Interactive CSR campaign and symbolic brand benefits: a moderated mediation model of brand trust and self-congruity in the restaurant industry

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on symbolic interaction theory (SIT), this study aims to identify what makes corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication more favorable to customers in the chain restaurants context. Specifically, this study examines the direct relationships between the interactivity of CSR communication, brand trust and brand sincerity. In addition, the mediating role of brand trust (i.e. separate dimensions of brand reliability and intentions) and the moderated mediating role of self-congruity are explored.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 418 US consumers with past experiences of participating in CSR campaigns organized by chain restaurants on social media were recruited using the online survey method of nonprobability sampling through Amazon Mechanical Turk in December 2021.

Findings – The results of this study revealed that the interactivity of CSR communication on social media affects brand sincerity; brand reliability and brand intentions mediate the positive effect of interactivity of CSR communication on brand sincerity; and customer’s self-congruity moderated the positive mediation effect via brand reliability.

Practical implications – Chain restaurant marketers need to understand the important role of interactivity as a key element of CSR communication on social media to help develop brand trust and brand sincerity in chain restaurants.

Originality/value – This study expands on SIT to support the symbolic benefits of interactive CSR communication on social media.

Keywords Interactivity of CSR communication, Brand trust, Brand sincerity, Self-congruity, Symbolic interaction theory

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

These days, companies are often implementing corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities to respond to pressures from various stakeholders, including customers, competitors and the government. These stakeholders expect or even encourage businesses to participate in sustainable practices to protect society and the environment as a whole (He et al., 2022; Kaur et al., 2022). CSR engagement affords businesses a distinct
communication strategy to strengthen their corporate and product brands through invoking positive associations with stakeholders and elevating their response (Le Thanh et al., 2021).

Especially for engaging customers in interactive communication, the favor of social media is unrivaled in the digital age (Lee et al., 2019).

In particular, in the restaurant industry, building a favorable brand image through interactive customer experiences has a significant impact on customers’ brand preference and trust (Yoon and Kim, 2016). For example, the fast-casual salad chain, Sweetgreen is dedicated to using its own application and other social networking services (e.g. TikTok@sweetgreen) to actively communicate its movement (e.g. the plan to reach carbon neutrality by 2027). Its interactive social media communication is expected to in fact generate customer value and engagement through CSR campaigns, such as a four-week loyalty program to build personal and community well-being (Businesswire, 2021).

The extant CSR literature have generally demonstrated that favorability created from CSR communication can positively influence customer attitude (Sung et al., 2022), corporate reputation (Jeong and Kim, 2021), purchasing intentions and loyalty (Tarabashkina et al., 2020). However, less attention has been paid to research on how the favorability of CSR communication (especially on social media) is formed and when it specifically affects customer–brand relationship. This study takes symbolic interaction theory (SIT) as the overarching theoretical framework of the study, and intends to address the research gap of what makes CSR communication more favorable to customers. The SIT is based on the assumption that an individual interprets and develops a specific meaning for a specific phenomenon through interaction with society, and this meaning ultimately determines the actor’s practice (Blumer, 1986).

Interactivity is one of the most significant subjects in communication today which led to the surge in research on “interactivity” (Lee et al., 2019). By participating in interactive CSR communication with the brand, consumers develop their self-identity and project it onto the brand, giving symbolic meaning to their consumption behavior (Jeong and Kim, 2021). The literature focusing on symbolic brand benefits reveals two flows of research, namely brand personality and self-congruity (Lee et al., 2020). Brand sincerity, as one aspect of brand personality, is critical to decide the customer–brand relationship quality (Aaker, 1997). Self-congruity is defined as the similarity between a customer’s self-image and a brand image (Sirgy, 1982) and crucial for comprehending the focal problems of brand failure (Lee et al., 2020).

Based on the SIT, this study aims to establish the assumption that customers may participate in CSR communication as a meaningful symbolic action on social media, which in turn will directly or indirectly favor the brand’s symbolic benefits such as brand sincerity and self-congruity. So far, the role of interactivity in the relationship between CSR communication on social media and consumer attitudes has not been fully investigated in the chain restaurant industry. Furthermore, given that the important goal of marketers and brand managers is increasingly shifting toward the symbolic advantage of brands (Saxton et al., 2019), the impact of interactivity of CSR communication on symbolic brand benefits should receive more attention in the literature.

Based on these research gaps, this study proposes the following two research questions in the context of chain restaurant industry, as it is becoming increasingly consequential in engaging in CSR (Kaur et al., 2022; Sung et al., 2022):

**RQ1.** how does chain restaurant’s social media-based CSR communications affect brand sincerity?

**RQ2.** what is the role of self-congruity and brand trust in this relationship?
The specific objectives of this study are:

- to examine the direct relationships between interactivity of CSR communication, brand trust and brand sincerity;
- the mediating role of brand trust (reliability and intentions); and
- the moderating and moderated mediating role of self-congruity in the relationship between interactivity of CSR communication, brand trust (reliability and intentions) and brand sincerity.

This study contributes to the literature on SIT and CSR by empirically demonstrating multiple mechanisms through which interactive CSR communication influences customers’ perceptions of symbolic brand benefits. Furthermore, it aims to help chain restaurant marketers recognize the importance of interactivity in communicating their CSR campaigns through social media as a key factor to maintain and improve brand trust and brand sincerity.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

2.1 Symbolic interaction theory

As a sociology theory, SIT advances an interactive view of mind, society and the environment (Mead and Mind, 1934). Symbolic interactions arise from the interactions of individuals with other individuals in a social environment focused on symbols and meanings (Blumer, 1986). In addition, a self that interacts with others will form a mutual bond and a solid foundation for future relationships (West et al., 2010). They share meanings for certain behaviors that can form a sense of human behavior over a period of time (Blumer, 1986).

The view of symbolic interactionism can be applied to claims arising from comments or use of social media that need to defend something on social media (Saxton et al., 2019). Symbolic interactionism manifests itself in consumer behavior in the form of symbolic buying behavior. This type of purchase occurs when a consumer acquires a particular good or service for what it means based on a symbol given by society. Such products and brands serve as social tools in that they serve as a symbolic communication between an individual and his or her important object (Leigh and Gabel, 1992).

2.2 Interactivity of CSR communication on social media

Saxton et al. (2019) argued that companies normally encourage their customers to engage in CSR campaigns through social media, a tool frequently embraced for interactive communication with customers concerning CSR. The concept of interaction has been defined in various ways, but in general, there are two broad perspectives of interactivity: functional and contingent (Sundar et al., 2003). It has been found that functional interactivity in message conveyance enhances the perception of message reliability (Sundar et al., 2003). CSR content on social media, along with various multimedia (e.g. photos, audio and video) provided on social media to improve convenience and clarity of the communication, can also benefit from functional interactivity by enhancing awareness of the trustworthiness of the CSR message, which may otherwise raise suspicion of the motives (Go and Bortree, 2017). The contingency view of interactivity sees interactions as happening during human-to-human interactions. In this respect, interactivity is considered “expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges” (Rafaeli, 1988, p. 111). This type of interactivity is also called a message interactivity, which relies on an accidental and responsive exchange of messages between two interactors (Sundar et al., 2003). In this study,
the interactivity of CSR communication on social media can be viewed as the perception of the nature of participatory CSR campaigns distinguished by two-way communication occurring in real time (Lee et al., 2019).

2.3 Interactivity of CSR communication on social media and brand sincerity

In marketing communications, brand sincerity relates to honesty, soundness, realistic attitude, playfulness and sensitivity, and is considered one of the five main dimensions of brand personality (Aaker, 1997). Customers acquire comfort and confidence when interacting with the brand because personifying brands makes nonhuman brands appear more human and familiar. CSR research also revealed the meaningful relationship between CSR effectiveness and the human-like effect of a brand. For example, Jeong and Kim (2021) showed that when CSR is communicated as a humanoid brand message, consumers are more likely to sense greater warmth and develop a purchasing preference to stress their moral commitment. Sun et al. (2022) also revealed that the CSR communication of hotel firms is positively associated with the brand image of warmth. A recent study shows that sustainability messages, especially with an environmental focus, has a positive impact on brand personality (Sander et al., 2021). Tarabashkina et al. (2020) similarly argued that CSR engagement can reduce information asymmetry, consequently enhancing responsible and active dimensions of brands personality. Ragas and Roberts (2009), in their case study, also argued that a restaurant firm’s CSR communication strategy was strongly associated with customers’ perceptions of the sincere dimension of brand personality.

Despite the previous studies, research examining the impact of CSR communication on brand personality has been notably limited. Moreover, the relationship between the interactivity of CSR communication and sincerity traits of brand personality has been rarely explored. This study, therefore, suggests that interactive CSR communication can positively influence the sincerity traits of brand personality due to the nature of relationship-oriented emotional immersion (Go and Bortree, 2017; Jeong and Kim, 2021; Sun et al., 2022). In addition, based on SIT (Smith and Bugni, 2006), it is suggested that consumers’ interactivity with chain restaurant brands on social media through CSR communication can help consumers feel more comfortable and confident by intrinsically bonding them with the brand environment (West et al., 2010), consequently enhancing brand sincerity. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1.** Interactivity of CSR communication on social media positively affects brand sincerity.

2.4 The mediating role of brand trust (reliability and intentions)

A significant factor in fostering an effective CSR communication strategy is how to diminish stakeholder skepticism and engage stakeholders to communicate the active development of the company’s CSR activities (Lee et al., 2019). Delgado-Ballester (2004) theorized brand trust as “The confident expectations of the brand’s reliability and intentions in situations entailing risk to the consumer” (p. 574). Understanding brand trust is critical, as it underpins any successful long-term relationship and is a cardinal driver of loyalty via interactive relationships. Hiscock (2001, p. 1) argued that “the ultimate goal of marketing is to generate an intense bond between the consumer and the brand, and the main ingredient of this bond is trust.” SIT also supports the importance of the mutual bonds formed by individuals interacting with others, which are based on trust and provide a steady ground for future relationships (West et al., 2010).
2.4.1 Brand reliability. Brand reliability is more closely related to competency-based character (Kim et al., 2021). In their study of brand trust, Belaid and Behi (2011) emphasize that brand reliability is connected to cognitive aspects of brand trust that can be assessed through perceptions of a firm’s ability to meet consumers’ needs (e.g. credible information and brand performance). Research also has indicated that firms’ CSR activity is closely associated with the perception of brand reliability. For example, Tezer and Tofighi (2021) showed that the spillover effect of CSR information induces a high perception of the reliability of the focus brand, which leads to a more favorable evaluation of the brand. In addition, consumers have confidence in the brand when they believe that their service/brand providers are reliable and of unparalleled honesty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Because customers obtain the symbolic meaning of a brand by interacting with others, their belief regarding the brand’s reliability is a significant factor that advances the brand’s personality traits (e.g. sincerity and competence) (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Likewise, Sung and Kim (2010) reasoned that customers’ perceptions of the sincerity traits of a brand’s personality have a positive impact on their brand reliability. Previous studies so far have mostly focused on the role of brand personality as an antecedent of brand trust. Reversely, the role of brand trust (reliability and intentions) on brand personality has not received enough attention. Furthermore, research broadly shows that brand trust plays an important mediating role in the relationship between companies’ CSR efforts and consumer attitude and/or behavior, including firm performance (Le Thanh et al., 2021), brand trust (Huang and Liu, 2020) and loyalty (Martínez and Del Bosque, 2013). Nonetheless, it is not clear from the existing studies how brand reliability mediate the positive impact of CSR communication on symbolic brand benefits, such as brand sincerity. Therefore, building on previous research, we suggest that brand reliability plays a mediating role in the proposed relationship. Specifically, based on SIT, it is assumed that customers develop self-expressive and approachable symbolic meanings for their brands by actively interacting with online communities through CSR campaigns (Garcia-De los Salmones et al., 2021; Jeong and Kim, 2021). The social recognition of the brand then increases its reliability and, as a result, affects its perception as a brand with caring and honest human attributes. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

\[ H2a. \] Brand reliability mediate the positive effect of interactivity of CSR communication on social media on brand sincerity.

2.4.2 Brand intentions. Brand reliability is the result of a rational and cognitive process based on the evaluation of brand performance and reputation, whereas brand intentions proceed from emotional and social trust based on consumers’ perceptions of a brand’s orientation and honesty toward consumers (Delgado-Ballester, 2004). Brand reliability is more closely related to consumers’ perception of a brand’s competency-based traits, whereas brand intention has more to do with brand favoritism in relation to the firm’s will to improve consumer well-being (Kim et al., 2021). In other words, when consumers feel that a brand prioritizes the long-term interests of consumers, they regard its intentions as trustworthy and honorable in emotional terms (Belaid and Behi, 2011).

Previous research has indicated that trust is one of the main elements of relationship engagement and that brand trust is a fundamental variable to nurture a persistent desire to engage in long-term relationships with brands (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester, 2004). Similarly, brand sincerity plays a vital role in influencing the quality of a brand’s relationship with customers, sways brand trust and contributes to the formation of long-term relationships with the customers (Aaker, 1997). As previously stated, CSR activities positively influence brand trust. They make a confident impression on consumers
who are sensitive to these social issues because consumers perceive companies that participate in CSR activities as having a genuine intention to defend the consumer’s position (Kim et al., 2015). Despite previous studies, the role of brand intentions, an affective aspect of brand trust, has received little attention. Therefore, it is assumed that interactive CSR communication via social media influences brand intentions by creating mutual bonds and emotional commitment (West et al., 2010) between actors for future relationships. In addition, brand intentions play a mediating role in the relationship between customer participation in interactive CSR communication and the sincerity traits of brand personality. Hence, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H2b. Brand intentions mediate the positive effect of interactivity of CSR communication on social media on brand sincerity.

2.5 The moderating role of self-congruity
Self-congruity, which is specified as the process of corresponding consumers’ self-concept with the image of a target brand or service, is one of the fundamental concepts to fathom branding (Sirgy, 1982). Aaker (1999) indicated that the correspondence between the material’s symbolic image of consumption and the material’s self-concept was regarded as an important prerequisite for individual behavior. Likewise, it was found that individuals avoid brands when there is a symbolic inconsistency with their personality, which can lead to brand aversion (Zarantonello et al., 2016).

Research shows that restaurant firm’s CSR communication positively influence corporate brand trust (He et al., 2022; Huang and Liu, 2020) and other studies have further revealed the positive influence of self-congruity on positive attitude toward brand (Kaur et al., 2022; Zarantonello et al., 2016). Research also shows that self-congruity is a critical antecedent of brand trust. For example, Yoon and Kim (2016) demonstrated that McCafé consumers were more likely to perceive the brand as reliable and competent if they felt that the brand’s image was consistent with their self-image. Consumers tend to prefer brands whose image matches theirs and maintain long-term relationships with them because the perception of self-congruity evokes positive emotions such as pride and joy (Aaker, 1999). Ultimately, through this emotional attachment to a brand, consumers believe that the brand has a lasting desire and intention to maintain a worthy relationship with them (Yoon and Kim, 2016).

There were also some studies that investigated the relationship between CSR and self-congruence. For example, one study found that the effectiveness of CSR information in terms of green marketing depends on how well it aligns with the customer’s own values (Klipfel et al., 2014; Quester et al., 2013). Regarding the self-congruity, however, most studies have focused on the direct or indirect effect of self-congruity. Furthermore, although a moderating role of self-congruity has been examined, such as Aguirre-Rodriguez et al. (2012) revealing that self-congruity moderated the positive relationship between consumer’s cognitive evaluation and consumer’s attitude and behavior, the moderating role of self-congruity has not been explored in the context of interactive CSR communication and brand sincerity to the best of the authors’ knowledge.

Accordingly, the following assumptions can be made based on previous studies. First, CSR interacts positively with self-congruity (Klipfel et al., 2014) and trust (He et al., 2022; Huang and Liu, 2020). In addition, as customers’ perceptions of self-congruity induce emotional attachment through positive emotions (Aaker, 1999; Yoon and Kim, 2016), they have a positive effect on the belief in the brand’s ability to fulfill value and the emotional trust that the brand prioritizes long-term relationships with the customers. On this basis, we suggest that the impact of restaurant firm’s interactive CSR communication through social
media on brand reliability and brand intentions differs depending on the degree of perception of the customer’s self-image and the consistency of the brand’s image. Thus, the following hypotheses are put forward:

\[ H3 \text{. The positive relationship between interactivity of CSR communication and brand reliability (H3a)/brand intentions (H3b) is moderated by self-congruity, such that the relationship is stronger (vs weaker) for customer’s high (vs low) self-congruity.} \]

Furthermore, based on the arguments taken together in \( H2 \) and \( H3 \), we also suggest that the mediation effect of interactive CSR communication on brand sincerity via two important components of brand trust (brand reliability and intentions) would be moderated by customer’s self-congruity. Given the previous studies supporting the positive impact of customer’s self-congruity on brand attitudes (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012), we assume that the mediation mechanism through brand trust can be influenced by the difference of customer’s self-congruity. Thus, we propose the following moderated mediation hypothesis:

\[ H4 \text{. The mediation effect of interactivity of CSR communication on brand sincerity via brand reliability (H4a)/brand intentions (H4b) is moderated by self-congruity, such that the indirect relationship is stronger (vs weaker) for customer’s high (vs low) self-congruity (Figure 1).} \]

3. Methods
3.1 Participants and procedure
This study used the online survey method of nonprobability sampling through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and targeted individuals who had past experiences of participating in social media-based CSR campaigns by chain restaurants. Consumers in the USA with ages of 18 and over were recruited through MTurk’s qualification system (based on location and age) on December 6–8, 2021. Before taking the survey, two samples of social media CSR campaigns from chain restaurants (see Appendix 1) were provided to ensure that participants could correctly evaluate whether they had experienced interactive CSR communication on social media before.

After reading the samples, participants answered questions regarding their past experiences (e.g. types of restaurants, social media platforms and CSR campaigns) to confirm their own experience with a chain restaurant’s interactive CSR campaigns on social media. During the recruitment period, 865 participants took an online survey. A total of 418 participants were then selected for data analysis (48.3% response rate), excluding participants who failed to answer the attention check question (“This is an attention filter. Please select ‘Disagree’ for this statement, or you will not be able to complete the survey”).

![Figure 1. Conceptual model](image-url)
Among the 418 participants, 55% were male and 45% were female; 26.8% of them were between 21 and 30, 38.5% were between 31 and 40 and 21.5% were between 41 and 50 years old.

3.2 Measurement scale
We adapted the measurement items from previously validated measurements and designed five construct models. A seven-point Likert-type scale varying from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”) was used for all question items. Four-item measurement scale of Interactivity of CSR communication was adapted from Labrecque (2014). Eight-item measurement scale of Brand Trust (Reliability and Intentions) was developed from Delgado-Ballester (2004). We adapted an eight-item measurement scale of Brand Sincerity from Ragaś and Roberts (2009). Su et al. (2015)’s five-item measurement scale was used to measure self-congruity. Variables (e.g. gender, age, income, education and chain restaurant segment) were controlled for this study to maintain consistency with the prior study of a customer’s brand behavior on social media (Saxton et al., 2019) and coded as dummy variables (e.g. Gender: male = 0; female = 1; Age: 18–20 = 1, 21–30 = 2, 31–40 = 3, 41–50 = 4, 51–60 = 5, 61 or older = 6; chain restaurant segment: fine dining = 1, casual dining = 2, fast casual = 3 and quick service = 4). All measurement items are described in Appendix 2.

3.3 Data analysis
To assess the measurement model and confirm the reliability and validity, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted by using AMOS 21.0 (Hair et al., 2017). In addition, to test the direct effect of the proposed hypotheses, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted. In addition, to test the mediation effect (Model 4) and moderating and moderated mediation effect (Model 7), macro PROCESS in IBM SPSS 21.0 was used (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). In this study, the minimum sample size required to run SEM is 137 (“anticipated effect size = 0.3, medium effect size”; “desired statistical power level = 0.8”; “number of latent variables = 4”; “number of observed constructs = 17”; and “probability level = 0.05”) according to the literature (Soper, 2022). Therefore, the sample size (n = 418) of this study is considered sufficient enough.

Common method bias (CMB) was assessed by operating Harman’s single-factor method. The results showed that the total variance demonstrated by one factor was 47.9% (e.g. if a single factor is less than 50%, CMB has no effect on the data), indicating that CMB was not a major issue for this study (Rather, 2021). Table 1, explaining that all the values of variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity of CSR</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.911</td>
<td>0.847</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand trust</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.906</td>
<td>0.474**</td>
<td>0.760</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Brand reliability)</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.815</td>
<td>0.414**</td>
<td>(0.937)</td>
<td>0.725</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Brand intentions)</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.894</td>
<td>0.473**</td>
<td>(0.950)</td>
<td>0.701**</td>
<td>0.824</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-congruity</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.925</td>
<td>0.705**</td>
<td>0.573**</td>
<td>0.529**</td>
<td>0.522**</td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand sincerity</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.904</td>
<td>0.544**</td>
<td>0.751**</td>
<td>0.711**</td>
<td>0.706**</td>
<td>0.686**</td>
<td>0.782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s α</td>
<td>0.910</td>
<td>0.907</td>
<td>0.796</td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td>0.885</td>
<td>0.924</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>VIF</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Cronbach’s α, correlations and VIFs

Notes: **p < 0.01; Diagonal italic font = square root of AVE; CR = composite reliability; SD = standard deviation; VIF = variance inflation factors
Source: Created by the authors
inflation factors (VIFs) are below 5, also verified that this study has no such issues as CMB and/or multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2017).

4. Results

4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis

As shown in Table 1, it was confirmed that all Cronbach’s α values were higher than 0.80, and CR values were greater than 0.70, describing that the internal consistency and the reliability of the measurement items were high. Also, all AVEs are greater than 0.50 and each square root of AVE is greater than the correlation of the construct pairs, which confirms convergent and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017). CFA was conducted to further assess the validity of the measurement model.

The results indicated that the four-factor model (e.g. Interactivity of CSR communication, Brand reliability, Brand intentions, Brand sincerity) met the satisfactory model fit ($X^2 = 348.446 \ [df = 108, p < 0.001, X^2/df = 3.226]$, root mean square of error approximation [RMSEA] = 0.069, root mean square residual [RMR] = 0.066, comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.958, Tucker–Lewis coefficient [TLI] = 0.947, Incremental Fit Index [IFI] = 0.958). In addition, to confirm the validity of the measurement model, the four-factor model with four latent factors and the single/two-factor model were compared. The results indicated that the four-factor model performed significantly better than the single-factor model ($X^2 = 1347.403 \ [df = 114, p < 0.001, X^2/df = 11.819]$, RMSEA = 0.152, RMR = 0.184, CFI = 0.782, TLI = 0.740, IFI = 0.783) and two-factor model (Table 2).

4.2 Tests of hypotheses

4.2.1 Direct effect results. To test the direct effects of the proposed hypothesis, SEM was conducted by using IBM AMOS 21 software. SEM analysis was performed by evaluating all path coefficients by controlling the age and gender of the participants. As shown in Table 3, the structural model yielded adequate fit indices ($X^2/df = 3.066$, RMSEA = 0.067, RMR = 0.064, CFI = 0.949, TLI = 0.938). The path coefficient from CSR communication interactivity to brand sincerity ($\beta: 0.217, p < 0.001$) and brand reliability/intentions ($\beta: 0.313, p < 0.001/\beta: 0.370, p < 0.001$) was statistically significant, explaining CSR communication interactivity enhances brand sincerity and brand trust, supporting H1. The path coefficient from brand reliability/intentions to brand sincerity was also significantly positive ($\beta: 0.845, p < 0.001/\beta: 0.263, p < 0.001$). This implies that brand trust promotes brand sincerity (Figure 2).

4.2.2 Mediation results. To further explore the indirect effects of brand trust, we separated brand trust into two dimensions: brand reliability and brand intentions (Kim et al., 2021). Then, we operated a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 iterations by using

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$X^2/df$</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>RMR</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>TLI</th>
<th>IFI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four-factor model (ICSR, BR, BI, BS)</td>
<td>3.226</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.958</td>
<td>0.947</td>
<td>0.958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-factor model (ICSR, BT, BS)</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.954</td>
<td>0.943</td>
<td>0.954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two factor model (ICSR + BT, BS)</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two factor model (ICSR + BS, BT)</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-factor model</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** ICSR = interactivity of CSR communication; BS = brand sincerity; BR = brand reliability; BI = brand intentions

**Source:** Created by the authors

Table 2. CFA comparison results
Table 3 also shows that the parameter bootstrap with a 95% confidence interval does not hold zero, confirming that the indirect effect of interactivity of CSR communication on brand sincerity via brand reliability (β: 0.174, SE: 0.024, 95% CI [0.129, 0.224]) and brand intentions (β: 0.198, SE: 0.027, 95% CI [0.048, 0.255]) (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Therefore, it is confirmed that a customer’s brand reliability and intentions positively mediate the relationship between interactivity of CSR communication and brand sincerity, supporting H2a and H2b.

Figure 2.
Structural model results

Source: Created by the authors
4.2.3 Moderation and moderated mediation results. Next, to test the moderating effect of self-congruity in the relationship between CSR communication and brand reliability (H3a) and brand intentions (H3b) and moderated mediation (H4a/H4b), we conducted Hayes's (2022) PROCESS (Model 7). Following the procedure suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2008), the following assumptions should be statistically satisfied: direct effect of CSR communication on brand reliability and brand intentions; direct effect of self-congruity on brand reliability and brand intentions; and interaction effect between interactivity of CSR communication and self-congruity on brand reliability and brand intentions; and conditional indirect effect of interactivity of CSR communication on brand sincerity via brand reliability and brand intentions across the degree of self-congruity.

Table 4 indicates that self-congruity positively moderated the relationship between interactivity of CSR communication and brand reliability ($\beta$: 0.0569, SE: 0.0179, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [0.0218, 0.0920]), supporting H3a (Figures 3 and 4). In addition, it was found that the indirect relationship between interactivity of CSR communication and brand sincerity via brand reliability are moderated by self-congruity ($\beta$: 0.0223, SE: 0.0099, 95% CI [0.0048, 0.0430]), supporting H4a (Table 5). In contrast, the results showed that there is no moderation effect of self-congruity between interactivity of CSR communication and brand intentions ($\beta$: 0.0229, SE: 0.0196, $p > 0.05$, 95% CI [−0.0157, 0.0615]) and no moderated mediation effect in the proposed indirect relationship via brand intentions ($\beta$: 0.006, SE: 0.008, 95% CI [−0.0102, 0.0228]). Thus, H3b and H4b were not supported.

5. Discussion and conclusions
5.1 Conclusions
Our results revealed that the interactivity level of chain restaurants' social media-based CSR communication campaigns affects customer perceptions of brand sincerity. Although previous studies have suggested that CSR/sustainability practices are positively associated with brand personality (Sander et al., 2021) and brand image (Sun et al., 2022), our findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome variable</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>95% CI (lower/upper)</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Brand reliability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.4976</td>
<td>0.0417</td>
<td>131.9753</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.001$</td>
<td>5.4157/5.5794</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactivity of CSR</td>
<td>0.0871</td>
<td>0.0395</td>
<td>2.2040</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.05$</td>
<td>0.0094/0.1647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-congruity</td>
<td>0.3389</td>
<td>0.0379</td>
<td>8.9389</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.001$</td>
<td>0.2644/0.4134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity of CSR $\times$ Self-congruity</td>
<td>0.0569</td>
<td>0.0179</td>
<td>3.1877</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.01**$</td>
<td>0.0218/0.0920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand intentions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.4854</td>
<td>0.0458</td>
<td>119.6709</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.001$</td>
<td>5.3953/5.5755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity of CSR</td>
<td>0.1510</td>
<td>0.0435</td>
<td>3.4722</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.001$</td>
<td>0.0655/0.2364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-congruity</td>
<td>0.3340</td>
<td>0.0417</td>
<td>8.0055</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.001$</td>
<td>0.2520/0.4160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity of CSR $\times$ Self-congruity</td>
<td>0.0229</td>
<td>0.0196</td>
<td>1.1647</td>
<td>$p &gt; 0.05$</td>
<td>$-0.0157/0.0615$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Moderation results

Source: Created by the authors
are unique in a way that it is not just CSR/sustainability practices but interactivity in CSR campaigns (perceived by customers) that significantly influences customers’ perceptions about brand sincerity. Furthermore, our study is also unique in indicating that brand reliability and brand intentions mediate the positive effect of interactivity of CSR communication on brand sincerity. Many previous studies demonstrated that brand trust positively mediates the relationship between companies’ CSR efforts and performance.

Figure 3.
Moderating effect on brand reliability

Source: Created by the authors

Figure 4.
The result of slope analysis by self-congruity

Source: Created by the authors
Despite these findings, research focusing on the impact of subdimensions of brand trust in the proposed relationship has been limited. This study offers new insights on the mediating roles of brand reliability and brand intentions on customers’ perceptions of brand sincerity derived by interactive social media-based CSR communication. Furthermore, this study reveals that a customer’s self-congruity moderates the positive indirect effect of interactivity of CSR communication on brand sincerity via brand reliability, but not via brand intentions. Thus far, most studies on self-congruity have focused on the antecedents and consequences of self-congruity; the moderating mechanisms of self-congruity have not been sufficiently explored. This study is – to the best of the authors’ knowledge – one of the first to identify the moderating and moderated mediating role of self-congruity, especially in CSR communication research.

Our results provide not only statistical significance, but also economic significance. For example, based on our results, an increase of 1 unit in CSR interactivity will increase brand sincerity by 0.217 unit. This result can be translated into a return on investment context; an investment in enhancing CSR interactivity by 1 unit will provide a return of approximately 22% in brand sincerity improvement. On top of the main effect, mediating effects of brand reliability and brand intentions appear to provide approximately 17% and 20% returns, respectively, on the relation between CSR interactivity and brand sincerity. These are certainly meaningful and economically significant returns for the company’s investment or effort.

5.2 Theoretical implications
The findings of this study show that several theoretical contributions can be suggested. First, this study extends the extant research by empirically supporting the positive impact of the interactivity of chain restaurants’ CSR communication on social media on brand sincerity. This finding is in line with the previous studies maintaining the positive effect of a firm’s CSR efforts on brand personality and brand image (Sander et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2022;...
Upon these findings, this study contributes to the literature by focusing on the importance of interactivity in social media. In addition, this study expands on SIT to support the meaningful benefits of interactive communication between social groups through products and/or services (Leigh and Gabel, 1992).

Based on SIT, it can be said that the interactive communication process enabled by CSR campaigns on social media can serve as a social tool (García-De los Salmones et al., 2021; Smith and Bugni, 2006) helping customers develop an intrinsic bond and symbolic behavior with the brand they interact with. In conclusion, this study suggests that customer interaction with CSR communication on social media has the potential to form symbolic meaning for brands. These findings are significant because they show how interactive CSR communication can heighten a sense of human behavior and shared understanding (Blumer, 1986) in customer–brand relationships. Therefore, researchers interested in fathoming the impact of CSR communication on brand personality may benefit from theoretical suggestions based on our findings.

Second, to further comprehend the underlying relationship between the interactivity of CSR communication and brand sincerity, the mediating role of brand reliability and brand intentions was examined based on SIT. The results suggested that a customer’s perception of both brand reliability and brand intentions toward chain restaurants enhanced the positive effect of interactivity of CSR communication on brand sincerity. Many studies so far have manifested a mediating role of brand trust that influences various company/brand values in the relationship with CSR (He et al., 2022; Le Thanh et al., 2021). Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to research on how brand trust (e.g. brand reliability and brand intentions) mediates the impact of the interactivity of CSR communication on brand sincerity.

SIT explains that interactive communication allows customers to develop a self-projecting and friendly symbolic meaning for their brand, which, in turn, enables them to form trusted connections that are important determinants of long-term relationships (Hiscock, 2001). Based on our results, we suggest, from a theoretical perspective, that projecting social awareness through CSR communication can increase brand reliability because it helps customers recognize brands as possessing honest and warm human attributes (Lin et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2022). In addition, interactive CSR communication through social media can create a mutual bond and emotional commitment (He et al., 2022; West et al., 2010) between actors, influencing brand intentions for future relationships. These findings contribute to the brand personality literature because they highlight the importance of customer beliefs in a firm’s achievement of value promises and prioritization of customer interests as mediators in the context of CSR communication. Third, by investigating the moderating and moderated mediating of self-congruity based on congruency theory and SIT, this study engenders fresh insights into when interactivity of CSR communication develops brand sincerity via brand trust. Customers with higher self-congruity were found to be more sensitive to the interactivity of CSR communication, indicating a stronger relationship between the interactivity of CSR communication and brand reliability. However, it was found that the degree of a customer’s self-congruity did not strengthen the impact of interactivity of CSR communication on brand intentions, indicating neither moderation nor moderated mediation effect.

Most research on self-congruity, except for Aguirre-Rodriguez et al. (2012), focused on its direct or indirect effect, and to date, few studies tested the moderating role of self-congruity, especially in the relationship between CSR communication and brand trust. Thus, this finding adds knowledge to the hospitality literature by suggesting that when customers interact with a chain restaurant’s CSR campaign on social media, customers who perceive
that the brand's symbolic image is consistent with their self-concept are more likely to trust a firm's ability to achieve its value promises. Studies have shown that self-congruity is deeply related to functional aspects of congruity (Lee et al., 2020; Su et al., 2015). Therefore, self-congruity may have a greater effect on brand reliability, which is a belief in the functional aspect of brand trust, than brand intentions that focuses on brand goodwill.

5.3 Practical implications

The findings of this study deserve further discussion regarding their practical implications on chain restaurant brand managers and marketing practitioners on social media. First, chain restaurant marketers need to understand the important role of interactivity as a key element of CSR communication on social media to help develop brand trust and brand sincerity in chain restaurants. Therefore, beyond simply posting CSR-related campaigns on social media, it is necessary to encourage customers to actively use social media’s interactive features (e.g. comments, replies, and likes). In addition, in the message delivery method, it is necessary to clearly recognize that the reliability and sincerity of a company/brand can be enhanced by pursuing a two-way CSR communication effort with interactivity in mind (Lee et al., 2019).

In addition, social media communication marketers need to keep an eye on the increasing number of non-face-to-face and online orders in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic (Luo and Xu, 2021). The results of this study suggest that interactivity on social media affects customers’ trust in the company and the symbolic image of the brand. Therefore, communication practitioners will be able to apply effective strategies to CSR communication through a clear understanding of how the various interactivity features of social media platforms differentially affect customer attitudes. For example, Wendy’s, a quick service restaurant group, has worked for many years to integrate various CSR efforts (e.g. reducing greenhouse gases) into technological innovation to engage with customers. Recently, they collaborated with Meta’s Horizon Worlds to develop a virtual restaurant platform, the Wendyverse™, allowing customers to have extraordinary virtual 3D experiences in which they interact with each other and with brands (PRNewswire, 2022). Therefore, based on our findings, Wendy’s is encouraged to actively use the interactive features of the Wendyverse™ for its CSR campaigns to enhance its customers’ brand sincerity.

In addition, this study showed that brand trust can reinforce the influence of chain restaurants’ interactive CSR communication on brand sincerity. In particular, it was found that brand reliability and brand intentions, which are subdimensions of brand trust, have a positive effect on consumers’ attitudes. Accordingly, chain restaurant managers are advised to formulate a message strategy while recognizing that the two aspects of brand trust are important factors in reinforcing the symbolic preference of customer–brand through CSR communication. In particular, managers need to provide a clear appeal to their brand values and a message to their customers that they are always striving to develop the capacity to achieve the values promised by the company. Furthermore, even in uncertain situations such as the current pandemic, companies can help to secure the sincerity of the brand by continuously delivering the message that the interests of customers always come first.

As a further illustration, Chipotle, a leading fast-casual restaurant that emphasizes its social and environmental responsibility as a core value, faced a food safety crisis in 2015. They not only actively and transparently communicated the issue with customers and the public, but also promoted their CSR campaigns in an interactive manner (e.g. creating Snapchat show to engage young consumers in the firm’s “Food With Integrity” agenda) to restore damaged trust in the brand. They were eventually able to maintain their customers’
loyalty by committing to investing in customer service innovation and building emotional bonds with customers in their online community (Associationsnow, 2017).

Finally, our findings reveal that self-congruity affects the indirect effect of brand reliability between interactivity of CSR communication and brand sincerity, but did not affect the indirect effect of brand intentions. Therefore, when considering the mediating effect of brand reliability in the company’s CSR campaign discussed above, practitioners need to pay attention to the degree of self-congruity of customers as an important factor. In other words, chain restaurant managers need to understand that when they want to increase the brand’s symbolic benefits through CSR campaigns, the brand strategy about the company’s ability to achieve value is more effective than the message that the company puts the consumer’s interests first for customers with a higher sense of customer–brand congruity. As a result, it will be possible to maximize the effectiveness of CSR communication by strengthening brand reliability.

5.4 Limitations and future research
This study hopes to motivate subsequent research on various related topics. First, this study focused on the role of interactivity in the effect of CSR communication on brand sincerity. However, there may be other factors besides interactivity of which CSR communication influences the symbolic brand benefits. For example, an individual’s prior experience of using social media and the method of delivering message language (e.g. using symbolic or functional cues) can also affect an individual’s attitude toward CSR communication. Exploring such additional factors in CSR communication in the future will add value to the extant CSR literature. Second, this study is limited to the study of the effect of interactive CSR communication in social media on brand sincerity in the process of consuming tangible products in chain restaurants. However, interactivity with customers who consume intangible services on other platforms may appear in different paths. For example, in the case of customers who consume hotel or travel products, the interactivity in virtual reality platforms can influence customer attitudes through other mediators (e.g. emotional brand attachment) or moderation pathways (e.g. the degree of technology acceptance). In addition, this study used the online survey method of nonprobability sampling through MTurk. A more effective screening procedure is recommended for future studies to improve the validity of online samples and adequately assess the sample quality (Arndt et al., 2022).

References


Mead, G.H. and Mind, H. (1934), Self and Society, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, pp. 173-175.


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**Appendix 1. Examples of “CSR campaign” on social media**

**Example 1. (@AutismSpeaksCol)**

*To highlight Autism Awareness Month (in April), the restaurant chain A has partnered with Autism Speaks since 2010. Customers are encouraged to purchase a puzzle-piece for $1, $3, or $5 to benefit the organization and, since 2010, the burger chain has raised more than $3 million.*

**Example 2. (#getwastED)**

*In 2015, burgeoning fast-casual chain B put its cause right on the menu with a salad comprised entirely of food waste – and asking diners to dig in. The ingredients in the “wastED” salad read like a veritable who’s-who of restaurant kitchen rejects. Half of the proceeds of every $8.60 wastED salad went to City Harvest, a food rescue organization devoted to ending hunger.*

*Source: https://aaronallen.com/blog/restaurant-chain-cause-marketing*
### Appendix 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactivity of CSR com</strong></td>
<td>“When I think of the CSR campaign of my favorite restaurant brand on social media…”</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It will talk back to me if I post a message”</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It would respond to me quickly and efficiently”</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It allows me to communicate directly with it”</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It listens what I have to say”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-congruity</strong></td>
<td>“If I consider my favorite restaurant brand as a person…”</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.811</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I perceive that I share the same personality traits with the brand”</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>1.62</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“My favorite restaurant brand is a reflection of how I see myself”</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.861</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The image of my favorite restaurant brand is consistent with my self-identity (how I think about myself)”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“People who visit my favorite restaurant brand are very similar to me”</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.41</td>
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<td>“Using my favorite restaurant brand is a reflection of who I am”</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.881</td>
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<td><strong>Brand Trust</strong></td>
<td>“I have confidence in my favorite restaurant brand”</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.666</td>
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<td><strong>Brand Reliability</strong></td>
<td>“My favorite restaurant brand never disappoints me”</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>1.30</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“My favorite restaurant brand guarantees satisfaction”</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>1.07</td>
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<td><strong>Brand Intentions</strong></td>
<td>“My favorite restaurant brand would be honest and sincere in addressing my concerns”</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.776</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I could rely on my favorite restaurant brand to solve any problem with the product/menu”</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.816</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“My favorite restaurant brand would make any effort to satisfy me in case of a problem”</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.847</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“My favorite restaurant brand would compensate me in a way for the problem with the product/menu”</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.820</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Brand Sincerity</strong></td>
<td>“If my favorite restaurant is a person, I would describe it as…”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“honest”</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.822</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>“trustworthy”</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.770</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>“wholesome”</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.668</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“unique”</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.660</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“caring”</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.852</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“compassionate”</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.832</td>
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</table>

**Table A1.**

Measurement-item scales (ranging from 1 to 7, strongly disagree/agree)

**Source:** Created by the authors