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When Pretesting Corporate Social Responsibility Advertising can Mislead: Feelings versus Attitudes

Abstract

Purpose – The main purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature concerned with improving the effectiveness of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) advertising by considering how such ads are pre-tested.

Design/methodology/approach – Two similar video ads were produced, one using an informative appeal, the other using an emotional appeal. The latter appeal is more widely used by practitioners. Each ad was designed to promote the CSR credentials of the same (fictitious) company. A web-based experiment (n=244) was used to test both using two types of measure, first attitude towards the company (such as its image) and second the feelings evoked by the ad.

Findings – As predicted from theory, the ads promoted similar evaluations of the company but the evaluations measured by evoked feelings differed significantly. The information-based ad evoked more positive emotions, less negative emotions, and more positive attitudes toward the ad. If the ads had been pretested using only measures of evoked feelings, the more emotive treatment would have been rejected.

Practical implications – The study shows why CSR ads should be pretested and why such tests should include multiple measures. It also illustrates how informative CSR video ads can be better received but how both informative and emotional appeals can be used when communicating a company's CSR.

Originality/value – There is little research relevant to the pretesting of ads designed to communicate a company's CSR. Signaling theory can help explain why comparable (CSR) video ads can be evaluated as similar in their effect on company related evaluations.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; CSR advertising; corporate communications; ad-evoked feelings; CSR ad pretesting

Introduction

In recent decades, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has gained increasing prominence in organizations (Majumder *et al.*, 2017; Mögele and Tröpp, 2010) and being seen as socially responsible is now widely considered to be important for long-term success (Velte, 2022; Schaltegger *et al.*, 2019). Almost ninety percent of all consumers would prefer to see evidence of a company's responsible actions before they make a purchase decision (Cone, 2018). Consequently, companies must not only implement appropriate practices and initiatives, but also communicate their commitment and ability to embed CSR into their business operations (Pomering, 2011; Moreno and Kang, 2020). Organizations have then sought to communicate about their CSR activities (Taylor, 2018), establish and maintain an image of social responsibility (Viererbl and Koch, 2022); and to do so by way of 'CSR advertising' (Pomering and Johnson, 2009; Lloyd-Smith and An, 2019). This specific form of corporate image advertising is characterized by 'a social ethos as [it informs] about a company's commitment to environmental concerns, community relations, or the future of mankind, without any overt attempts to promote a specific product' (Schröder, 1997, p. 277). It is distinctive from other forms of corporate communication, aiming to inculcate a moral and ethical image of an organization that is committed to its social responsibilities, and to being a good 'corporate citizen' (Hooghiemstra, 2000).

Responsibility for such a role is often located within a corporate communications function. Views differ on the role of corporate communications within organizations both among practitioners (Dolphin and Fan, 2000) and academics (Apolo *et al.*, 2017) and definitions of corporate communications can consequently vary. Many however (e.g., Cornelissen, 2020)

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3 emphasize the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable reputations with
4 stakeholder groups. The business function can embrace a wide range of activities including
5 both corporate advertising (Argenti, 1996) and the communication of the company's CSR
6 (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). It follows that many of those engaged in corporate
7 communications as either managers or researchers will be concerned to understand how to
8 make CSR advertising as effective as possible.

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17 Corporate CSR advertising has been defined as “a technique that projects the organization's
18 CSR image, disclosing its social and/or environmental programs, actions, or stances” (Perks *et*
19 *al.*, 2013, p.1882). The objective of such advertising, to enhance perceptions of the company,
20 should be distinguished from similar ads designed to enhance sales of individual products by
21 communicating product level messages (e.g., Lee and Lin, 2022). Corporate CSR advertising
22 can take many forms, including print and video. Video ads, the medium considered here, is
23 commonly used in three of the main advertising channels, television, the internet and cinema
24 which together represent 84.25% of global advertising expenditure (Guttman, 2022).

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Prior work on CSR advertising has included much on describing and analyzing the content
of actual CSR ads (e.g., Mögele and Tröpp, 2010; Ajayi and Mmutle, 2021; Kwon and Lee,
2021) exploring different approaches to CSR advertising (e.g., Coombs, 2019), or comparing
the effectiveness of the appeals they contain (e.g., Berens and Van Rekom, 2008; Lee and Lin,
2022; Perez et al., 2020; Schade et al., 2022). Within the last tradition is work on how the
content of CSR ads can be made more effective by for example making their messages more
authentic (Pérez, 2019) or by including specific types of information (e.g., Pomeroy and
Johnson, 2009). This paper draws upon the same tradition but also from the literature on the
pretesting of advertising to help ensure its effectiveness, a perspective which is not apparent in
prior research into corporate CSR advertising.

Advertisers and their agents have a wide range of tools they can use to test an ad before it is

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3 deployed in the marketplace (King *et al.*, 1993) ranging from relatively inexpensive focus
4 groups (Kenyon, 2004), through laboratory testing such as facial expression analysis (Lewinski
5 *et al.*, 2014) or gaze tracking (Berger *et al.*, 2012) to the modeling of actual field data (Tellis
6 *et al.*, 2000). The wide use and cost of pretesting is justified by the large budgets involved and
7 the high risk, because much advertising is not cost effective (Hu *et al.*, 2009).
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15 However, pretesting is a controversial area as evidenced by the complaints from practitioners
16 that its use can result in the creative judgement of advertising experts being ignored (Gwynn,
17 2017) and that pretesting is not infallible (Cramphorn, 2014).
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21 In summary, despite the rise in interest into researching CSR advertising and the existence
22 within that body of knowledge of a strand of research aimed at improving the effectiveness of
23 such ads, there have been calls for more research along similar lines (Taylor, 2018; Hartmann
24 *et al.*, 2022). Both reviews cite a lack of research into CSR advertising appeals. A specific gap
25 exists within the existing literature on how CSR ads might be pretested to guide both
26 practitioners and researchers. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to simulate the pretesting
27 process for CSR video advertising by comparing the effects of two commonly used approaches
28 to such corporate communication, ads which focus on providing information and those that
29 adopt a more emotional base. In doing so, the two bases for a CSR ad are also compared in
30 absolute terms. The intended contribution is then both to the general literature on corporate
31 CSR advertising and more specifically to how CSR ads might be pretested and thus improved.
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49 **Theory and Hypotheses**

50 Promoting an image for being socially responsible can improve consumer attitudes and
51 behavior towards a company and its products (Lloyd-Smith and An, 2019). For example, a
52 positive image for CSR is expected to create a ‘halo effect’ whereby consumers also report
53 positive product evaluations (Brown and Dacin, 1997), purchase intentions (Sen and
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Bhattacharya, 2001; Pérez *et al.*, 2019) and loyalty and advocacy (Du *et al.*, 2007) and value is created for all stakeholders (Peloza and Shang, 2011).

Negative effects are also possible from CSR ads depending upon how authentic the motivation of the advertiser appears to be (Morsing and Schultz, 2006). Audiences tend to be more cynical about advertising claims than those made in any other form of corporate communication (Yoon *et al.*, 2006) implying a greater need to pretest any significant campaign and to assess attitudes towards the ad itself as well as any changes in attitude towards the company the ad might produce.

The pretesting process can begin with scoping several options and using formal research and judgement to select the approach used (Krieger *et al.*, 2016). Several authors have offered guidance on how to design the content of CSR advertising to increase its effectiveness (Pomering and Johnson, 2009; Farache, 2012; Kim *et al.*, 2022). Perhaps the most detailed and comprehensive guidelines are provided by Pomering and Johnson (2009) who propose that the claims made within CSR advertising can be made more credible by the inclusion of three elements: i) *Social topic information*, ii) *CSR commitment*, and iii) *CSR impact-specificity*.

There are two broad types of CSR advertising that are considered here, affect-based and information-based. An affect or emotion-based advertising execution is one that is ‘designed to appeal to the receiver’s emotions by using drama, mood, music and other emotion-eliciting strategies’ (Yoo and MacInnis, 2005, p. 1397). The same authors describe an information-based execution as one that is ‘designed to appeal to the rationality of the receiver by using objective information describing a brand’s attributes or benefits.’ Berens and Van Rekom (2008, p. 100) distinguish between ‘factual’ appeals (‘specific data that can be measured by a standard scale not subject to individual interpretation’) and ‘impressionistic’ appeals (‘descriptions that are subject to individual interpretations’). They suggest that the former approach is more likely to be effective in CSR advertising. Others differentiate between

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3 ‘expositive’ communication, which relies upon rational argument, statistics and facts and
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5 ‘narrative’ communication which relies upon the telling of a story when communicating CSR
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7 (Perez *et al.*, 2018; 2020; Schade *et al.*, 2022) arguing that the latter approach will be generally
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9 more effective. In this research, the effects of ads with the same underpinning storyline but
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11 which are based upon either an affect-based or an information-based appeal are compared using
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13 a similar approach to CSR ad content to that of Berens and Van Rekom (2008) but within the
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15 context of video ads.
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19 As to practice, companies tend more towards affect-based appeals (Farache, 2012; Mögele
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21 and Tröpp, 2010) and often do not provide specific information about CSR performance in
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23 their CSR ads (Farache, 2012). This reality has received scant attention thus far, and the
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25 research question implied is therefore ‘why do companies, particularly large companies who
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27 might be expected to pretest their CSR advertising, apparently choose to ignore research which
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29 suggests benefits from providing information?’ One possible explanation follows from
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31 signaling theory and what this might imply in pretesting CSR video ads.
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38 *Signaling CSR*

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40 Fiset *et al.*, (2021) define a market signal as a voluntary communication aimed at enhancing
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42 outsiders’ perceptions of organizational quality while Herbig and Milewicz (1996) emphasise
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44 the information the activity itself reveals into what is not observable. For example, companies
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46 might choose to provide signals implying they are of high quality, something difficult for a
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48 potential customer to observe, by investing in advertising or brand equity (Kirmani and Rao,
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50 2000). Two key points emerge from prior work, first that the more expensive or costly the
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52 signal, the more effective it can be (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). For example, more expensively
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54 produced ads can be more credible (Lohse and Rosen, 2001). Second, substantial investment
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56 in marketing, including that in producing video ads, represents such an expensive signal
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(Mishra *et al.*, 1998). Consequently, while prior work using print ads suggests that an information-based approach can be more effective when promoting CSR (Berens and Van Rekom, 2008), in the case of a company using the far more expensive approach of a video ad, an inherently more costly signal is being made about the company, irrespective of the ad content.

When the recipient has limited knowledge of the company doing the signaling, the use of a video ad can be expected to act as a decision heuristic (Merlo *et al.*, 2008) such that the company will be judged similarly irrespective of the detail of the ad treatment because of the greater credibility of a costly signal. Consequently, we can expect, in the context of CSR video ads of the same production quality:

Hypothesis 1: People who are exposed to video CSR ads produced either with an informative or an emotional appeal but to a similar standard will report a similar **a)** image of, **b)** attitudes towards, and **c)** behavioral intentions towards an unfamiliar company.

The implication of Hypothesis 1 is that information-based and affect-based CSR video ads of similar quality will have a similar effect on recipients' attitudes toward the advertiser. However, that does not preclude recipients from reacting to the two different types of ad treatment in different ways specifically when their attitude towards the ad (rather than to the company) is considered.

Ads can evoke positive and/or negative feelings (Olney *et al.*, 1991), which are then used to inform attitudes toward the ad (e.g. Edell and Burke, 1987; García-De los Salmones and Perez, 2018) rather than necessarily towards the company featured in the ad. Ad-evoked feelings are generally considered to be subject to individual differences, to the extent that 'one person's warm commercial may be another person's cool commercial' (Edell and Burke, 1987, p. 431).

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3 However, advertising that is subject to skepticism has been consistently found to evoke feelings
4 of irritation and disinterest in audiences (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985). Skepticism can be an
5 issue in CSR advertising (Schade *et al.*, 2022), but the negative feelings towards the ad with
6 which these are associated, might be reduced by the provision of substantive and specific
7 information (Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009). Consequently, ads that adopt an information-based
8 appeal have been found to elicit less irritation in audiences (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985). On
9 this basis, it is hypothesized that:
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22 **Hypothesis 2:** Negative ad-evoked feelings will be higher in response to affect-based CSR
23 ads than to information-based CSR ads.
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29 Affect-based CSR advertising is primarily designed to evoke feelings in the audience via a
30 range of cues; including, music, visual imagery, and emotive narrative (see Tellis, 2004).
31 However, the emotion-inducing power of narrative is only leveraged when audiences engage
32 with the ad and become immersed in the story; a state that Escalas, Moore and Britton (2004)
33 describe as becoming ‘hooked’. Skepticism prevents such levels of engagement and immersion
34 by evoking feelings of irritation, mistrust and disinterest (Escalas *et al.*, 2004). Given that an
35 affect-based CSR ad is likely to be the subject of relatively high levels of skepticism, its ability
36 to evoke positive feelings through the mechanism of narrative might thus be expected to be
37 considerably constrained. Information-based advertising, on the other hand, is primarily
38 designed to evoke rational, cognitive responses in the audience via reasoned argument
39 (MacInnis *et al.*, 2002).
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54 Information-based CSR ads may thus be expected to evoke positive feelings, and to do so in
55 two ways. First, because cognitive processes are intimately involved in the generation of
56 affective responses (Forgas, 2008) positive ad-induced thoughts may give rise to positive
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3 feelings. In particular, Yoo and MacInnis (2005, p. 1400) note that, 'informational ads can
4 influence feelings by affecting the credibility thoughts consumers have towards ads'. Second,
5 information-based CSR advertising is often characterized by a clear, detailed message. For
6 information-based CSR advertising is often characterized by a clear, detailed message. For
7 example, a CSR ad that is constructed in line with the guidelines of Pomeroy and Johnson
8 (2009) would, by way of clear and detailed information, illustrate and substantiate how a
9 company engages in certain actions (CSR activity and initiatives), that result in particular
10 outcomes for beneficiaries.
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18 Furthermore, this form of CSR advertising is more likely to leverage the power of narrative
19 by evoking positive feelings, because the information it provides reduces skepticism, irritation
20 and disinterest (Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009), thus facilitating greater engagement with, and
21 immersion in, the narrative (Escalas *et al.*, 2004). Consequently, while it may seem somewhat
22 counterintuitive to assume that information-based CSR ads will evoke more positive feelings
23 than those that are ostensibly affect-based, the idea has considerable theoretical and empirical
24 support. As such, it is hypothesized that:
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38 **Hypothesis 3:** Positive ad-evoked feelings will be higher in response to information-based
39 CSR ads than affect-based CSR ads.
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45 Finally, ad-evoked feelings have previously been identified as a key determinant of
46 attitudinal responses to an ad (Burke and Edell, 1989; García-De los Salmones and Perez, 2018).
47 Specifically, positive ad-evoked feelings are associated with positive attitudes to the ad, while
48 negative ad-evoked feelings are associated with negative attitudes (Jones *et al.*, 2010).
49 Furthermore, it is proposed that ads that increase credibility evaluations, and enhance audience
50 engagement will be better liked (Yoo and MacInnis, 2005; Escalas *et al.*, 2004). On this basis,
51 the authors propose:
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Hypothesis 4: Audiences will exhibit a more positive attitude towards information-based CSR ads than affect-based CSR ads.

The implications of Hypotheses 1-4 include that tests comparing an information-based CSR video ad and an affect-based CSR video ad can favor one or the other depending upon how the ads are evaluated. Measures of attitude towards the company are not expected to differentiate between the two approaches while attitudes towards the ad itself are expected to differ.

Methods

This study employed a within-subject experimental design to test the effect of CSR advertising on company image, and a between-group design to compare the effects of different types of CSR video advertising (information-based *versus* affect-based). Experimental research design aims at determining the causal relationships between independent and dependent variables (Moses and Knutsen, 2007). In particular, this study used a web-based experiment which adopts the same basic logical criteria as laboratory and field experiments, but has the advantage of utilizing the Internet and panelists (Reips, 2006). Web experiments can recruit an optimal number of respondents in a short period of time in a cost-effective manner and enhance the external validity of the study which enables better generalizability of findings (Krantz and Dalal, 2000; Reips, 2006). Moreover, this method can eliminate problems associated with student samples (Reips, 2000) and experimenter bias effects (Rosenthal, 1998), again enhancing the external validity of a study.

Two-hundred and fifty-six adult participants were recruited from an online consumer panel on the basis that they were British nationals who owned a pet (as a pet food company would

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3 be the context for the experiment). Participants were randomly divided into two treatment
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5 conditions; exposure to an affect-based CSR ad (n=130) and exposure to an information-based
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7 CSR ad (n=126). Twelve participants were excluded from the original sample of 256 as they
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9 were identified as ‘extreme flat-liners’ (who selected the same point on the scales for all
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11 questions)’ or ‘super speeders’ (who completed the experiment in less than one quarter of the
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13 median time) or they failed to correctly answer more than two of five check questions correctly.
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15 The final sample (244) was slightly weighted towards female participants (55.3%) and to those
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17 over the age of 45 (63%).
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20 21 22 23 24 *Procedure and Measures*

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26 All participants were presented with a mock-up online news website containing news headlines
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28 and leaders for both written and video news stories. The target CSR ad was shown to them
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30 immediately prior to the airing of each video news story. This is reflective of the natural online
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32 advertising environment in which it is common for video news stories to be preceded by
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34 ‘compulsory’ video ads and was used to create a more authentic context for the respondent.
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38 Established scales (see Appendix) were then used to measure five dependent variables. Ad-
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40 evoked feelings were assessed using 13 items from Machleit and Wilson (1988) and Aaker and
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42 Bruzzone (1985). Attitudes toward the ad were measured using 7 items from Machleit and
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44 Wilson (1988). Company image was measured using 12 items from (Davies *et al.*, 2003),
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46 chosen to assess the dominant judgement made on first contact with a new entity (Cuddy *et al.*,
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48 2013). More general attitudes towards the company were measured using 6 items from Yang
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50 and Yoo (2004). Two questions were included from Becker-Olsen *et al.* (2006) to assess
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52 behavioral intentions.
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56 All multi-item scales proved reliable, the Cronbach alphas, AVE, and CR for each being:
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58 Ad-evoked positive feelings 0.896, 0.589, and 0.919; Ad-evoked negative feelings 0.766, 0.517,
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3 and 0.833; Attitude towards the ad 0.813, 0.474, and 0.862; Agreeableness 0.970, 0.756, and
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5 0.974; Attitude towards the company 0.913, 0.699, and 0.933; and Behavioral intention 0.803,
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7 0.837 and 0.911.
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10 11 12 *Stimuli*

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15 To control for variance in any prior experience, the study used a fictional company, NutrioPet
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17 (presented as a real company to participants). The pet food industry was chosen as a context
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19 because almost half of British households own at least one pet. To establish congruity between
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21 the company mission and CSR activity, and thus ensure the credibility of the company's actions,
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23 the two ads both focused on the same themes, the company's charitable work to rescue and
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25 rehabilitate abused animals, its relationship with a well-known charity and the involvement of
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27 its staff.
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31 In line with the recommendations of Pomeroy and Johnson (2009), both CSR ads included
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33 three key message variables: *Social topic* information (referring to a social issue in which a
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35 firm is engaging through CSR initiative), *social impact-specific* information (referring to the
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37 impact that the firm has achieved through its CSR activity), *organizational commitment*
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39 information (referring to the company's commitment towards addressing the problem). To add
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41 credence to the company's CSR activity, both ads positioned the company as working closely
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43 with a well-known animal welfare charity (see Morsing *et al.*, 2008).
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48 The ads were created with different types of appeal but based around the same theme. The
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50 first ad was developed mainly on the principles of emotion-based persuasion (see Tellis, 2004);
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52 employing emotive imagery, music, images of a rescued and re-homed puppy, and affective
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54 language (as defined by the Affective Norms for English Words database, Bradley and Lang,
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56 1999). The background music differed with the affective ad being backed with a relatively
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58 sentimental orchestral piece. This ad will be referred to as 'affect-based' hereafter.
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The second ad adopted a largely cognition-based approach, utilizing the principles of argumentation as the main basis of persuasion (see Tellis, 2004). It made prominent use of statistics, lists of CSR activities and achievements, multiple images of staff and buildings, lighter background music, and used neutral words (i.e. those not contained in the Affective Norms for English Words database, Bradley and Lang, 1999). This ad will be referred to as 'information-based' hereafter. Both ads lasted exactly 59 seconds and were professionally created by a media production company.

The ads were pretested for perceived emotionality and informationality using four 7-point Likert scaled items adopted from Yoo and MacInnis (2005). The 'affect-based' CSR ad was perceived by a panel of 38 business academics and researchers as relatively weak on information ($n=38$, $M=2.63$, $SD=.56$), and relatively strong on affective nature ($M=5.27$, $SD=.89$). The difference in means was significant ($t(37) = -11.162$, $p < .001$). The 'information-based' CSR ad was perceived as relatively strong on information ($n=38$, $M=5.17$, $SD=.89$), and neutral on affective nature ($M=3.01$, $SD=.56$). Again the difference was significant ($t(37)=14.102$, $p < .001$).

Results

Hypotheses 1a, 1b and 1c were first tested by comparing the mean response from the survey with the midpoint of the relevant scale, because a positive response would be significantly above the mean and a negative response significantly below. Participants, on average, reported a positive image of the organization ($M=3.98$); significantly higher than the neutral point ($M=3.00$; $t(243) = 32.130$, $p < .001$) confirming that the ads had a positive effect. Similarly, respondents reported positive attitudes towards the company ($M=4.99$); a mean that is significantly higher than the neutral point on the 7-point attitude scale ($M=4.00$; $t(243) = 22.295$, $p < .001$). Respondents also reported positive recommendation intentions ($M=4.58$) and

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3 purchase intentions (M=4.92): means that are significantly higher than the neutral points on the
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5 7-point scales (recommendation intention: M=4.00; $t(243) = 6.593, p < .001$), purchase
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7 intention: M=4.00; $t(243) = 11.743, p < .001$).

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9 Then the differences in effect on respondents from the two ads were compared. No
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11 significant differences in company image were apparent following exposure to the information-
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13 based ad (M=3.98, SD=.70) *versus* the affect-based ad (M=3.98, SD=.73; $t(242) = .018, p = .99$)
14
15 (Table 1).

16 17 18 19 **Take in Table 1.**

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21 Similarly, there was no significant difference in attitudes to the company following exposure
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23 to the information-based ad (M=5.05, SD=1.08) versus the affect-based ad (M=4.93, SD=1.01;
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25 $t(242) = -.89, p = .37$) (see Table 2).

26 27 28 29 30 31 **Take in Table 2.**

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33 Regarding recommendation intention, no significant difference was found following
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35 exposure to the information-based ad (M=4.53, SD=1.40) versus the affect-based ad (M=4.63,
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37 SD=1.34; $t(242) = .553, p = .58$). Similarly, purchase intentions were found not to differ
38
39 significantly between respondents exposed to the information-based ad (M=4.84, SD=1.28)
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41 and those exposed to the affect-based ad (M=4.99, SD=1.16; $t(242) = .952, p = .34$) (see Table
42
43 3). Thus, H1a, 1b and 1c are each supported. People who were exposed to the two types of
44
45 video CSR ads had similar images of, and attitudes and intentions towards the company after
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47 watching the ads. The explanation from theory is because both ads represent relatively
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49 expensive signals (Connelly *et al.*, 2011) a signal which was more influential to the respondent
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51 than any difference in ad content.

52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 **Take in Table 3.**

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However, with respect to the effects of information-based and affect-based CSR ads on respondent feelings towards the ads, the results show that the information-based ad evoked significantly lower negative feelings ($M=1.39$, $SD=.46$) than the affect-based ad ($M=2.17$, $SD=.60$; $t(242)=11.275$, $p<.001$). The effect size here was relatively large ($MD=.78$, 95% CI: .98 to 1.36, $\eta^2=.34$) (Cohen, 1988). H2 is therefore supported (see Table 4 & Figure 1).

Similarly, the information-based ad evoked significantly higher positive feelings ($M=2.48$, $SD=.73$) than the affect-based ad ($M=1.97$, $SD=.69$; $t(242)=-5.572$, $p<.001$). The differences in the means ($MD=.51$, 95% CI: .29 to .60) was between moderate and large ($\eta^2=.11$). H3 is then also supported (see Table 4 & Figure 1). The support for H2 and H3, that CSR ads that adopt an information-based approach elicit less negative and more positive feelings, is compatible with prior thinking on advertising in general (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985) and holds here for CSR advertising.

Finally, attitudes toward the information-based ad were significantly more positive ($M=5.14$, $SD=1.04$) than attitudes towards the affect-based ad ($M=4.68$, $SD=1.06$; $t(242)=-3.405$, $p<.01$). The effect size in this case is small to moderate ($\eta^2=0.05$) and H4 is supported (see Table 4). As hypothesized, positive ad-evoked feelings are associated with positive attitudes to the ad, while negative ad-evoked feelings are associated with negative attitudes to the ad, as expected from prior work on general communication (Jones *et al.*, 2010) but supported here specifically for CSR communication.

Take in Table 4.

Take in Figure 1.

Discussion and Implications

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It was argued earlier that CSR advertising can be regarded as a core activity within the corporate communications function and that by, implication, having a theoretically grounded approach to ensure its effectiveness should be an issue within the corporate communications literature. Fortune Global 500 firms alone spend an estimated \$20 billion a year on CSR activities (Dattani *et al.*, 2015) and research continues to claim causal links between how socially responsible companies are perceived to be and their financial performance (Bashir, 2022) with advertising being one way to promote an image for being responsible. However, many advertising campaigns do not create the effects expected of them (Hu *et al.*, 2009), and even large advertising agencies can fail to pretest their ads and, among those that do, the use of qualitative methods appears to dominate (King *et al.*, 1993; Turnbull and Wheeler, 2017). Pretesting is a controversial topic (Gwynn, 2017; Cramphorn, 2014), but the work presented here can guide decision-making particularly when using video advertising, the main format applied globally (Guttman, 2022). First, the findings provide general support for the idea that exposure to corporate CSR video advertising can establish a positive company image and engender positive attitudes towards the organization irrespective of whether an affect-based or information-based approach is adopted. This supports prior work arguing in favor of both types of corporate communication (Lloyd-Smith and An, 2019). But it also explains why their influence is similar; because both types of video ad represent costly signals which can be expected to evoke positive attitudes towards the company who are communicating (Connelly *et al.*, 2011).

Second, the findings show that while both types of ad tested were equally effective at promoting a positive company image and attitudes towards the company, the information-based ad evoked more positive feelings, less negative feelings and more positive attitudes toward the ad; and all such differences were significant. Given that there has been some considerable concern in the literature over the wisdom of engaging in CSR advertising

(Goldberg and Hartwick, 1990; Yoon *et al.*, 2006), the current study provides empirical support for earlier indications of the positive effects of CSR advertising (Davis, 1994; Lloyd-Smith and An, 2019), while allaying more recent concerns over the potentially negative effects of this form of communication (Berens and Van Rekom, 2008; Morsing *et al.*, 2008). However, each ad tested here was produced using the guidelines of Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) and the reaction to each type of ad differed when measured using feelings towards the ad.

The most relevant finding for those producing ads is then that the relative effectiveness of affect- and information-based CSR ads, measured one way (e.g., feelings towards the ad) can differ from that measured another (e.g., corporate image). Using different methods to test or pretest the effectiveness of competing approaches to CSR advertising can then lead to different conclusions as to their relative effectiveness. The implications for practice include the need to evaluate ads using a range of criteria as using only one may mislead. Prior work suggests that attitudes towards the ad (rather than the company) are widely used in pretesting (King *et al.*, 1993; Turnbull and Wheeler, 2017). Such thinking needs revisiting particularly in the context of pretesting video ads and where the objectives include promoting a positive image for an organization.

To the extent that findings specifically relate to a previously unfamiliar organization, they might be particularly relevant to new companies and those entering new markets or to companies who had previously relied upon individual product branding. In this respect, they suggest that CSR advertising may be an effective means by which to establish a competitive position based on the organization's social responsibility actions. However, while previous research has suggested that CSR messages need to be highly informative (i.e. to convey substantive and specific information) in order to minimize skepticism and increase ad effectiveness (Farache, 2012), this concern is not fully supported here. In fact, respondents were found to hold a similar image of the company as being socially responsible, and to be

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equally positive towards it, following exposure to the affect-based ad.

Concerns over the perceived lack of ‘transparency’ (Farache, 2012) or ‘authenticity’ in any relatively abstract emotional appeals do not seem to have materialized in the current study to the extent that they were a hindrance to the effectiveness of this type of CSR advertising. These results would appear to be in contrast to those of Berens and Van Rekom (2008), who found that the more informational the ad the more positively the reputation and competence of the company were perceived to be. One possible explanation for the difference is that their study used plain text as the stimuli and a student sample; although it cannot be ruled out that disparities are due to differences in product type (a chemical company, *versus* a pet food company) and that neither of their ads followed the recommendations of Pomeroy and Johnson (2009). One further explanation from the current research is again that video CSR ads are inherently valid because they represent costly signals.

This and prior work underline the difficulty in generalizing about CSR advertising. Berens and Van Rekom (2008) found an advantage for informative CSR ads. Perez et al. (2020) found a similar advantage for a narrative approach. Furthermore, affective and informational approaches both were equally effective when assessed using attitudes towards the company and its products, but not when attitude to the ad was considered. This implies the ideal approach might depend on the type of ad (video, text), the commercial context, the ad treatment and how success is assessed. This in turn highlights both the need for practitioners to pretest their approach in their specific context and the challenge facing researchers trying to predict the factors explaining effective CSR advertising.

The current study may offer an explanation as to why practitioners appear to prefer an affect-based over an information-based approach (Mögele and Tröpp, 2010; Farache, 2012) despite research indicating that informative CSR ads can be more effective (Berens and Van Rekom, 2008). If, as implied from advertising data (Guttmann, 2022), the majority of advertising

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3 expenditure is on video based ads, pretests using measures of attitude towards the advertiser,
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5 rather than towards the ad itself appear more relevant, particularly in the current context.
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8 Finally, it should be emphasized that the ads tested here were developed using the criteria
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10 suggested by Pomeroy and Johnson (2009). Specifically, these authors propose that, to
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12 enhance cognitive response to CSR advertising, the ad should refer to a) a social issue in which
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14 a firm is engaging through a CSR initiative (in this case animal welfare), b) the impact that the
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16 firm has achieved through its CSR activity (e.g., improved animal welfare), and c) the
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18 company's commitment towards addressing the problem. Both ads were based on the same
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20 themes, of a company engaged in animal rescue, with links to a major charity and involving
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22 their staff. Both groups of respondents rated the company positively for doing so but their
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24 preferred way of delivering the message was by using an informative approach.
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28 In summary the implications for practitioners include that pretesting of CSR ads should start
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30 with an assessment of their proposed content using guidelines such as those from Pomeroy
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32 and Johnson (2009). Once produced the ad might be pretested particularly if the budget is
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34 substantial on a sample of those it is intended to influence. The criteria used to evaluate the ad
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36 can usefully include attitudes towards the company and its products/services. Measures of
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38 attitude towards the ad may also be useful particularly in explaining why one ad should be
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40 preferred over another but may mislead if used on their own.
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44 45 46 **Limitations and Directions for Further Research**

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48 To isolate the effects of CSR advertising from those that may arise from prior knowledge of,
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50 and/or experience with, the organization, this study used a fictional pet food company. Further
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52 research to examine the impact of CSR advertising by familiar companies that are already
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54 viewed relatively positively, negatively or neutrally by stakeholders would be a useful
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56 extension of this work. Future research might also seek to broaden the context in question,
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3 which was limited to one industry (pet food) and one congruent issue (the protection of animals)
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5 in the current study. Additionally, while a comprehensive examination of the mechanism by
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7 which CSR advertising influences stakeholder attitudes is beyond the scope of the current study,
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9 the findings indicate that some theoretically implied intermediate effects (such as the evocation
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11 of feelings and attitude to the ad) may not necessarily explain the impact of affect-based (nor
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13 perhaps information-based) CSR advertising on attitudes to the company. Further research
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15 might thus be usefully conducted to examine the mechanisms that underlie the effects of affect-
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17 based and information-based CSR advertising. However, given that this study demonstrates
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19 the potential for positive CSR advertising effects, perhaps the most important next question is
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21 whether CSR advertising should be undertaken at the expense of non-CSR advertising.
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26 While the current findings inform the debate as to whether and how CSR advertising might
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28 positively influence perceptions, attitudes and intentions, they do not extend to a direct
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30 comparison of the relative effectiveness of CSR and other types of corporate advertising. To
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32 the extent that many organizations are faced with the challenge of deciding how to allocate a
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34 finite advertising budget, further research into this issue is likely to constitute an important and
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36 valuable next step.
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40 The set up used for the experimental design placed the ads between items of news. This was
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42 intended to create a more natural context than from just showing the ads in isolation, but the
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44 choice of context might have influenced responses and thus how generalizable the conclusions.
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48 A company's corporate communications including that on CSR should consider multiple
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50 stakeholders (Crane and Glozer, 2016). Respondents in this study were members of the public
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52 but likely to be interested in becoming customers of the company if it were real. While the
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54 dependent measures reflected most of the prior work that focuses on such an audience (Kumar
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56 and Srivastava, 2022), they were also relevant to potential employees and investors. Similar
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58 findings might be expected in any future research with other stakeholder groups.
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Conclusion

This work contributes to the strand of enquiry within corporate communications research that aims to improve the effectiveness of Corporate CSR advertising (e.g. Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009; Pérez, 2019; Lee and Lin, 2022). Its unique contribution is to evaluate, in this context, the consequences of how such ads are pretested. It explains why practitioners appear to rely more upon affective forms of CSR ads while prior work (Berens and Van Rekom, 2008) into CSR ad effectiveness suggests they should use an informative approach. A main message to practitioners is the advantage of using multiple measures, as individual measures may mislead. The work further emphasizes that Corporate CSR ads are valid tools corporate communications managers can use in their role to promote positive associations with the company and consequently value among stakeholders (Pelozo and Shang, 2011). Finally, it suggests that video ads can be inherently effective if they have been designed to certain standards (see Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009) because they represent costly signals.

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Appendix

<Measures>

Company image

If NutrioPet came to life as a person, what would his/her personality be like? (Each item measured on a five-point scale from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree)

Honest, open, supportive, friendly, concerned, socially responsible, reassuring, pleasant, trustworthy, agreeable, sincere, straightforward.

Company attitude

Thinking about NutrioPet makes me feel (on a seven-point scale anchored by):

Happy Unhappy

Negative...Positive

Good. Bad

I think it would be _____ for me to commit to NutrioPet (on a seven-point scale anchored by):

Foolish... wise

Beneficial....harmful

Valuable....of no value

Behavioural intention

Measured on a seven-point scale from 1 certainly not to 7 certainly would:

How likely would you to be recommend the company?

How likely would you be to buy products made by the company if all conditions are same (e.g. price, quality of product, services)?

Attitude towards the ad

Each item measured on a seven-point scale anchored on extremely. ..extremely.

Unfavourable/favourable, unenjoyable/enjoyable, not likable/likable, irritating/not irritating, poorlymade/well made, insulting/not insulting, bad/good.

Feelings evoked by the ad

Each item measured on a four-point scale from 1 not at all to 4 very strongly

Positive: Happy, cheerful, warm-hearted, pleased, amused, stimulated, calm, soothed (positive feelings)

Negative: Irritated, shocked, angry, repulsed, insulted (negative feelings)

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Table I. Independent-Sample t-test results - Company imageIndependent Samples Test – Company image

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1 Affect-based ad		123	3.98	.733	.066
2 Information-based ad		121	3.98	.709	.065

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SE	95% CI	
									Lower	Upper
Company image	Equal variances assumed	.117	.733	.018	242	.986	.00168	.092	-.18	.184
	Equal variances not assumed			.018	241.9	.986	.00168	.092	-.18	.184

Table II. Independent-Sample t-test results - Attitudes toward a companyIndependent Samples Test – Attitudes toward a company

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1 Affect-based ad		123	4.93	1.006	.091
2 Information-based ad		121	5.05	1.078	.098

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SE	95% CI	
									Lower	Upper
Attitudes toward a company	Equal variances assumed	.996	.319	-.889	242	.375	-.11865	.133	-.38	.14
	Equal variances not assumed			-.889	240.2	.375	-.11865	.133	-.38	.14

Table III. Independent-Sample t-test results - Behavioural intentionsIndependent Samples Test – Behavioural intentions

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Recommendation intention	1 Affect-based ad	123	4.63	1.339	.120
	2 Information-based ad	121	4.53	1.403	.128
Purchase intention	1 Affect-based ad	123	4.99	1.163	.105
	2 Information-based ad	121	4.84	1.278	.116

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SE	95% CI	
									Lower	Upper
Recommendation intention	Equal variances assumed	.694	.406	.553	242	.581	.09709	.176	-.25	.44
	Equal variances not assumed			.553	241.0	.581	.09709	.176	-.25	.44
Purchase intention	Equal variances assumed	4.638	.032	.952	242	.342	.14889	.156	-.16	.46
	Equal variances not assumed			.951	239.0	.342	.14889	.156	-.16	.46

Table IV. Independent-Sample t-test results - Ad-evoked feelings and attitudes toward the adIndependent Samples Test – Ad-evoked feelings & Attitudes toward the ad

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Positive feelings	1 Affect-based	123	1.96	.691	.062
	2 Information-based	121	2.47	.732	.066
Negative feelings	1 Affect-based	123	2.16	.603	.054
	2 Information-based	121	1.39	.463	.042
Attitudes toward the ad	1 Affect-based	123	4.68	1.064	.096
	2 Information-based	121	5.14	1.044	.094

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SE	95% CI	
									Lower	Upper
Positive feelings	Equal variances assumed	1.653	.200	-5.572	242	.000	-.508	.091	-.688	-.328
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.570	240.7	.000	-.508	.091	-.688	-.328
Negative feelings	Equal variances assumed	12.400	.001	11.275	242	.000	.777	.068	.641	.913
	Equal variances not assumed			11.299	228.6	.000	.777	.068	.641	.912
Attitudes toward the ad	Equal variances assumed	.244	.622	-3.405	242	.001	-.459	.135	-.725	-.193
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.406	241.9	.001	-.459	.135	-.725	-.193

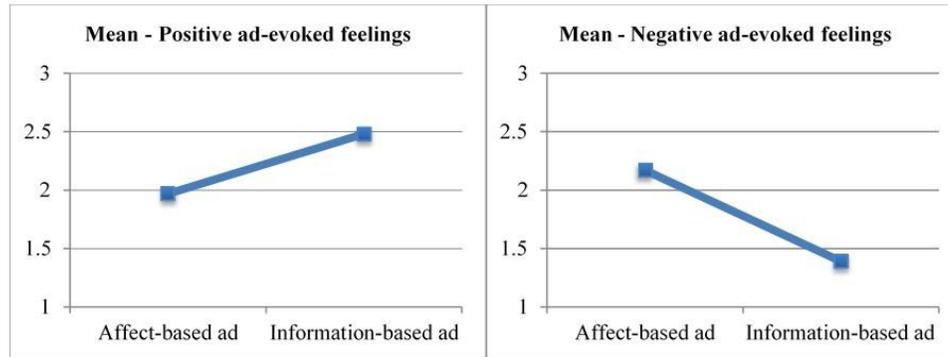
Figure 1 Means plots-Positive and negative ad-evoked feelings

Figure 1 Means plots-Positive and negative ad-evoked feelings

159x70mm (150 x 150 DPI)