

**L'EFFICACITE DES COMMUNICATIONS RSE:
LES ROLES DES LABELS ETHIQUES, DE LA PERFORMANCE PASSEE DE
L'ENTREPRISE EN MATIERE DE RSE, ET DU SCEPTICISME DES
CONSOMMATEURS**

**ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CSR COMMUNICATION:
THE ROLES OF ETHICAL LABELS, PRIOR CSR RECORD, AND CONSUMER
SKEPTICISM**

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RESUME

De nos jours, les entreprises communiquent de plus en plus au sujet de leurs activités socialement responsables. Le fait que les consommateurs demandent à en savoir davantage sur la responsabilité sociétale des entreprises (RSE) est un facteur important qui pousse les entreprises à communiquer de la sorte sur leurs activités RSE. En même temps, les consommateurs ont tendance à être sceptiques envers les messages RSE des entreprises. Beaucoup considèrent que les entreprises communiquent sur la RSE principalement ou uniquement dans le but d'améliorer leur image, une pratique communément appelée « Greenwashing ». Dans ce contexte de scepticisme des consommateurs, trouver les moyens de rendre plus crédibles leurs communications RSE est une question de grande importance pour les entreprises. A travers 2 études, cette recherche étudie si et comment la présence (vs absence) d'un label éthique dans une publicité RSE influence l'évaluation que font les consommateurs de la publicité et de la marque, ainsi que leurs perceptions de greenwashing. Cette recherche étudie également les rôles qu'ont la performance passée de l'entreprise en matière de RSE et le degré de scepticisme des consommateurs. Les résultats de cette recherche suggèrent que, lorsque la performance passée de l'entreprise en matière de RSE est négative, la présence d'un label éthique ne permet pas d'atténuer les perceptions de greenwashing des consommateurs. Par contre, lorsque la performance passée de l'entreprise en matière de RSE est positive, tant un label éthique provenant d'une tierce partie qu'un label décerné par l'entreprise elle-même permettent de réduire les perceptions de greenwashing que peuvent avoir les consommateurs. De plus, les labels éthiques attribués par des tierces parties jouent un rôle important pour convaincre les consommateurs les plus sceptiques de la sincérité et de la vérifiabilité des messages RSE.

Mots-clés : Responsabilité sociétale de l'entreprise, publicité, labels éthiques, scepticisme, experimentation, greenwashing, crédibilité

ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CSR COMMUNICATION: THE ROLES OF ETHICAL LABELS, PRIOR CSR RECORD, AND CONSUMER SKEPTICISM

ABSTRACT

Companies increasingly communicate about their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. A key motivator for such communication efforts is that consumers demand to know more about companies' CSR activities. At the same time, consumers tend to be skeptical toward companies' CSR claims. Many consumers consider that companies engage in CSR communication mainly for image management—a practice referred to as *greenwashing*. In the broad context of consumer skepticism, finding ways to enhance the credibility of CSR communication is a question of critical importance. Across two studies, this research investigates whether and how the presence (vs absence) of an ethical label in a CSR advertisement affects consumer evaluations of the ad and the brand, and their perceptions of greenwashing. We also investigate the roles of the company's prior CSR record and consumers' dispositional skepticism. Taken together, our results suggest that, when prior CSR record is negative, neither company ethical label nor third-party ethical label could reduce greenwashing perceptions. However, when prior CSR record is positive, both company ethical label and third-party label are equally effective in reducing greenwashing perceptions. Moreover, third-party labels play an important role in convincing highly skeptical consumers about the truthfulness and verifiability of the CSR claims.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, Advertising, Ethical labels, Skepticism, Experimental designs, Greenwashing, Ad credibility.

INTRODUCTION

Companies increasingly communicate about their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, which exemplify their “commitment to minimizing or eliminating any harmful effects and maximizing [their] long-run beneficial impact on society” (Mohr, et al. 2001, p. 47). A key motivator for such communication efforts is that consumers demand to know more about companies’ CSR activities (Cone Communications and Ebiqity 2015). At the same time, consumers tend to be skeptical toward companies’ CSR claims (Leonidou and Skarmas, in press; Sheehan and Atkinson 2012). Many consumers indeed consider that companies engage in CSR communication mainly, or even solely, for image management, self-serving reasons—a practice often referred to as *greenwashing* (Parguel et al. 2011). In the broad context of consumer skepticism, finding ways to enhance the credibility of CSR communication is thus a question of critical importance for companies making genuine CSR efforts.

Literature highlights an array of factors that companies can leverage to increase the credibility of their CSR communication (Du et al. 2010) including content-specific factors (e.g., the congruence between CSR issues and the company’s core business), company-specific factors (e.g., reputation), and consumer-specific factors (e.g., CSR support). However, prior research has seldom examined the ways in which executional elements of CSR messages might affect credibility perceptions and consumer responses toward the brand (for an exception, see Parguel et al. 2015).

Given the widespread use of ethical labels in the marketplace, this research investigates, across two studies, whether and how the presence (*vs* absence) of an ethical label in a CSR advertisement affects consumer evaluations of the ad and the brand, as well as their perceptions of greenwashing. We also investigate the role of two potential moderators of ethical label effects: the company’s prior CSR record (Study 1) and consumers’ dispositional skepticism (Study 2).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

As consumers often don’t have the expertise or ability to verify CSR claims, message endorsement and/or seals of approval by expert third parties may enhance the credibility of CSR messages (Carpenter and Larceneux 2008; Ottman et al. 2006). Ethical labels, such as eco-labels or fair trade labels, are believed to be an effective means to influence consumer attitudes and product choice (Hoek et al. 2013; Thøgersen 2010; Vanclay et al. 2011), if consumers notice the label and understand its meaning (Thøgersen 2000). Yet, the current proliferation of third-party and company self-declared labels causes confusion in consumers’ mind (D’Souza 2004). Furthermore, consumers often have difficulties understanding exactly what these labels intend to communicate; uncertainty about the meaning of a label is often accompanied by mistrust (Thøgersen 2002). For these reasons, ethical labels remain controversial communication tools (Ottman et al. 2006).

Existing literature suggests that the perceived believability of an advertisement bearing a seal of approval is generally higher than that of an advertisement without any seals (Beltramini and Stafford 1993; Miyazaki and Krishnamurty 2002). This increased believability of the ad might partly be explained by consumers’ beliefs that labels provide them with some insurance that the claims made have been verified. In the context of CSR communication, we expect that consumers might perceive ethical labels as a means for them to verify the CSR claims and accordingly perceive CSR ads with ethical labels to be more believable and truthful. According to Carpenter and Larceneux (2008), however, the capacity of a label to generate positive associations largely depends on its perceived credibility, which in turn depends on the credibility of its source. Most consumers expect more credible information to come from third-party sources, and tend to be

critical and skeptical of messages from company-controlled sources (Mohr et al. 2001; Obermiller and Spangenberg 2000). Thus, all else equal, a third-party ethical label in an ad should be more effective than a company self-declared ethical label in terms of enhancing consumer perceptions of ad credibility.

In addition to perceptions of ad credibility, it would be worthwhile to examine whether the presence and type of ethical label used in an ad might affect consumers' perceptions of greenwashing. While some research endeavors have tried to identify the drivers of companies' greenwashing activities (Delmas and Burbano 2011) and the conditions necessary for it to be successful (Pope and Waeraas, in press), or investigate consumer responses to companies' greenwashing behaviors (e.g., Chen and Chang 2013; Parguel *et al.* 2011), existing literature provides little information about the factors that influence consumers' own perceptions of greenwashing. Considering that greenwashing entails the idea that a company misleads consumers about its socially responsible character and/or the properties of its advertised product, factors that enhance the perceived credibility of a CSR communication, such as the presence of a third-party ethical label, are also likely to lower consumers' perceptions of greenwashing. However, the relationship between perceived ad credibility and perceived greenwashing has never been empirically tested. Accordingly, we expect that the presence (versus absence) of a third-party ethical label in an ad would lower consumers' greenwashing perceptions.

The ability of ethical labels to enhance ad credibility and reduce greenwashing perceptions may vary depending on company-specific and consumer-specific factors. A company's existing or prior CSR record, in particular, is likely to be perceived by consumers as a particularly diagnostic cue for evaluating its CSR communication (Du et al. 2010). A company's prior CSR record is a specific aspect of the company's reputation (Brammer and Pavelin 2006), defined as "collective representation of a firm's past actions and results that describes the firm's ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders" (Gardberg and Fombrun 2002, p. 304). Prior CSR record may serve as a pre-existing schema upon which consumer can rely to interpret new information they receive about the company (Fombrun and Shanley 1990), and its CSR activities.

According to research on person perception and information integration, an impression is often disproportionately influenced by negative information (Leyens and Yzerbyt 1992); and this negativity effect is particularly strong in the domain of morality or ethicality (Martijn et al. 1992). When a company with a negative CSR record communicates about its (positive) CSR activities, it is likely to generate perceptions of corporate hypocrisy (Wagner et al. 2009) and consumers might consider the negative information (i.e., a negative CSR record) about the company more diagnostic and discount the positive CSR information. In this case, it is unlikely that the presence of ethical labels, whether a third-party label or company self-declared label, will be sufficient to counter consumers' initial negative perceptions and reactions. On the other hand, when a company with a positive CSR record communicates about its CSR activities, consumers do not confront inconsistent information. The presence of ethical labels, in this case, might come to reinforce the credibility of the claim made. As a company's CSR record shapes consumers' expectations about how the company will behave in the future with respect to social and ethical matters, even company self-declared labels might be perceived positively by consumers for a company with a positive CSR record. Accordingly, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: *The presence of an ethical label (third-party or self-declared) in a CSR advertisement is likely to (a) increase ad credibility, and (b) decrease greenwashing perceptions for companies with a positive CSR record, but not for companies with a negative CSR record.*

Some consumer-specific factors, such as their dispositional skepticism, will likely affect the extent to which labels can increase the effectiveness of CSR communication. Dispositional skepticism is a personality trait that predisposes people to generally distrust or disbelieve various forms of corporate communication (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998), and is, in part, the result of consumers' past experiences with and understanding of marketers' persuasive tactics (Boush et al. 1994; Obermiller and Spangenberg 2000). Such dispositional skepticism has been shown to affect ad effectiveness. Specifically, highly skeptical consumers are more likely to resist misleading ads, are more aware of the persuasive nature of ads, and more critical in processing ad messages (Obermiller et al. 2005). In their investigation of the skeptical green consumer, Matthes and Wonneberger (2014) have found a significant positive relationship between consumers' general ad skepticism and skepticism toward green ads. These findings suggest that highly skeptical consumers will generally tend to perceive CSR advertisements as less credible than less skeptical consumers.

Furthermore, ethical labels may not play an important role in convincing less skeptical consumers about the CSR claims made in an advertisement; these consumers are less skeptical, therefore the presence of a label might not affect their ad credibility perceptions. In contrast, as highly skeptical consumers examine the claims made in advertisements in a critical way and do not accept them at face value (Mangleburg and Bristol 1998), ethical labels, particularly third-party labels, likely play an important role in convincing skeptical consumers about the truthfulness and verifiability of the CSR claims.

Previous research suggests that when consumers perceive an advertisement as credible, they are more likely to react positively to the ad and hold positive attitudes toward the brand (Cotte et al. 2005; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). Therefore, we expect that the presence of an ethical label will have the similar differential effects on highly skeptical versus less skeptical consumers, in terms of their reactions to the ad and the brand. Further, perceived ad credibility will mediate the results of the ethical label on consumer reactions to the ad and the brand. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: *For highly skeptical consumers, a CSR advertisement with an ethical label, as compared to one without an ethical label, will (a) have greater perceived ad credibility, and (b) generate more favorable responses toward the ad and the brand; for less skeptical consumers, CSR advertisements with or without an ethical label are likely to have similar perceived ad credibility, and generate similar responses toward the ad and the brand.*

H3: *Perceived ad credibility mediates the joint effects of ethical label and skepticism on consumer responses toward the ad and the brand.*

STUDY 1

To test H1, we employed a 2 (CSR record: positive vs. negative) x 3 (no label, company label, third-party label) x 2 (product category: cotton swab vs. chocolate) factorial between-subjects experimental design. 360 respondents participated in the study, and were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. Respondents first read about a fictitious brand and information about its CSR record that was either positive or negative. Afterwards, they viewed a product advertisement describing the use of fair trade ingredients. The ad has three conditions: no fair trade label, a company fair trade label, and an official, third-party fair trade label. In addition, we developed stimuli for two product categories. Depending on the experimental condition, respondents either saw an advertisement for cotton swab or for chocolate.

After seeing the ad, participants completed items measuring perceived greenwashing, ad credibility, and perceived CSR reputation on 7-point scales. Greenwashing perceptions are measured by seven items (sample items: “this ad misleads the consumer about the fair trade features of the product,” and “the ad makes a fair trade claim that is vague or seemingly un-provable,” adapted from Parguel et al. 2011). We also use one item pertaining to the perceived verifiability of the claim made (i.e., “the claims made in the ad can be verified even by a non-expert consumer”) as an indicator of ad credibility (see Jain and Posavac, 2001). Since we did not find any specific effects linked to the product category considered, below we report results based on data from both product categories combined.

Manipulation of CSR was successful. Full factorial ANOVA with perceived CSR reputation as the DV only shows a significant effect of CSR condition. Mean perceived CSR reputation for the negative CSR condition is 2.41 while mean perceived CSR for the positive CSR condition is 5.45 ($F=365.46$, $p<.01$). Label has no effect on perceived CSR of the company ($F<1$, NS). Regarding label manipulation, 5 respondents stated that they have seen a label in the no label condition, and 54 stated that they did not see the label in the two Label conditions. Thus we deleted these 59 respondents from our sample, resulting in a sample of 301.

As illustrated in figure 1, ANOVA with perceived greenwashing as the DV shows that CSR condition has a significant main effect on perceived greenwashing ($F=240.90$, $p<.01$), and that there is a significant interaction between Label and CSR condition ($F=3.40$, $p<.05$). When in negative CSR condition, perceived greenwashing is 5.36; in positive CSR condition, perceived greenwashing is 3.23. There is no main effect of label on perceived greenwashing ($F=1.40$, NS).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Further, for negative CSR condition, there is no difference in perceived greenwashing across the three Label conditions. For the positive CSR condition, perceived greenwashing is significantly lower in both company label (mean GW=3.05) and third-party label (mean GW=2.99) as compared to no label condition (mean GW=3.64, $p<.05$). There is no difference in perceived greenwashing between the company label and third-party label. Taken together, these results suggest that, when the prior CSR record is negative, neither company ethical label nor third-party ethical label could reduce greenwashing perceptions. However, when the prior CSR record is positive, both company ethical label and third-party label are equally effective in reducing greenwashing perceptions.

ANOVA with ad credibility as DV (see figure 2) shows that label has a main effect ($F=3.35$, $p<.05$), that CSR condition has a significant effect ($F=10.29$, $p<.01$), and that there is a significant Label X CSR interaction ($F=3.79$, $p<.05$). Ad credibility is higher in third-party label condition (mean=3.20) relative to no label condition (mean =2.61, $p<.01$). Ad credibility is 2.59 in the negative CSR condition, but is significantly higher (mean=3.22) in the positive CSR condition ($p<.01$).

Furthermore, in the negative CSR condition, ad credibility is higher in third-party label condition (mean=3.00) as compared to the company label condition (mean=2.21, $p<.05$). In the positive CSR condition, ad credibility is higher in both company label and third-party label condition (mean=3.60 and 3.39, respectively) as compared to no label condition (mean=2.66, $p<.05$). This result is very interesting, suggesting that, in the negative CSR condition, only a third-party ethical label could enhance perceived ad credibility, whereas in the positive CSR

condition, both company label and third-party label could enhance perceptions of ad credibility. Taken together, H1 is largely supported.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

STUDY 2

To test H2 and H3, concerning how consumer dispositional skepticism influences the effects of ethical label, we ran another study with a 2 (third-party label vs. no label) x 2 (skepticism: high vs. low) x 2 (product category: chocolate and paper towel) factorial between-subjects experimental design. Since we did not find any category specific results, we lump the data together across the product categories and present the results based on the combined data. 154 respondents participated in the study. Participants were recruited through emails sent by a graduate master's student at a large European university to members of his social networks and invited to participate in our online survey. All participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions.

Respondents viewed a product advertisement that describes its use of organic ingredients and environmental stewardship. The ad either has no label or a third-party label (EcoCert). After seeing the ad, participants completed items measuring ad attitude (4 items, MacKenzie and Lutz 1989); behavioral intentions (5 items, Zeithaml et al. 1996); message credibility (7 items, adapted from Boyer 2010 and MacKenzie and Lutz 1989) and perceived CSR reputation (3 items, Wagner et al. 2009). Consumer dispositional skepticism was measured using four items ("I often doubt about the truthfulness of promotions"; "I tend not to believe the promise made in the ad promotion"; "I am not convinced by the merits praised by promotions about a product/service"; "In general, promotions lie"; inspired by Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998) and split into high vs. low conditions based on the median split of skepticism.

We ran full factorial ANOVA with label and skepticism as the independent variables and message credibility, attitude toward the ad, perceived CSR reputation, and behavioral intentions as the dependent variables. For message credibility, presence of label has a positive effect ($F=31.26$, $p<.01$). Skepticism has a negative main effect ($F=14.45$, $p<.01$). The expected Label X skepticism interaction effect is significant ($F=14.53$, $p<.01$). Label increases message credibility for consumers with high skepticism ($Mean_{no\ label}=3.87$, $Mean_{label}=5.49$, $p<.01$), but not for consumers with low skepticism ($Mean_{no\ label}=5.18$, $Mean_{label}=5.48$, NS).

For attitude toward the ad, as shown in figure 3, presence of label has a positive effect ($F=24.57$, $p<.01$), skepticism has a negative main effect ($F=55.97$, $p<.01$). The expected Label X skepticism interaction is highly significant ($F=9.35$, $p<.01$). When skepticism is low, label does not affect attitude toward the ad ($Mean_{no\ label}=5.67$, $Mean_{label}=6.01$, NS); however, when skepticism is high, presence of label significantly increases attitude toward the ad ($Mean_{no\ label}=3.81$, $Mean_{label}=5.23$, $p<.01$).

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

For behavioral intentions (see figure 3), label has a positive effect ($F=16.52$, $p<.01$), skepticism has a negative effect ($F=53.27$, $p<.01$). The label X skepticism interaction effect is significant ($F=6.68$, $p<.01$). Label increases behavioral intentions among consumers with high dispositional skepticism ($Mean_{no\ label}=3.61$, $Mean_{label}=4.83$, $p<.01$), but not for consumers with low dispositional skepticism ($Mean_{no\ label}=5.42$, $Mean_{label}=5.69$, NS).

For perceived CSR reputation of the brand, label has a positive effect ($F=26.78$, $p<.01$), skepticism has a negative effect ($F=9.56$, $p<.01$). The label X skepticism interaction is significant ($F=11.77$, $p<.01$). Label increases perceived CSR reputation for consumers with high dispositional skepticism ($Mean_{no\ label}=4.07$, $Mean_{label}=5.59$, $p<.01$), but not for consumers with low dispositional skepticism ($Mean_{no\ label}=5.22$, $Mean_{label}=5.53$, NS). Thus, we get full support for H2.

To test H3 pertaining to the mediating role of message credibility in the joint effects of ethical label and skepticism on consumer responses toward the ad and the brand, we ran several regression models. First, regression analysis with label, skepticism and labelXskepticism as the predictors of attitude toward ad, behavioral intention, and perceived CSR reputation, respectively, shows that labelXskepticism is highly significant in predicting all these three outcomes (all $p<.01$). Second, when message credibility is included in the regression models, the coefficient of message credibility is significant, yet the interaction between label and skepticism ceases to be significant. Specifically, when regressing attitude toward ad on label, skepticism, labelXskepticism, and message credibility, the coefficient of message credibility is highly significant ($b=.72$, $p<.01$) but the coefficient of labelXskepticism is no longer significant ($b=.13$, $p=.62$). When regressing behavioral intention on the same four variables, the coefficient of message credibility is significant ($b=.74$, $p<.01$) but the coefficient of labelXskepticism is no longer significant ($b=-.01$, $p=.96$). In the case of perceived CSR reputation, when message credibility is included in the regression analysis, its coefficient is significant ($b=.67$, $p<.01$) but the interaction between label and skepticism is not ($b=.33$, $p=.24$). Taken together, the above analysis suggests that message credibility fully mediates the interactive effects of label and skepticism on attitude toward ad, behavioral intentions toward the brand, and perceived CSR reputation. Thus H3 is fully supported.

DISCUSSION

This research has timely and relevant managerial implications and contributes to extant CSR communication research in several ways. First, by highlighting the factors that influence consumers' greenwashing perceptions, this research contributes to existing literature focusing on greenwashing, which tends to define greenwashing as a voluntary act of a company, independent of consumers' perceptions of it (Parguel et al. 2011). It also provides relevant insights into the debate over "how" companies should communicate on CSR (Du et al. 2010). Given the widespread use of ethical labels, practitioners urgently need to understand the effects of ethical labels in CSR communication, a topic that has received scant attention. Our results suggest that, although ethical labels have an overall positive effect on the effectiveness of CSR advertisements, this effect is contingent on company-specific factors and consumer-specific factors.

Specifically, we show that the prior CSR record of the company influences the effectiveness of ethical labels on consumers' perceptions of greenwashing: for companies with a positive CSR record, even the use of company ethical label can help reduce greenwashing perceptions. On the other hand, for companies with a negative CSR record, the use of either company self-declared labels or third-party labels does little to reduce greenwashing perceptions. Overall, these results are quite encouraging for companies making genuine CSR efforts: it shows that consumers do not react in an automatic, positive way to the presence of an ethical label in an ad, without considering what they already know about the CSR record of the company/brand. A company that suffers from a negative CSR record should not hope that labels will be the magic solutions to make its CSR communication appear more credible; it should instead focus first on developing honest CSR

activities to regain its consumers' confidence and trust in its CSR engagement before communicating about it with them.

In addition, we show that labels can play an important role in convincing consumers about the truthfulness and verifiability of companies' CSR claims. In particular, in the current context where many consumers tend to be skeptical toward companies' CSR claims, our research confirms that obtaining a third-party label could be a means to appear more credible in the eyes of highly skeptical consumers.

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FIGURES

Figure 1. Roles of ethical labels and prior CSR record on perceived greenwashing

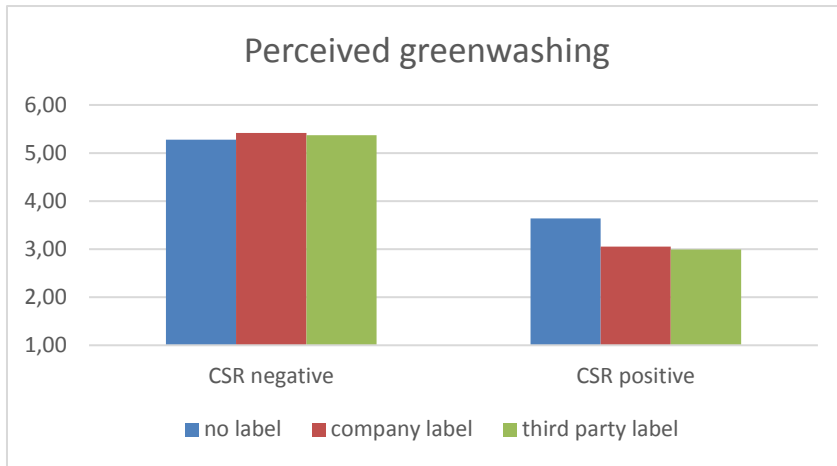


Figure 2. Roles of ethical labels and prior CSR record

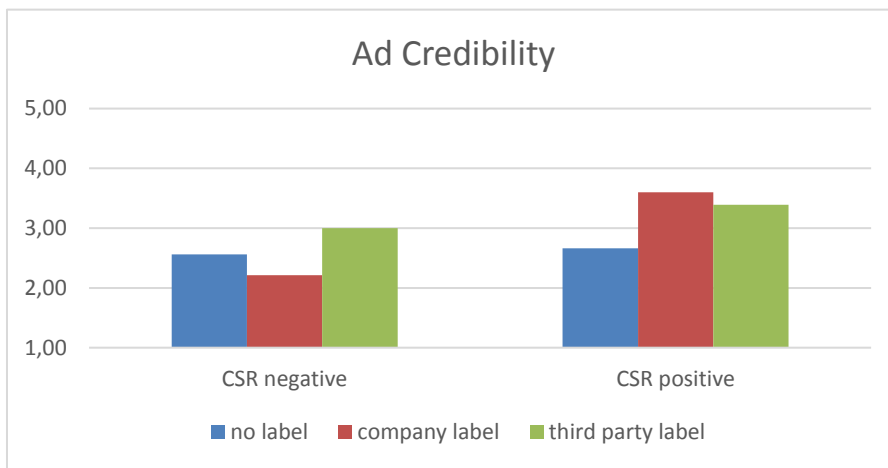


Figure 3. Roles of ethical labels and dispositional skepticism on ad attitude and behavioral intention

