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# What makes the corporate social responsibility impact on Customer–Company identification stronger? A meta-analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Customer–company identification (CCI) has been highlighted as an important mechanism that explains the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and customer outcomes such as customer loyalty and word-of-mouth (WOM). However, findings on when and how this mechanism works are mixed. To uncover the viability and strength of CSR's indirect effect on customer outcomes through CCI, we conduct a *meta-analysis* testing a moderated mediated framework. This analysis incorporates 237 independent effect sizes from 58,766 individuals and 86 papers to examine the indirect effect of CSR on customer loyalty and WOM through CCI, while simultaneously testing a range of substantive and control moderators. The results reveal that 1) CSR has a main effect on CCI, 2) CCI mediates the effect of CSR on customer loyalty and WOM, and 3) there are significant theoretical moderators that amplify and reduce CSR's relationship with CCI. The paper's year of publication and industry controversy (versus non-controversy) mitigate the relationship between CSR and CCI, while collectivism and a holistic focus augment it.

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## 1. Introduction

Customer–company identification (CCI), defined as a customer's perception and feeling of oneness or psychological belongingness to an organization, is considered the crucial link that connects corporate social responsibility (CSR) to a firm's financial performance (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Bhattacharya, Korschun and Sen 2009; Male and Ashforth 1992; Pelozo and Papania 2008). To capture this link, research casts CCI as a mediator between a company's CSR initiatives and customers' loyalty and word of mouth (WOM), two outcomes that are critical to a firm's future revenues (Watson, Beck, Henderson and Palmatier 2015). Thus, the extent to which CSR influences customers largely depends on the strength of the relationships between CSR and CCI and between CCI and loyalty and WOM.

Yet, there are varied and conflicting results in the literature that undermine the central mediating role of CCI. Regarding the CSR–CCI relationship, studies report a wide variety of positive effects in addition to null and negative effects (e.g., Arli,

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Rundle-Thiele and Lasmono 2015, Edinger-Schons, Lengler-Graiff, Scheidler and Wieseke 2019, Homburg, Stierl and Bornemann 2013, Gilal, Paul, Gilal, and Gilal 2021). Regarding the relationships between CCI and loyalty and WOM, research documents positive and null effects (e.g., Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Stokburger-Sauer et al. 2012). The conflicting results undermine the entire CSR–CCI–customer outcome chain. Furthermore, the varied results obscure the potential importance of CSR for managing customer relationships, and they suggest substantive moderators are decisive in translating CSR into customer loyalty and WOM through CCI.

The current research seeks to address these conflicting results by conducting a *meta*-analytic review focusing on CCI and its mediating relationship with CSR. To achieve this goal, we propose a moderated mediated framework, which involves testing moderation and mediation simultaneously using *meta*-analytic structural equation modeling. The authors conduct these tests using 237 observed effects in the literature across 86 studies and 58,766 respondents. The research estimates population effects of the CSR–CCI–customer outcomes chain and hypothesizes moderating effects based on theoretical factors, such as time, culture, industry controversy, and construct features. The analysis finds that the relationship between CSR and CCI, as well as CSR's indirect effects on loyalty and WOM, is highly dependent on these factors.

The current *meta*-analysis explains two gaps in the literature. First, the present study supports the mediating role of CCI in the relationship between CSR and customer outcomes (i.e., loyalty and WOM). Notwithstanding the literature reporting mixed effects between CSR and CCI, we generalize that the indirect effects of CSR on loyalty and WOM through CCI are positive, strong, and significant. This finding provides robust empirical support for CSR initiatives as a way to develop and deepen customer relationships. CSR's effect on loyalty and WOM through CCI remains strong even when controlling for customer satisfaction or other relevant control variables utilized in published research.

Second, the current research identifies significant theoretical factors that explain disparate findings on the CSR–CCI relationship. For example, the CSR–CCI relationship is weakening over time, likely due to the common adoption of CSR and the subsequent dilution of its meaning for a social identity across the years. In addition, when a customer's culture is collectivistic (*vs* individualistic), the reputation of an industry is non-controversial (*vs* controversial), or CSR is holistic (*vs* atomistic), the mediated influence of CSR through CCI on loyalty and WOM is strongest. Importantly, our reported research suggests that firms in controversial industries can still utilize CSR to foster CCI, but the effect is diminished. Interestingly, we find that research has tended to favor contexts that are advantageous to CSR and CCI, such as data collection in collectivistic cultures and non-controversial industries. In summary, our findings provide robust support for companies addressing stakeholder and societal responsibilities to manage their customer relationships.

## 2. Theoretical background on CCI: Stakeholder theory and social identity theory

Fig. 1 presents the moderated mediated framework of CSR to loyalty and WOM through CCI. In addition, empirical evidence shows how theoretical moderators change the CSR–CCI effect while controlling for covariates. In the next section, we review prior literature and the theoretical background and theorize the hypotheses.

### 2.1. Previous research on CSR's effect on loyalty and WOM through CCI

Before addressing the theoretical underpinnings of the studied relationships in Fig. 1, we first note the empirical literature, which is unclear on the strength of the relationships. Some studies report strong effects for CSR–CCI–outcomes. For example, Huang, Cheng, and Chen (2017) indicate that CSR not only affects, but also increases CCI over time. Marin, Ruiz, and Rubio (2009) provide evidence that CSR has a substantial effect on CCI over and above the extent to which CSR increases the attractiveness of a company's identity. Some research suggests that CCI predicts customer loyalty over time – loyalty that is long lasting and loyalty that overcomes competitive and situational barriers (Haumann, Quaiser, Wieseke and Rese 2014; Huang, Cheng and Chen 2017; Wolter, Bock, Smith and Cronin 2017). Similarly, research strongly links CCI and WOM (e.g., Bagozzi, Bergami, Marzocchi and Morandin 2012; Lam, Ahearne and Schillewaert 2012).

Yet, as mentioned before, studies also report null or small effects for different parts of the mediated relationship. For example, Edinger-Schons et al. (2019) report that a retailer's CSR communications exhibits no relationship with customers' CCI and only a small effect on their CSR knowledge. Arli, Rundle-Thiele, and Lasmono (2015) test the effect of CSR for tobacco companies and find that CSR has no effect for smokers and a negative effect for non-smokers. In a business-to-business context, Homburg, Stierl, and Bornemann (2013) report little-to-no effect of business practice CSR or philanthropic CSR on CCI.

For the other side of the moderated mediated framework, some research suggests CCI does not affect loyalty at all. For example, Deng and Xu (2017) find no effect for CSR on attitudinal loyalty and only a small effect for CCI on WOM. According to Pérez and Del Bosque (2015), although CCI predicts WOM, CSR does not predict loyalty. Similarly, Elbedweihy, Jayawardhena, Elsharnouby, and Elsharnouby (2016) note only a weak relationship between CCI and loyalty. For WOM, research mostly shows statistically significant effects, but some of these are very weak (e.g., Brown, Barry, Dacin and Gunst 2005; Hong and Yang 2009). The above research reveals a need for the clarity provided by a *meta*-analysis. In the next section, we review *meta*-analyses on the primary constructs of CSR and CCI, positioning our study.

### Moderated Mediated Framework of CSR on Loyalty and WOM through CCI

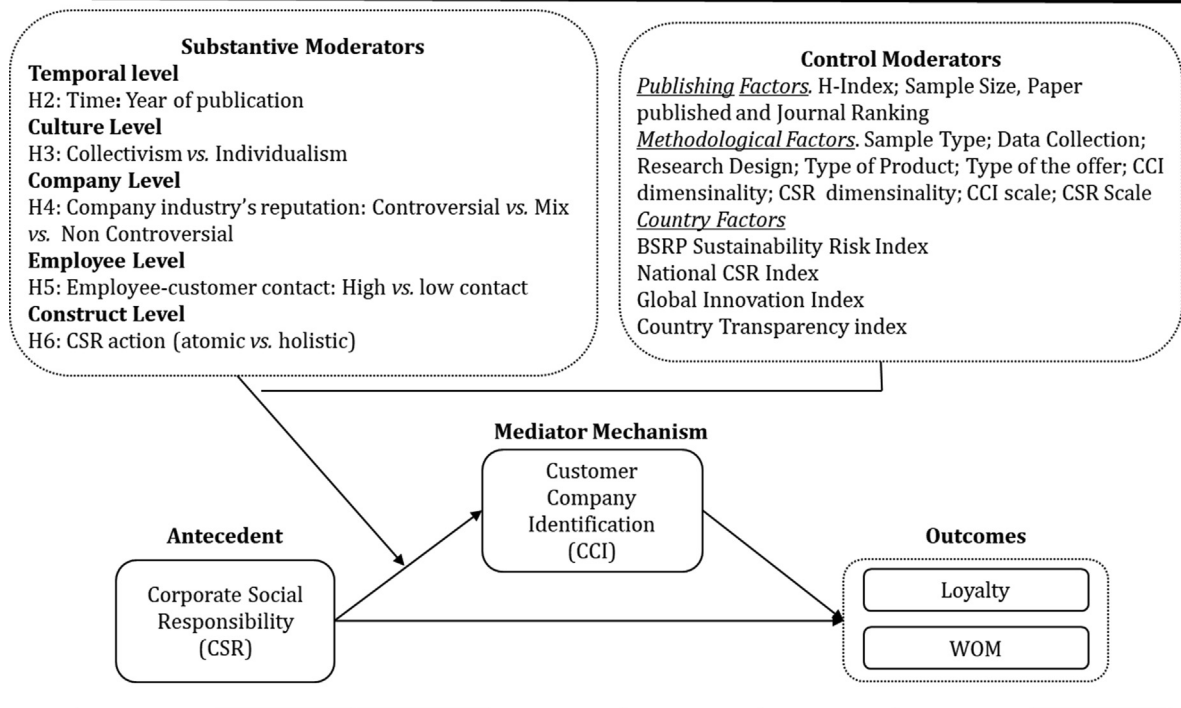


Fig. 1.

#### 2.2. Previous meta-Analyses and paper positioning

Though there are multiple *meta*-analyses on CSR and employee-based identification (as listed in Table 1), none have addressed whether CCI mediates the effect of CSR on loyalty and WOM, and none have considered CCI as a focal construct, positioning our paper. Regarding the two previous studies on identification, one examines the effect of consumers' identification on brand loyalty and the other examines the effect of employees' identification on work outcomes (Khamitov, Wang and Thompson, 2019; Riketta 2005). Although more *meta*-analyses examine CSR than have identification, only two examine CSR's influence on customers and neither examines identification (Aljarah and Ibrahim 2020; Orlitzky, Schmidt and Rynes 2003). In contrast to the published *meta*-analyses, the current research focuses on whether CCI mediates the effect of CSR on loyalty and WOM and how moderators change the CSR-CCI link.

#### 2.3. Theoretical link between CSR and Loyalty/WOM through CCI

The view that CSR affects loyalty and WOM through CCI primarily stems from two theoretical perspectives: stakeholder theory (Laplume, Sonpar and Litz 2008) and social identity theory (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Lichtenstein, Drumwright and Braig 2004). Web Appendix I presents details about the theoretical logic behind CCI. According to stakeholder theory, CSR initiatives help an organization fulfill its obligations to all stakeholders, facilitating stakeholders' sense of belonging with the organization and each other (Maignan and Ferrell 2004; Sen, Bhattacharya and Korschun 2006). According to social identity theory, a firm's CSR reputation signals to customers "that the company understands their needs and is, therefore, 'like them'" (Bhattacharya, Korschun and Sen 2009, p. 264). As Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig (2004, p. 17) explain, "when a corporation behaves in a manner that is perceived as socially responsible, customers are likely to infer that it has certain desirable traits that resonate with their sense of self."

Once a company becomes connected to a customer's self-definition, social identity theory suggests the customer will exhibit a positive bias toward the company (sustaining and promoting it). Strong identification can result in customers isolating themselves from the market because competitors conflict with their identity (Lam, Ahearne, Hu and Schillewaert 2010). Furthermore, the bias from CSR-based identification insulates customers against negative information about a company (Einwiller, Alexander, Johnson and Kamins 2006), although not when that information pertains to CSR hypocrisy (Einwiller, Lis, Ruppel and Sen 2019).

**Table 1**  
Previous meta-analyses on CSR and CCI.

Study	Focus	Moderator groups	Relevant findings	CSR	CCI/ OI	Loy	WOM	Mod
Khamitov, Wang, and Thompson (2019)	Consumer brand identification's effect on brand loyalty	Time, demographics, status signaling of brand, type of loyalty	Identification predicts loyalty, especially for older consumers, high status brands, and loyalty behaviors.		X	X		X
Riketta (2005)	Identification's effect on work outcomes	NA	Organizational identification is associated with work outcomes.		X			
Orlitzky, Schmidt, and Rynes (2003)	CSR's effect on CFP	Method	CSR is related to CFP.	X				X
Wang, Xu, and Wang (2020)	CSR's effect on work outcomes	Demographics, culture (i.e., individualism)	Perceived CSR correlates with work outcomes. Gender and age moderate these relationships.	X				X
Paruzel et al. (2021)	CSR's effect on work outcomes	Demographics, culture	Identification mediates the relationship between CSR and employee outcomes.	X	X			X
Aljarah and Ibrahim (2020)	CSR's effect on customer loyalty	Method, industry, product, culture	CSR and loyalty exhibit a positive and medium effect size but are moderated by many factors.	X		X		X
Huang, Sim, and Zhao (2020)	CSR's effect on CFP	Economic variables, method, company	CSR exhibits a small positive effect on CSP once economic shocks are controlled for.	X				X
Santini et al. (2021)	Antecedents and outcomes of CSR	Method, economic variables, culture	CSR strongly predicts loyalty and WOM. Few moderators significantly affect the results.	X		X	X	X
Wu, Furuoka, and Lau (2021)	Board gender diversity on CSR	Location, governance, demographics	Board gender diversity exhibits a small to medium effect on CSR based on gender parity.	X				X
Current study	CSR's effect on loyalty and WOM through CCI	Time, culture, company, employee and construct moderators. Publishing, methodological and country controls	CSR's effect on customer loyalty and WOM is mostly mediated by CCI. This effect is weakest in recent years, individualistic cultures, controversial industries, companies (rather than brands), employee-mediated products, and atomistic CSR (i.e. the moderators).	X	X	X	X	X

Note. CFP = corporate financial performance; WOM = word of mouth; CCI = customer–company identification; OI = organizational identification; Loy = loyalty; Mod = moderators; NA = not available; CSR = corporate social responsibility.

In summary, social identity theory and stakeholder theory suggest that CSR's relevance to customers is primarily as *an identity signal of social concern*. By identity signal, we mean that CSR primarily has symbolic meaning for customers, who often do not receive direct benefits from CSR initiatives. In other words, when a customer is purposely associated with a company known for CSR, this association allows them to signal important aspects of their own identity. By social concern, we mean that CSR shows that a company cares about stakeholders and society. For those customers who align with this value, associating with the company affords positive associations and belongingness.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** CCI plays a mediating role in the main effect of CSR on WOM (H1a) and loyalty (H1b).

### 3. Moderation hypotheses

To provide clarity on the conflicting results in the literature, we examine a set of moderators that influence CSR's relevance as an identity signal of social concern. Factors that help communicate CSR and make it relevant to customers should explain the existence of positive, null, and negative effects between CSR and CCI.<sup>2</sup> Frameworks of CCI have postulated several moderators that conceptually overlap. Fundamentally, two factors must be present for CSR to affect CCI. First, for CSR to act as an identity signal of social concern, customers must have knowledge of a company's CSR (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Lam 2012; Maignan and Ferrell 2004). Such knowledge can come from company communications, stakeholder interactions, or third parties (e.g., news coverage). Second, customers must have a positive view of CSR, both in general and in relation to a company's CSR initiatives (Marin, Ruiz, and Rubio 2009; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Wolter et al. 2021). Characteristics that affect the

<sup>2</sup> We focus on this relationship because variation in the CSR–CCI relationship affects the entire chain-of-effects.

symbolic value of CSR can stem from any number of factors ranging from the dyad in question (i.e., customer and company) to broader environmental factors (e.g., industry, culture, and time).

We examined previous studies for characteristics that indicated whether customers had knowledge of a company's CSR or whether they valued a company's CSR. We purposefully searched for moderators that crossed levels of analysis, spanning from the macro (e.g., environmental) to the micro (e.g., CSR characteristics) as research documents how factors across such levels affect CSR (Aguinis and Glavas 2012). Put another way, we sought to have our group of moderators span multiple levels and perspectives, per prior theory's recommendation, as such is needed to explain variation in CSR's influence. This examination revealed five potential theoretical moderators: time (i.e., the year a study was conducted), the culture of a company's customers (i.e., individualist or collectivist), whether a company's industry is controversial (or non-controversial), the existence of employee-mediated organizational interaction (i.e. high vs low interaction), and the CSR type (i.e., whether CSR is holistic or atomistic).

### 3.1. Time: Year of publication

Social identity theory suggests that identification and identities are dynamic (Pratt 2014). Groups' meanings fluctuate, as do company identities. For example, being an American meant something different in the 1970s than it does today, as does being a Ford customer. Similarly, the symbolic relevance of company actions also changes over time. CSR means something different in the marketplace today than it did 40 years ago. Whereas CSR was once emerging and new, it has become common. Today, CSR is even expected by consumers, suppliers, employees, and investors (Lamberti and Lettieri, 2009).

Once an identity signal becomes common, it loses its relevance, explanatory power, and identity-signaling properties. As Turner et al. (1994, p. 455) note, a "collection of stimuli is more likely to be categorized as an entity to the degree that the average differences between those stimuli are less than the average differences perceived between them." In other words, once all companies start using and promoting CSR activities, CSR loses its ability to differentiate between companies and reflect well on customers. American Express' cause-related marketing campaign to clean the Statue of Liberty was novel, attention-grabbing, and highly successful in New York in the 1980s. However, a similar campaign 40 years later would be less likely to stand out in the clutter of social responsibility initiatives. As such, we expect that CSR's relationship with CCI is diminishing over time because CSR has become more common, which causes its symbolic value to weaken. Thus,

**H<sub>2</sub>:** The magnitude of CSR's influence on CCI has declined across the years.

### 3.2. Culture: Collectivism vs Individualism

Cultures vary in terms of prioritizing group or individual interests. Cultures high in individualism prize individual interests (e.g., self-fulfillment; see Oyserman and Lee 2008), whereas cultures high in collectivism emphasize socially oriented goals (e.g., welfare; Triandis 2001). This cultural distinction is so strong that it results in significant behavioral differences. For example, areas with more individualism have greater artistic creativity but also higher binge drinking than areas with more collectivism (Vandello and Cohen 1999).

Research links an individualist mindset to a less positive view of broad socially responsible actions and a collectivist mindset to positive views of all forms of CSR, no matter the target (Xiang, Zhang, Geng, Zhou and Wu 2019; Zhao, Lee and Moon 2019). Furthermore, customers with a collectivist mindset are more likely than those with an individualist mindset to make altruistic attributions to CSR activities and to reward companies for their CSR actions or punish them for irresponsible actions (Choi, Chang, Li and Jang 2016). Research suggests that collectivism increases CSR's influence on the affective commitment of employees because CSR generates "favorable perceptions" of a firm's CSR (Hofman and Newman 2014, p.637). Thus, collectivist cultures should value CSR more than individualistic cultures and exhibit a stronger CSR–CCI relationship because the symbolic value of CSR as an identity signal is greater in collectivist cultures. As such, we propose H<sub>3</sub>:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Collectivism, as compared to individualism, strengthens the effect of CSR on CCI.

### 3.3. The controversy of a Company's industry

According to stakeholder theory and social identity theory, CSR's value to consumers is a signal that they can incorporate as part of their identity. Namely, a high-CSR firm fulfills its obligations to all stakeholders, which creates a positive association for consumers who value social causes (Maignan and Ferrell 2004; Sen, Bhattacharya and Korschun 2006). However, some companies operate in industries that inherently carry a negative reputation that can undermine CSR's value (Sen, Bhattacharya and Korschun 2006). For example, oil and coal are labeled "dirty" industries because of the connotation of pollution. Similarly, the tobacco, alcohol, and gambling industries are stereotyped as unhealthy and associated with vice products. As Pelozo, Loock, Cerruti, and Muyot (2012, p. 83) have argued, "some industries or product categories suffer from a negativity bias among stakeholders."

Research notes that CSR in controversial industries can positively affect firm value, mitigate firm risk, and even foster organizational identification (Cai, Jo and Pan 2012; De Roeck, Marique, Stinglhamber and Swaen 2014; De Roeck and Delobbe 2012). However, that research does not suggest that controversial and non-controversial industries are equivalent in terms of customer perceptions and identification (Jo and Na 2012). To the contrary, other research doc-

uments that “issue-riddled” industries can overshadow CSR effects (Song, Wen and Ferguson 2020). Experimental evidence implies that consumers respond less favorably to CSR from companies in controversial industries compared to CSR from companies in non-controversial industries (Yoon, Gürhan -Canli, and Schwarz 2006). In fact, Palazzo and Richter (2005) question whether the tobacco industry can even authentically conduct CSR. Similarly, consumers observe that some companies’ CSR possibilities are restricted by their industry (e.g., oil; Überseder, Schlegelmilch, and Murphy 2013).

If the industry undermines consumers’ perceptions of a company’s CSR, then the value of CSR as an identity signal is also undermined. While companies in controversial industries can engage in meaningful CSR, which can even positively affect firm value, the symbolic value of CSR is hampered by the stigma around their industry. Thus, a controversial industry should dampen the effect of CSR on CCI linked to non-controversial industries because the negative bias that stems from the industry will undermine the identity signaling of CSR. Therefore,

**H<sub>4</sub>:** Controversial industries, as compared to non-controversial industries, weaken the effect of CSR on CCI.

### 3.4. Employee–Customer mediated contact

Because customers are often unaware of a company’s CSR initiatives, companies must communicate their actions to increase awareness (Bhattacharya, Korschun, and Sen 2009). Research suggests that a best practice is an inside-out approach in which companies first practice CSR toward internal stakeholders, who can communicate externally about the CSR practices (Korschun, Bhattacharya and Swain 2014; Tang, Hull and Rothenberg 2012). In this view, employees, acting as *direct* ambassadors of a company’s CSR stance, can directly increase customers’ CSR knowledge and CCI (Edinger-Schons, Lengler-Graiff, Scheidler and Wieseke 2019). Employees who identify with their company exhibit the values of the company, thereby embodying a company’s CSR reputation (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Korschun, Bhattacharya and Swain 2014; Homburg, Wieseke and Hoyer 2009).

However, not all companies’ products regularly foster employee–customer contact during the purchase process. Some firms have intermediaries, such as third-party companies and technology, that mediate the purchase process instead (Singh, Brady, Arnold and Brown 2016). Customers rarely interact with employees of web-based companies such as [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and [Airbnb.com](https://www.airbnb.com), while sit-down restaurant customers interact directly with employees during every visit. Without regular customer and employee contact, companies must explain their CSR with arms-length communications, which customers often view skeptically (Morsing, Schultz and Nielsen 2008). In other words, employees are valuable conduits for identification, and companies with a little customer–employee contact lose this method for translating CSR into CCI. Based on this direct and indirect interaction, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>5</sub>:** Employee–customer interaction during purchase or consumption, as compared to no customer–employee interaction, strengthens the CSR–CCI link.

### 3.5. CSR Actions: Atomistic or holistic

Consumers understand that CSR can encompass multiple domains and stakeholder groups (Überseder, Schlegelmilch, and Murphy 2013). However, researchers’ operationalization of CSR may correspond to a specific initiative, which we refer to as *atomistic*, or multiple initiatives and stakeholder groups, which we term *holistic*. For example, Wolter et al. (2021) and Deng and Xu (2017) assess CSR primarily in terms of environmental concerns. In contrast, Pérez and Del Bosque (2015) and Fatma et al. (2016) evaluate CSR as comprising many aspects (e.g., economic and social) and serving many stakeholders (e.g., customers, shareholders, and employees).

Both stakeholder theory and social identity theory suggest that holistic CSR should more strongly affect CCI than atomistic CSR. When customers use a company for a social identity, they do so based on the meaning of the overall identity, not based on a single CSR initiative (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). A company that treats employees, customers, and society sustainably and responsibly rather than as just one group creates a better CSR reputation, which is necessary for CSR to facilitate CCI (Lii and Lee 2012). Put another way, holistic CSR has greater symbolic value than atomistic CSR because holistic CSR represents a better identity signal of social concern. Based on the previous logic, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>6</sub>:** Holistic CSR, as compared to atomistic CSR, strengthens the CSR–CCI link.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Literature search

To ensure the comprehensiveness of our literature search, we followed the meta-Analysis Reporting Standards protocol as documented by Kepes, McDaniel, Brannick, and Banks (2013) and exemplified by Santini et al. (2020). First, we searched for manuscripts in major databases, such as EBSCO, JSTOR, Elsevier, Emerald, ProQuest, and ABI/INFORM Global, similar to Vieira, Rafael and Agnihotri (2022). Second, we used Google Scholar because it provided more citations across all subject areas and returned a substantial number of unique citations (Martín-Martín, Orduna-Malea, Thelwall and López-Cózar

2018). Third, we searched the most important marketing and customer-focused journals according to SJR SCImago ranking.<sup>3</sup> In both the databases and the journal searches, we used the following terms for the title and abstract: “customer–company identification,” “consumer–company identification,” “customer identification,” “consumer identification,” “customer–brand identification,” and “consumer–brand identification.” To safeguard the inclusiveness of our literature search, we specified the date range from 2003 to December 2021. Fourth, we contacted researchers by e-mail through ELMAR-AMA to gain access to unpublished and working papers. Fifth, we examined the references in the papers we found to reveal additional relevant papers on CCI.

#### 4.2. Sample and inclusion criteria

Initially, we included studies that reported correlations with CCI. As an eligibility criterion, studies were selected that presented Pearson’s  $r$  coefficients as a metric variable. We used systematic reviews and PRISMA for meta-analysis protocol, which describes the logic, search, and analytical methods of systematic reviews. As shown in Fig. 2, our database searches generated 917 studies. We rejected 746 manuscripts (81 %) after reading the titles and abstracts. We downloaded 171 papers and coded all the studies for the focal construct CCI (moderators, independent and dependent variables). After that, we excluded 37 articles that were not empirical or that did not report at least one effect size coefficient for CCI (e.g., Elbedweihy and Jayawardhena 2014; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). We also excluded Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, and Schillewaert (2013) because their time series model could not be converted into an effect size ( $ES$ ). This process resulted in 134 eligible reports. Next, we excluded 44 studies because the data were unavailable or had no relationship with CCI. Contacting marketing researchers through ELMAR-AMA resulted in 6 papers that were either repeated ( $n = 4$ ) or unrelated to our study ( $n = 2$ ). For the CSR–CCI relationship, the ratio of unpublished to published papers was 4/86 (5 %). Thus, 90 papers met our eligibility criteria for bivariate meta-analysis, and 86 papers met our eligibility criteria for multivariate meta-analysis (see Web Appendix II).<sup>4</sup>

These inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in 237 independent effect sizes, derived from 58,766 respondents, and 57 different papers (see Web Appendix III for the list of journals). To expand the dataset, we then searched for the terms “CSR–loyalty” and “CSR–WOM” in Google Scholar and the journals. The expansion resulted in 42 additional effect sizes ( $M_{es} = 0.407$ ) for the CSR–loyalty relationship, which derives from 27,123 respondents, and 21 additional effect sizes for the CSR–WOM relationship ( $M_{es} = 0.422$ ), which originates from 137,766 respondents. We merged these search results with our primary data collection.

To achieve coding accuracy, we used Rauch et al.’s (2009) guide. After obtaining agreement on the conceptual definitions and coding conditions for the constructs, we independently coded all the studies, resulting in a 90 % inter-coder reliability, which indicates a good level of agreement among raters (Hulland, Baumgartner & Smith, 2018). We resolved inconsistencies in coding through debate.

#### 4.3. Moderator measurement

For theoretical moderators, we coded time as a temporal index for testing  $H_2$  (i.e., the year a study was conducted). The papers have an average publication year of  $M_{year} = 2015$  ( $SD = 4.25$ , range = 2004–2021, 17 years of analysis). Next, for testing  $H_3$ , we coded the collectivistic and individualistic culture moderator using the same procedure as Carrillat, Jaramillo, and Mulki (2009). We coded the country where the data collection occurred and then obtained values from Hofstede’s website.<sup>5</sup> With the continuum index, we created an individualism ( $n = 15$ , 22.39 %) vs collectivism dummy variable ( $n = 52$ , 77.61 %). We controlled for the effects of culture according to national indexes. We used Gjolberg’s (2009) National Corporate Social Responsibility Index ( $M = -11.18$ ,  $SD = 12.76$ ); Crespo and Crespo’s (2016) Global Innovation Index, which assesses an economy’s innovative capacity ( $M = 46$ ,  $SD = 11.01$ ); and Vadakkepatt et al.’s (2021) Business Sustainability Risk and Performance (BSRP) index ( $M = 44.80$ ,  $SD = 7.18$ ). We measured public corruption using Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI;  $M = 56.77$ ,  $SD = 15.50$ ). The CPI uses a scale from zero (very corrupt) to 100 (very clean). A high CPI score indicates a clean and ethical culture at the geopolitical entity level (Tang et al. 2018). For testing hypothesis  $H_3$ , we entered the culture construct plus the four covariates of moderators in the meta-regression.

For the controversy level of a company’s industry ( $H_4$ ), we used Cai, Jo, and Pan’s (2012) and Oh, Bae, and Kim’s (2017) categorizations to code whether companies are part of controversial industries (e.g., tobacco,  $n = 9$ , 13.43 %), and non-controversial industries (e.g., restaurants,  $n = 58$ , 86.56 %). For employee–customer mediated contact ( $H_5$ ), we coded whether customers regularly interact with the employees of the company (e.g., hotels, restaurants, and retail,  $n = 53$ , 79.10 %, direct

<sup>3</sup> These journals included *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Marketing Science*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Retailing*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *Psychology and Marketing*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Service Marketing*, and *Journal of Service Research*.

<sup>4</sup> The bivariate analysis uses the association between  $x$  and  $y$ . The multivariate analysis uses a bivariate correlation matrix as input and controls for the constructs (multi)collinearity when testing, generating more reliable results. When applying multivariate analysis, we can test our hypotheses using structural equation modeling, similar to previous studies (Gremler, Van Vaerenbergh, Brügggen and Gwinner 2020).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>.

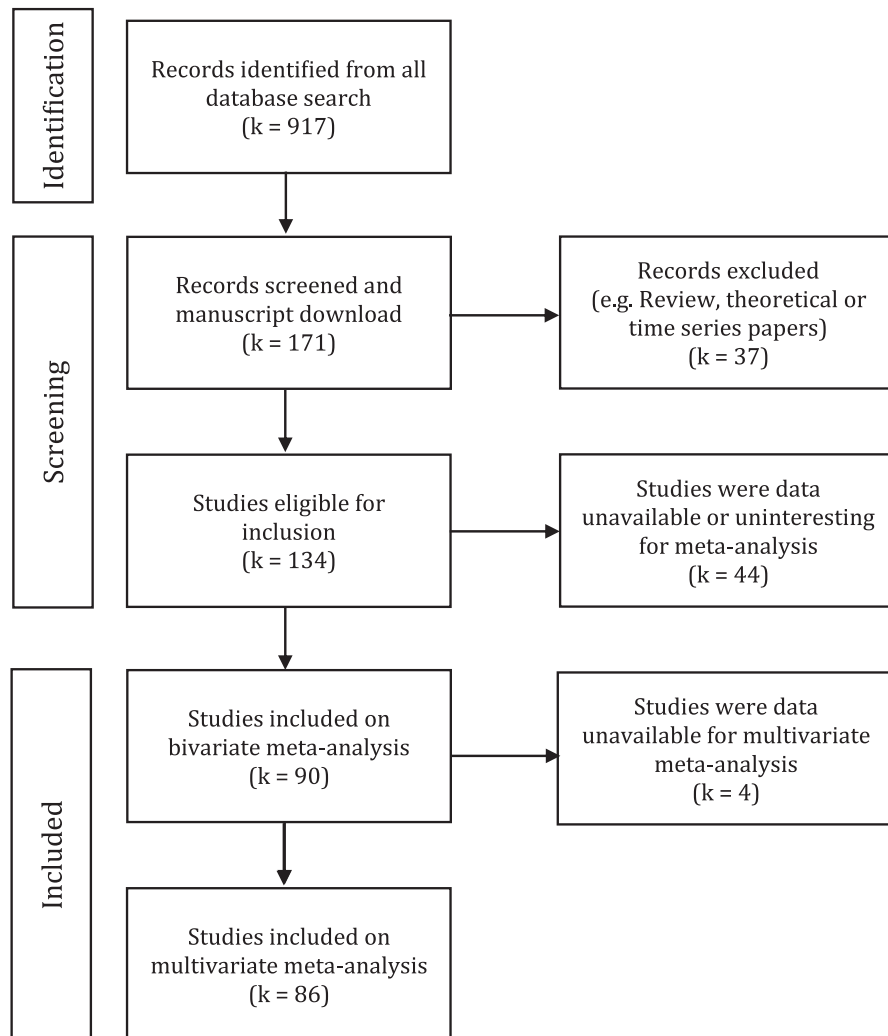


Fig. 2. Literature search diagram based on PRISMA protocol.

contact) or whether companies have intermediaries, third-party companies, or technology that intermediates customer-company interaction (e.g., manufacturers and telecommunication,  $n = 14$ , 20.90 %, indirect contact).

For testing  $H_6$ , we coded CSR as holistic (e.g., general) or atomistic (e.g., specific) by considering the CSR operationalization of each study. When a scale was unidimensional, if the items measured stakeholder, customer, and employee aspects, we coded the CSR as holistic. When a scale was multidimensional, if the items measured a company's initiatives or reputation towards different stakeholders, such as customers, shareholders, employees, community, and general (Pérez and Del Bosque, 2015), we also coded the CSR as holistic. However, when the paper assessed a specific element of CSR, such as employees or philanthropy (i.e., "This company treats its employees well; this is a socially responsible company; and this company supports children in need"), we coded the CSR as atomistic (e.g., Marin et al. 2009). The results indicated a fairly even distribution between the two groups, holistic CSR ( $n = 39$ , 58.21 %) and atomistic CSR ( $n = 28$ , 41.79 %).

For methodological covariates, we included variables to represent the sample type, defined as student ( $n = 10$ , 14.93 %) or non-student ( $n = 57$ , 85.07 %; Matos, Henrique and Rossi 2007; Peterson 2001); data collection procedure where the survey happened, such as field interview vs laboratory vs online vs self-report ( $n_{\text{interview}} = 22$ , 32.84 % vs  $n_{\text{lab}} = 5$ , 7.46 % vs  $n_{\text{online}} = 14$ , 20.90 % vs  $n_{\text{self-report}} = 26$ , 38.81 %; respectively; Vieira, Santini and Araujo 2018); research design, defined as experiment vs survey ( $n_{\text{experiment}} = 8$ , 11.94 % vs  $n_{\text{survey}} = 59$ , 88.06 %; Pan and Zinkhan 2006; Vieira 2013); type of product, defined as good ( $n = 15$ , 22.73 %) or service ( $n = 51$ , 77.27 %; Gelbrich and Roschk 2011); and feature of the offer, namely brand (e.g. Facebook,  $n = 1$ , 1.49 %, Popp and Wilson 2018) vs company (e.g. Spanish insurance companies  $n = 53$ , 79.10 % Perez, 2009) vs product (e.g. fast food  $n = 9$ , 13.43 % Deng and Xu 2015) vs service (e.g. finance service banking  $n = 4$ , 5.97 %, Perez and Del Bosque, 2015). We coded for four groups of CCI scales based on previous authors (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000 vs Homburg, Wieseke and Hoyer 2009 vs Mael and Ashforth 1992 vs others). The CCI scale groups' sizes were uniform ( $n = 20$ , 29.85 % vs  $n = 12$ ,



17.91 %;  $n = 24$ , 35.82 % vs  $n = 11$ , 16.42 %, respectively). We did the same for the CSR metric according to [Lichtenstein et al. \(2004\)](#) vs other scales ( $n_{\text{Lichtenstein}} = 15$ , 22.39 % vs  $n_{\text{others}} = 52$ , 77.61 %, respectively). These were the most used instruments found in our search.

For publishing covariates, we collected several moderators, including a paper's sample size (taken directly from the methods and results sections,  $M = 1,612$ ,  $SD = 6,618$ ) and the H-Index from the journal (from Google Scholar,  $M = 91$ ,  $SD = 64$ ). Based on [Brembs \(2018\)](#), we created a dummy variable to represent journal quality using the first quartile of SJR SClmago rankings for top journals and the remaining quartiles for non-top journals (top  $n = 54$ , 80.60 % vs non-top  $n = 13$ , 19.40 %). We coded the manuscripts published in journals ( $n = 65$ , 97.01 % vs unpublished,  $n = 2$ ) and those that were unpublished (working papers, doctoral dissertations, conference proceedings, etc.;  $n = 2$ , 3 %) as a dummy variable. [Table 2](#) presents the focal constructs and their theoretical definitions. [Web appendix IV](#) presents methodological and publishing moderators and their definitions.

## 5. Main results

### 5.1. Bivariate meta-Analysis

In the first stage of the meta-analysis, we convert the conventional statistical effects, such as the chi-square, beta values,  $t$ -values, ANOVA  $F$ -values, and other statistical information, into a product-moment  $r$  correlation coefficient. Second, we use random effects modeling to pool the uncorrected effect size, which has the bias of a normal distribution ([Hunter and Schmidt 2004](#)). Third, we correct this biased effect size according to a study's sample size and scale reliability (in both independent

**Table 2**  
Focal construct, definition, and measurement.

Construct	Theoretical definition of constructs and	Measurement of constructs
CSR (predictor)	CSR is defined as "obligations of the firm to society [...] and company involvement with the charitable causes" ( <a href="#">Lichtenstein, Drumwright and Braig 2004</a> , p.16).	Continuous (Pearson's $r$ ranging from $-1$ to $+1$ and corrected by sample and reliability)
CCI (mediator, $H_1$ )	CCI is defined as "primary psychological substrate for the kind of deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that markets are increasingly seeking to build with their customers" ( <a href="#">Bhattacharya &amp; Sen, 2003</a> , p.76).	Continuous (Pearson's $r$ ranging from $-1$ to $+1$ and corrected by sample and reliability)
Loyalty	Loyalty is defined as customer's intention to repeatedly purchase from a company or brand regardless of convenience or price ( <a href="#">Watson et al. 2015</a> ).	Continuous (Pearson's $r$ ranging from $-1$ to $+1$ and corrected by sample and reliability)
WOM	WOM is defined as "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers" ( <a href="#">Westbrook 1987</a> , p.261).	Continuous (Pearson's $r$ ranging from $-1$ to $+1$ and corrected by sample and reliability)
Time ( $H_2$ )	Year is the time that an article was published. We measured time as the year of the paper ( $M = 2015$ ; $SD = 4.25$ ).	Continuous variable (year ranging from 2004 to 2021). We used $\pm 1$ standard deviation above/below the average for creating groups
Individualism–collectivism ( $H_3$ )	Individualism is defined "as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families" and collectivism is defined as "a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular ingroup to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty". ( <a href="#">Hofstede 1997</a> ).	Continuous variable from Hofstede site, ranging from 0 (low score is collectivistic) to 100 (high score is Individualist). We measured individualism–collectivism according to Hofstede's individualism measure of the country where the data collection happened.
Controversy of a company's industry ( $H_4$ )	Controversial industry sectors "are typically characterized by social taboos, moral debates, and political pressures, include sinful industries, such as tobacco, gambling, alcohol, and adult entertainment as well as industries involved with emerging environmental, social, or ethical issues, i.e., weapons, nuclear, oil, cement, and biotech" ( <a href="#">Cai, Jo &amp; Pan, 2012</a> , p. 468).	Multinomial variable: 0 = controversy ( $N = 9$ ), 1 = non-controversial ( $N = 58$ ). We measured controversy of a company's industry by coding whether companies are part of controversial industries (e.g., tobacco, gambling), and non-controversial industries (e.g., restaurants).
Employee–customer mediated contact ( $H_5$ )	Employee–customer mediated contact refers to the way that the interaction firm and customer happen, direct versus indirect way.	Multinomial variable. 0 = direct contact ( $N = 53$ ), 1 = indirect contact ( $N = 14$ ). We coded whether customers regularly interact with the employees of the company (e.g., hotels, restaurants, and retail) or whether companies have intermediaries, third-party companies, or technology that intermediates customer–company interaction (e.g., manufacturers and telecommunication).
CSR actions (Holistic and atomistic, $H_6$ )	CSR actions focused on a specific issues or stakeholder groups (e.g., ethical, economic, environmental, and social viewpoints, which we coded as atomistic) or CSR focused on a multiple initiatives or stakeholder group (e.g., only employees).	Dummy, 0 = holistic ( $N = 39$ ), 1 = atomistic ( $N = 28$ ). We measured CSR actions as dummy variable, holistic vs atomistic, based on whether a study's manipulations, context, or measure indicated multiple initiatives / stakeholders or a single initiative / stakeholder, respectively.

and dependent variables; see [Web Appendix V](#) for reliability analysis). This correction is similar to previous *meta*-analytic studies ([Grinstein 2008](#); [Van Laer, Feiereisen and Visconti 2019](#); [Zaremozhzabieh, Ahrari, Krauss, Samah, Meng and Ariffin 2019](#)). Fourth, we estimate the effect size after it has been corrected and weighted ( $ES\rho$ ,  $\rho$ ) ([Hunter and Schmidt 2004](#)). Following [Miao et al. \(2017, p.74\)](#), we “compute the corrected 95 % confidence interval to gauge the statistical significance of effect sizes.” Fifth, we estimate the  $Q$  test and  $I^2$ . The  $Q$  test indicates the presence or absence of heterogeneity in the variance, whereas  $I^2$  quantifies the degree of heterogeneity in a *meta*-analysis ([Huedo-Medina, Sánchez-Meca, Marín-Martínez and Botella 2006](#)). Sixth, we implement three approaches to check publication bias: the fail-safe number, Egger’s regression test, and  $p$ -curve analysis. The fail-safe number analysis follows [Orwin’s \(1983\)](#) approach, which calculates the total papers with non-significant findings necessary to reduce the effect size to a null result. The Egger test uses a regression analysis, which the slope of the regression line represents the standardized effect and the publication bias is captured by the intercept. A significant intercept indicates the presence of publication bias. Once the intercept becomes non-significant, it indicates the absence of publication bias ([Sterne and Egger 2005](#)). A  $p$ -curve analysis, based on [Simonsohn, Nelson, and Simmons \(2014\)](#), assesses potential problems caused by the unavailability of failed studies and analyses (i.e., the “file-drawer” problem).

We first analyze the effect of CSR on CCI using 67 observations, which refer to 108,062 respondents. The effect size representing CSR’s relationship with CCI is  $\rho = 0.542$  ( $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{lower} = 0.46$  and  $CI_{upper} = 0.61$ ; see [Web Appendix VI](#) for the forest plot on CSR–CCI). The result from [Table 3](#) suggests considerable variance among effect sizes ( $Q$  test,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the effect size for the CSR–CCI relationship varies across studies, and moderators may explain these variations ([Lipsey and Wilson 2001](#)). The  $I^2$  statistic, which quantifies the proportion of total variability deriving from population effects rather than sampling error, suggests substantial variability in effect sizes across studies in a *meta*-analysis ([Huedo-Medina, Sánchez-Meca, Marín-Martínez and Botella 2006](#)). Thus, it is crucial to investigate factors that may moderate the size of this effect.

We implement three approaches to check for publication bias: the fail-safe number, Egger’s regression test for funnel asymmetry, and a  $p$ -curve. The fail-safe number based on Orwin’s formula suggests that the results are comparatively reliable. For example, the fail-safe number is  $N = 304$  for the CSR–CCI relationship,  $N = 979$  for the CCI–loyalty relationship, and  $N = 419$  for the CCI–WOM relationship. Egger’s test yields a non-significant result for the set of studies, indicating no appreciable asymmetry of the effect-sizes. As found in Egger’s test, there is no indication of studies with low precision (higher standard error) for quantifying potential publication bias in *meta*-analyses (see [Table 4](#)).

Finally, we conduct  $p$ -curve analyses on CSR. We exclude 2 out of 67 (2.9 %) effect sizes from the  $p$ -curve analysis because they are not statistically significant. The distribution is right-skewed. For the CSR–CCI, CCI–loyalty, and CCI–WOM relationships, the  $p$ -curve is significantly right-skewed based on both the binomial test (share of significant results  $p < .025$ ;  $p < .000$ ) and the continuous test. The  $p$ -curve values present 197, 58, and 28 studies that are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . Furthermore, the values show a “true” effect size behind our *meta*-analytic findings and that the results are not the product of publication bias (See all  $p$ -curve analyses and plots in [Web Appendix VII](#)).

## 5.2. Mediating role of CCI

In the second stage of the *meta*-analysis, we test our hypotheses using structural equation modeling, similar to previous studies ([Gremier, Van Vaerenbergh, Brüggem and Gwinner 2020](#)). According to [Viswesvaran and Ones \(1995, p. 865\)](#), “the estimate true score correlations between the constructs of interest are established through the application of *meta*-analysis, and structural equation modeling is then applied to the matrix of estimated true score correlations.” We create a multivariate correlation matrix by using the effect size values (see [Web Appendix VIII](#)) and estimate the direct and indirect effects with

**Table 3**  
Bivariate meta-Analysis of CCI.

Relationship	$o$	$k$	$N$	$ES_{rho}$	ES range	$\rho$	z-value	Sig	95 % confidence interval	$Q$ test	$I^2$	FSN Orwin
CSR → CCI	67	41	108,062	0.484	-0.503 to 0.980	0.542	11.049	0.000	0.462 to 0.614	11,318.58	99 %	304
CCI → loyalty	58	49	26,470	0.624	0.170 to 0.960	0.674	15.821	0.000	0.615 to 0.726	5,034.39	98 %	979
CCI → word of mouth	29	19	10,606	0.540	-0.190 to 0.905	0.601	8.638	0.000	0.485 to 0.696	3,473.43	99 %	419
CSR → loyalty	42	42	27,123	0.407	-0.100 to 0.860	0.461	10.2	0.000	0.372 to 0.550	1,911.07	98 %	42
CSR → word of mouth	21	21	137,766	0.422	0.138 to 0.680	0.461	10.8	0.000	0.377 to 0.545	1,308.93	97 %	21

Note.  $O$  = number of observations;  $k$  = number of effects;  $N$  = the number of respondents/individuals included;  $ES_{rho}$  = average effect size corrected by sample and reliability ( $\rho$ );  $z$ -test = test of whether  $\rho$  is significant; Sig = significance level associated with  $z$ -test;  $Q$  = test for heterogeneity of variance;  $I^2$  = index quantifying the dispersion of effect sizes in a *meta*-analysis; FSN = fail-safe number based on Orwin’s equation.

### 5.2. Publication Bias Analysis.

**Table 4**  
Publication bias.

Statistics	CSR → CCI	CCI → Loy	CCI → WOM
Test for funnel plot asymmetry	$z = 0.953, p = \text{ns}$	$z = -1.66, p = \text{ns}$	$z = 0.090, p = \text{ns}$
Limit estimate (as sei → 0)	$b = 0.466^{***}$	$b = 1.1190^{***}$	$b = 0.6740^{***}$
Funnel asymmetry Kendall's tau	$-0.105, p = \text{ns}$	$0.006, p = \text{ns}$	$0.0076, p = \text{ns}$
p-curve analysis total number of $p < .05$ studies included in the analysis	$k = 65 (97 \%)$	$k = 58 (100 \%)$	$k = 28 (96.55 \%)$
Total number of studies with $p < .025$	$k = 64 (95.52 \%)$	$k = 58 (100 \%)$	$k = 28 (96.55 \%)$
Right-skewness test	$-54.707^{***}$	$-53.518^{***}$	$-35.125^{***}$
Flatness test	54.414	54.135	34.732

Note. Model was estimated using mixed-effects meta-regression; predictor was standard error; power estimate was 99 %;  $z = z$ -test; we used the evidential value present:  $*** p < .001$ ;  $p = \text{ns}$  is non-significant;  $k =$  number of observations; Loy = loyalty; WOM = word of mouth.

structural equation modeling (similar to Iyer et al. 2020). Then, we use statistics to determine model fit: the comparative fit index (CFI), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the adjusted GFI index (AGFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Finally, to understand the moderated mediated effect from our framework, we evaluate the interactive indirect effect using bootstrap analysis.

Table 5 presents the results from the structural equation modeling analysis testing whether CCI is considered the missing link between CSR and customer loyalty and WOM (Peloza and Papania 2008). We test two models: a mediation model without the main effect of CSR on loyalty and WOM (model 1) and a model with these direct paths (model 2). Both models use the multivariate matrix and have a sample size of 20,963 observations. The model fit indexes for both models present good values. Model 1 has a CFI of 0.95 and an AGFI of 0.90, and model 2 is superior, presenting a CFI of 0.99 and an AGFI of 0.98. The results support the mediation role of CCI ( $H_{1a,b}$ ), as the indirect effects of CSR on loyalty and WOM are significant for model 1 ( $b = 0.365$ ;  $p < .01$  and  $b = 0.326$ ;  $p < .007$ ) and model 2 ( $b = 0.326$ ;  $p < .007$  and  $b = 0.269$ ;  $p < .019$ ). Thus, CSR exhibits strong indirect effects on loyalty and WOM through CCI even when CSR affects loyalty and WOM directly. The variance explained for CCI, loyalty, and WOM is 29 %, 46 %, and 37 %, respectively.

In a rival model (alternative model 1 in Web Appendix IX), we assess whether the CSR–CCI mediated relationship is robust to common customer loyalty and WOM drivers of quality and satisfaction (i.e., instrumental drivers; see Lam, Ahearne and Schillewaert 2012). In another rival model (alternative model 2 in Web Appendix X), we assess whether the CSR–CCI mediated relationship explains objective firm performance. The results from both rival models provide more support for the mediating role of CCI.

### 5.3. Moderating effects

#### 5.3.1. meta-regression

We use meta-regression to test moderating effects (Vieira et al., 2022). “meta-regression analysis is a multivariate empirical investigation, using multiple regression analysis, of what causes the large variation among reported regression estimates or transformations of regression estimates” (Stanley and Doucouliagos, 2012, p. 3), meta-regression is used to explain the cause of effect-size differences in the data, and applied to continuous and categorical exogenous variables (Harrer, Cuijpers, Furukawa and Ebert 2021; Higgins et al. 2019). The first hypothesis considers the temporal condition of CCI. Once an identity signal becomes common, it loses its relevance, explanatory power, and identity. Our results show that time has a negative moderating effect ( $r = -0.02$ ;  $p < .002$ ), supporting  $H_2$ .<sup>6</sup> Over time, the CSR–CCI relationship weakens from  $ES_r = 0.625$  to  $ES_r = 0.485$  (see Table 6). Furthermore, as shown in Table 7, time weakens CSR's indirect effect on WOM and loyalty ( $r_{\text{older}} = 0.36$  vs  $r_{\text{newer}} = 0.30$  for loyalty and  $r_{\text{older}} = 0.33$  vs  $r_{\text{specific}} = 0.27$  for WOM).

Second, we analyze the moderating effect of culture on the CSR–CCI link ( $H_3$ ). According to the results (see Table 6), the effect of CSR on CCI is stronger for a collectivist orientation than for an individualist orientation, and this difference is significant ( $r_{\text{collectivism}} = 0.52$  vs  $r_{\text{individualism}} = 0.35$ ;  $b = -0.166, p < .03$ ). Culture also moderates the indirect effects of CSR on WOM and loyalty ( $b_{\text{collectivism}} = 0.31$ ;  $p < .001$  vs  $b_{\text{individualism}} = 0.21$ ;  $p < .001$  and  $b_{\text{collectivism}} = 0.34$ ;  $p < .001$  vs  $b_{\text{individualism}} = 0.23$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively). The country-level controls of national CSR, global innovation, BSRP Index, and CPI are not significant. Thus, the results support our proposal that collectivistic cultures, compared to individualistic cultures, value and respond to CSR more.

Third, we examine the controversy of a company's industry. The results indicate that this variable moderates the relationship between CSR and CCI, supporting  $H_4$ . The moderating finding suggests that controversial industries, as compared to non-controversial industries, weaken the effect of CSR on CCI ( $r_{\text{controversial}} = 0.27$  vs  $r_{\text{non-controversial}} = 0.51$ ;  $b = 0.24, p < .005$ ). Furthermore, the controversy of the industry moderates the indirect influence of CSR on loyalty ( $b_{\text{controversial}} = 0.18$ ;  $t = 50.12p < .001$  vs  $b_{\text{non-controversial}} = 0.34$ ;  $t = 81.33p < .001$ ) and WOM ( $b_{\text{controversial}} = 0.16$ ;  $t = 49.25p < .01$  vs  $b_{\text{non-controversial}} = 0.306$ ;  $t = 77.77p < .001$ ).

<sup>6</sup> There is an outlier in the dataset ( $r = -0.503$ ). The overall CSR–CCI correlation reduced from  $r = 0.60$  in 2004 and to  $r = 0.45$  in 2021. We excluded the outlier and the negative slope still exists. The overall CSR–CCI correlation without the outlier reduced from  $r = 0.57$  in 2004 and to  $r = 0.42$  in 2021. See details in Web Appendix XII.

**Table 5**  
Estimate effects of CSR through CCI on loyalty and WOM.

Model 1 without main effect of CSR on loyalty and WOM	<i>b</i> coeff.	Error	<i>t</i> -value	Sig	R-square
<i>Main effect</i>					
CSR → CCI	0.542	0.006	93.37	0.000	0.294
CCI → WOM	0.601	0.006	108.87	0.000	0.361
CCI → loyalty	0.674	0.005	132.09	0.000	0.454
<i>Indirect effect through CCI</i>					
CSR → CCI → loyalty	0.365	0.004		0.01	
CSR → CCI → WOM	0.326	0.004		0.007	
<b>Model 2 with main effect of CSR on loyalty and WOM</b>	<b><i>b</i> coeff.</b>	<b>Error</b>	<b><i>t</i>-value</b>	<b>Sig</b>	<b>R-square</b>
<i>Main effect</i>					
CSR → CCI	0.542	0.006	93.37	0.000	0.294
CCI → WOM	0.497	0.006	77.27	0.000	0.387
CCI → loyalty	0.601	0.006	100.11	0.000	0.467
CSR → WOM	0.192	0.006	29.76	0.000	
CSR → loyalty	0.135	0.006	22.58	0.000	
<i>Indirect effect through CCI</i>					
CSR → CCI → loyalty	0.326	0.005		0.007	
CSR → CCI → WOM	0.269	0.004		0.019	
<i>Total effect</i>					
CSR → CCI → loyalty	0.461	0.006		0.021	
CSR → CCI → WOM	0.461	0.006		0.012	

Note. Model 1 without main effects of CSR, maximum likelihood, CFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.90, GFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.15. Model 2 with main effects of CSR, maximum likelihood, CFI = 0.99, AGFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05. *b* = standardized coefficient; Sig = significance estimate using structural equation model; indirect effect tested by bootstrapping 1,000 and upper and lower confidence intervals (two tailed).

Fourth, drawing on evidence that employees act as communicators of company identity (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), we expect that high (vs low) customer–employee contact would strengthen the CSR–CCI link ( $H_5$ ). The results led us to reject the employee–customer mediated hypothesis ( $r_{\text{low-contact}} = 0.57$  vs  $r_{\text{high-contact}} = 0.46$ ;  $b = 0.109$ ,  $p < .21$ ). Thus, employee–customer contact does not facilitate the CSR–CCI relationship. Other channels of communicating CSR, such as advertising, product packages, and PR press releases, must also facilitate CSR alongside employee–customer interactions.

Fifth, we hypothesize that holistic CSR would result in a stronger CSR–CCI relationship than atomistic CSR. When the CSR is holistic, as compared to atomistic, it amplifies the influence of CSR on CCI, supporting  $H_6$  ( $r_{\text{holistic}} = 0.54$  vs  $r_{\text{atomistic}} = 0.39$ ;  $b = -0.148$ ,  $p < .019$ ). Thus, CSR that spanned stakeholders exhibits a stronger relationship with CCI.

We do not hypothesize methodological and publishing moderators, but we code them as covariates to control their effects. In general, the effect size between CSR and CCI does not change according to methodological features, such as sample type, data collection procedure, research method, type of product, type of good, or scale dimensionality ( $r_{\text{unidimensional}} = 0.50$  vs  $r_{\text{multidimensional}} = 0.45$ ,  $b = 0.045$ ,  $p < .46$  for the CSR scale;  $r_{\text{unidimensional}} = 0.48$  vs  $r_{\text{multidimensional}} = 0.53$ ,  $b = -0.051$ ,  $p < .77$  for the CCI scale). One significant methodological effect is the h-index ( $r = -0.002$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The significance of this effect suggests that publishing in smaller journals has stronger effects on the CSR–CCI relationship. We now holistically discuss all results.

## 6. Discussion

The current research employs a meta-analysis to ascertain whether CCI acts as a focal mediating variable between CSR and customer loyalty and WOM. To help explain disparate findings in the literature, the analysis include multiple moderators in a moderated mediated framework, as shown in Fig. 1. We find that CSR exhibits a robust positive relationship with CCI, which mediates most of CSR's relationship with loyalty and WOM. Of the five moderators, four exhibit significant effects. Interestingly CSR's relationship with CCI seems to be weakening over time (Appendix XI and XII). In addition, we find that CSR's relationship with CCI is weakest when it is atomistic (i.e., when it targets only one or two stakeholder groups), in individualistic cultures, or in controversial industries.

### 6.1. Theoretical implications

As noted in the conceptual development section, two complementary theories postulate how CSR translates into CCI: stakeholder theory and social identity theory (Web Appendix I). Our analyses suggest the relationship between CSR and CCI is strong and positive across published and unpublished research, despite a wide range of published effects. Research suggests that “larger effect sizes indicate a better understanding of a phenomenon” (Bosco, Aguinis, Singh, Field and Pierce 2015, p. 431), which implies that stakeholder and social identity theories effectively explain CSR-induced CCI. CSR initiatives can facilitate customers' perceiving conceptual overlap and feeling a sense of belongingness with a company. Sub-

**Table 6**  
Moderator analysis (meta-regression with all moderators).

Moderators of CSR → CCI association	Meta-regression				
	Values	Coeff	Std E	z-value	Sig
<b>Temporal level</b>					
H <sub>2</sub> : Year of publication (-1 SD   +1 SD)	0.55   0.45	-0.24	0.008	-3.03	0.002
<b>Culture level</b>					
Intercept		0.291	0.639	0.46	0.649
H <sub>3</sub> : Culture: individualism   collectivism	0.35***   0.52***	-0.166	0.076	-2.18	0.03
BSRP index (-1 SD   +1 SD)	0.49   0.48	0.004	0.013	0.33	0.738
National CSR index (-1 SD   +1 SD)	0.50   0.48	-0.003	0.007	-0.56	0.576
Global Innovation Index (-1 SD   +1 SD)	0.52   0.46	0.002	0.003	0.90	0.369
Transparency Index (-1 SD   +1 SD)	0.53   0.48	-0.002	0.001	-1.31	0.192
<b>Company level</b>					
Intercept		0.243	0.084	2.87	0.004
H <sub>4</sub> : Industry controversy: non-controversial   Controversial	0.51***   0.27***	0.244	0.086	2.83	0.005
<b>Employee level</b>					
H <sub>5</sub> : Employee interaction: low   high	0.57***   0.46***	0.135	0.073	1.85	0.064
<b>Construct level</b>					
Intercept		0.568	0.173	3.28	0.001
H <sub>6</sub> : Holistic CSR focus (holistic vs atomistic)	0.54***   0.39***	-0.148	0.063	-2.35	0.019
<b>Methodological moderators</b>					
<b>Covariates</b>					
Intercept		0.361	0.327	1.11	0.269
Sample type: student   non-student	0.41**   0.49***	-0.087	0.144	-0.60	0.546
Data collection: interview   lab	0.49***   0.74***	0.256	0.213	1.20	0.230
Self-report	0.44***	-0.032	0.102	-0.32	0.749
Online	0.45***	-0.051	0.110	-0.46	0.642
Method: experiment   survey	0.51***   0.48***	-0.027	0.146	-0.19	0.852
Type of product: product   service	0.33*   0.52***	0.193	0.147	1.31	0.190
Type of the offer: brand   company	0.47 ns   0.47***	-0.001	0.270	-0.01	0.995
Product	0.69***	0.219	0.333	0.66	0.51
Service	0.21 ns	-0.259	0.309	-0.84	0.402
CSR: unidimensional   multidimensional	0.50***   0.45***	0.045	0.061	0.74	0.46
CCI: unidimensional   multidimensional	0.48***   0.53*	-0.051	0.175	-0.29	0.77
CSR scales: Lichtenstein (2004) vs other scales	0.50***   0.48***	-0.022	0.118	-0.19	0.847
CCI scales: Bergami (2000)   Homburg (2009)	0.46***   0.43***	-0.032	0.199	-0.27	0.786
Mael (1992)	0.52***	0.056	0.107	0.52	0.602
Other scales	0.51***	0.054	0.117	0.46	0.643
<b>Publishing moderators</b>					
<b>Covariates</b>					
Intercept		49.82	16.23	3.07	0.002
H-index (-1 SD   +1 SD)	0.55   0.38	-0.002	0.000	-3.21	0.001
Sample size (-1 SD   +1 SD)	0.40   0.20	-0.001	0.000	-0.97	0.333
Paper: published   unpublished	0.48***   0.46**	-0.019	0.175	-0.11	0.91
Journal: top   non-top	0.49***   0.43***	-0.059	0.089	-0.67	0.503

Note. Dependent variable is the effect size corrected. Values are the references for low and high according to sub-group analysis. When the moderator is continuous, we used  $\pm 1$  standard deviation above/below the average for creating the groups; Coeff = coefficient from meta-regression; Std E = standard error; Sig = significance level; -1 SD | +1 SD = mean low and high values above and below one standard deviation; the first group went to the intercept. For example, individualism was in the intercept, and the negative direction indicates it weakens the effect; national CSR = National Corporate Social Responsibility Index; BSRP = Business Sustainability Risk and Performance Index; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

For culture level set:  $T^2 = 0.05$ ,  $I^2 = 97\%$ ;  $H^2 = 47\%$ ; Wald = 8.42,  $p = ns$ ,  $n = 67$ .

For firm level set:  $T^2 = 0.05$ ,  $I^2 = 98\%$ ;  $H^2 = 56\%$ ; Wald = 9.68,  $p = ns$ ,  $n = 67$ .

For construct level set:  $T^2 = 0.05$ ,  $I^2 = 98\%$ ;  $H^2 = 61\%$ ; Wald = 5.92,  $p = ns$ ,  $n = 67$ .

For methodological-level set:  $T^2 = 0.06$ ,  $I^2 = 98\%$ ;  $H^2 = 72\%$ ; Wald = 9.76,  $p = ns$ ,  $n = 66$ .

For joint publishing- and temporal-level sets:  $T^2 = 0.04$ ,  $I^2 = 98\%$ ;  $H^2 = 51\%$ ; Wald = 19.71,  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 66$ .

sequently, these customers exhibit loyalty toward a company and WOM because the behaviors sustain and promote a valued identity.

CSR's direct effects on loyalty and WOM are still statistically significant even when controlling for CCI. Other mediators, such as trust and commitment (Brown, Barry, Dacin and Gunst 2005), likely explain why customers are loyal to and recommend companies that engage in CSR. Another possible mediator is reciprocity, as predicted by social exchange theory. Notably, CSR's direct effects on loyalty and WOM are very small when accounting for the mediating role of CCI. The theoretical explanation for this result is that CSR's influence on customer loyalty and WOM is mostly due to CSR acting as an identity signal of social concern.

Although the observed CSR-CCI relationship is robust to methodological and publishing factors, moderators account for significant variance in the relationship. The influence of time (i.e., year of publication) is particularly interesting as it suggests

**Table 7**  
Moderated mediated framework and indirect effects through CCI.

Moderated mediation test	Indirect effect on WOM	t-value	Sig	Indirect effect on loyalty	t-value	Sig
<b>H<sub>2</sub>: Time</b>						
CSR * time old → CCI → y	0.33	48.21	0.001	0.36	49.39	0.001
CSR * time new → CCI → y	0.27	41.04	0.001	0.30	41.77	0.001
<b>H<sub>2</sub>: Culture</b>						
CSR * individualism → CCI → y	0.21	5.80	0.001	0.23	5.82	0.001
CSR * collectivism → CCI → y	0.31	17.07	0.001	0.34	17.12	0.001
<b>H<sub>4</sub>: Controversy of a company's industry</b>						
CSR * controversial → CCI → y	0.16	49.25	0.01	0.18	50.12	0.001
CSR * non-controversial → CCI → y	0.30	77.77	0.001	0.34	81.33	0.001
<b>H<sub>5</sub>: Customer–employee interaction</b>						
CSR * high/direct → CCI → y	0.27	8.11	0.001	0.30	8.12	0.001
CSR * low/indirect → CCI → y	0.38	15.15	0.001	0.39	15.19	0.001
<b>H<sub>6</sub>: CSR actions</b>						
CSR * holistic → CCI → y	0.32	17.71	0.001	0.36	17.77	0.001
CSR * atomistic → CCI → y	0.24	9.70	0.001	0.39	9.71	0.001

Note. y refers to the dependent variables WOM (second column) and loyalty (fifth column). Coefficients are standardized. The t-value refers to the indirect effect test (two paths multiplied), and it is significant above  $\pm 1.96$ .

that CSR's influence on CCI is waning, as CSR becomes a more established practice. CSR does not signal unique social concern as it once did. This effect suggests that researchers may need to pay more attention to how the antecedents of CCI change over time and whether new influences are emerging. In addition, researchers could examine how CSR initiatives can stand out and still be a strong identity signal.

Our results also suggest that CSR's influence loyalty and WOM through identification is greatest in collectivistic cultures. Previous research has noted how collectivism enhances CSR's influence (Zhao and Moon 2019). We provide robust results on collectivism's established effect by testing it across the many countries represented in the literature and with several controls related to a country's culture. Furthermore, our analysis offers insight into the literature's cultural focus. Of the examined studies, more are conducted in collectivistic cultures (67 %) than in individualistic cultures (33 %). Thus, despite researchers' previous focus on collectivism, theory on this matter is still in need of development. More work must be done to better understand why CSR is weaker in individualistic countries. Is CSR weaker in individualistic countries because of collectivists' greater acceptance of CSR or their higher likelihood of CCI? In addition, research could help uncover mechanisms that uniquely boost CSR's influence in individualistic countries.

Industry controversy is a newly studied moderator of the relationship between CSR and CCI. Its moderation effect is strong and helps explain weak effects in the literature, as CSR's indirect influence on WOM was non-significant in controversial industries. Once again, the literature has tended to study the CSR–CCI relationship in favorable conditions, as most studies are conducted on companies in non-controversial industries (73 %). Thus, theory is needed to model controversial industries' difficulties in creating CCI and methods for strengthening CSR's influence.

## 6.2. Managerial implications

Companies in the Fortune Global 500 spend over \$20 billion a year on CSR (Meier and Cassar 2018). This study's results suggest that managers need to be thoughtful regarding this CSR spending. Yes, a company can use CSR to show its values to stakeholders, some of whom will respond with identification. However, the likelihood of such a result is partly determined by contextual factors. Thus, investing in CSR is a complex process that is conditioned by the responsiveness of customers in a company's operating environment.

One factor of potential importance is how CSR's influence on CCI is weakening over time. Such a trajectory means that the return on CSR investments is potentially decreasing, at least in terms of customer responses. Importantly, CSR still has a positive relationship with CCI, even in recent years, although its effect is decreasing (2010–2015,  $r = 0.50$  and 2015–2020,  $r = 0.46$ ). However, the decreasing effect means that other methods for engendering CCI may be preferable. Managers would be wise to monitor CSR investments to ensure the desired effect is still occurring.

Additional considerations regarding return on CSR investments are a company's industry and culture. Companies in non-controversial industries with collectively minded customers have the most to gain from CSR. In contrast, companies in controversial industries and individualistic cultures will want to pay particularly close attention to their CSR investments, as they have the least to gain. In extreme cases, CSR's effect on CCI could be negative, as a case in our data exemplified (Arl, Rundle-Thiele, and Lasmono 2014). Though such cases are the exception, their possibility warrants consideration. Companies that operate in multiple countries may want to conduct a disproportionate amount of their CSR initiatives and communication in collectivist cultures.

However, the fact that CSR exhibits a positive population effect on CCI and an indirect effect on customer loyalty no matter the moderating factors suggests that CSR should be considered critical to a defensive marketing strategy that focuses on customer retention. Given CSR's strong effect on CCI, the current research suggests that CSR is a critical component of ensur-

ing customer loyalty in the marketplace. CSR can transcend consumption experiences, which can vary substantially. In the competitive business environment, some firms will figure out how to configure CSR investments so that customers respond favorably. As such, a company that is trying to engender CCI only through functional benefits is unlikely to retain customers against a competitor that provides functional benefits and that properly integrates a values-led strategy through CSR actions.

A final consideration is that holistic CSR engenders CCI more than individual CSR initiatives. In effect, the overall CSR reputation of a company is more powerful than individual initiatives. Spending resources on many CSR initiatives that target multiple stakeholder groups is more costly. Our moderation analysis suggests that holistic CSR's effect might be 30 % higher than that of atomistic CSR – a finding that management should weigh when considering the return on increased spending for multiple CSR initiatives. That said, companies might be able to develop integrated CSR practices that work together to benefit multiple stakeholder groups, thereby facilitating holistic CSR perceptions without dramatic cost increases.

### 6.3. Limitations and future research

Meta-analyses are critiqued for an overreliance on published studies that reject the null hypothesis. We attempted to overcome these limitations by directly modeling the effect of journal quality, assessing the file-drawer problem, estimating the Egger test and *p*-curve, and soliciting studies that were never published. However, these attempts at alleviation are proxies and post hoc assessments. As such, the current results are reliant on the quality of published research.

The current investigation's focus on CSR and CCI also has limitations. The evaluation of CSR is susceptible to halo effects from companies' images and product quality (Pelozo, Loock, Cerruti and Muyot 2012). As such, biased and insufficient evaluations of CSR, to the extent that they are prevalent in the literature, are present in the current research. In addition, much of the research on CSR and CCI assessed CSR using perceptual measures from customers. These measures could be incomplete due to halo effects or customers' lack of CSR knowledge. However, the chain of effects from CSR to CCI to outcomes requires customers to develop an assessment and mental image of a company's overall CSR stance and reputation. Even so, CSR perceptions move the analysis from company actions at the firm level to customer observations at the individual level. This cross-level movement may lead to an overestimation of CSR's relationship with CCI. Unfortunately, few studies have investigated a cross-level interaction between CSR at the firm level and perceptions of CSR at the customer level. Hopefully, future research will assess this cross-level interaction to better understand the actual effect of CSR on CCI.

Another limitation is that the *meta*-analytic framework restricts the choice of moderators and main constructs, as there were many possibilities that could not be determined or coded from the papers. (See [Web Appendix XIII](#) for other constructs that further studies can address.) For example, individual variables such as trust, satisfaction, or embeddedness could not be collected, although they likely affect CSR's role as an identity signal (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). In addition, contextual variables, such as competition, CSR-company fit, or corporate reputation, may affect CSR's influence on CCI, but these variables were not distinguishable in most studies. Thus, the current research cannot claim to have fully tested the moderating influences of CSR on CCI.

### 6.4. Conclusions

Overall, the current moderated mediated framework resolves ambiguity in the literature regarding the CSR–CCI–outcome chain, suggesting that CSR can have a powerful and direct influence on CCI, barring limiting factors relating to culture, industry, and CSR target. In addition, the current research supports CSR as a potentially valuable marketing tool, as it exhibited strong indirect effects on loyalty and WOM. Finally, the research suggests that there is more work to be done in regard to studying CSR and CCI, as published research has overly utilized contexts that facilitate the relationship rather than diminish it.

### Data availability

The authors are unable or have chosen not to specify which data has been used.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2022.09.002>.

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