). This effect, sometimes referred to as the positive-negative asymmetry or negativity bias, is considered especially relevant when evaluations entail affective reactions (Lewicka et al., 1992). In judgment and decision-making research, the prospect theory demonstrates that people are more aversive toward small losses than they are positive toward corresponding gains (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). This effect implies that people tend to be risk-averse over prospects involving gains, while they are risk-seeking when it comes to prospects involving losses (Shefrin and Statman, 1985; Frazzini, 2006). Another consequence of the effect is the tendency of people to sell assets whose price has increased, while keeping assets that have decreased in value. The implication is that people are less willing to recognize losses, but are more willing to recognize gains (Odean, 1998; Weber and Camerer, 1998; Camerer, 2000; Barberis and Xiong, 2009).

Continuing the general ‘bad is stronger than good’ finding into corporate ethics research, Creyer (1997) found that consumers are willing to purchase from unethical companies, but they expect a substantial reduction in prices. The consumers expect ethical corporate behavior as a norm, and are willing to pay a slightly higher price for products from companies who go above and beyond the expected level of ethical behavior. The willingness to pay for products from unethical, normal and ethical companies, respectively, correspond to the curve of prospect theory, in which minor ethical violations are weighted more heavily than corresponding minor ethical advances.

Taken together, the evidence from the ‘bad is stronger than good’-literature, suggests that the number of claims used in a persuasion setting should play a larger role in positive persuasion than negative persuasion. As negative information is processed more thoroughly, the psychological point of satiety should be reached sooner in negative persuasion than positive persuasion. Thus, a positive-negative asymmetry is to be expected, in which the number of claims cause significant changes in the positive domain, whereas the reaction to negative persuasion should be less affected by the numerosity of claims. Borrowing the terms from the Persuasion Knowledge model (Friestad and Wright, 1994), we further theorize that the level persuasion knowledge

an individual experiences when being persuaded into believing that something or someone is good, increases as the number of claims increases. As a contrast, the amount of claims used in negative persuasion should not elicit changes in persuasion knowledge, as the point of satiety is reached sooner. There are several reasons to expect that numerosity of claims will fail to elicit differences in persuasion and persuasion knowledge when subjects are dealing with negative claims. Firstly, high coping with negative claims may be evolutionarily maladaptive, as the consequences of adherence and defecting are asymmetrical. As an example, consider an individual in a pre-historic society, being subjected to claims favoring the abolishment of certain foods. Adhering to the advice would take out one of the sources of food from his diet, which is presumably unfortunate but not directly life-threatening. Defecting from the advice may result in much more direct and dire consequences, both in terms of health and social status. Coping when faced with claims saying that something or someone is bad, has presumably been less evolutionarily advantageous than coping when faced with claims saying that something or someone is good. Secondly, modern day consumers are presumably more experienced with positive persuasion, from a lifetime of dealing with marketers (Boush et al., 1994; John, 1999). Negative persuasion is rarely used in marketing, with the notable exceptions of health-behavior ads and political attack ads. Consequently, consumers may activate their persuasion-knowledge and coping schemas more effectively and with greater sensitivity when faced with a positive persuasion attempt, rather than a negative persuasion attempt. Including diluting (weak) claims into sets of strong claims is also theorized to produce asymmetrical dilution-effects across positive and negative persuasion. The subjects being persuaded into believing that a company is good (environmentally friendly), are expected to display a higher readiness to perceive the inclusion of a weak claim as heavy-handed or transparent, alerting them to the persuasion-attempt they are being subjected to. The subjects being persuaded to believe that the company is bad (environmentally aversive), should have a lower readiness to perceive the inclusion of a weaker claim as heavy-handed or transparent, and therefore not utilize the same coping mechanisms.

To summarize, the two related research-questions that stand to be answered in this thesis are; (1) What are the effects of different numbers of claims in positive and negative persuasion? and (2) How does different qualities of claims effect the outcomes in positive and negative persuasion? Based on these research-questions, we state the following four hypotheses:

- (1) The number of claims will have a significant effect on the perception of the company in positive persuasion, but not in negative persuasion.
- (2) The number of claims will have a significant effect on persuasion knowledge and skepticism in positive persuasion, but not in negative persuasion.
- (3) Dilution-effects will emerge in positive persuasion, but not in negative persuasion.
- (4) Dilution-effects on persuasion knowledge will be moderated by dispositional reactance.

## Materials and Pre-Testing

This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the Research Council of Norway, The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, with electronically written informed consent from all subjects. All subjects gave written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Before running the experiment, various claims were tested in a population similar to the one used in the experiment. We used CSR-related claims pertaining to an ocean-farming company as setting. There are two main motivations behind this choice. Firstly, CSR persuasion has been studied less extensively than traditional persuasion, even though it is becoming an increasingly important part of branding (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Aburdene, 2007; Costa and Menichini, 2013). Secondly, ocean-farming has been both hailed as one of the industries that may potentially be part of the solution to global warming (Asche and Khatun, 2006), as well as criticized for being unsustainable in its current form (Folke and Kautsky, 1992). Our setting thus provides the basis for a plausible and realistic persuasion-attempt, both in favor and against the actions of a company. The participants in the pre-test were exposed to a list of either 10 claims in favor of an ocean-farming corporations' social responsibility (positive claims), or 10 claims in favor of an ocean-farming corporations' social irresponsibility (negative claims). Participants were told that all the claims were candidates to be used in a persuasion setting, but that it was up to the participant to rate how strong they felt each claim was. The participants were instructed to allocate 100 points selectively among the claims. Claims perceived as strong were to be awarded more points, and claims perceived as weak were to be awarded few or no points. All 100 points had to be allocated by each participant. The rank order of the presentation of the claims were randomized across trials, to ensure that primacy-, and recency effects did not affect the outcome of the test. A total of 32 student participants rated the positive claims, and 29 student participants rated the negative claims. The four positive and four negative claims with the highest score were chosen to be used in the experiments. **Tables 1** and **2** display these claims (translated to English by the authors), and their mean and median rating.

Additionally, two positive and one negative claim were chosen as moderately diluting claims, to be used in the second experiment. These claims were selected because they fulfilled the criteria of having been evaluated as weak but similar in strength, across subjects. **Table 3** displays the diluting claims used in Experiment 2.

## Procedure and Results

### Experiment 1: The Role of Numerosity

The first experiment was designed to explore the role of different numbers of claims in positive and negative persuasion. Hundred and ninety eight students from a large Norwegian business-school were recruited to the experiment. The participants in the

**TABLE 1 | Evaluation of positive claims.**

Claim	The company has paid to restore 10 km <sup>2</sup> of destroyed ocean-floor	The company has switched to solar-powered energy	Without reducing the quality in the end-product, the company only uses recycled materials in fodder-production	The company has committed itself to invest 20% of all earnings in technology that will help protect wild salmon and trout
Mean	13,43	17,22	13,25	22,78
Median	12,5	15	14,5	22,5

**TABLE 2 | Evaluation of negative claims.**

Claim	The company's activities has destroyed 10 km <sup>2</sup> of ocean-floor	The company emits over 100 metric tons of CO <sup>2</sup> each year	The company is unwilling to invest in new facilities. As a consequence, many of the farmed fish escape, increasing the spread of lice, and harming the wild salmon in nearby areas	The farming activities cause the emission of nutrient salts and organic matter, which increase the algae-growth and eutrophication in the inner fjords
Mean	16,37	12,66	17,23	18,17
Median	20	10	15	20

**TABLE 3 | Diluting claims.**

Claim	The company has switched to slightly costlier but more eco-friendly lightbulbs in all offices	The company has replaced all its cars with electric cars	The entire company car-fleet consists of high-emission SUV's
Mean	2,44	4,28	2,77
Median	0,5	1	0

pre-test could not participate in the experiment. Participation was incentivized by lottery of smartphone and serving of pizza. The experiment was done in an auditorium, and subjects used their smartphone, tablet, or pc/mac to read instructions and indicate responses. Web-based experiment-software ensured an even and random distribution of subjects to either positive or negative persuasion. In the positive persuasion setting, participants were exposed to the following vignette (translated by authors):

*"Imagine that you are applying for your first job, and that corporate environmental care is of great importance to you. You consider applying at Marine Farming, a large ocean-farming company. A friend of yours already works at the company. In order to convince you that Marine Farming is environmentally friendly, your friend presents the following claims:."*

To ensure validity, the vignette had a 30 s forced exposure setting. The software further randomized these subjects into three subgroups; Group A was exposed to two of the strong positive

claims, Group B to three strong positive claims, and Group C to four strong positive claims. The claims were all drawn from the pool of four positive claims presented in **Table 1**. The software ensured that which claims, and the rank order of presentation of claims, was randomized across subjects (except for Group C, in which all four claims were used, and only the rank order of presentation was randomized).

The other half of the sample was randomly allocated to the negative persuasion setting. They were firstly presented with the following vignette:

*"Imagine that you are applying for your first job, and that corporate environmental care is of great importance to you. You consider applying at Marine Farming, a large ocean-farming company. A friend of yours works at a competing company. In order to convince you that Marine Farming is environmentally harmful, your friend presents the following claims:."*

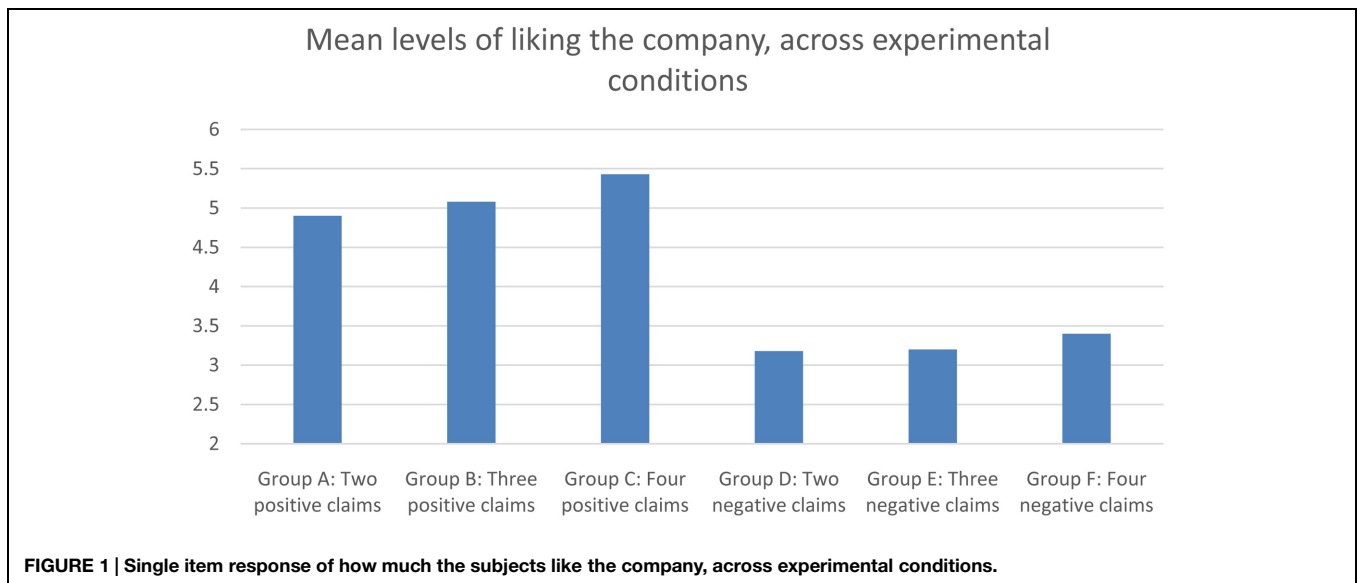
This vignette also had a 30 s forced exposure setting. The software further randomized these subjects into three subgroups; Group D was exposed to two of the strong negative claims, Group E to three strong negative claims, and Group F to four strong negative claims. The claims were all drawn from the pool of four negative claims presented in **Table 2**. The software ensured that which claims, and the rank order of presentation of claims, was randomized across subjects (except for Group F, in which all four claims were used, and only the rank order of presentation was randomized). Both vignettes described a source (friend) who spoke of the company in a manner that is congruent with her motives, as we expect that subjects assume that the friend would prefer that the target applies for a job at the same company as the agent.

After having been exposed to both the vignette and the claims, each participant indicated how much they liked the company, how certain they felt about their liking of the company, how believable the claims were perceived, and how relevant they felt the claims were. The participants also gave scores on persuasion knowledge and perceived informational intent by indicating their level of agreement with the statements; "I felt my friend was attempting to influence my choice of employer," and "I felt my friend wanted to give me information," respectively. All these outcome-measures were given on 7-point likert-scales. Additionally, each subject completed the 11-item Hong reactance-scale (see Hong and Page, 1989; Hong and Faedda, 1996).

## Results from Experiment 1

Manipulation checks revealed that positive and negative persuasion lead to a significant difference in the perceived likeability of the company,  $F(1,172) = 178,26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . There were no overall-effects of amount of claims used. **Figure 1** shows the level of liking of the company among groups who were exposed to either two, three, or four positive claims, or two, three, or four negative claims.

Hypothesis 1 states that there should be significant differences among the different conditions within positive persuasion, not an overall effect of amount of claims. So in order to test Hypothesis 1, we performed planned contrasts between each



of the groups in positive persuasion, and each of the groups in negative persuasion, with level of liking the company as the dependent variable. In positive persuasion, univariate analysis of variance revealed significant differences between two and four claims,  $F(1,5) = 7,32$ ,  $p = 0.009$ , as well as borderline significant differences between three and four claims,  $F(1,2) = 2,97$ ,  $p = 0.09$ . Surprisingly, there were no significant differences between two and three positive claims. In negative persuasion, liking of company increased marginally with each added negative claim. However, when running the same planned contrasts between different amounts of negative claims, no significant differences in levels of liking the company were found. Based on these findings, we partially confirm Hypothesis 1. It seems that presenting two positive claims “leaves room” for more persuasion, if more claims are added. In negative persuasion, however, a satiety-like finding emerges, in which the level of liking is not affected by the presence or absence of more than two claims.

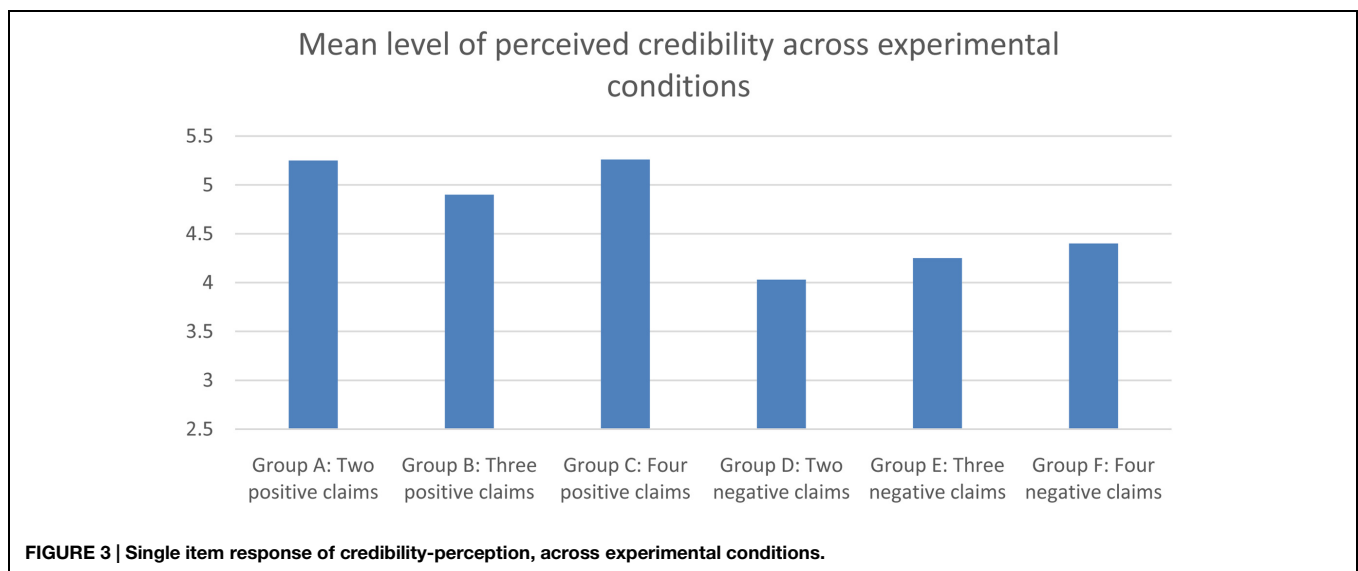
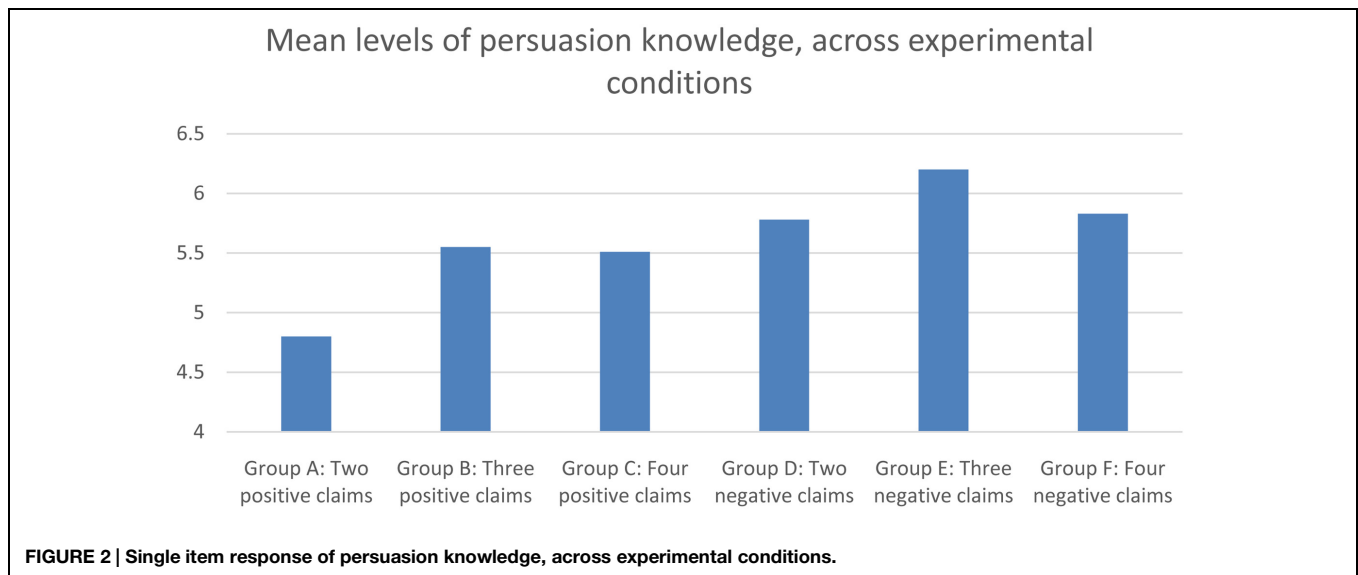
Previous studies have indicated that behavioral outcomes are seldom predicted by the valence of an attitude alone, but rather by the valence combined with certainty or attitude-strength (Tormala and Petty, 2004). In order to increase our ability to make predictions of behavioral outcomes, subjects in our experiments were asked not only to indicate how much they liked the company, based on the information they had received, but also how certain they felt about that feeling. In order to include both valence and certainty in our analysis, we computed a variable that captures the likeability of the company, multiplied by the certainty-score the subjects gave. Manipulation check of certainty-adjusted liking showed significant differences between positive and negative persuasion  $F(1,3312) = 59,64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . There was also a significant main effect of the amount of claims  $F(2,273) = 4,93$ ,  $p = 0.008$ . Planned contrasts between the different subgroups revealed significant differences between two and four claims in positive persuasion,  $F(1,350) = 4,82$ ,  $p = 0.032$ . Similar differences were found between three and four positive claims,  $F(1,367) = 6,03$ ,  $p = 0.017$ . No differences were found

amongst the groups in negative persuasion. This finding further supports Hypothesis 1.

Using persuasion knowledge as outcome-variable, manipulation checks again revealed significant differences between positive and negative persuasion  $F(1,20) = 13,35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The number of claims also carried a significant main effect  $F(2,5) = 3,69$ ,  $p = 0.027$ . **Figure 2** shows the level of persuasion knowledge among groups who were exposed to either two, three or four positive claims, or two, three or four negative claims.

An interesting first observation from the analysis is that persuasion-knowledge in negative persuasion is much higher than in positive persuasion. This finding is addressed in larger detail in the discussion part of the article. In order to test Hypothesis 2, we performed planned contrasts between the different groups. The results revealed significant differences in the amount of persuasion knowledge elicited by two and three positive claims  $F(1,9) = 5,71$ ,  $p = 0.020$ . Going from two to four positive claims also induced a significant shift in the amount of persuasion knowledge elicited  $F(1,9) = 4,44$ ,  $p = 0.039$ . There was no significant difference between three and four claims. When performing the same planned contrasts for different amounts of negative claims, no significant differences were found. Performing the same analyses with skepticism as outcome variable, we find a significant asymmetry between positive and negative persuasion, in that negative persuasion elicits more skepticism in general  $F(1,42) = 26,31$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . **Figure 3** displays the mean rating of credibility or believability across groups.

The stark asymmetry in credibility between positive and negative persuasion is also elaborated on in the discussion. Moving on to the planned contrast, we find no significant variance in skepticism with regards to different numbers of claims, in positive or negative persuasion. We further tested whether or not the reported findings could be due to variance in the strength of claims, rather than the numerosity of claims.



We computed variables consisting of the sum of strength of claims, based on the pre-test mean and median evaluation of the strength of the claims (see **Table 1**). These variables were used in standard multiple regression models. All the reported significant findings remained, even when controlling for the strength of claims, while none of the reported insignificant findings were explained by strength of claims. Hypothesis 2 thus stand as partially confirmed.

## Experiment 2: Dilution Effects

The purpose of the second experiment was to explore the role of different quality or subjective strength of claims in positive and negative persuasion. Eighty-six students from a large Norwegian business-school was recruited to the experiment. Participation-incentives and practical procedure were identical to Experiment 1. Web-based experiment-software ensured that the participants were randomly distributed to either positive or

negative persuasion, in which two of the claims were randomly collected from the list of four claims used in Experiment 1, and one of the claims came from the list of diluting claims presented in **Table 3**. Two different diluters of positive persuasion were used, and one diluter of negative persuasion. The negative diluter used was that the company car-fleet consisted of only high-emission SUV's. This claim was selected because results from the pre-test indicated that it best fitted the purpose of being a moderately diluting claim. The two positive diluters were chosen on different grounds; the "lightbulb"-claim was chosen because the results from the pre-test indicated that it received a score almost identical to the negative diluter. The "electric cars" claim was chosen because it represents a semantic comparable contrast to the negative diluter. The vignettes and instructions given to the subjects were otherwise identical to Experiment 1.

After exposure to both the vignette and the claims, consisting of one diluting claim and two strong claims, each participant



indicated their responses on the same outcome-variables as in Experiment 1. Here as well, each subject completed the Hong reactance-scale (see Hong and Page, 1989; Hong and Faedda, 1996).

## Results from Experiment 2

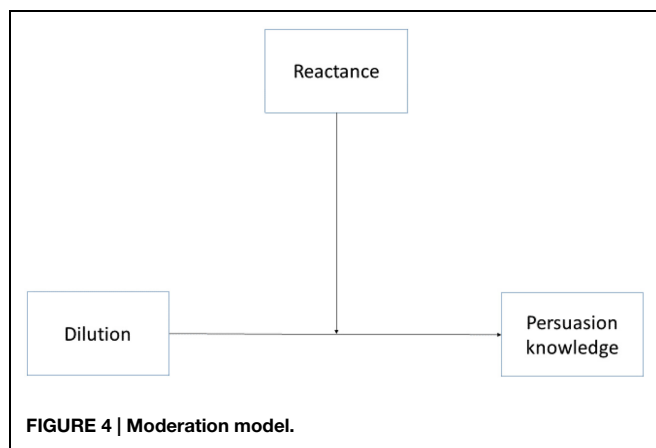
Preliminary analysis of the results from Experiment 2 revealed no differences between the two positive diluting claim conditions. To ensure statistical power and symmetry, these groups were combined to a joint diluted positive persuasion group ( $N = 44$ ). All further analysis in this experiment was done with this combined group. No different results were obtained when keeping these groups separate.

To test for dilution-effect, we performed independent samples  $t$ -tests, where the three strong claims groups were run against their corresponding diluted groups. According to the theoretical predictions, dilution effects were expected to manifest in the positive persuasion domain, but not in the negative domain. However, the findings from the  $t$ -tests showed that across all outcome variables, in both positive and negative persuasion, no dilution effects were present. This suggests that the presence of a claim with low quality or low subjective strength, in conjunction with two strong claims, has scarce effect on the total persuasion. This finding is similar to the one obtained by De Vries et al. (2014), where only completely irrelevant information produced dilution-effects, and moderately diluting information produced no dilution-effect. Hypothesis 3 is thus rejected.

Diluted claims were expected to bring about an increased sense of being subject to a persuasion-attempt, as the total pitch would come across as more heavy-handed. This effect was not manifest in our results, as we found no difference in persuasion knowledge or skepticism between the groups who were exposed to three strong claims compared to the groups exposed to diluted sets of claims. However, both theory and past research on resistance to persuasion suggests that dispositional reactance should give a person a heightened awareness of being subject to a persuasion-attempt. Hypothesis 4 is based on this assertion. In order to test Hypothesis 4, we conducted moderator analyses (see Hayes, 2013), using dilution as independent variable, persuasion-knowledge as outcome variable, and dispositional reactance as moderator-variable. **Figure 4** presents the model described.

The results revealed no interaction when using positive claims. This indicated that different levels of reactance had little or no effect on the amount of persuasion knowledge elicited by including a diluted claim. In negative persuasion, however, a significant interaction was revealed. The effect of dilution of claims, on persuasion knowledge, is dependent upon another predictor, dispositional reactance. **Table 4** shows the values of the model.

Plotting the graphs for level of persuasion knowledge, conditional on dispositional level of reactance, and dilution of claims, it is clear that high-reactance subjects exposed to diluted negative claims showed higher persuasion knowledge, while low-reactance individuals did not. **Figure 5** displays the interaction



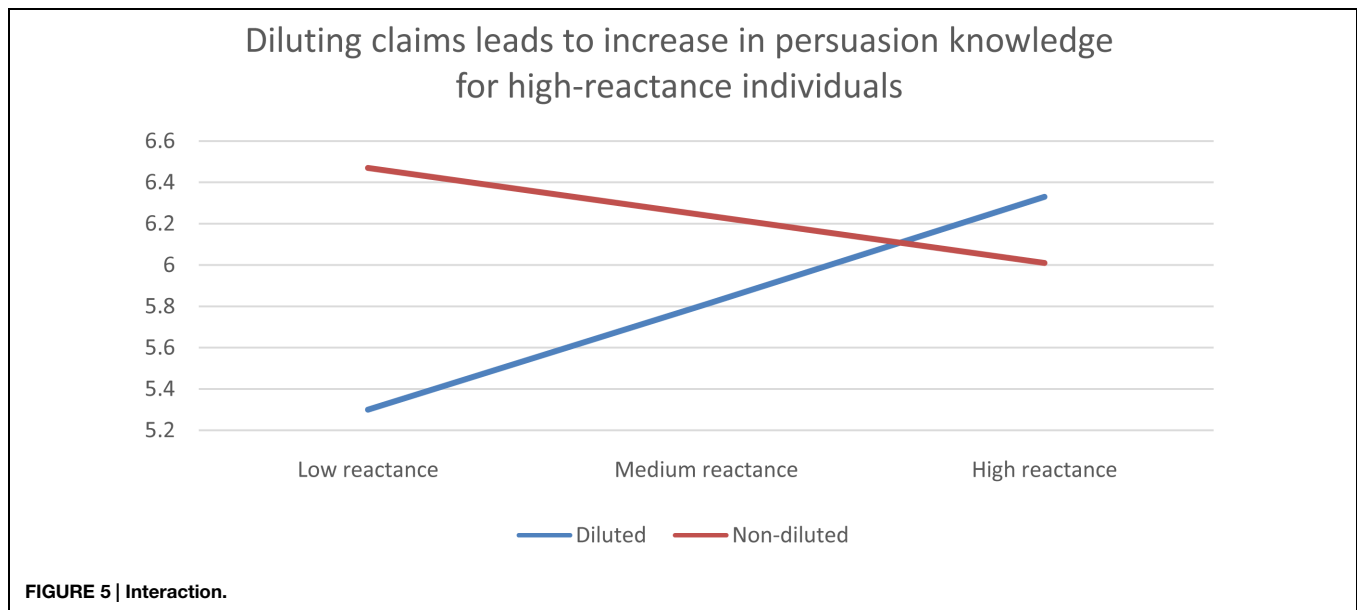
**TABLE 4 | Interaction values.**

	Coefficient	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	13,06	3,80	3,44	0,0011	5,46	20,66
Reactance	-2,04	1,19	-1,72	0,0903	-4,43	0,3313
Dilution	-1,12	0,46	-2,43	0,0179	-2,04	-0,20
Int	0,33	0,15	2,27	0,0264	0,04	0,62

## Discussion

### Direct Effects

Our most powerful finding is the large difference in the amount of persuasion-knowledge and skepticism generated by negative claims, relative to positive claims. Our theorizing from the point of evolutionary psychology and consumers past experience with similar persuasion episodes is contradicted by this finding. This is theoretically interesting, as past research on the effects of negative persuasion is limited. We interpret the finding in the light of negativity effect, stating that negative events are given more attention, and weighted more heavily than positive claims. As negative claims receive more attention and elaboration, they also induce an elevated amount of scrutiny in the targets interpretation of the claims. The target who gives more attention and performs a deeper elaboration of the claims is more likely to make attributional inferences into the motivation of the agent, resulting in an increase in their awareness that they are being subjected to a persuasion-attempt. Put differently, they increase their persuasion knowledge. The heightened level of scrutiny also induces a higher level of skepticism, making the target perceive the claims as less believable. The high levels of persuasion knowledge and skepticism revealed in the negative persuasion groups correspond well with the limited effect negative persuasion had on overall likeability of the company. The positive persuasion induced a mean liking that was higher than the one for negative persuasion. Given that the neutral point on this outcome variable is four, the results clearly indicate that the impact on likeability generated by positive persuasion was far greater than that of negative persuasion. The reason for this difference seems to lie in the increased coping in negative persuasion relative to positive persuasion. However,



the limitations of the current study leaves room for alternative, or supplemental interpretations. In the current study, the target was presented as “considering applying at Marine Farming.” This may be perceived as stating that the target already held a positive view of the company, and a behavioral intention that leaned more toward applying than not applying. Subjects may have interpreted the vignettes as saying that the positive persuasion agent tried to enhance or affirm a behavioral intention that was present to begin with, while the negative persuasion agent tried to stop and alter a behavioral intention. As such, it may be the case that arguing against the application is perceived as a more invasive or heavy-handed action than arguing for it. However, as both vignettes described the target as “considering applying,” another interpretation may be that the target already has a slightly negative view of the company, hence the need for consideration. In line with this interpretation, negative claims would be conceived of as more affirming of an attitude that is already present, while positive claims are perceived as a more invasive attempt at attitude-change. We therefore disregard this potential interpretation. Another confounding element in the present study may be that the person arguing for the company is currently working there, while the person arguing against the company works at a competing firm. The different positions of the sources may be considered a confounding variable, which might explain the heightened skepticism and persuasion knowledge among the subjects exposed to negative persuasion. The vignettes were designed in this way to secure a sense of motivation on behalf of the source in both the negative and positive persuasion setting. Future experiments should attempt to remove this confounding variable, while maintaining realism in the congruency of source and motivation. The present study described a typical scenario for positive and negative persuasion, in which a representative of a company speaks well of her employer, or ill of a competing company. We consider the opposite scenario, in which someone speaks well of

the competition, and ill of one’s own company, as less realistic. Indeed, De Vries et al. (2014), attempted to use claims that were incongruent with the motives the organization in question is assumed to act upon (an industrial organization that spoke well of CO<sup>2</sup> capture and storage). They found that this breach of realism in the design of stimuli made the subjects confused, to the extent that their responses failed to pass the manipulation check. In our experiment, the source of the message is positioned in a way that allows for congruency between her motivations and the content of her claims. On this basis, we can conclude that positive claims made from someone within a company generates far less skepticism and persuasion knowledge than negative claims made from someone at a competing company. Although we are unable to pinpoint whether this effect stems primarily from negativity bias or the relative position of the source of the claims, the finding is nevertheless theoretically and pragmatically interesting, as it arose from a realistic description of events.

Our secondary sets of findings show that the effects of different amounts of claims in persuasion are asymmetrical across the positive–negative divide. This finding resonates well with the theoretical predictions from negativity effect and numerosity effect. More specifically, we demonstrate that the amount of claims induce quite small variances in outcomes overall, but the significant changes are all within positive persuasion. This finding also corresponds well to the predictions made by past work on positive–negative asymmetry. We assert that receiving more and more information about how environmentally responsible or irresponsible a company is, will affect one’s perception of the company, up to a certain point. Past this point, more information of the same valence will no longer produce changes in the impression of the company. We refer to this theoretical inflection point as a satiety point, as there is no longer any effect of additional information of the same valence. The finding that more information elicits changes in the effect of

positive persuasion, but not in negative persuasion, is interpreted in the light of this satiety-model of persuasion. Our finding demonstrates that the psychological level of satiety is reached sooner in negative persuasion than in positive persuasion. The reason for this is that negative claims are weighted more heavily, given more attention, and elaborated on more thoroughly, than positive claims. Consequently, less information is needed before the point of satiety is reached. This finding resonates well with prospect-theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), in that the slope on the graph is steeper in the area of negative information (losses) than in the area of positive information (gains). It also corresponds well with the notion of contagion, put forth by Rozin and Royzman (2001), in that perceived virtue stems from many, consistently positive behaviors, while a single act of immorality elicits immediate contagion, and further acts of immorality are superfluous in changing the impression for the worse. Here as well, it is possible to argue that the position of the source plays a confounding role in the interpretation of the claims. However, even though the claims presented in negative persuasion are perceived as less believable than the ones presented in positive persuasion, they are still perceived as more believable than neutral (mean believability rating > 4). Another possible confounding aspect to our design is the fact that the claims used are semantically different, and were evaluated differently in the pre-test. However, the variance in strength within the four positive and four negative claims is very similar. The difference in median score from the weakest to most powerful claim is 10 points, in both sets of claims. And as the list of two, three, or four claims were randomly generated for each research-subject, we believe that it is unlikely, but not impossible, that the results could be caused by differences in the strength of the claims. Within positive persuasion, our findings show support for the numerosity effect (see Pelham et al., 1994). Our findings contradict the “charm of three” finding, demonstrated by Shu and Carlson (2014), in which three claims consistently generated more liking and less persuasion knowledge than four or two claims. Instead, we find that four claims significantly outperforms two and three claims, even though persuasion knowledge is increased. One of the differences between our design and that of Shu and Carlson may be that we assess persuasion in a CSR setting, rather than in a traditional marketing setting. The claims we therefore use are more specific in nature than the claims used by Shu and Carlson (2014).

### Interaction Effects

Finally, we demonstrate that including moderately diluting claims in bundles of claims give no direct effect on the outcomes of persuasion. This finding is consistent with previous research on moderately diluting claims (Tetlock and Boettger, 1989; De Vries et al., 2014). The implication of this finding is that the subjective quality of the claims used in CSR communication has less effect on the outcome than one would intuitively imagine. We interpret this finding as being fairly consistent with the phenomenon of scope insensitivity or scope neglect (see Desvousges et al., 1992). This effect states that, in lieu of available reference-points, different levels of positive and negative impact on the wellbeing

of people and ecosystems are uncondusive to persuasion. This effect has been studied experimentally in philanthropy and environmentalism. For instance, when asked how much they would be willing to pay to save 2000, 20,000, or 200,000 migratory birds from uncovered oilponds, the respondents average answers were 80, 78, and 88\$, respectively. Similar experiments showed that residents would pay little more to clean up all polluted lakes in Ontario than polluted lakes in a particular region of Ontario (Kahneman, 2004). Furthermore, residents of four western US states would pay only 28% more to protect all 57 wilderness areas in those states than to protect a single area (McFadden and Leonard, 1993). One proposed explanation for scope neglect is the “valuation by prototype”-hypothesis, suggesting that the mental representation of the different options usually consists of single, representative and emotionally charged exemplars (such as a single bird drenched in oil), rather than numerical variables (Kahneman et al., 2000). The results from our experiment are compatible with scope neglect, as the subjects responses indicate that the attitude toward the company is unaffected by the scope of the claims, and more affected by the prototypical direction those claims point (good/bad). Only when adding dispositional reactance as another predictor variable were we able to identify a significant effect of dilution. Based on available theory, it is easy to understand why the level of dispositional reactance is associated with the amount of persuasion knowledge elicited by diluted claims. However, it is difficult to interpret, based on available theory, why this phenomenon is asymmetrical across the positive-negative divide, and only manifest within negative persuasion. Hence, we report it here as a singular finding, and leave the interpretation for future research.

### Contribution, Implication, and Future Research

The present study is one of the few studies to investigate persuasion in both positive and negative directions. Recently, Rozin and Royzman (2001) found that negative information was more powerful than parallel positive information. Based on this and other findings, loss-framed appeals have been launched as more persuasive than gain-framed appeals (e.g., Johnson et al., 2005). However, negative frames have proven to be more persuasive than positive ones predominantly when participants’ processing of the information is in-depth (Block and Keller, 1995). The impact of negative message framing is thus dependent on degree of elaboration, it seems (Jones et al., 2003). Nevertheless, negative framing not only requires deep processing in order to have a greater impact than positive framing, it also stimulates more effortful and thorough information processing in itself (Kuvaas and Selart, 2004).

The present study adds to this literature by assessing in particular how persuasion knowledge and skepticism are elicited by positive vs negative persuasion. Our main finding, that morally motivated positive framing of one’s employers’ green activities generates far less skepticism and persuasion knowledge than negative framing of competing firms harmful activities, is of both theoretical and managerial value. The value of the finding comes largely from the fact that the design of the study is realistic and motivationally congruent. From a managerial point of view, the results of this study imply that word-of-mouth accusations on



behalf of a competitor are largely inadvisable, as they not only face the risk of being condemned as inappropriate, but that the entire persuasion-attempt risks coming across as heavy-handed or transparent, as well as less believable. Highlighting one's own laudable efforts seems to be a better persuasion tactic. From a theoretical point of view, our results indicate that there seems to be a positive-negative asymmetry in persuasion, not only concerning the consequences of the persuasion *per se*, but also the consequences using different numbers of claims. This deepens our understanding of the interaction between the numerosity effect and the negativity bias. However, as with most persuasion-experiments, we cannot assert with certainty that these results

can be generalized to any persuasion setting. We recommend that future research should attempt to isolate the mechanisms behind the positive-negative asymmetry documented here, while maintaining ecological realism and congruency in the design of stimuli.

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## Paper 2: Mortality awareness and perceived sincerity

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# Perceived Mortality and Perceived Morality: Perceptions of Value-Orientation Are More Likely When a Decision Is Preceded by a Mortality Reminder

Mads Nordmo<sup>1\*</sup> and Elisabeth Norman<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Strategy and Management, The Norwegian School of Economics, Bergen, Norway, <sup>2</sup> Department of Psychosocial Science, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

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### \*Correspondence:

Mads Nordmo  
mads.nordmo@nhh.no

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The questions addressed in this paper are whether and how reported mortality reminders can function as an indication of sincerity when communicating ambiguously motivated decisions. In two experiments, participants were exposed to a fictitious CEO who announced a decision to implement new organizational measures that were both environmentally and financially beneficial. In the experimental condition, the CEO attributed her new ideas to a recent mortality reminder. In the active control condition, the CEO attributed her decision to a non-lethal dentistry health scare, and in the passive control condition the CEO did not give any account of events preceding her decision. When a CEO implemented new corporate initiatives after a mortality reminder, her motivation for doing so was perceived as somewhat more motivated by intrinsic values, and significantly less motivated by financial gains. This change in attribution patterns was demonstrated to be indirectly related to a positive evaluation of the CEO, as well as an increased willingness to pay for the organization's services. The second experiment further demonstrated that the reduced attribution to financial motivation associated with mortality awareness persisted even when the CEO in question was known for placing a high personal priority on financial goal attainment. The findings underscore the importance of perceived value-oriented motivation when communicating climate change mitigating policies, and the role of mortality awareness as one of many ways to induce such attributions.

**Keywords:** mortality salience, terror management, CSR communication, attribution, value-orientation

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing consensus that corporations have a social responsibility to serve communities, society, and the environment in ways that go above and beyond what is legally required (Wood, 1991; McWilliams and Siegel, 2001; Lockett et al., 2006). This form of social responsibility is typically referred to as *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR). The goal of most CSR initiatives is to achieve sustained competitive advantage by attracting and retaining support from consumers and other stakeholders (Waddock, 2008; Devinney, 2009; Porter and Kramer, 2011). CSR measures

frequently involve activities and goals that appear to go against the corporate logic of profit, such as philanthropy, community development, environmental conservation, or social justice (Van Marrewijk, 2003). In many cases, however, the CSR goals neatly overlap with the ordinary corporate goals, such as reducing costly waste and conserving energy.

Organizations and individuals face a dilemma regarding how to communicate their CSR policies to the public. In general, most consumers want corporations to act as good corporate citizens. However, consumers are often also quite skeptical of corporations that promote their good citizenship (Brønn and Vroni, 2001; Morsing et al., 2008; Lii and Lee, 2012). Yoon et al. (2006) found that in cases where a company was perceived as insincere, CSR communications actually hurt the company image. Similarly, psychological research has demonstrated that perceived intentions and motivations are crucial when labeling actions morally good or bad. For a behavior to be considered morally praiseworthy, the agent must not only have intended and brought about the action and its consequences, she must also have performed the act for reasons that are themselves praiseworthy (Fedotova et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2012; Critcher et al., in preparation). Organizations thus face a perilous and delicate situation. By under-communicating CSR activities, one faces the risk of people never learning about the activities, and possibly assuming that no CSR initiatives have been made. By failing to communicate CSR messages in a sincere and believable fashion, one faces the risk of skepticism and cynicism among of weary consumers, who disbelieve the accuracy and sincerity of the claims, and the efficacy of the policies (Morsing et al., 2008). This danger of perceived insincerity is also relevant when corporations engage in environmentally friendly activities. Even though communicating environmentally oriented CSR policies and activities could elicit positive reactions, it may also lead to adverse motivational attributions (see Groza et al., 2011). In cases where the sustainability initiatives are seen as primarily motivated by financial gain, people often respond negatively (Morsing and Schultz, 2006). Previous research has demonstrated that people easily suspect ulterior motives when they hear of corporate activities that are both environmentally and financially beneficial (de Vries et al., 2013; Windsor, 2013). As perceived sincerity of motivation has been identified as a key success factor for CSR communication, and as CSR is becoming an increasingly important part of brand strategy, it is important to understand how consumers perceive the motivation behind different CSR strategies, and identify the antecedents to favorable motivational attribution (Du et al., 2010; Debeljak et al., 2011; Olsen et al., 2014).

In this paper, we explored how justifying ambiguously motivated CSR initiatives with a recent mortality reminder can mitigate suspicion of extrinsic motivation. The overarching research question was whether people recently exposed to a mortality reminder are perceived as more value-oriented. By perceived value-orientation, we mean a combination of more attribution to intrinsic moral or ideological convictions, and less attribution to extrinsic factors, such as financial gains, and external expectations on behalf of consumers and stakeholders. The research question is particularly interesting in order to

understand how people perceive individuals and organizations who attempt to portray themselves as morally motivated, while obviously also being motivated by financial gain. It is also of immediate concern for research on how to increase favorable evaluation of climate change mitigating CSR initiatives in the population at large, as cynical motivational attribution may be a barrier against positive evaluations of such initiatives. While previous research has speculated that mortality awareness can aid people into more environmentally friendly attitudes and behaviors (Vail et al., 2012), we extend the investigation into how a motivational attribution can be altered when we know that the observed person is in a state of elevated mortality awareness.

## Mortality Salience

The psychological and behavioral consequences of thinking about death, and the mortality of the self and others, have been studied extensively (Burke et al., 2010). Most of this research has been conducted within the framework of terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Typical terror management has been studied in experiments where one group is exposed to a mortality prime, e.g., an instruction to describe what happens to the physical body after death, while a control group is exposed to a control prime, e.g., an instruction to describe a painful dentistry treatment (Burke et al., 2010). After an initial priming manipulation, participants then go on to indicate their attitudes, or perform behaviors that are hypothesized to be affected by the presence of mortality awareness. According to TMT, people have an innate existential motivation to turn to meaning-providing structures to cope with the knowledge of inevitable mortality (Greenberg et al., 1990; Routledge et al., 2008). The most commonly observed coping mechanisms are increased investments in-, and defense of, own cultural world views, and self-esteem (Baumeister, 1991). Subsequent increase in self-esteem and an increased defense of one's own cultural world views have been observed as a reaction to mortality primes in a vast number of studies (Burke et al., 2010), while a slight shift toward political conservatism has been observed in others (Jost et al., 2003). These reactions are typically referred to as 'distal defenses,' meaning that the process by which they arise as a response to the mortality prime is typically not consciously accessible (Greenberg et al., 2000). Terror management studies using attributions as outcome measure have yielded findings in line with the theoretical framework, demonstrating that mortality primes increase the tendency for self serving attributions and imbuing everyday actions with meaning (Mikulincer and Florian, 2002; Landau et al., 2010).

## Mortality Salience and Different Motivations

The idea that awareness of one's own mortality may be related to changes in the priority of extrinsic pursuits is not new. All five major religions present recurrent reminders of how material riches are rendered empty in the face of mortality. Works of literature and philosophy further echo the notion that the thought of one's inevitable death can make efforts to obtain superfluous material value seem inauthentic and meaningless.



The existential psychologists Yalom (1980, 2008), as well as classic literary characters like Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge, have illustrated how intimations of mortality make strivings for wealth and social status seem vacuous and void of meaning. Councilors working with terminal patients, or people who have had near-death experiences, report that a typical reaction is to devalue the meaning of material possessions and ego-enhancement (Kinnier et al., 2001; Ware, 2011). The effects of mortality primes on materialism and extrinsic vs. value-driven motivation have been researched quite extensively. While philosophy and literature point solely toward a decrease in extrinsic motivation as consequence of mortality reminders, TMT experiments offer more complex results. Kosloff and Greenberg (2009) found that participants who were asked how much importance they placed on extrinsic pursuits tended to trivialize their importance if asked directly after the mortality prime. However, when given a distractor task between the presentation of the mortality prime and the subsequent questionnaire, participants gave higher importance ratings for a high priority extrinsic goal. The authors argued that such effects may arise because the affirmation of personally important extrinsic goals can lead to higher self-esteem and defense of the sources of meaning in life. Across most TMT experiments, the delay and distraction between the mortality prime and outcome measure is used to allow for mortality cognitions to fade from consciousness, as the distal defenses are theorized to only manifest after the thought has faded from consciousness (Burke et al., 2010). Increase in self-esteem and embracement of one's cultural world views are the two well-known distal defenses, and as such, it is in line with TMT that the increased investment in extrinsic goals after a mortality prime is only present when a distractor task is used, and the extrinsic goal considered culturally and/or personally important (Arndt et al., 2004). Support for pro-environmental attitudes can be increased as a reaction to a mortality prime, but only in cases where people are already imbued with pro-environmental attitudes (Vess and Arndt, 2008; Fritzsche and Häfner, 2012), or when pro-environmental norms are a salient part of the environment (Fritzsche et al., 2010). Taken together, these findings suggest that the predictable reaction toward a mortality prime is increased defense of one's cultural worldview and self-esteem. Provided that extrinsic pursuits are the central theme in one's cultural worldview, and/or the prominent source of positive self-esteem, mortality primes should induce an increased investment in those extrinsic pursuits. If morally motivated pro-environmentalism is an important part of one's cultural world view, and/or important source of self-esteem, mortality primes should reliably induce increased engagement in those pursuits.

While some research has focused on the link between mortality salience, extrinsic motivation, and environmental attitudes and behavior, less is known about how mortality salience can affect the motivational attribution of other people's behavior. Even though the presented paper draws upon TMT research, it departs from the terror management tradition in one crucial aspect. Whereas most TMT research focuses on how people respond when primed with reminders of their own mortality, this study explores how an observed decision maker is perceived,

when that decision maker claims to have been made more acutely aware of her own mortality. To the very best of our knowledge, people's lay-theories about the nature of motivation under mortality awareness have not previously been described in the literature. However, past research has demonstrated that people often infer that the motivational processes they experience are present in the minds of others as well (Reeder and Trafimow, 2005). This is why we chose to base the direction of our hypotheses on TMT research. The experiments presented here were designed to test if and how a decision makers' claimed mortality awareness can eschew motivational attribution from financial and extrinsic to value-oriented. The experiments tested perceptions of behaviors and decisions made by an executive in a corporate setting.

## Research Outline: Mortality Awareness and Perceived Value-Orientation

The independent variable (IV) in TMT research is the presence or absence of a psychological prime that makes the issue of mortality more or less salient in the experiment situation. As the present research is more concerned with social perception (i.e., the perception of others), the IV in this study was termed mortality awareness, referring to the extent to which the decision maker claimed to have been acutely aware of her own mortality. According to Critcher et al. (in preparation), people engage in social-cognitive mind reading when assessing how morally praiseworthy an observed behavior is. This mind reading entails picking up cues that indicate the extent to which the observed person seems to appreciate the underlying moral principle behind their behavior. We hypothesized that mortality awareness may serve as such a cue, highlighting that the demonstrated behavior is more motivated by moral values such as a sincere appreciation for the importance of sustainability and environmental protection, and less by financial gains and external expectations. The setting of the experiment was a description of a fictitious company that had recently decided to implement CSR measures that were not only environmentally beneficial, but also cost saving for the company, as the customers would bear the cost of the initiatives. In this particular case, the setting is a hotel chain manager who decided to reduce the size of plates and glasses at the buffet, install water saving showers, and adopt a more restrictive policy regarding changing of towels and linens. These initiatives are all clearly environmentally friendly, as they will lead to reduced waste of food and drink, reduced energy consumption, and reduced use of detergents and emission of wastewater. They are also certainly financially beneficial, as they will reduce costs on behalf of the hotel. The CEO in question claimed that the new initiatives were motivated by her sincere appreciation for the importance of environmental care and climate change mitigation. However, as all these cost-saving measures are ultimately carried by the consumer, and directly and positively influencing the company cash flow, the sincerity of the CEO's motivation was clearly questionable. Our first prediction, derived from TMT, was that the CEO who decided to implement these measures would be presumed to be more motivated by her intrinsic values, and less motivated by extrinsic factors, if she was perceived as

having been acutely aware of her own mortality when she made the decision. Our second prediction was that this relationship would be reversed, if the observed decision maker was known to put a strong personal priority on financial goal attainment. Two experiments were designed to test each of the predictions, respectively.

## EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 was designed to explore if a person's ambiguously motivated decision is attributed to different motivations, depending on whether, or not the decision maker has recently been reminded of her own mortality. The IV was the circumstances that led the CEO to come up with the new initiatives. The three experimental conditions only differed in how the CEO answered to a question of how these ideas came about, one of which involves mortality awareness. In the mortality awareness condition, the CEO claimed to have had a mortality reminder, and subsequently decided to implement the aforementioned CSR initiatives. We predicted that this set of events would lead to more value-based attributions, and less attributions to extrinsic factors, compared to the control conditions, which do not involve mortality awareness. As value-based attributions were expected to be associated with support for CSR initiatives, the first hypothesis predicted a direct effect between mortality awareness as justification, and favorable evaluation of the CSR initiatives.

*H1: Reporting that a mortality reminder preceded the decision to implement environmentally friendly policies will lead to (a) more positive evaluation of decision maker and (b) higher willingness to pay, compared to active, and passive control.*

We further predicted that the participants would expect a decision maker who was highly aware of her own mortality to be more inclined to make decisions that were motivated by her ideology, morality and values, compared to a decision maker who did not come across as acutely aware of her own mortality. More specifically, we predicted that the mortality awareness would lead to an increase in value-based motivational attribution, and reduction in attribution to extrinsic motivations. The second hypothesis was thus:

*H2: Reporting that a mortality reminder preceded the decision to implement ambiguously motivated policies will lead to (a) more attribution to value-based motivation, and (b) less attribution to extrinsic factors, compared to both control conditions.*

Past research in moral psychology has demonstrated that perceptions of underlying intentions are crucial in determining whether or not a behavior is morally praiseworthy (Fedotova et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2012), and CSR research has demonstrated that perceived sincerity of motivation is a crucial success factor for CSR communication (Du et al., 2010; de Vries et al., 2013). Our final prediction was therefore that the positive perceptual outcomes generated by using mortality reminder as justification would be mediated by a higher tendency to attribute the measures

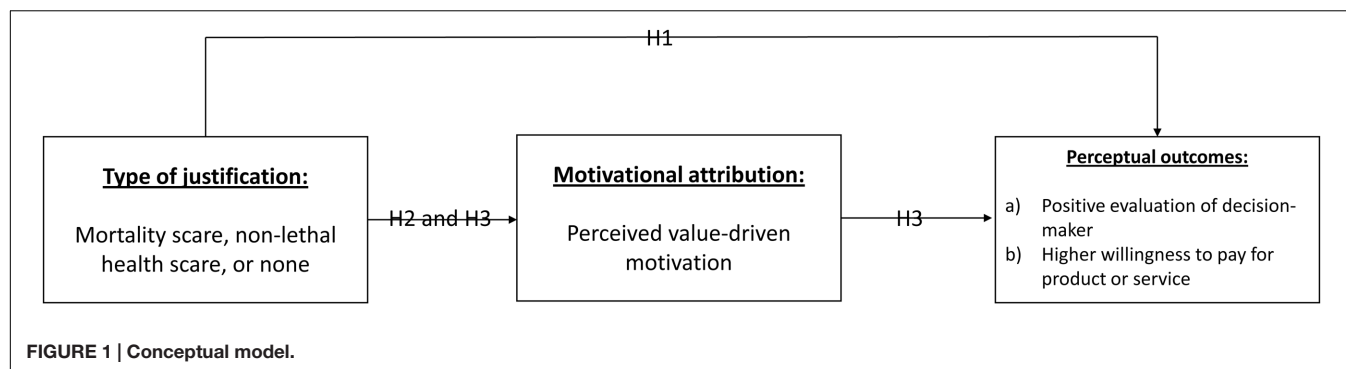
to value-based motivation. The third and final hypothesis was therefore:

*H3: The relationship between presence of mortality awareness in justification and (a) more positive evaluation of decision maker and (b) higher willingness to pay, will be mediated by degree of value-based attributions.*

Figure 1 displays the conceptual model for Experiment 1, with predicted paths in accordance with the hypotheses.

## Materials and Pre-Test

Both experiments used video footage of an actress portraying a CEO in an interview setting. The actress was instructed to portray her character in a realistic manner, while maintain identical postures, facial expressions, and tone of voice in all recordings. The video started with a rolling text stating: "Ellen Hansen is the CEO of a large Nordic hotel chain. She has just approved a new plan to make the hotels more environmentally friendly. Among the measures are reducing the size of plates and glasses at the breakfast buffet with 20 percent, in order to reduce waste of food. Furthermore, the hotels have been equipped with water-saving showers. Additionally, the hotels have adopted a more restrictive policy on changing of towels and linens on shorter stays. [New paragraph] In an interview, Ellen explained the background for the decision." Here, the video continued to a fictitious interview, wherein the actress portraying the CEO, stated: "We are now taking measures in order to become more socially responsible. The climate threat is one of the biggest challenges that humanity has ever faced, and our chain has to be a part of the solution". This part of the video constituted the passive control condition, and was identical for all conditions. The independent variable, i.e., the justification for the decision, was introduced at the end of this video. The screen showed the text: "When asked how she got the idea for these measures, she replied:". The mortality awareness video showed that the CEO attributed her decision to a recent mortality reminder: "A while ago I discovered a lump in my armpit. I contacted the doctor, who informed me that he couldn't say for certain what this was, but that it could be the early form of a lethal and incurable form of cancer. They took a sample of the cells, and sent it to a lab for analysis. I had to wait 2 weeks for the results to arrive. The waiting was very demanding, and it got me thinking about what really matters in life. That's when I decided to run the company in a more sustainable direction. The results came back negative, and the lump disappeared, but the motivation stayed with me". In accordance with past TMT research (see Burke et al., 2010), the active control video displayed the same CEO, who attributed her decision to a recent non-lethal dental health scare: "A while ago I got a terrible oral infection. I contacted the dentist, who told me that it was either something that would pass away by itself, or an infection of the gums, in which case I would have to undergo a harmless but painful operation. He took some samples, and told me to wait a couple of weeks for the results. The waiting period was very demanding, and it got me thinking about what really matters in life. That's when I decided to run the company in a more sustainable direction. The results came back negative, and the pain went away, but the motivation stayed with me". This



active control condition contained many of the same elements as the mortality awareness condition, in that they both entailed insecurity, loss of control, physical pain, and personal health problems. Both conditions were liable to induce pity on behalf of the observer, and both could be seen as candid and forthright accounts of a private matter. The significant difference between the experiment condition and the active control condition was the mortality reminder referenced in the experiment condition, pitted against the explicit non-lethality of the dentistry condition.

Before the experiments, all video stimuli was pre-tested on a student sample. A total of 11 participants saw both versions of the video, in random order, producing a total of 22 observations. The pre-test examined how the actress was perceived in each video in terms of how enthusiastic and interpersonally warm the CEO was rated. Across the observations, no significant differences between the groups were found. After the test, the participants were told how the stimuli were to be used, and asked if any of the videos stood out as different from the other, aside from the different words the actress conveyed. None of the participants indicated that any of the videos differed from the others in such a way.

## Sample and Procedure

Participants ( $N = 87$ ) were recruited from a Norwegian university law school (40 female, mean age 22). Participation was compensated with a 60 NOK (~11 \$) gift card to the student cafeteria. Before the experiment, participants were told that the experiment would be about communication, business, and environmental care. The participants were guaranteed anonymity, and allowed to discontinue the study at any time. All participants indicated informed consent electronically, in accordance with the declaration of Helsinki. The study was approved by the Vice-Rector of Research at The Norwegian School of Economics.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups and one passive control group. The participants assembled in different classrooms. Before the experiment started, they were given instructions on how to respond during the experiment via their smartphones, tablets, or computers. The participants were furthermore instructed to give responses individually, and maintain silence throughout the experiment. The participants first responded to Kanter and Mirvis' (1989) dispositional cynicism scale, and Milfont and Duckitt's (2010) environmental attitude scale. They were then

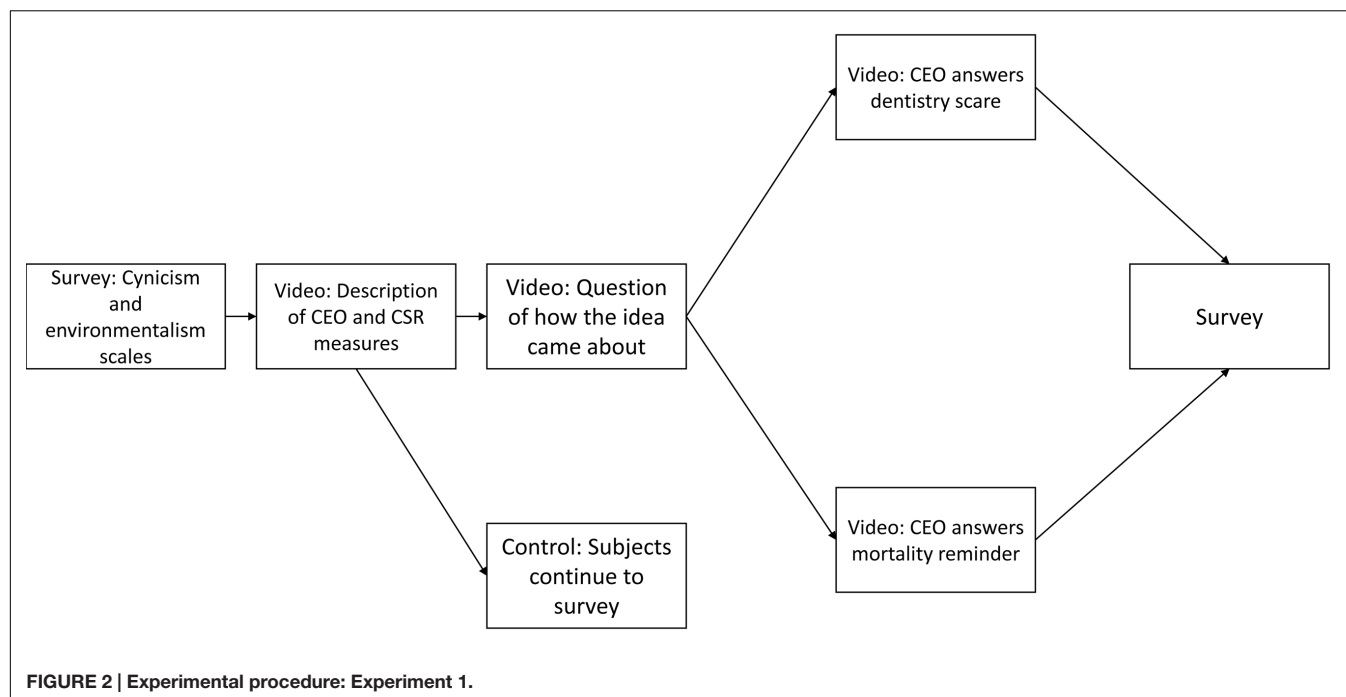
exposed to one of three different videos, as described in the section above. The video was displayed on a big screen in the classroom. Participants in the passive control condition ( $N = 27$ ) saw the video wherein no justification was asked for, and went on to complete the survey. The second group saw the active control dentistry video ( $N = 29$ ), and continued to give their responses on the outcome measures. The third group saw the mortality awareness video ( $N = 31$ ), and continued to give their responses on the outcome measures. All participants had to view the entire designated video before they could move on in the experiment. **Figure 2** illustrates the experimental procedure.

## Dependent Measures

Having seen their respective video, all participants were instructed to complete a survey, detailing their attitudes toward the decision and the decision maker, as well as perceived communicative intention, and motivational attributions pertaining to the decision (see Appendix for a complete overview of all). All outcome measures were entered into a principle components factor analysis, with direct oblim rotation. The analyses extracted four factors with an eigenvalue above 1.00. According to Singh (1991), deviations from the normative use of one as eigenvalue cut-off score is permissible in cases where adherence to the norm would produce redundancy in constructs. Using scree plot analyses of the eigenvalues (see Hair et al., 1998) a drop in eigenvalue between the fifth and sixth factors was identified. This was consistent with the expected factor structure. As the factor analysis was used mainly to investigate the internal consistency of my measures, we applied similar criteria to Rust et al. (2004) (parsimony, managerial usefulness, and psychological meaningfulness) and applied a five factor structure in these analyses. **Table 1** displays the measurement model.

Liking decision maker, perceiving decision maker as professional, perceiving decision maker as competent, and willingness to endorse decision maker as a member on an advisory board on ethical investment were all measured on seven-point Likert scales. These items formed the factor *evaluation of decision maker* (factor 4 in **Table 1**) (Cronbachs  $\alpha = 0.84$ ). A single item measuring liking decision had to be removed due to multicollinearity. The CSR attribution scale from Groza et al. (2011) was also deployed, but due to cross-loading, only six of the nine items were included in the analysis. The



**TABLE 1 | Measurement model in Experiment 1.**

Item:	Mean	SD	Factor loadings				
			1	2	3	4	5
Like decision maker	4,81	1,18				−0.595	
Endorse decision maker	4,31	1,55				−0.671	
Decision maker is professional	4,95	1,36				−0.918	
Decision maker is competent	4,77	1,24				−0.935	
Moral motivation	4,92	1,42	0.719				
... they have a long-term interest in society	3,39	0.94	0.889				
... they believe in environmental care	3,76	0.96	0.861				
... they are trying to give back to society	3,07	1,02	0.817				
... their customers expect them to do this	3,43	1,14		0.922			
... society in general expects them to do this	3,56	0.973		0.833			
... they will retain more customers by doing this	3,38	0.94		0.721			
Attitudinal persuasion knowledge	4,06	0.89			0.844		
Behavioral persuasion knowledge	3,93	0.89			0.890		
Willingness to pay	4,38	0.78					0.944

three items measuring value-driven attribution were combined with the single item measuring perceived moral motivation to form the factor *value-based attributions* (factor 1 in **Table 1**) (Cronbachs  $\alpha = 0.84$ ). The mean score on the three remaining attribution items was labeled *extrinsic attribution* (factor 2 in **Table 1**) (Cronbachs  $\alpha = 0.72$ ). The concept *persuasion knowledge* refers to the extent to which a person feels that the communicative intention of another person is to manipulate or persuade them. In this experiment, persuasion knowledge refers to the extent to which participants felt that the CEO had such a communicative intention, and was measured with two items (factor 3 in **Table 1**). One item assessed attitudinal persuasion knowledge (i.e., “the CEO is attempting to change my attitudes”)

and another item assessed behavioral persuasion knowledge (i.e., “the CEO is attempting to influence my future choices”) (Cronbachs = 0.70). However, the measure was not used in the further analysis. Finally, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to pay in reference to a normal price for an equivalent room at an equivalent hotel, given their new information (factor 5 in **Table 1**). The participants indicated their *willingness to pay* on a seven-point scale, with zero percent as center value, and 10% increases or decreases in price in each direction, with 30% more and 30% less as extreme values. All standardized scales used in this study were translated to Norwegian. The following process assured the quality of the translation: first, three Ph.D. students working separately produced a translation of each

item. Secondly, three bilingual professors at the department of language choose which translation was correct. The professors provided their votes separately. Across all items, the professors were unanimous in all but two cases, in which the version with two out of three votes was selected. This translation procedure is very similar to the one recommended by Douglas and Craig (2007).

## Results

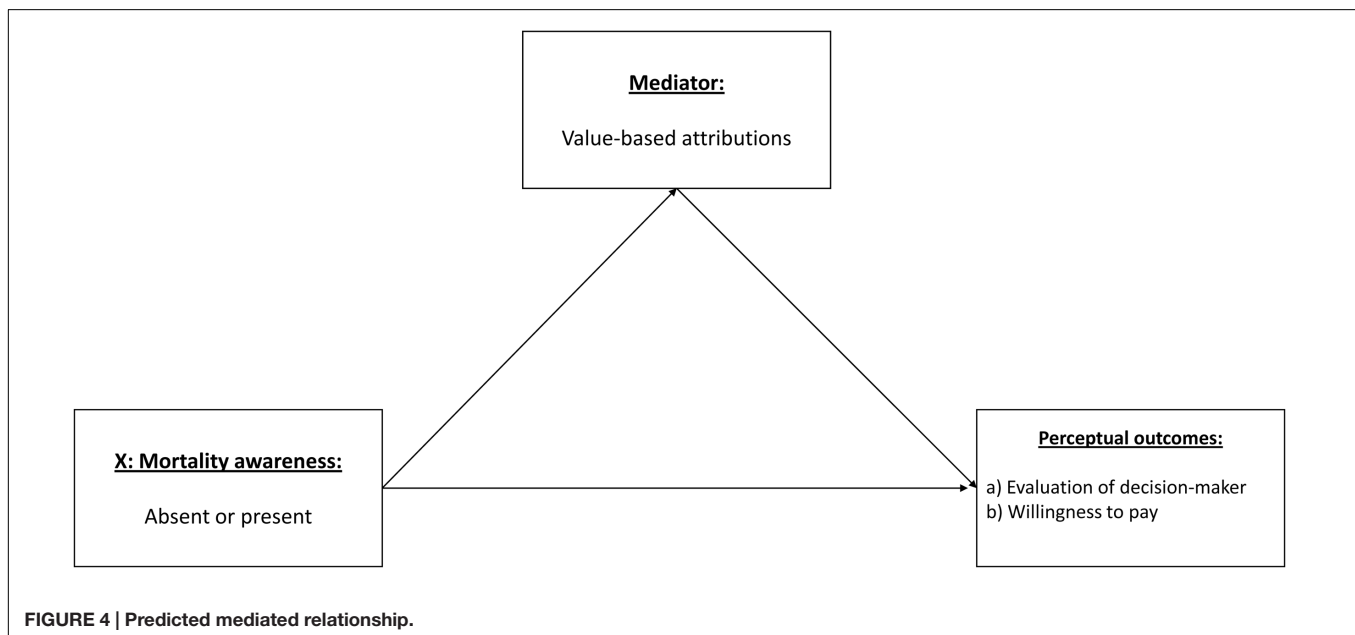
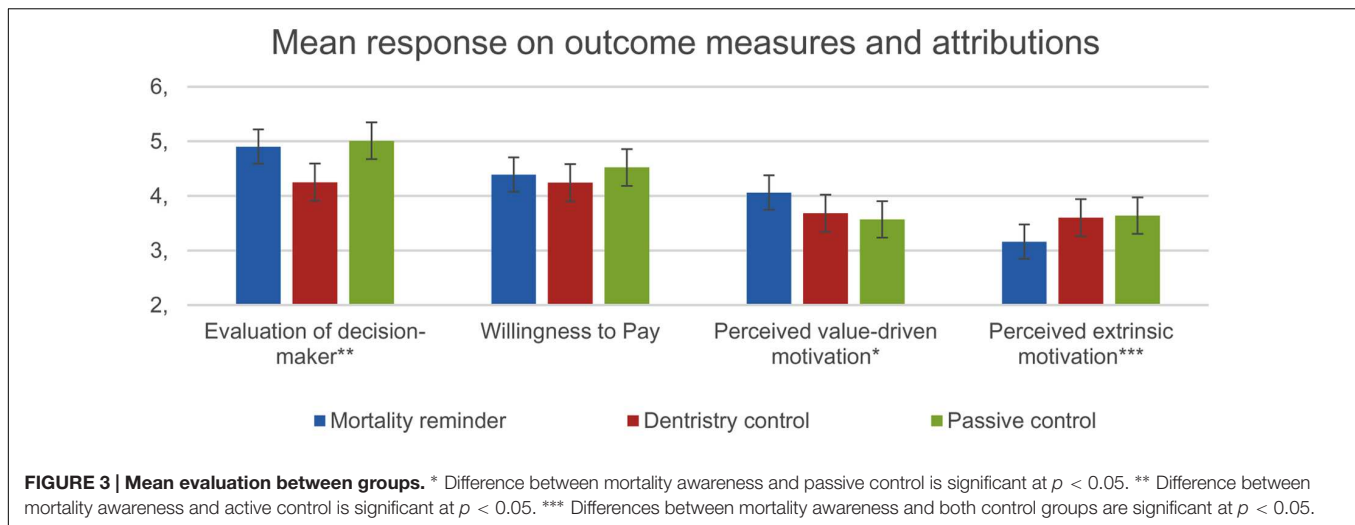
Correlational findings from this experiment were in line with past research that has shown that motivational attribution is a crucial factor for positive evaluation in CSR communication (Du et al., 2010; Groza et al., 2011; de Vries et al., 2013). A high score on the value-based attribution measure was positively associated with liking the decision ( $r = 0.51$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and a positive overall evaluation of the decision maker ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The two first hypotheses predicted between-groups differences in how the CEO would be perceived and how her decision would be attributed. In order to test the hypotheses, we conducted a series of ANOVAs where condition (mortality awareness vs. active control vs. passive control) was always the between-subject variable, and where the dependent variables were evaluation of decision maker, willingness to pay, extrinsic attribution, and value-based attribution, respectively. As we were only seeking to address the question of how mortality awareness can produce differences in evaluation and attribution, we performed planned contrasts of [mortality awareness] vs. [active control + passive control]. We also performed planned contrasts between the two active conditions, i.e., [active control] vs. [mortality awareness]. According to Hypothesis 1, the CEO would be perceived more favorably by participants in the mortality awareness condition than by participants in the two control groups. The results revealed statistically significant differences between group means [ $F(2,84) = 4.13$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ]. The planned contrast tests indicated that the CEO was given a more positive evaluation by participants in the mortality awareness condition compared to the active control condition CEO [ $t(83) = -2.16$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $d = 0.57$ , 95% CI from 0.30 to 0.86], but not compared to both control conditions combined [ $t(83) = 1.11$ ,  $p = 0.69$ ,  $d = 0.25$ , 95% CI from  $-0.48$  to  $-0.02$ ]. Hypothesis 1a was thus only partially supported. We further predicted that the mortality salient CEO would produce a higher willingness to pay than the control conditions. The ANOVA did not provide support for this prediction [ $F(2,84) = 0.88$ ,  $p = 0.42$ ], and the planned contrast tests demonstrated no significant differences in willingness to pay. Hypothesis 2 stated that the CEO whose justification involved mortality awareness would produce more value-based attributions, and less attribution to extrinsic motivations. The ANOVA failed to demonstrate significant between groups differences [ $F(2,84) = 2.13$ ,  $p = 0.09$ ]. However, the planned contrast tests indicated that the mortality salient CEO came across as significantly more motivated by intrinsic values, compared with the two control groups combined [ $t(84) = 2.18$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $d = 0.49$ , 95% CI from 0.31 to 0.68], but not when compared solely with the active control group [ $t(84) = -1.66$ ,  $p = 0.10$ ,  $d = 0.43$ , 95% CI from 0.23 to 0.61]. Hypothesis 2a thus only received partial support. Finally,

the groups were found to differ significantly, in line with the hypothesis, with regards to attributing the decision to extrinsic motivation [ $F(2,84) = 4.20$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ]. The planned contrast test showed that the mortality aware CEO came across as significantly less motivated by extrinsic factors, compared to the two control conditions combined [ $t(84) = -2.89$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = -0.63$ , 95% CI from  $-0.82$  to  $-0.50$ ], and compared to only active control [ $t(84) = 2.42$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ,  $d = -0.53$ , 95% CI from  $-0.82$  to  $-0.43$ ]. This finding supported Hypothesis 2b. **Figure 3** displays the mean evaluations between the groups in perceptual outcomes and motivational attribution.

In order to test Hypothesis 3, two simple mediation analyses were conducted. Across the analysis of differences between the groups, the active control group and passive control group did not differ significantly on any dispositional measures or outcome measure except evaluation of decision maker. While hypotheses 1 and 2 predict direct effects of mortality awareness compared to both passive and active control stimuli, hypotheses 3a and 3b represent attempts at exploring the mediating factors that are affected by the presence or absence of mortality awareness. As such, and in order to increase the validity and power of the mediation analysis necessitated by Hypothesis 3, the results from the active and passive control groups were combined into a single group. The tested models are illustrated in **Figure 4**.

We employed Preacher and Hayes's (2004, 2008) PROCESS macro for SPSS. The proposed mediation models revealed no significant direct effect on any of the perceptual outcome measures. Although the direct effects are absent, it is still possible and useful to test and report the indirect relationships in the proposed model (see Hayes, 2009). In such analyses, where a direct effect between X and Y is absent, the proposed mediators are better referred to as indirect relationships, rather than mediated relationships (Mathieu and Taylor, 2006). The first predicted relationship was between presence or absence of mortality awareness, value-based attribution, and evaluation of decision maker. The analysis revealed a significant indirect effect. A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (from 0.0524 to 0.6469). The coefficients revealed that presence of mortality awareness led to significantly higher levels of value-based attribution, which in turn was significantly positively associated with positive evaluation of decision maker. Hypothesis 3a was thus supported. **Figure 5** displays the model, with coefficients.

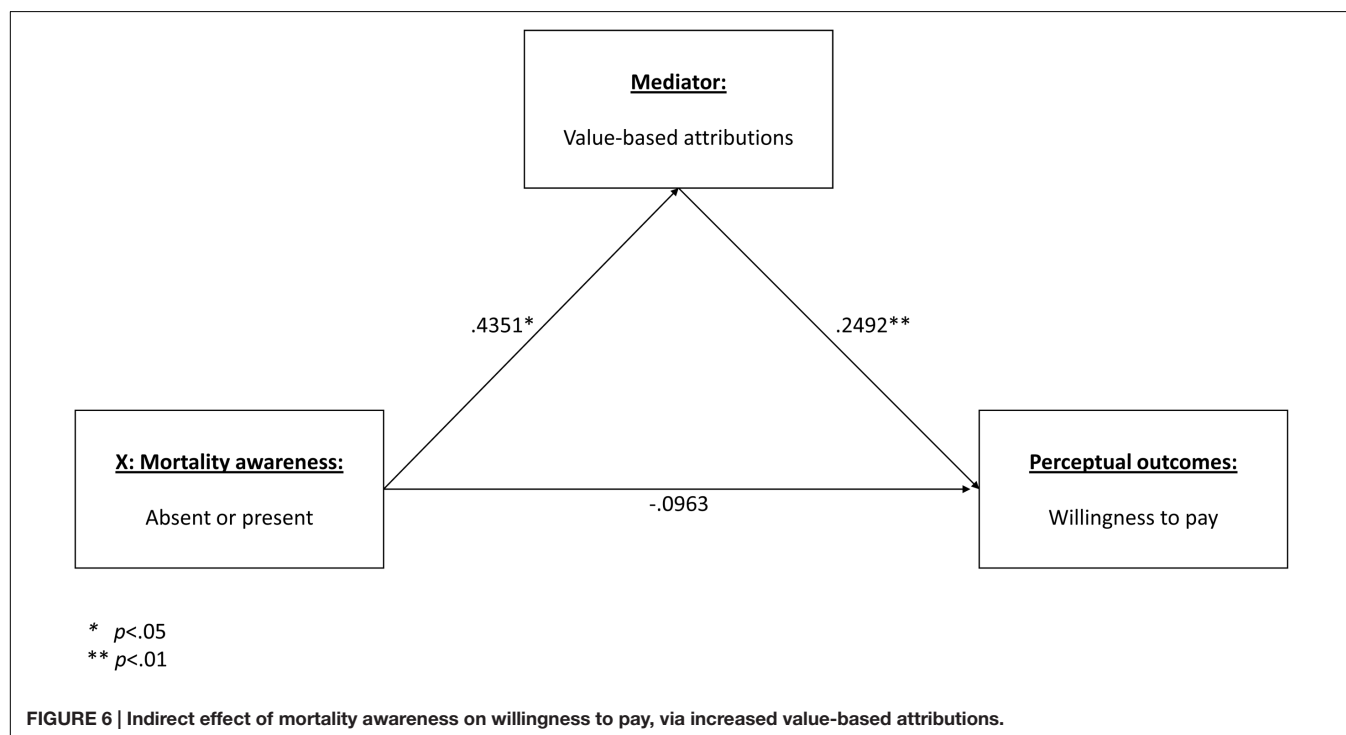
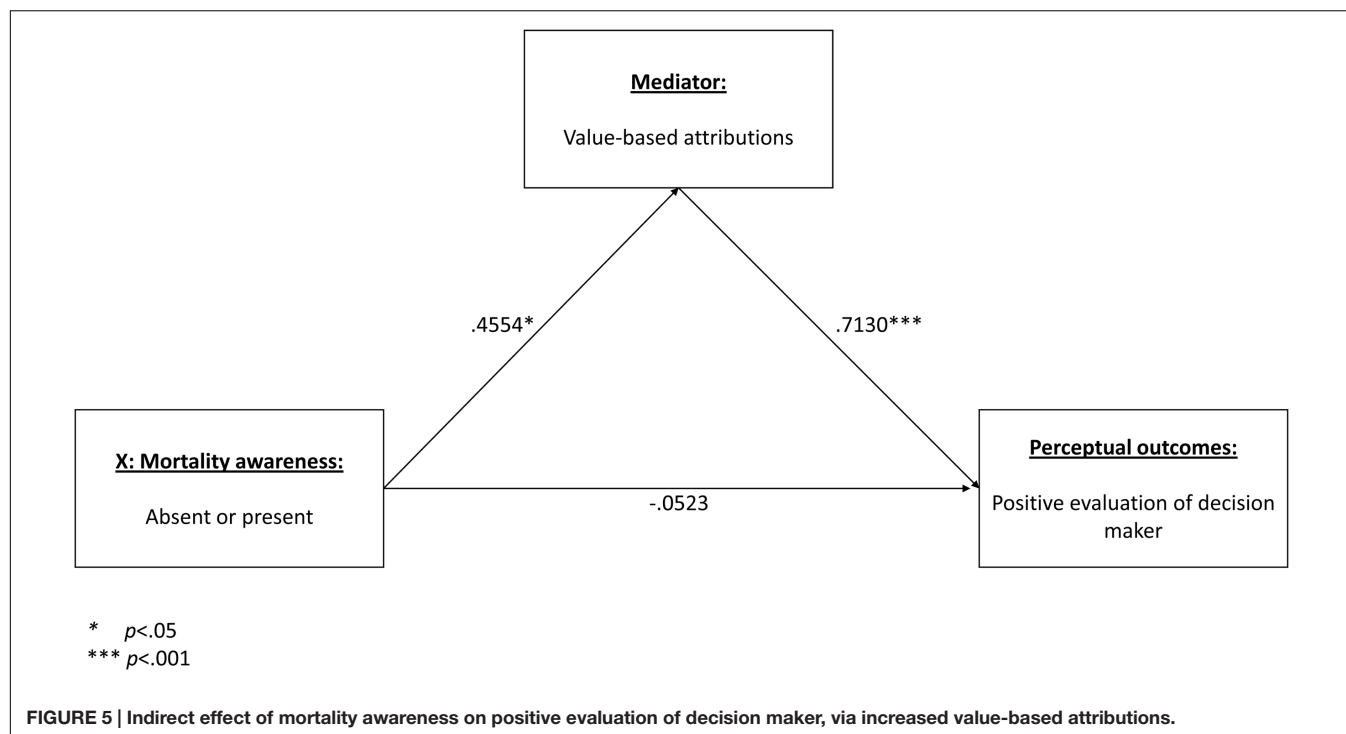
In order to test Hypothesis 3b, the same analysis was repeated, but with willingness to pay as outcome measure. Once again, the indirect effect proved significant, with confidence intervals entirely above zero (from 0.0249 to 0.2887). As predicted, the coefficients revealed that the presence of mortality awareness led to higher levels of value-based attribution, which in turn was found to be significantly positively related to higher willingness to pay. These findings underscore the importance of value-based attribution as antecedent to favorable outcomes in strategic CSR communication. In as much as the predicted mechanisms were proven significant, Hypothesis 3 is supported. **Figure 6** displays the mediation model with corresponding coefficients.



## Discussion

The results from Experiment 1 demonstrated that the decision maker who had recently suffered a mortality reminder was seen as more motivated by moral values, and significantly less by extrinsic or instrumental factors. Furthermore, the support of Hypothesis 3 demonstrates that this difference in attribution is a relevant factor when participants evaluate the decision maker, and when they determine their willingness to pay. However, having recently been reminded of her own mortality did not change evaluation of the decision maker or willingness to pay directly. Nevertheless, the results offer support for the notion that ambiguously motivated decisions made by a decision maker who appears aware of her own mortality is seen as less driven by extrinsic motivation. The first experiment thus demonstrates that the identified main effect of mortality primes is also relevant in social perception: people expect a decision maker

to be less motivated by extrinsic factors when she has recently been exposed to a mortality reminder. This result is allegorical to the general finding from TMT, which states that people tend to trivialize the importance of extrinsic pursuits after a mortality prime (Burke et al., 2010). However, the TMT literature suggests that the relationship between mortality salience and motivation for extrinsic pursuits is moderated by the personal priority placed on the extrinsic pursuit in question (Kosloff and Greenberg, 2009). The moderated relationship states that mortality primes remove motivation for low-priority extrinsic pursuits, but increases the motivation for high-priority extrinsic pursuits (Arndt et al., 2004). As the importance of this moderator has been readily demonstrated within the TMT tradition, the aim of the second experiment in this paper was to explore whether the same moderated relationship is relevant in perception of others.



## EXPERIMENT 2

The aim of Experiment 2 was to explore the extent to which mortality awareness may serve as an indicator of value-driven motivation in cases where the observed decision maker places a high importance on the attainment of financial goals.

As mentioned, TMT research indicates that mortality primes mainly tend to amplify investments in whatever themes are personally and/or culturally important to the decision maker (Burke et al., 2010). Building on the assumption that people's perceptions of the motivation of other people largely parallels their own motivational processes (Reeder and Trafimow, 2005),

it is reasonable to hypothesize that their lay-theories about other people's motivation under mortality awareness would also encompass this general amplification tendency. If people perceive others in line with relevant results from TMT research, an ambiguously motivated decision made by a recently mortality reminded decision maker who is known to place a high priority on financial goal attainment should generate the opposite attributional pattern from the one demonstrated in the first experiment. More specifically, if the findings from Kosloff and Greenberg (2009) translate into perception of others, the decision maker who is both acutely aware of her mortality, and known for placing a high priority on financial goal attainment, should be interpreted as being more motivated by the extrinsic gains associated with the decision, and less by the claimed moral or value-based motivation for the decision. The first hypothesis was thus:

*H1. In cases where the observed decision maker is known for placing a high personal priority on financial goal attainment, reporting that a mortality reminder preceded the decision to implement environmentally and financially beneficial policies will lead to more attribution to financial motivation.*

Past research on CSR perception and motivational attribution has demonstrated that endeavors that are perceived as self-serving in a financial sense are often perceived as less motivated by morality or intrinsic values (Groza et al., 2011; de Vries et al., 2013). We therefore further predicted that the recently mortality reminded decision maker would be perceived as less motivated by intrinsic values and morality. The second hypothesis was therefore:

*H2. In cases where the observed decision maker is known for placing a high personal priority on financial goal attainment, reporting that a mortality reminder preceded the decision to implement environmentally and financially beneficial policies will lead to less attribution to moral motivation.*

Moral psychology has demonstrated that inferences of motivation are crucial when people make judgments about how morally praiseworthy a behavior is (Fedotova et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2012). Similarly, CSR research has demonstrated that the perceived motivation behind environmental policies influence peoples' general perception of those policies, and the companies that employ them (Windsor, 2013; de Vries et al., 2013; Olsen et al., 2014). Our last prediction was therefore that the changes in motivational attribution produced by the stated mortality reminder would produce overall worse evaluation of the decision and decision maker. The third and final hypothesis was thus:

*H3. In cases where the observed decision maker is known for placing a high personal priority on financial goal attainment, reporting that a mortality reminder preceded the decision to implement environmentally and financially beneficial policies will lead more negative evaluation of (a) the decision and (b) the decision maker.*

## Procedure, Materials, and Sample

One hundred and eighty undergraduate psychology students (140 female, mean age 20) were recruited to participate in the experiment. Participation was voluntary and not compensated. Before the experiment, participants were told that the experiment would be about communication, business, and environmental care. The participants were guaranteed anonymity, and allowed to discontinue the study at any time. All participants indicated informed consent electronically, in accordance with the declaration of Helsinki. The study was approved by the Vice-Rector of Research at The Norwegian School of Economics.

Again, a between-groups design was applied. Groups to which students had been randomly assigned were randomly assigned to the different conditions, i.e., the passive control group, the dentistry control group, or the mortality awareness group. The experiment was conducted on three consecutive days. The experimental procedure was identical to that of the first experiment. The participants first indicated their responses to the dispositional and attitudinal measures. After all participants had completed these surveys, they were exposed to one of the three different video stimuli. The only difference between the stimuli used in this experiment, relative to the stimuli used in the first experiment, was that the text part of the video contained one additional piece of information, regarding the emphasis placed on financial pursuits by the observed decision maker. The text in the videos in the second experiment read: "Ellen Hansen is the CEO of a large Nordic hotel chain. She has always had an intense desire to make her hotel chain the most profitable in Europe. One of her biggest life-time goals has been to ensure that the company generates over 100 million NOK in profits in one fiscal year. [new paragraph] Ellen has just approved a new plan to make the hotels more environmentally friendly. Among the measures are reducing the size of plates and glasses at the breakfast buffet with 20%, in order to reduce waste of food. Furthermore, the hotels have been equipped with water-saving showers. Additionally, the hotels have adopted a more restrictive policy on changing of towels and linens on shorter stays. [new paragraph] In an interview, Ellen explained the background for the decision." The passive control condition participants ( $N = 57$ ) saw the video wherein no justification is asked for, and went on to complete the survey. The second group saw the active control dentistry video ( $N = 55$ ), and continued to give their responses on the outcome measures. The third group saw the mortality salient video ( $N = 68$ ), and continued to give their responses on the outcome measures. All participants had to view the entire designated video before they could move on in the experiment.

## Dependent Measures

Dependent measures were identical to those used in Experiment 1. Additionally, in order to better capture the motivational attributions of interest in this study, the measurement model in the second experiment was supplemented with more attribution measures. The additional attribution measures were all in the form of statements, with which the participants indicated their agreement on seven-point Lickert scales. The statements all



started with “*It seems like an important goal with these measures is*”. The proposed perceived goals were; *please customers, save money, ensure financial solidity, and reduced climate change*. We also added new items assessing support for the decision itself, as the single item used in Experiment 1 had to be removed from analysis due to cross-loading. The new items measures support for decision from both a consumer and employee perspective, principled support, an overall support item, and a reversed support item. All outcome measures were initially entered into a Principle Components factor analysis, with direct oblim rotation. The items measuring level of endorsement for the CEO to serve at ethics committee, as well as the item measuring willingness to pay had to be removed due to issues with multicollinearity and cross-loading. **Table 2** displays the final measurement model used in the experiment.

The results from the factor analysis revealed seven distinct factors, consistent with the expected factor structure. The factors are numbered in accordance with their position in **Table 2**. The first factor was labeled *support for decision* (1) (Cronbachs  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). The second factor was labeled *evaluation of decision maker* (2) (Cronbachs  $\alpha = 0.83$ ). The third factor was labeled *value-based attribution* (3) (Cronbachs  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). This factor consisted of the same four items that made up the same factor in Experiment 1, plus the addition of one item; *the purpose appears to be reduced climate change*. The fourth factor was labeled *reactive attribution* (4), meaning that the measures are seen more as motivated by external expectations (see Groza et al., 2011) (Cronbachs  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). The sixth factor was labeled *financial attribution* (6) (Cronbachs  $\alpha = 0.85$ ). The fifth and seventh factor were not utilized in further analysis.

## Results

The three hypotheses predicted between-groups differences in how the CEO would be perceived and how her decision would be attributed. In order to test the hypotheses, we conducted a series of ANOVAs where condition (mortality awareness vs. active control vs. passive control) was always the between-subject variable, and where the dependent variables were evaluation of decision maker, support for decision, financial attribution, value-based attribution, and reactive attribution, respectively. As we were only seeking to address the question of how mortality awareness can produce differences in evaluation and attribution, we performed planned contrasts of [mortality awareness] vs. [active control + passive control]. We also performed planned contrasts between the two active conditions, i.e., [active control] vs. [mortality awareness]. The degree of financial attribution evoked differed significantly between the groups, but not in line with Hypothesis 1 [ $F(2,177) = 4.81, p < 0.01$ ]. The planned contrast test showed that the mortality aware CEO induced lower levels of financial attribution than the CEO presented in the two control conditions combined [ $t(177) = -2.96, p < 0.01, d = -0.45$ , 95% CI from  $-0.61$  to  $-0.31$ ], and active control in isolation [ $t(177) = 2.05, p = 0.042, d = -0.36$ , 95% CI from  $-0.55$  to  $-0.17$ ]. These findings failed to provide support for the first hypothesis, which stated that the decision made under mortality awareness would be more attributed to financial motivation. Furthermore, the analyses showed no significant

group differences in value-based attribution [ $F(2,172) = 1.00, p = 0.37$ ]. The planned contrast test revealed no significant difference between the mortality awareness condition and the two controls combined [ $t(172) = 1.41, p = 0.16, d = 0.22$ , 95% CI from  $0.09$  to  $0.36$ ], and no difference when compared only against active control [ $t(172) = -1.28, p = 0.20, d = 0.24$ , 95% CI from  $0.08$  to  $0.40$ ]. This finding did not offer support for the Hypothesis 2, which predicted that the mortality awareness CEO would produce less value-driven attributions, compared to the control conditions. Finally, the ANOVA revealed no significant group differences in support for the decision [ $F(2,177) = 0.48, p = 0.62$ ]. Neither of the planned contrasts showed significant differences. However, the analysis did reveal a significant difference in evaluation of decision maker [ $F(2,177) = 5.88, p < 0.01$ ]. The planned contrast test showed a non-significant difference between the mortality awareness condition and the two controls combined [ $t(177) = 0.55, p = 0.58, d = 0.08$ , 95% CI from  $-0.11$  to  $0.26$ ]. However, there were significant differences between the mortality awareness CEO and the active control, in terms of evaluation of decision maker [ $t(177) = -2.23, p = 0.03, d = 0.38$ , 95% CI from  $0.16$  to  $0.61$ ]. These findings failed to provide support for the third hypothesis, which stated that the mortality awareness CEO would produce the lowest support for her decision, and lowest levels of evaluation of decision maker. Aside from testing the hypotheses, we also explored between groups differences in reactive attributions. The groups were found to differ significantly in terms of reactive attributions [ $F(2,177) = 3.10, p = 0.04$ ]. The actions of the mortality aware CEO were perceived to a lesser degree to be a reaction to external expectations, compared with the two control conditions combined [ $t(177) = -2.56, p = 0.01, d = -0.39$ , 95% CI from  $-0.54$  to  $-0.26$ ], and compared only to the active control condition [ $t(177) = 2.23, p = 0.027, d = -0.42$ , 95% CI from  $-0.59$  to  $-0.26$ ]. **Figure 7** displays the mean evaluations and attributions between groups.

## Discussion

According to Kosloff and Greenberg (2009), as well as Arndt et al. (2004), the decision maker portrayed in this experiment should be expected to be more motivated by financial goal attainment as a consequence of her recent mortality reminder, combined with her life-long ambitions of financial goal attainment. However, the results clearly indicate that participants did not perceive the CEO in this manner. Even though TMT studies have demonstrated the moderating role of personal importance of financial pursuits, the present results indicate that people's attributions of others are not sensitive to the presence of this moderator. The lack of support for any of the hypotheses, can be interpreted in terms of the observed decision makers' priority of financial gains being less relevant in social perception and attribution. Much like in Experiment 1, the decision maker who explained that she had recently been exposed to a real life mortality reminder was perceived as less motivated by financial gain and external expectations, even though it was clearly stated that financial goal attainment had long been a guiding goal for the decision maker in question. Put in less technical terms, the participants' attributions fell more along the lines of what one would predict

TABLE 2 | Measurement model in Experiment 2.

Item:	Mean	SD	Factor loadings						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
As an employee, support for decision	6,28	1,1	−0.745						
As a customer, support for decision	5,93	1,27	−0.669						
The decision is good	4,33	0.761	−0.755						
Principled support for decision	4,54	0.712	−0.952						
Disagree with decision (reversed)	4,52	0.758	0.886						
Like decision maker	4,49	1,48		0.650					
Decision maker seems professional	4,85	1,49		0.950					
Decision maker seems competent	5,00	1,37		0.784					
Perceived moral motivation	5,02	1,49			0.666				
Goal appears to be reduced climate change	3,84	1,05			0.670				
... they have a long term interest in society	3,55	1,06			0.740				
... they believe in environmental care	3,77	1,04			0.886				
... they are trying to give back to society	3,15	1,05			0.795				
... they think their customers expect them to do this	3,17	1,15				0.816			
... they think society in general expects them to do this	3,48	1,13				0.929			
... they think their owners and other stakeholders expect them to do this	3,12	1,05				0.815			
... they think they will retain more customers by doing this	3,60	0.992					−0.902		
... they think they will get more customers by doing this	3,62	1,06					−0.856		
Goal appears to be to please customers	3,71	1,02					−0.564		
Perceived financial motivation	4,43	1,70						0.742	
Goal appears to be to save money	3,31	1,14						0.878	
Goal appears to be to ensure financial solidity	3,37	1,04						0.839	
... they think they will earn/save more money by doing this	3,93	1,03						0.825	
Attitudinal persuasion knowledge	4,02	0.948							0.898
Behavioral persuasion knowledge	3,86	1,04							0.892

after reading about Dickens Ebenezer Scrooge, and less in line with the predictions one would make after reading TMT research on how financially oriented people actually tend to respond to mortality reminders. The only notable difference between the results from Experiments 1 and 2 was that the former produced a significant difference in value-based attributions, while the latter did not. It would thus seem that mortality awareness increases value-based attribution in cases where the decision maker is unknown, but not in cases where the decision maker is known for placing a high priority on financial goal attainment. However, external and financial attributions were reduced as a consequence of mortality awareness, regardless of the personal priorities of the observed decision maker.

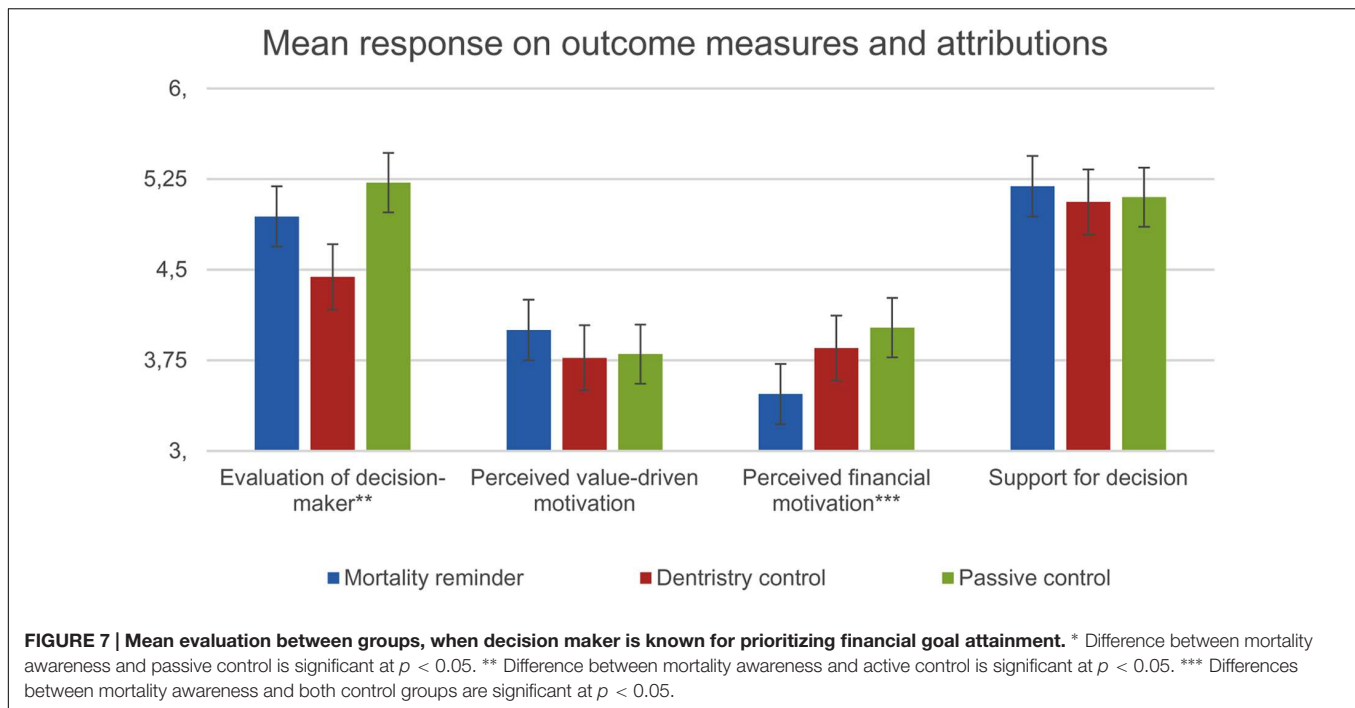
## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results confirm that communicating mortality awareness when justifying ambiguously motivated CSR initiatives alleviates suspicions of extrinsic motivation, and may leave observers with a stronger perception that the decision is motivated by sincerely held values. This attributional effect holds true even in cases where the observed decision maker is known to place a high priority on the pursuit of financial goal attainment.

Both experiments demonstrated that ambiguously motivated CSR measures are met with more favorable attribution when

the CEO explains that the motivation came after a mortality reminder. There are several direct implications from this result. Firstly, it demonstrates that the same set of CSR measures can induce very different motivational attributions among observers, based on how those CSR measures are presented. Secondly, the results indicate that people suspect behaviors to be less motivated by extrinsic and financial factors, when the person they evaluate attributes her decision to a recent mortality reminder. This change in attribution is likely not due to pity alone, as the active control condition, which presumably also induces pity, produced attributions more similar to that of the passive control condition than that of the mortality awareness condition. Furthermore, the improved motivational attribution is demonstrated to be indirectly associated with evaluation of decision maker and willingness to pay. This finding highlights the importance of perceived sincerity of motives when communicating CSR policies, which resonates concordantly with other findings in CSR communication (Du et al., 2010; Groza et al., 2011; de Vries et al., 2013).

The results offer some careful practical implications. Motivational ambiguity is ubiquitous in both general management and marketing. The main result from this study is that mortality awareness can function as a factor that alleviates some of that ambiguity, and induces a sense of sincerity on behalf of the observed decision maker. Presumably, other ways of conveying mortality awareness, other than recapping



one's own recent mortality reminders, can produce similar benefits. Invoking a life-death narrative when communicating ambiguously motivated CSR measures might produce similar results, in that people's tendency to attribute the initiatives to extrinsic factors decreases. The results further indicate that people expect a drop in the priority of financial gains as a consequence of mortality salient experiences. This finding gives further practical implications. When faced with suspicion of being motivated by greed, rather than virtue, invoking a mortality salient narrative behind one's decisions can give an indication of authenticity, thus reducing cynical attributions and creating more engagement and approval for the decision.

The experiment made use of vivid and realistic video-stimuli, in order to increase ecological validity. Nevertheless, we want to highlight some potential limitations. As is the case for almost all lab-experiments in social sciences, the results stem from hypothetical scenarios, and are therefore free from circumstantial factors that may be crucial to any real-life scenario involving the role of mortality primes in eliciting different attributions. Furthermore, the distinction between the active control condition (dentistry) and experimental manipulation (mortality reminder) has been subject to some criticism (Burke et al., 2010). TMT research has typically suggested that the threat of mortality produces qualitatively different consequences than similar non-mortality control primes. Indeed, the premises and conclusion of this paper partially rely on the same assertion. However, it cannot be definitely concluded that the distinction between mortality primes and other negative events are qualitative, and not quantitative. If the only real difference between the active control and the mortality awareness manipulation is the level of pity induced in the participants, a theoretical implication would be that sufficiently elevated levels of pity, not perceived

mortality awareness, might produce a similar effect. In both the active control condition and mortality awareness condition, the CEO links her account of health problems to the CSR decision by the sentence fragment "[...] it got me thinking about what really matters in life". This sentence was necessary in order for the CEO's statements to be meaningful in their given context. However, we cannot rule out that this statement comes across as more plausible and sincere when stated as a consequence to a potentially lethal health-scare, than a non-lethal health scare. We recommend that future studies of perceptions of motivation under mortality awareness should attempt to continue to explore these processes in ecologically valid manners, while attempting to keep the experimental condition and the active control condition as similar as possible. The presented research was primarily concerned with between-groups differences in evaluation and attribution, based on the CEO's reported mortality awareness. In order to explore this effect, other factors pertaining to the CEO were held constant across conditions. There is thus a possibility that the reported tendencies are the result of interaction effects between mortality awareness and unique factors pertaining to the CEO, such as gender, age, physical appearance or other visible factors.

The results offer some further directions for future research. First, the degree of liking the decision to implement the CSR initiatives, evaluation of decision maker and willingness to pay, did not differ between the groups in any of the experiments, even though the attributional patterns differed significantly between the groups. This finding goes against the importance placed on motivational attribution in past research, both in CSR communication (see Yoon et al., 2006; Du et al., 2010; Groza et al., 2011; McShane and Cunningham, 2012; de Vries et al., 2013),



and in moral psychology (see Fedotova et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2012). A possible explanation for why the changes in motivational attribution were not accompanied by direct changes in evaluation of decision maker, support for decision or willingness to pay, may be that the described scenario entailed removing hedonic value for the customer. Past research has indicated that consumers often dislike CSR measures that impede the organizations ability to deliver value to the consumer (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006). As such, it may be that the participants responses to the question of whether or not they liked the decision was overly focused on the removal of hedonic value, making the issue of motivational attribution less salient. Other mediating variables, not measured in the experiments, may also have influenced the outcomes. However, these are merely speculative interpretations, and more research is needed in order to better understand the antecedents of consumer support for CSR measures.

## CONCLUSION

The problem of negative motivational attribution hinders the endorsement of effective CSR measures that can mitigate climate change. The presented research explored the role of mortality awareness on attribution of environmentally friendly behaviors. The first experiment demonstrated that when a CEO implements environmentally friendly corporate measures after a mortality

reminder, her motivation for doing so was perceived as more value-oriented, meaning that it was attributed more to intrinsic values, and less to extrinsic factors. This attributional pattern was indirectly linked to an increase in positive evaluation of decision maker and increased willingness to pay, even though the CSR measures entailed removing hedonic value at the customers' expense. The second experiment demonstrated that the reduction in extrinsic and financial attribution observed in the first experiment persisted, also when the decision maker was known for placing a high priority on financial goal attainment.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors have contributed substantially in all parts of the research process.

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### Paper 3: Cognitive decision style and perceived sincerity

Nordmo, M., & Norman, E. (2016). "And then it hit me...": The relationship between claimed decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication. Manuscript submitted for publication.

“And then it hit me...”: The relationship between claimed decision style and perceived sincerity in  
CSR communication

Original research, submitted to the JOBE special issue on Leadership and the Creation of CSR.

Authors:

**Mads Nordmo<sup>1\*</sup>, Elisabeth Norman<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Strategy and Management, The Norwegian School of Economics, Bergen, Norway

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychosocial Science, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Norway

**\* Correspondence:** Mads Nordmo: mads.nordmo@nhh.no

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on how different managerial decision styles are perceived in CSR communication. More specifically, we explore (a) how different managerial decision styles induces different levels of perceived sincerity, and (b) how perceptions of sincerity are linked to overall evaluation of new sustainability initiatives. In two experiments (N=148), we examined how a leader claiming to have made a CSR decision through different levels of cognitive spontaneity affected the evaluation of that decision, the evaluation of the leader, the motivation attributed to the leader, and communicative intentions attributed to the leader. The setting of the experiments was a video-recorded interview where the leader presented ambiguously motivated sustainability initiatives. Results indicated that the leader who exhibited a partially spontaneous decision style was perceived as more sincere than a leader who used willful deliberation. However, a leader who claimed complete spontaneity of thought as decision style was perceived as less sincere than the leader who used willful deliberation. Differences in sincerity were found to be indirectly related to the evaluation of the leader and the evaluation of the CSR initiatives. The results have managerial implications for CSR communication, as well as general implications for management and social psychology.

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

*The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that you've got it made.*

*Jean Giraudoux (1882-1944)*

Successfully communicating sustainability initiatives is one of the most important ways by which leaders can create and sustain CSR in organizations. This act of communication often involves explaining the central motivation behind these initiatives. From the corporations' point of view, the goal of most CSR initiatives is to achieve sustained competitive advantage by attracting and retaining support from consumers, employees and other stakeholders (Devinney, 2009; McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Waddock, 2008). CSR initiatives frequently involve activities and goals that appear to be counterintuitive to the corporate logic of profit, such as philanthropy, community development, environmental conservation or social justice (Van Marrewijk, 2003). In many cases, however, the CSR goals neatly overlap with the ordinary corporate goals, such as reducing costly waste, ensuring employees health and wellbeing, and conserving energy. In such cases, when the CSR goals overlap with the ordinary corporate goals, the task of coming across as motivated by sincere caring poses a communicative challenge. Avoiding perceptions of insincerity is an important factor for leaders who attempt to create and sustain CSR support and engagement. Although most people want corporations to act as good corporate citizens, people are quite skeptical of corporations who promote their good citizenship (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001; Lii & Lee, 2012; Webb & Mohr, 1998). In cases where claims of responsibility and citizenship are perceived as insincere, this skepticism may have detrimental effects. For instance, Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, and Schwarz (2006) found that CSR communications hurt the company image in cases where the company was perceived as insincere. The risk of coming across as insincere is also relevant when companies communicate environmentally oriented initiatives. If the corporation is perceived as sincerely caring for the environment, environmentally oriented CSR initiatives could elicit positive reactions. However,

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

seemingly insincere environmental policies may lead to adverse motivational attributions (see Groza, Pronschinske, & Walker, 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that people easily suspect ulterior motives, when they hear of corporate activities that are both socially and financially beneficial (de Vries, Terwel, Ellemers, & Daamen, 2013; Windsor, 2013). In short, a main finding from CSR research thus far is that both the public as well as employees, prefer endeavors that seemingly stem from sincere, moral motivation, rooted in intrinsic values (Beckman, Colwell, & Cunningham, 2009; Debeljak, Krkac, & Bušljeta Banks, 2011; May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003; McShane & Cunningham, 2012). That being said, the literature on leadership behavior and perceptions of CSR is still very limited (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012), and the role of leadership in communicating and implementing CSR initiatives remains especially underexplored (Christensen, Mackey, & Whetten, 2014; Morgeson, Aguinis, Waldman, & Siegel, 2013). As corporate social responsibility is becoming an increasingly central part of brand strategy, it is important to understand how people respond to different types of CSR communication, and how leaders can come across as sincerely caring about their social responsibility (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Olsen, Slotegraaf, & Chandukala, 2014; Waldman, Siegel, & Javidan, 2006).

### Decision style as psychological signal

General management literature has noted that leaders often make decisions where the guiding motivation may seem ambiguous or mixed (Calder, 1977; Di Norcia & Larkins, 2000). Past research has demonstrated that employees often scrutinize the way managerial decisions are communicated, in order to understand what the real purpose of the decision may be (Weick, 1995). In some cases, peripheral cues related to how the decision is communicated may affect followers' reactions. One such cue may be the leaders' account of her cognitive decision style, i.e. the thought process that preceded the decision. This paper represents an exploration of whether and how decision style can function as such a signal.

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

This paper presents an exploration of how the leaders' account of her decision style can alter followers' perceptions of sincerity. More specifically, we have explored the role of *claimed cognitive spontaneity* in the communication of CSR decisions. Research in cognitive psychology has recently begun exploring how different decision styles lead to different decisional outcomes (Giblin, Morewedge, & Norton, 2013). In this paper, we explore how different decision styles lead to different social-perceptual outcomes. Put differently, we explore the social signaling effects of different decision styles, not the cognitive effects. Across two experiments, we have tested whether and how a CEO who claimed to have used different cognitive decision styles produced different perceptions of sincerity, and how this affected followers evaluation of both the decision and the CEO. In the following two paragraphs we present and outline the central constructs of the paper.

### Cognitive spontaneity

The manipulated variable in both experiments was the degree of cognitive spontaneity that a fictitious CEO claimed to have experienced when deciding to implement new sustainability initiatives. Spontaneously arising forms of cognition, such as dreams, Freudian slips, cognition under intoxication, and sudden insights and intuitions are generally considered to be outside conscious control (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). As spontaneous thoughts are often considered less strategically oriented than willful deliberation, people often perceive them as revealing honest and meaningful characteristics (Morewedge, Giblin, & Norton, 2014). This general tendency is reflected in naïve folk theories of honesty and sincerity, such as the widespread notions that drunk people, children, and angry people are more likely to tell the truth. The empirical truthfulness of these folk-theories notwithstanding, one common denominator in these examples is that these individuals are presumably less capable of strategic deliberation, and thus more likely to speak their mind in an uninhibited and unfiltered manner. Morewedge, Giblin and Norton (2014, p. 1742) defined spontaneous thoughts as “thoughts produced by a broad category of higher order mental processes



Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

that cannot be controlled or accessed by the thinker” (for a more thorough discussion, see Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). According to this definition, spontaneous thoughts are characterized primarily by not being deliberately evoked by the thinker, and the process through which the thoughts were evoked cannot be controlled or accessed through introspection.

Morewedge, Giblin and Norton demonstrated that people experience a higher degree of self-insight from spontaneous thoughts than from deliberate cognition. The authors theorized that it is precisely the lack of control over and access to the processes by which they arise that leads people to perceive spontaneous thoughts as revealing meaningful self-insight. The tendency to see spontaneous thoughts as indicative of sincerely held values may work similarly in the perception of others as it does in self-perception (Merritt & Monin, 2011). Recent research has demonstrated that we think we learn more about other peoples’ preferences from their speedy decisions, relative to their slow decisions (Van de Calseyde, Keren, & Zeelenberg, 2014). For instance, Critcher, et al. (2013) found that when participants observe decision makers, quick decisions are taken as indications of certainty in the decision. Perceptions of certainty in decision making led observers to infer that more unambiguous motives drove the observed behavior. In a similar vein, Evans, Dillon and Rand (2014) found fast responses in economic games to be associated with extremes of motivations, whereas slower responses were associated with combinations of motivations. Although these studies used decision-time rather than decision style as the manipulated variable, they still inform the theoretical basis of this paper. Quick, intuitive and spontaneous decision may come across as more revealing of sincere values than slow, rational and deliberative decisions.

## Perception of sincerity

The central outcome variable in both experiments was the perceived level of sincerity in the communicating CEO. Perceived sincerity is a key aspect of much adhered-to theories on leadership, including transformational leadership (Bass, 1991), and charismatic leadership (Conger & Kanungo,

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

1998; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Perceptions of honesty and sincerity are also central to psychological theories on persuasion (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). We have operationalized sincerity to be a combined construct of two different inferences made by the followers. The first inference is *motivational attribution*, pertaining to the decision itself (see Groza, et al., 2011). Put in plain terms, this inference is represented by the implicit question ‘why are they doing this?’. When a leader makes a decision that serves multiple ends, aspects pertaining to the leader, setting, medium and style of communication may affect the observers tendency to attribute the decision to different motivations. Sincerity of motivation will in this sense entail that followers believe that the managerial decision is primarily motivated by the reasons that the leader communicates. Perceptions of insincerity, on the other hand, is manifest when followers attribute the decision to ulterior motives. The other inference that makes up our construct of sincerity is *communicative intention*. Put in plain terms, this inference is represented by the implicit question ‘why are they telling us this?’. When faced with a corporate communication, people will often attempt to understand whether or not the deliberate intention of the communicator is to persuade them in any direction (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The belief that a leader’s communicative intention is to persuade, is typically referred to as *persuasion knowledge*. According to the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), people will attempt to hold valid attitudes when faced with a persuasion attempt. In order to maintain a valid attitude towards the communicated message, people will analyze the persuasion tactics, and the effectiveness and the appropriateness of the persuasive agent. They will then adjust their overall impression in accordance with their analysis, in an attempt to maintain a sense of independent and dissuaded view of the message they are evaluating. This process is typically referred to as coping, or coping cognitions (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Effective CSR communication can be achieved only when the coping efforts of the recipients are taken into account. Low levels of persuasion knowledge can be seen as indicative of perceived sincerity, whereas acute feelings of being subjected to a persuasion attempt can be seen as indicative of perceived insincerity. The higher the awareness of being subjected to a persuasion attempt, i.e. the higher persuasion

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

knowledge the follower reports, the more coping cognitions the followers will engage in. Conversely, if the followers perceive mainly informational intent on behalf of the communicating leader, they will to a lesser extent engage in coping cognitions. Friestad and Wright (1994) called for more research exploring the artifacts which may disguise a persuasion tactic, and which may make its execution seem heavy-handed or transparent to the observer. Several different candidates have already been identified (see e.g., Campbell, 1995; Edwards, Li, & Lee, 2002; Kirmani, 1997; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007). We suggest that a partially spontaneous decision style may be added to the list of factors that can disguise a persuasion attempt.

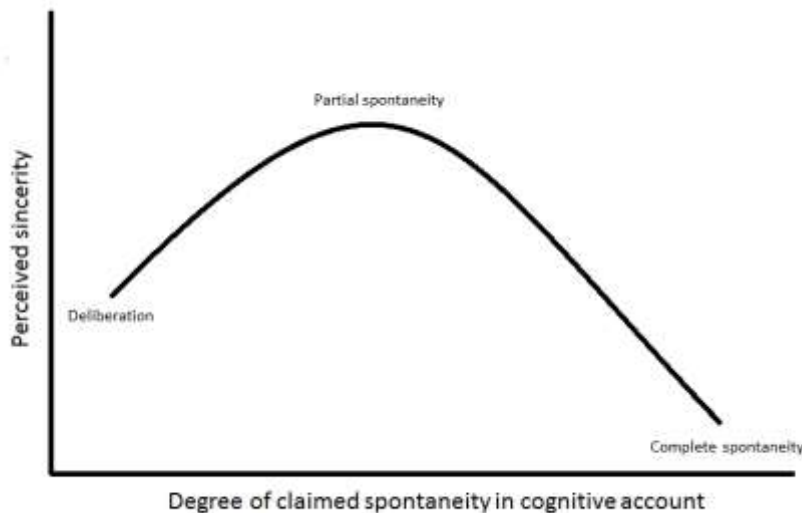
### General model

Our main prediction is that when a leader presents ambiguously motivated CSR initiatives, different claims of cognitive spontaneity may increase or decrease followers tendency to attribute the decision to different motivations, and perceive different communicative intentions. Although academic work in this area limited, it is conceivable that people perceive spontaneous thoughts as signaling sincere and unfiltered motivations (Barden & Tormala, 2014; Giblin, Morewedge, & Norton, 2013; Inbar, Cone, & Gilovich, 2010; Merritt & Monin, 2011; Morewedge, et al., 2014). A naïve and premature implication of such a spontaneity-sincerity heuristic would be that the more spontaneous the decision style is reported to have been, the more sincere the decision maker comes across. Taken to its extreme implication, this heuristic would imply that more claimed cognitive spontaneity would produce higher levels of perceived sincerity, ad infinitum. However, this positive linear relationship between sincerity and spontaneity seems intuitively implausible. Instead, we therefore propose an inverted U-shaped model (see Figure 1). The proposed model depicts the degree of claimed spontaneity in cognitive account along the x-axis, and perceived sincerity of the leader on the y-axis. Up to a certain point, the more cognitively spontaneous the leader claims to have been, the more sincere the leader comes across. However, past a certain point, the account of decision style may

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

become unrealistic, which induces a suspicion of falsehood. Past this point, furthering the claim of spontaneity will only further the experience of insincerity.

*Figure 1. Predicted model of relationship between claimed spontaneity and perceived sincerity*



## Research setting and materials

Two experiments were designed to explore how different decision styles can influence the motivation and communicative intention attributed to the leader. Experiment 1 tested the left-most half of the presented graph, which indicated that levels of perceived sincerity would be highest when the decision maker reported partial spontaneity as decision style. Experiment 2 tested the right-most half of the graph, which indicated that a leader who claimed complete spontaneity as decision style would produce the lowest levels of perceived sincerity.

The setting in the experiments was a description of a hypothetical hotel chain, wherein the CEO had decided to reduce the size of plates and glasses at the buffet, install water-saving showers, and adopt a more restrictive policy regarding changing of towels and linens. These initiatives are clearly environmentally friendly, as they will lead to reduced waste of food and drink, reduced energy-consumption, and reduced usage of detergents and emission of wastewater. They are also financially

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

beneficial, as they will reduce costs on behalf of the hotel. The CEO depicted in the experiments claimed that sincere acknowledgement of social responsibility was the central motivation behind the new initiatives. However, as all these cost-saving initiatives are ultimately carried by the consumer, and directly and positively influencing the company cash-flow, the sincerity of the CEO is likely to be regarded as questionable.

To achieve a high degree of vividness and realism in the experimental manipulation, we used video-footage of an actress portraying a CEO who gave different accounts of the thought-process that preceded her decision. The actress was instructed to act naturally, while maintaining identical postures, facial expressions and tone of voice across all recordings. The video presented to all participants started with a text introducing the CEO and explaining the new CSR initiatives (See Appendix A for complete text stimuli). After the text, the video showed a fictitious interview, wherein the CEO stated that these initiatives were motivated by sincere environmental care (see Appendix B for a screenshot and exact wording). This part of the video was identical across all conditions. After this, the manipulated variable was introduced, namely the CEO's response when asked how she got the idea for the new initiatives. The experiments included four different conditions; *willful deliberation*, *partial spontaneity*, *complete spontaneity* and *passive control*. In the *willful deliberation condition* the CEO explained that the idea had come about through deliberate and goal-directed cognition. In the *partial spontaneity condition*, the CEO explained that the idea had come about through a spontaneous allegory, whereby the initial idea came about spontaneously, and the consequent cognitive work was done deliberately. In the *complete spontaneity condition*, the CEO answered that the entirety of the CSR initiatives came to her completely spontaneously, in an unrelated situation. Finally, participants in the *passive control condition* saw a video that presented the same CEO and CSR initiatives, but contained no account of decision style. See Appendix C for exact wording in all conditions, and a screenshot of the video.

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

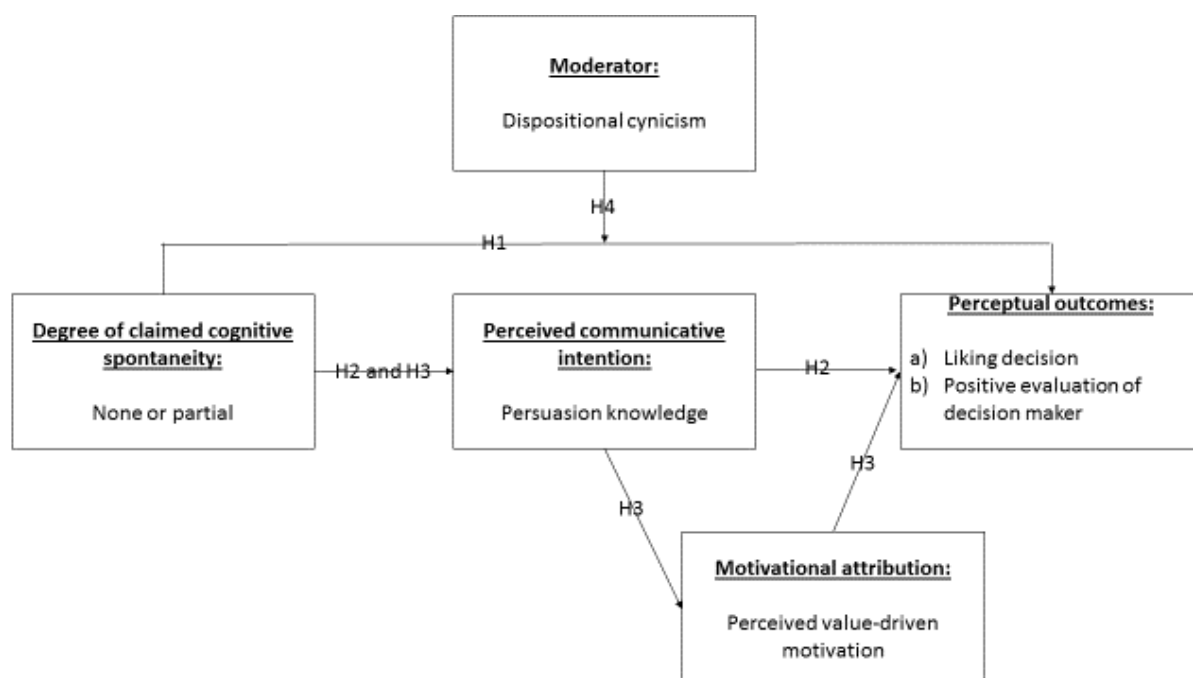
All video stimuli were pre-tested on a student sample. 11 participants (taken from the same sample as experimental participants) saw all versions of the video, in random order, producing a total of 33 observations. The pre-test examined how the actress came across in each video. The measurement items were how enthusiastic, and interpersonally warm the CEO was perceived. There were no significant differences between the videos. After the test, the students were told how the stimuli was to be used, and asked if any of the videos stood out as different from the other, aside from the different words the actress conveyed. All participants indicated that none of the videos differed from the others in such a way.

## Experiment 1: Partial Spontaneity of Thought

Three experimental conditions were compared, i.e., *passive control*, *willful deliberation*, and *partial spontaneity*. The degree of claimed spontaneity ranged from the CEO giving no account of decision style (i.e. “passive control”), to willful deliberation, to claiming a partially spontaneous decision style. The outcome variables were presumed to reflect how the CEO was evaluated, how the decision was received, what motivational attributions were generated, and how much persuasion knowledge was produced. Figure 2 presents the conceptual model tested in Experiment 1.

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

Figure 2. Conceptual model of Experiment 1



We proposed a multiple mediation model, in which the degree of claimed spontaneity was the manipulated variable, and the degree of liking the decision to implement these CSR initiatives, and evaluation of CEO were ultimate outcome variables. Motivational attribution and perceived communicative intention were the proposed mediators. Each predicted relationship in the model is numbered in accordance with its respective hypothesis.

Recent psychological research has demonstrated that for a behavior to be considered morally praiseworthy, the agent must have not only intended and brought about the action and its consequence, she must also have performed the act for reasons that are themselves praiseworthy (Fedotova, Fincher, Goodwin, & Rozin, 2011; Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012). Critcher, Helzer, Tannebaum and Pizarro (in prep) proposed a mindreading moral principles account of evaluating moral character. The authors demonstrated that people attempt to mind-read agents' moral principles by evaluating the mental antecedents that precede a morally motivated action. In their study, the amount of praise the agents received for their decisions was mediated by the extent to



Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

which the agents were assumed to appreciate the moral principle that would justify that choice.

Taken together with the emphasis placed on sincerity in CSR research, these findings provide direction to the hypotheses in this experiment. If a partially spontaneous decision style signals a clearer understanding of the moral principle that justifies the choice, while a deliberative decision style signals a clearer understanding of the strategic and financial benefits of the same choice, then participants would be expected to approve more of a decision that was preceded by spontaneous thoughts. The first hypothesis is therefore:

*H1: Claiming to have come up with the CSR initiatives via a partially spontaneous decision style will lead to a more positive evaluation of a) the decision and b) the CEO, compared to the condition where the CSR initiatives came about through willful deliberation or when no cognitive account was given.*

We further assumed that spontaneous thoughts signal sincere, intrinsic values, and that deliberate cognition signal more strategic, and potentially self-serving factors. Therefore the CEO who used a partially spontaneous decision style should come across as more forthright and candid. This would produce less of an impression that she was deliberately attempting to persuade her audience in any direction. We predicted that this reduction in persuasion knowledge would be a relevant psychological mechanism through which the partially spontaneous decision style would lead to more positive reactions. The second hypothesis was thus:

*H2: The increase in liking of (a) the decision and (b) the CEO, associated with claiming partial spontaneity of thought, will be mediated by a reduction in persuasion knowledge.*

Furthermore, we predicted the two proposed mediators to have a combined indirect effect. Coming across as having less persuasive intent was expected to be associated with more value-based

Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

attributions. This combined relationship would in turn be predicted to be associated with higher levels of liking the decision and CEO. The third hypothesis was thus:

*H3: The increase in liking (a) the decision and (b) the decision maker, associated with claiming partial spontaneity of thought, will be mediated by both persuasion knowledge and value-based attribution.*

We also predicted differences in how the different decision styles would elicit different reactions, based on the participants' dispositional levels of cynicism. High-cynicism individuals have a tendency to suspect ulterior motivations to be driving other people's behavior (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). We therefore proposed that individuals with a high score on dispositional cynicism would prove more likely to perceive deliberate thinking individuals as being less sincere. If the CEO seemed rehearsed and strategic, these individuals were expected to infer that the CEO was strategizing her communication. In contrast, a seemingly less rehearsed and somewhat untraditional decision style, was expected to make high-cynicism individuals less skeptical towards the CEO, as her seemingly unrehearsed account could make her come across as more sincere. We expected that highly cynical participants would be very concerned with perceptions of sincerity when evaluating the CEO. For less cynical individuals, however, the attribution conflict associated with the decision would presumably be a less important factor. As such, the level of perceived sincerity of motivation and intention was expected to have less impact on the evaluation of the CEO, compared to that of the highly cynical participants. The fourth hypothesis was thus:

*H4: A partially spontaneous decision style will lead high-cynicism participants, but not low-cynicism participants, to more positive evaluation of the CEO.*

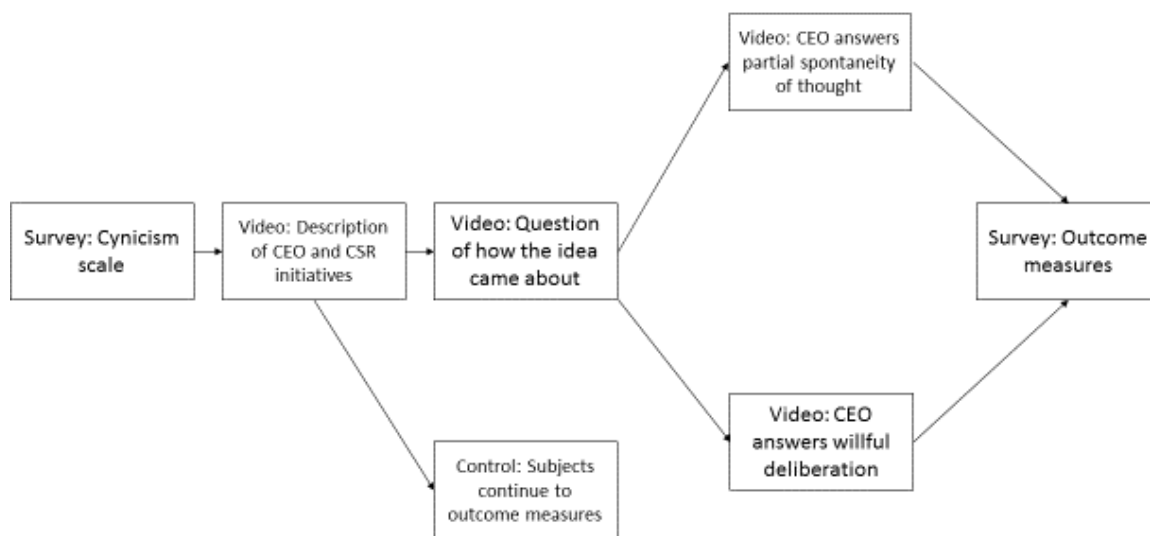
## Sample and procedure

A convenience sample of 81 law school students at a large Norwegian University (46 female, mean age 23) were recruited. Participation was compensated with a 60 NOK (approx 11 \$) gift card. The participants were told that the experiment would be about communication, business and the environment. All participants were informed that their responses were given in complete anonymity, and indicated informed consent electronically, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Participants were randomly assigned to three groups, each of which represented a test condition in a between-groups design. The groups assembled in three separate classrooms. After indicating their responses on dispositional measures, the participants were presented with one of three different versions of the video. The video was displayed on large screen at the front of the classroom. The video shown to the passive control group ( $N=27$ ) ended before the CEO was asked about her decision style. The willful deliberation group ( $N=27$ ) saw the same video, with the addition of the decision style indicating willful deliberation. The partial spontaneity group ( $N=27$ ) saw the video wherein the CEO's decision style indicated partial spontaneity of thought. Having seen their respective video, participants went on to complete the questionnaire. Figure 3 displays the experiment procedure.

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

Figure 3. Procedure of Experiment 1



## Measures

Before seeing the video, all participants indicated their responses on the Cynicism scale (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989), which is a seven-item scale originally derived from Wrightsman Jr (1964). The scale measures dispositional cynicism, defined as a tendency to disbelieve the accuracy of other people's claims (skepticism), but also the underlying motives of others (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ). A principal component factor analysis with direct oblim rotation revealed that the cynicism scale produces two distinct factors with an Eigenvalue above 1. The pattern matrix revealed that the first factor included four items detailing a general tendency to suspect people to care less about others than they claim. We labeled this factor *suspicion of lack of caring* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .65$ ). The second factor consisted of three items measuring participants general tendency to distrust the honesty and integrity of others. We labeled the second factor *suspicion of dishonesty* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .69$ ). This factor consists of the two items of the scale that specifically juxtapose money with integrity and honesty, and a third item simply stating that people by their very nature are dishonest.

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

Once all participants had completed the dispositional measures, the video was shown on a big screen. After seeing their respective video, the participant responded to a survey that contained all outcome measures (for an English version of the entire survey, see appendix D). The items presumed to be indicative of evaluation of CEO were *liking CEO*, *perceived professionalism*, *perceived competence*, and *willingness to endorse the CEO to serve as a member on a business-ethics advisory board*. An additional item measured the degree of *liking the decision* itself. Perceptions of sincerity were measured by two sets of items, one addressing motivational attribution and one addressing communicative intention. Motivational attribution was measured using the attribution scale from Groza, et al. (2011). Communicative intention was measured by a single item of *perceived informational intent*, as well as two items measuring *persuasion knowledge*. The principle-components factor analysis of all outcome measures using direct oblim rotation revealed three distinct factors, all with an Eigenvalue above 1. The attribution measure derived from Groza, et al. (2011) was found to produce only one distinct factor, consisting of the three items measuring *value-based attribution* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ). Because of issues with multicollinearity and cross-loadings, the remaining attribution-items from Groza, et al (2011) had to be excluded from the analysis. The four items measuring *evaluation of the CEO* all loaded onto a discrete factor (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ). The item measuring *liking of decision* loaded onto the same factor as value-based attributions. This measure was kept separate from the attribution measure in later analyses, but the cross-loading precluded investigations of mediated relationships between these variables. The two items measuring persuasion knowledge were combined into a single variable in the analysis, denoted simply as *persuasion knowledge* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .67$ ). The single-item measure of perceived informational intent was excluded due to multicollinearity. All standardized scales used in this study were translated to Norwegian. The translation process is described under Appendix E. Table 1 displays the outcome measurement model.

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

Table 1. Measurement model Experiment 1

<u>Item</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>H<sup>2</sup></u>	<u>Factors</u>		
			Value-based attribution	Persuasion Knowledge	Evaluation of CEO
Liking decision		.50	.640		
Liking CEO	5.04	.62			-.720
Endorsing CEO	4.63	.60			-.702
CEO is professional	5.36	.59			-.699
CEO is competent	5.16	.67			-.872
CEO is attempting to change my attitudes towards the hotels	4.05	.74		.802	
CEO is attempting to influence my future choice of hotels	3.85	.80		.909	
<i>...they have a long-term interest in society</i>	3.35	.82	.915		
<i>...they believe in environmental care</i>	3.65	.78	.845		
<i>...they are trying to give back to society</i>	2.91	.68	.852		

Note: All items in italics were preceded by "I believe the company is doing this because..."

## Results and discussion

The correlations between the outcome measures affirmed the notion that perceptions of sincere caring is conducive to followers approval of CSR initiatives, as highlighted in past research (Beckman, et al., 2009; de Vries, et al., 2013; Du, et al., 2010; Groza, et al., 2011; Windsor, 2013). Value-based attribution was found to be positively correlated with positive perception of the decision ( $r=.47$ ) and of the CEO ( $r=.53$ ). In order to test the hypothesis that the different decision styles would directly

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

influence the outcome measures, the groups were compared by simple t-tests. Only one significant difference between the partial spontaneous condition and the others was identified. The mean level of persuasion knowledge was significantly lower in the partial spontaneity group, compared to both the control group [ $t(52)=3.05, p<.01, d=.83$ ], and the willful deliberation group [ $t(52)=2.28, p=.03, d=.62$ ]. Reporting partial cognitive spontaneity as decision style significantly reduced participants' awareness of the persuasive intent of the CEO. There were no differences between groups in terms of how the decision or the CEO was evaluated. This result does not support Hypothesis 1, which stated that the different cognitive accounts would produce different evaluations of both decision and CEO.

Even though Hypothesis 1 was not supported, it is still possible and useful to test and report the indirect relationships pertaining to Hypotheses 2 and 3. Exploring mediated effects provides information regarding whether or not the proposed mediator has a positive or negative denotation, and can also suggest directions for future research in terms of identifying suppressing variables that are not measured in the presented research (see Hayes, 2009). In mediation analyses where the direct effect between X and Y is absent, the proposed mediators are better referred to as indirect relationships, rather than mediated relationships (Mathieu & Taylor, 2006). We employed Preacher and Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS (2004, 2008). In order to increase the statistical power of the mediation analysis, the passive control and willful deliberation conditions were combined to a single group. As these two groups had near-identical values on all outcome variables, this combination is very unlikely to pose a challenge to the validity of the subsequent analyses. We used a bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates, wherein absence or presence of claimed spontaneity was used as manipulated variable (X), degree of liking the decision was the outcome (Y) variable, and persuasion knowledge was the mediator. The analysis showed that the indirect path from degree of spontaneity, via persuasion knowledge, to level of liking the decision was statistically significant, with confidence intervals entirely above zero (from .05 to .56). As predicted, the



#### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

coefficients from the mediation model indicate that claiming partial spontaneity of thought induced reduced levels of persuasion knowledge [ $\beta = -.32$ ,  $t = -3.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ], and persuasion knowledge was in turn associated with a reduction in liking the decision [ $\beta = -.72$ ,  $t = -2.25$ ,  $p = .02$ ]. This finding supports Hypothesis 2a. Claiming a partially spontaneous cognitive decision style evoked significantly lower levels of persuasion knowledge compared to the conditions where no claim of cognitive spontaneity was made. This reduction in persuasion knowledge was further associated with higher levels of liking the decision. It is also theoretically possible that the reduction in persuasion knowledge made participants generally more susceptible to the influence of the CSR message, as higher levels of persuasion knowledge are assumed to evoke coping cognitions (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008; Friestad & Wright, 1994).

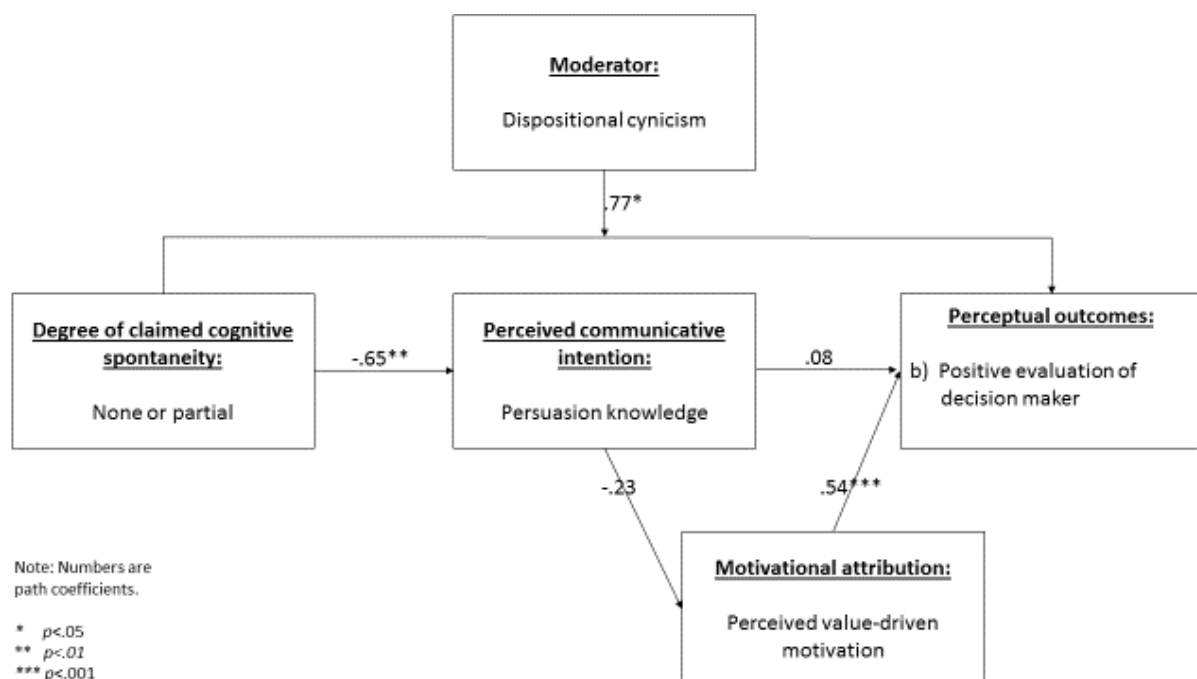
According to hypotheses 2b, the same mediated relationship should be observed when using perception of CEO as outcome variable. In order to test this hypothesis, we employed the same analysis as when testing Hypothesis 2a, only substituting the outcome variable from liking the decision to evaluation of CEO. There was a significant indirect relationship between degree of spontaneity and persuasion knowledge, as the claimed partial spontaneity condition evoked significantly lower levels of persuasion knowledge. However, in this model, persuasion knowledge alone produced no significant effect on evaluation of CEO. This finding contradicts Hypothesis 2b. Hypothesis 2 was therefore only partially supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted a multiple mediated relationship involving value-based attribution and persuasion knowledge on (a) level of liking the decision, and (b) evaluation of the CEO. As the factor analysis revealed that the item measuring liking decision and the items measuring value-based attributions all loaded onto the same factor, Hypothesis 3a could not be further explored. However, Hypothesis 3b was tested by using a bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates. The multiple mediation model included both persuasion knowledge and degree of value-

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

based attribution as mediators, and evaluation of CEO as an outcome measure. The results revealed a significant indirect effect of both mediators combined. Put differently, there was a significant indirect effect of presence of spontaneity, via persuasion knowledge, via perceived value-based motivation, on evaluation of CEO (confidence intervals from .01 to .18). As noted, the results indicated that claiming some spontaneity of thought reduced persuasion knowledge [ $\beta = -.65$ ,  $t = -3.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. Persuasion knowledge was found to be negatively associated with degree of perceived value-based motivation, albeit to a marginally insignificant degree [ $\beta = -.23$ ,  $t = -1.98$ ,  $p = .05$ ]. Lastly, the degree of perceived value-based motivation was significantly positively associated with positive evaluation of the CEO [ $\beta = .54$ ,  $t = 4.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. On this basis, Hypothesis 3 was supported, in so far as the predicted indirect effect was found to be significant. Figure 4 displays the model with coefficients.

Figure 4. Experiment 1 – Results



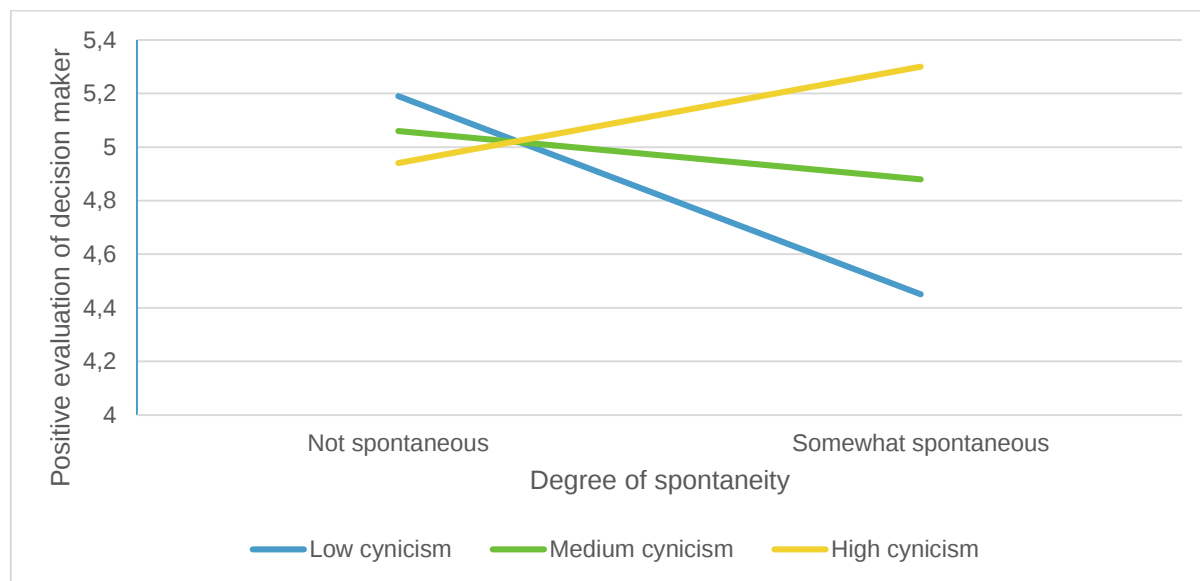
Finally, dispositional cynicism was examined as a moderator of the relationship between presence of claimed spontaneity and positive evaluation of CEO. Degree of claimed spontaneity and dispositional cynicism were entered in the first step of the regression analysis. In the second step, the interaction

#### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

term between the degree of claimed spontaneity and cynicism was entered, and it explained a significant increase in variance in liking the CEO [ $\Delta R^2=.07$ ,  $\beta=.77$ ,  $F=5.64$ ,  $p=.02$ ]. Thus, dispositional cynicism proved to be a significant moderator of the relationship between degree of claimed spontaneity and liking the CEO. Exploring this relationship further, the same statistical operation was performed using each of the two identified sub-factors of cynicism, as identified by the exploratory factor analysis. The results revealed that the cynicism factor labeled *suspicion of dishonesty*, did not produce a significant interaction. However, the other sub-factor of dispositional cynicism, labeled *suspicion of lack of caring* produced an even more pronounced moderated relationship [ $\Delta R^2=.08$ ,  $F=6.75$ ,  $p=.01$ ]. These results provide support for Hypothesis 4. Highly cynical participants in the spontaneous condition were more likely to give a positive evaluation of the CEO, compared to less cynical individuals in the same experimental condition. It seems that the partially spontaneous decision style curtailed potential negative person perceptions from highly cynical individuals, but produced negative evaluations in less cynical individuals. A plausible explanation may be that the issue of sincerity is more pronounced when high-cynicism individuals are evaluating a corporate executive. Because people generally perceive spontaneous cognitions to reveal more sincere motivations (Critcher, et al., 2013; Morewedge, et al., 2014), cynical participants, who otherwise typically suspect ulterior motives behind corporate decisions, may have perceived the CEO more positively when she conveyed a realistic claim of cognitive spontaneity. As the somewhat spontaneously thinking CEO was perceived as more sincere, in as much as she evoked less persuasion knowledge, she was altogether perceived more positively by the high-cynicism participants. The less cynical participants however, were presumably less concerned with how sincere the executive appeared. Figure 5 illustrates the moderating effect of dispositional cynicism on the relationship between degree of claimed cognitive spontaneity and perception of CEO.

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

*Figure 5. Dispositional Cynicism moderates the relationship between decision style and evaluation of decision maker*



Taken together, these results offer support for the first part of the predicted inverse U-shaped model, notably the left-most half of the inverse U. The reduction in persuasion knowledge and subsequent increase in value-based attributions demonstrate the small but positive effects associated with a partially spontaneous decision style, especially when communicating to a cynical audience. However, it stands to reason that the potential for increasing perceived sincerity by claiming higher levels of cognitive spontaneity cannot be infinite. Past a certain point, the more spontaneous the CEO claims the style of decision making was, the less believable she must come across, as the account of decision style itself will come across as less and less credible. Claiming to have come up with a set of CSR initiatives through complete cognitive spontaneity would presumably be seen as implausible. It is reasonable to assume that seemingly implausible accounts of decision style would lead to skepticism among observers. Furthermore, if claiming complete spontaneity of thought comes across as deceptive in its implausibility, the rest of the communication may also come across as less sincere, causing a general negative evaluation. In order to explore the evaluative

Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

effects of claiming complete cognitive spontaneity as decision style, we performed a second experiment.

## Experiment 2: Complete spontaneity of thought

While Experiment 1 demonstrated the relative gains associated with claiming a somewhat spontaneous form decision style, Experiment 2 was set up to explore the consequences of claiming complete spontaneity of thought as decision style. The design of Experiment 2 differed from Experiment 1 in that it explored the evaluative artefacts produced by claiming *complete* spontaneity of thought, rather than effects of claiming *partial* spontaneity of thought, which was the focus of Experiment 1.

The experimental condition in Experiment 2 was a CEO reporting to have relied completely on spontaneous thought as decision style. In this condition, participants saw the CEO who, upon questioning from the interviewer, replied that the idea behind the new plan came to her completely out of nowhere, and in a situation that was unrelated to the CSR initiative. It is important to note the difference between the partial spontaneity condition tested in Experiment 1 and complete spontaneity condition tested in Experiment 2. The claim of partial spontaneity is more realistic, as it entails getting the initial idea through a spontaneous cognitive process, and then using willful deliberation to come up with the rest of the CSR initiatives. By contrast, the complete spontaneity claim entails coming up with an entire set of CSR initiatives, which encompass different parts of the day-to-day operations of the organization, completely spontaneously. Our main prediction was that the claim of complete spontaneity as decision style would come across as implausible, and induce an overall negative effect in terms of persuasive appeal. As control condition, we chose willful deliberation rather than no account of decision style (i.e. passive control). The willful deliberation condition represents a more valid point of comparison than the passive control condition, because it

Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

indeed contains a cognitive account, and because this ensures that the videos used are similar in length. Furthermore, the results from Experiment 1 suggests that this type of decision style produced the same evaluation as absence of explanation of decision style (passive control).

Past research has indicated that when participants sense that a person is deliberately misrepresenting the truth, their general skepticism increases (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). The claim of complete spontaneity was not expected to alter participants' sense of strategic and willful manipulation or persuasion, as measured by the persuasion knowledge items. Claiming complete spontaneity carries little persuasive appeal, and would not be perceived as a typical persuasion tactic. Rather, the claim was expected to induce a sense of hiding the truth about how the ideas came about. We therefore predicted that the CEO who claimed to have come up with the CSR initiatives completely spontaneously would elicit lower levels of perceived informational intent, compared to the willful deliberation condition. The first hypothesis was thus:

*H1: Claiming complete spontaneity of thought will elicit lower levels of perceived informational intent, compared to those of willful deliberation.*

As the complete spontaneity CEO comes across as less forthright, her stated motives were expected to be subject to increased scrutiny. We therefore predicted that the complete spontaneity condition would evoke doubts regarding the motivation behind the CSR initiatives. The second hypothesis was thus:

*H2: Claiming complete spontaneity of thought will elicit low levels of value-based attributions, compared to those of willful deliberation.*

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

The predicted drop in perceived informational intent, caused by the implausible account of decision style, was predicted to result in lower levels of liking decision and poorer evaluation of the CEO. Put differently, the claim of having come up with an entire, multifaceted set of CSR initiatives from thin air, would lead to lower levels of perceived informational intent, which in turn would lead to lower levels of liking the decision, and worse overall evaluation of the CEO. Hypothesis 3 was therefore:

*H3: Claiming complete spontaneity of thought will elicit a) low levels of liking the decision, and b) worse evaluation of the CEO, mediated by level of perceived informational intent.*

The fourth hypothesis was that perceived informational intent and value-based attributions would have a combined mediating effect. The claim of complete cognitive spontaneity would first and foremost produce a drop in perceived informational intent. We expected this drop in perceived sincerity in communicative intention to produce a spillover effect of skepticism and cynicism regarding the claimed motivation behind the CSR initiatives. This effect was expected because it is likely that a CEO who comes across as insincere in her communicative intention, will be perceived as someone who is also willing to misrepresent the truth about the motivation behind her decision. Moreover, as the perceived level of value-based motivation is lowered, due to a drop in perceived informational intent, the overall evaluation of both decision and CEO was expected to worsen. The fourth hypothesis was thus:

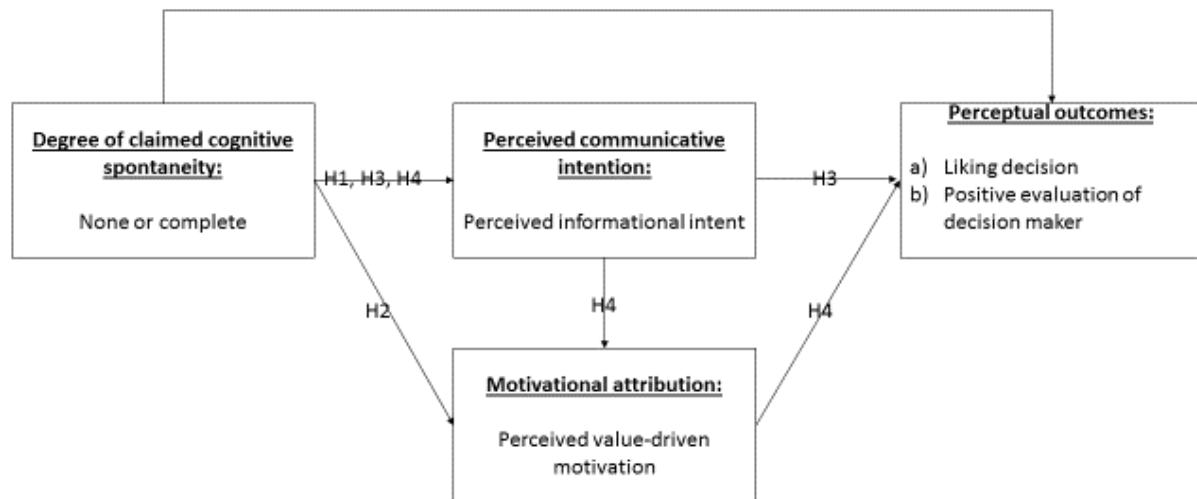
*H4: Claiming complete spontaneity of thought will elicit a) lower levels of liking the decision, and b) poorer evaluation of the CEO, mediated by both level of perceived informational intent and level of value-based attribution.*

Figure 6 displays the models tested in this experiment. The predicted relationships are numbered in accordance with their respective hypotheses.



## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

Figure 6. Conceptual model of Experiment 2



## Sample and procedure

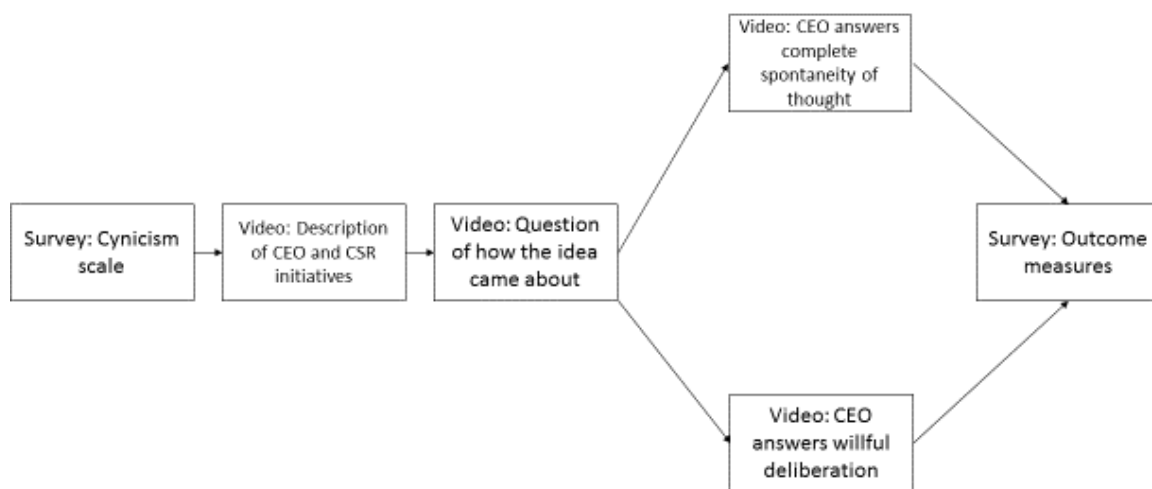
67 Students at a large Norwegian university (49 female, mean age 22) were recruited to participate in the experiment. Participation was paid with a 60 NOK (approx. 11 \$) gift card. Participants were told that the experiment would be about communication, business and the environment. All participants were informed that their responses were given in complete anonymity, and indicated informed consent electronically, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Participants were randomly assigned to two groups, each group representing an experimental condition in a between-groups design. The groups assembled in two separate classrooms, completed relevant dispositional measures, and saw one of two different versions of the video. The design of the videos was identical to Experiment 1, apart from the last part of the film, wherein the CEO answered the question of how the ideas to the measures had come about. The willful deliberation group (N=33) saw an account identical to the willful deliberation group in experiment 1. The

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

complete spontaneity group (N=34) saw the CEO claiming that the idea had come about completely spontaneously (see materials and pre-test section for a more comprehensive description of the video stimuli). Having seen their respective video, participants in both conditions moved on to provide answers to the outcome measures. Figure 7 displays the experimental procedure.

Figure 7. Procedure of Experiment 2.



## Measures

The dispositional measures were the same as in Experiment 1. The outcome measures were also the same, with the addition of a single-item measure of perceived moral motivation, and a single-item measure of perceived financial motivation. These items were included in order to more precisely assess the attribution effects that were central to the study. A principal component factor analysis with direct oblim rotation was performed to assess the measurement model. Having discarded items producing multicollinearity, the analysis revealed four distinct factors with an Eigenvalue above 1. Two items formed a factor measuring *evaluation of the CEO* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ). The two items measuring *persuasion knowledge* loaded onto a single factor (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .74$ ), as did the four items measuring *value-based attributions* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ). The items measuring level of *liking*

Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

*decision, perceived financial motivation* and the degree of perceived *informational intent* all loaded onto a single factor. As such, potential mediated relationships between these variables were not available for further exploration in this dataset. Table 2 displays the measurement model.

Table 2. Measurement model of Experiment 2

<u>Item</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>H<sup>2</sup></u>	<u>Factors</u>			
			1	2	3	4
Liking decision	6.03	.57				-.717
Perceived financial motivation	4.57	.75				.785
CEO's intention is to give me relevant information	3.45	.78				-.774
CEO is professional	5.43	.85			.800	
CEO is competent	5.19	.86			.918	
CEO is attempting to change my attitudes towards the hotels	3.90	.80		.889		
CEO is attempting to influence my future choice of hotels	3.81	.78		.875		
Perceived moral motivation	4.57	.75	.671			
<i>...they have a long-term interest in society</i>	3.24	.73	.865			
<i>...they believe in environmental care</i>	3.76	.70	.814			
<i>...they are trying to give back to society</i>	3.13	.59	.747			

Note: All items in italics were preceded by "I believe the company is doing this because..."

## Results and discussion

The correlational results were in line with those of Experiment 1. Attributing the CSR initiatives to value-based motivation was positively correlated with liking the decision ( $r=.41$ ), and positive evaluation of the CEO ( $r=.39$ ). Perceived informational intent was positively correlated with liking the decision ( $r=.47$ ), and with positive evaluation of the CEO ( $r=.51$ ). Conversely, perceived financial motivation was negatively correlated with liking the decision ( $r=-.52$ ), and perceived informational intent ( $r=-.52$ ). The first hypotheses in the experiment postulated that there would be significant between-groups differences in how the CEO was perceived. In order to test these hypotheses, we performed simple t-tests. The tests revealed significant differences between the groups, in line with the hypotheses. The t-tests demonstrated a significant difference in perception of informational intent. The allegedly completely spontaneously thinking CEO gave the impression of having significantly less informational intent than her deliberately thinking counterpart [ $t(65)=2.12$ ,  $p=.04$ ,  $d=.52$ ]. Hypothesis 1 was thus supported. This finding indicates that in terms of communicative intention, the CEO claiming to have come up with the ideas for CSR measures through complete cognitive spontaneity was seen as significantly less sincere than her deliberative counterpart. The second hypothesis predicted that the complete spontaneity group would generate significantly lower levels of value-based attributions. This prediction was not supported [ $t(65)=1.66$ ,  $p=.103$ ,  $d=.40$ ].

Hypothesis 3 stated that perceived informational intent would significantly mediate the relationship between the manipulated variable and a) liking the decision and b) evaluation of the CEO. As the factor analysis revealed that perceived informational intent loads onto the same factor as the item measuring liking the decision, Hypothesis 3a could not be explored. The potential indirect relationship predicted in Hypothesis 3b, however, was explored. We employed Preacher and Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS (2004, 2008), using a bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates. Willful deliberation vs. complete spontaneity was used as manipulated (X) variable,

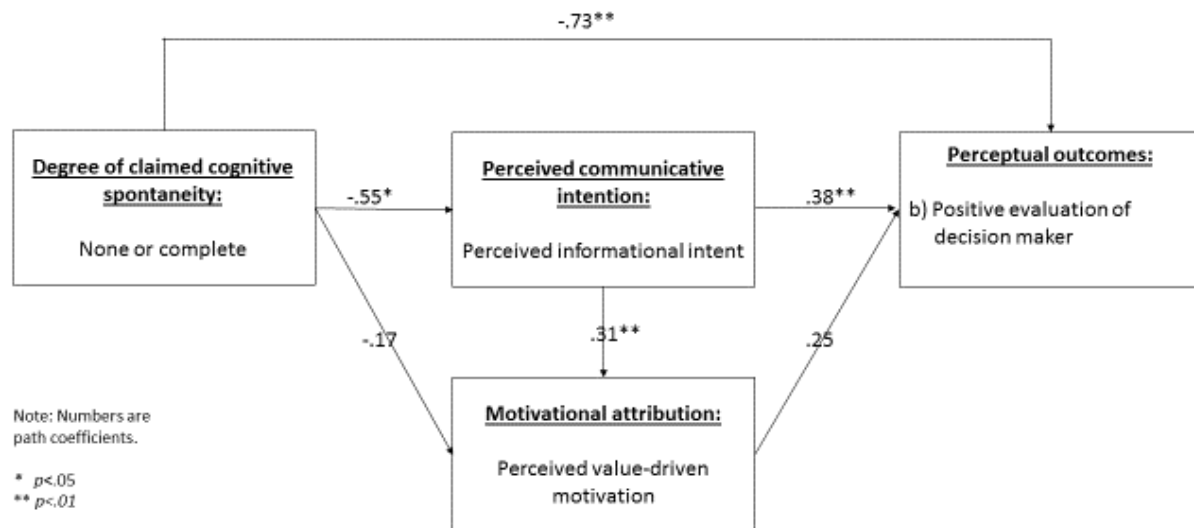
#### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

evaluation of CEO as outcome variable (Y), and perceived informational intent served as mediator. As expected, the direct effect between the manipulated variable and outcome variable proved significant, with confidence intervals entirely below zero (from  $-.63$  to  $-.15$ ,  $p=.002$ ). The coefficient for the direct effect indicates that claiming complete spontaneity of thought significantly worsens the overall evaluation of the CEO [ $\beta=-.73$ ,  $t=-3.21$ ,  $p<.01$ ]. The indirect effect via the mediator also proved significant, with confidence intervals entirely below zero (from  $-.31$  to  $-.02$ ). The coefficients revealed that claiming complete spontaneity was associated with lower levels of perceived informational intent [ $\beta=-.55$ ,  $t=-2.12$ ,  $p=.04$ ]. Perceived informational intent was in turn positively related to positive evaluation of CEO [ $\beta=.46$ ,  $t=4.13$ ,  $p<.01$ ]. Hypothesis 3b was thus supported. See Figure 8 for the mediation model with coefficients.

We continued to explore the multiple mediation model predicted in Hypothesis 4. The model was tested using a bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates, wherein complete spontaneity vs. willful deliberation was used as manipulated variable, perceived informational intent as first mediator, value-based attributions as second mediator, and evaluation of CEO as outcome variable. The indirect effect through both these mediators proved significant, with confidence intervals entirely below zero (from  $-.10$  to  $-.0002$ ). As noted, the coefficients revealed that claiming complete spontaneity was significantly negatively related to perceived informational intent [ $\beta=-.55$ ,  $t=-2.12$ ,  $p=.04$ ]. Perceived informational intent was in turn significantly positively related to value-based attributions [ $\beta=.31$ ,  $t=3.33$ ,  $p<.01$ ]. A high score on value-based attributions was in turn positively, albeit insignificantly related to a positive evaluation of the CEO [ $\beta=.25$ ,  $t=1.66$ ,  $p=.10$ ]. Although this last path was found to be nonsignificant, the entire path predicted in Hypothesis 4 was found to be significant. Hypothesis 4 was thus supported. Figure 8 displays multiple mediation model with all coefficients.

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

Figure 8. Experiment 2 - Results



The results from Experiment 2 indicates that claiming that complete spontaneity of thought preceding a decision leads to overall less perceived sincerity. Crucially, the significant drop in perceived informational intent associated with the CEO who claimed to have come up with the CSR measures from thin air, indicates that the participants may have suspected that she was not willing to give correct and valid information. This sense of hiding or misrepresenting relevant information was demonstrated to be indirectly associated with less favorable motivational attribution, as well as with less favorable evaluation of the CEO. These findings were in line with the hypotheses, and confirmed the right-most half of the predicted inverted U model. Claiming complete spontaneity in one's cognitive account produced overall less perception of sincerity, compared to the willful deliberation condition. This lack of sincerity was indirectly associated with unfortunate motivational attribution, and worse evaluation of the CEO.

## General discussion

Communicating CSR initiatives that serves multiple ends poses a challenge for any leader looking to create and sustain CSR in her organization. Coming across as sincerely caring about the moral aspects of the activities is a crucial criterion for engagement and support. Our findings suggest that different decision styles may influence this level of perceived sincerity in a predictable manner. The results from the two experiments generally supported the notion of a sloped, inverted, U-shaped model of the effects of spontaneity in cognitive accounts on perceived sincerity. Claiming a partially spontaneous decision style made the participants less aware that they were subject to a persuasion attempt. The reduction in persuasion knowledge was found to be associated with more favorable motivational attribution, which was further associated with a more positive evaluation of the CEO. The CEO who claimed complete spontaneity of thought, however, was perceived as less sincere than her deliberative counterpart. The seemingly implausible cognitive account produced significantly lower levels of perceived informational intent, and generally a worse evaluation of the CEO. This suggests that the participants exposed to this condition felt that the CEO was not attempting to give them valid information, on the basis of which they could make their decisions.

The results from Experiment 1 resonates with the literature on mindreading in moral psychology literature (Critcher, et al., in prep; Gray, et al., 2012). This literature has demonstrated that when people judge the moral praiseworthiness of a behavior, they are not only concerned with the consequences of the behavior, but also the appreciation of the underlying value or principle that guided the behavior. In order to gauge the underlying values guiding a person's decision, people attempt to mind-read the decision maker, using cues such as rationalizations and decision-time. This experiment demonstrates that decision style can serve as a mind-reading cue, and influence these evaluations positively, but also adversely, if it comes across as implausible. The findings may also offer general support for past research suggesting that people see spontaneous thoughts as more



### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

indicative for sincerely held values and beliefs (Barden & Tormala, 2014; Inbar, et al., 2010; Merritt & Monin, 2011; Morewedge, et al., 2014). While willful deliberation is thought to be a more strategic and filtered form of cognition, a credible claim of spontaneity was seen as indicative of sincerity. The reported findings also fit the literature on CSR communication, where perceived sincere caring has been identified as a key success factor (Beckman, et al., 2009; de Vries, et al., 2013; Du, et al., 2010; McShane & Cunningham, 2012).

The mediation analysis in Experiment 1 suggested that a theoretical suppressor variable may be associated with a claim of partial cognitive spontaneity. The obtained data offer no certain way of determining what this suppressor variable may have been. We speculate that the suppressor in question may be the supposed norm-violation associated with claiming to have made executive decisions in a somewhat spontaneous cognitive manner. As executive decision making seldom is presented as stemming from spontaneous forms of cognition, but rather to result from willful deliberation and rationality (Inbar, et al., 2010), it may be considered a norm violation for a CEO to admit that the new CSR initiatives came about in a spontaneous manner. The combined indirect effect of persuasion knowledge and norm violation may be the reason why the presence or absence of claimed spontaneity in the cognitive account had no direct effect on liking the decision or CEO. This interpretation may also explain why low-cynicism individuals in the same experiment liked the partial spontaneity CEO less than the control CEOs. As low cynicism individuals are less concerned with sincerity of motivation, but equally concerned with the presumed norm-violation of claiming to have come up with an executive decision partially via spontaneous thinking, they perceive the partially spontaneously thinking CEO as worse than the control conditions. According to this logic, the CEO who claims some cognitive spontaneity gains the positive effect of reduced persuasion knowledge, but suffers the negative effects associated with norm-violation.

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

The reported findings pose some managerial implications. First, it demonstrates that the same set of sustainability initiatives may produce different reactions, depending on the claimed decision style. Second, the results indicate that a realistic level of claimed cognitive spontaneity induces higher levels of perceived sincerity, in that it masks the persuasion attempt, which is associated with a more preferable motivational attribution. It may very well be that other ways of conveying realistic levels of cognitive spontaneity, other than post-hoc accounts, may produce similar benefits. By coming across as less rehearsed, less bound to a script, and more naturalistic, a leader may induce a stronger perception of sincerity. However, if the account of decision style becomes unrealistic, a backlash can incur. Third, high-cynicism individuals perceived the CEO as more likeable when she claimed her ideas had come about in a partially spontaneous fashion. This finding has important managerial implications, notably that a moderate level of claimed spontaneity is useful when the target audience is expected to be highly cynical, and have a general tendency to distrust the CEO's communicative intention and motivation. The sub-factor labelled *suspicion of lack of caring* explained even more variance as moderator variable. This provides further specificity in terms of managerial implications. A partially spontaneous decision style may be especially beneficial when the target audience suspects the leader of not really caring about the moral or ethical aspects of a CSR initiatives. However, if the target audience is expected to have less cynical dispositions, and perceived sincerity is a less salient element in the overall evaluation, a partially spontaneous decision style may deteriorate the overall impression of the CEO.

It is important to note that the results may be idiosyncratic to the communication of CSR decisions. CSR decisions are unique in that they entail more motivational ambiguity than many other decision settings. Presumably, the signalling effect of different decision styles is likely to be more pronounced in cases where sincerity of motivation is ambiguous, and less pronounced in cases where the motivation is clear-cut, and easily identifiable. In cases where the CEO's motivation is non-

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

ambiguous, the effect of different levels of perceived sincerity will presumably pose a weaker influence on the overall perceptual outcomes.

This paper adds to a relatively new stream of applied social-psychological research exploring the signaling effects of different decision styles. Although this paper explores a specific domain of executive decision making and communication, the experiment reveals that the type of thinking preceding the decision has a measurable effect on how the decision and the decision maker are perceived. Taken together with other recent publications on the signaling effects of spontaneous thoughts and deliberation, the results from this study demonstrate that old assumptions regarding the perception of decision making styles may be inadequately nuanced. It is likely that people perceive decisions stemming from reasoning and deliberation as better than the ones stemming from spontaneous thoughts in most cases, but not necessarily in all cases. Merrit and Monin (2011) call for further investigations into peoples' preferred modes of ethical judgement and decision making. The signaling effects of different kinds of thinking is a long ignored variable in social cognition, which shows promise for future research, not only in social psychology, but also for applied social-sciences such as marketing and management. Future studies should continue to explore the evaluative artefacts associated with different decision styles.

Across the CSR literature, perceptions of sincere caring seem to stand out as an important mediator between the initiatives deployed by the organization and reactions of the observers. Initiatives that are taken as indications of sincere caring and appreciation of responsibility result in positive effects, while the opposite is true for initiatives that come across as insincere. However, the CSR literature has proposed very few mechanisms through which perceptions of sincerity can be altered. This paper represents but one suggested mechanism. Presumably, decision style is not the only psychological mechanism through which a leader can signal sincerity. Ideally, future research should endeavor to combine knowledge from different fields, in order to gain a fuller comprehension of how perceptions

### Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

of sincerity can be increased and decreased. This is an important task, as suspicion of ulterior motives can hinder support for sustainability initiatives that are necessary in order to mitigate climate change.

## Conclusion

The two reported experiments demonstrate that different decision styles can influence perception of new CSR initiatives. Claiming to have engaged in different kinds of cognition in order to reach a CSR decision influenced perceptions of sincerity. The results indicated that a partially spontaneous decision style produced higher levels of perceived sincerity, while claiming complete spontaneity of thought induced lower levels of perceived sincerity. More research is needed in order to gain a full comprehension of how to successfully communicate CSR initiatives.

## Appendix A

Text stimuli:

*“Ellen Hansen is the CEO of a large Nordic hotel chain. She has just approved a new plan to make the hotels more environmentally friendly. Among the measures are reducing the size of plates and glasses at the breakfast buffet with 20 percent, in order to reduce waste of food. Furthermore, the hotels have been equipped with water-saving showers. Additionally, the hotels have adopted a more restrictive policy on changing of towels and linens on shorter stays. In an interview, Ellen explained the background for the decision:”*

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

### Appendix B

Wording in video:

*"We are now taking measures in order to become more socially responsible. The climate-threat is one of the biggest challenges that humanity has ever faced, and our chain has to be a part of the solution".*

Screenshot:



## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

### Appendix C

Willful deliberation manuscript:

*"I got the idea during a strategy-session, wherein many of our hotel-managers tried to come up with new ways of improving our business. We ran some analytics, and saw that this approach had a great potential".*

Partial spontaneity manuscript:

*"I was eating lunch at the office, I grabbed a big dinner-plate, and made three sandwiches. I could only finish two of them. At first I thought, I should have used the smaller breakfast-plates, but then it hit me, - this is something we can use in the hotels as well. And then the measures spun on from there".*

Complete spontaneity manuscript:

*"The idea just came to me spontaneously. I was at the office, working on something completely different, and suddenly it just hit me".*

## Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

### Appendix D

1. *To what extent do you like this decision*

(1. Dislike strongly, 4. Neutral/I don't know, 7. Like strongly)

2. *To what extent do you like the CEO*

(1. Dislike strongly, 4. Neutral/I don't know, 7. Like strongly)

3. *Leaders who have shown great ethical orientation in their management can be asked to serve as members of the Ethics Council, which gives advice to the Norwegian Petroleum Fund regarding ethical investments. How would you feel about nominating this CEO?*

(1. Strongly oppose nomination, 4. Neutral/I don't know, 7. Strongly support nomination)

4. *To what extent does the CEO come across as professional?*

(1. Very unprofessional, 4. Neutral/I don't know, 7. Very professional)

5. *To what extent does the CEO come across as competent?*

(1. Very incompetent, 4. Neutral/I don't know, 7. Very competent)

6. Indicate your agreement with the following claims:

*I believe the company are doing this because...\**

6.1 ... *They have a long-term interest in society*

6.2 ... *They believe in environmental care*

6.3 ... *They are trying to give something back to society*

6.4 ... *They feel their customers expect it*

6.5 ... *They feel society in general expects it*

6.6 ... *They feel their stakeholders expect it*

6.7 ... *They will get more customers by doing this*

6.8 ... *They will retain more customers by doing this*

6.9 ... *They will make more money by doing this*

7. What do you think was the CEOs intention for giving this press conference\*:

7.1 *I feel the CEO attempts to alter my attitudes towards the hotel chain*

7.2 *I feel the CEO attempts to influence my future choice of hotels*

7.3 *I feel the CEO wants to give me relevant information*

*\*All items indicated on 5-point Lickert scales from 1. Completely disagree to 5. Completely agree*

Added for Experiment 2:

8. *To what extent do the new initiatives seem to be financially motivated?*

(1. Not at all financially motivated, 4. Neutral/I don't know, 7. Very much financially motivated)

9. *To what extent do the new initiatives seem morally motivated?*

(1. Not at all morally motivated, 4. Neutral/I don't know, 7. Very much morally motivated)



Decision style and perceived sincerity in CSR communication

## Appendix E

All standardized scales used in this study were translated to Norwegian. The following process assured the quality of the translation: First, three PhD students produced one translation each, of each item. Secondly, three bilingual professors at the department of language chose which translation was correct, for all items. The professors provided their votes separately. Across all items, the professors were unanimous in all but two cases, in which the version with two out of three votes was included in the study. This translation process is very similar to the one recommended by Douglas and Craig (2007).

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