

# Effects of corporate social responsibility activities for refugees

## The case of Austrian Federal Railways

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – When in the Summer of 2015 unprecedented numbers of refugees traveled through Austria, not only public and governmental authorities were challenged to provide support, but also the business sector. Various companies responded to the challenge by organizing relief actions, among them Austrian Federal Railways (OEBB). The purpose of this paper is to analyze the effects of this initiative on stakeholder perceptions and behavior.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The case of OEBB served as the research context. Data were collected by means of an online survey in May of 2016, about eight months after the initiative.

**Findings** – Almost half of the participants mentioned OEBB's activities for refugees in an unaided recall task. Unaided corporate social responsibility (CSR) awareness is related to people's issue involvement and reminiscence of specific activities and communication measures. People unaidedly recalling the initiative expressed a significantly better CSR image and identification with the company; they also expressed a stronger intention to speak positively (positive word of mouth) about the company's CSR activities. CSR image and attitude toward the initiative mediates this effect.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study stresses the importance of CSR awareness and communication. The non-representative sample does not allow general inferences.

**Originality/value** – This research uses an actual case to test the effectiveness of CSR activities and communication in the context of a highly critical situation, and sheds light on the mediating processes that drive the effects. The study extends existing knowledge from experimental studies.

**Keywords** Corporate social responsibility, Awareness, Identification, Refugees, Corporate image, Corporate social responsibility communication

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

The field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has seen considerable interest in understanding stakeholder reactions to CSR (see Sen *et al.*, 2016 for an overview). Against a conception of CSR as “a firm's commitment to maximize long-term economic, societal, and environmental well-being through business practices, policies, and resources” (Du *et al.*, 2011, p. 1528), analyzing CSR effects on a firm's stakeholders is obvious, because stakeholders are not only affected by but can also affect the achievement of an organization's objectives (Freeman, 2010).

Much of the research on the stakeholder effects of CSR has been conducted in marketing in the field of consumer behavior (e.g. Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Ellen *et al.*, 2006; Xie *et al.*, 2015). Here, effects are typically tested in controlled laboratory settings. Comparatively few studies tested the psychological effects of CSR in a real-world environment (Du *et al.*, 2008, 2011; Sen *et al.*, 2006). To meaningfully appraise stakeholder reactions to CSR initiatives more tests with high external validity are necessary to



complement the internally valid assessments of CSR effects on the organization (Sen *et al.*, 2006). With this study, we contribute to the scarce research by assessing CSR effects using an actual case as research context.

Our study's context is the so-called refugee crisis[1] of 2015, when more than 1.25m refugees – many of whom fleeing from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan – arrived at the borders of the European Union (EU) in need of international protection. Austria served as a key transit country for asylum seekers on their way to Germany and Scandinavia. In the late Summer of 2015 the situation in Austria escalated (see Kornberger *et al.*, 2018 for an overview of events): on September 4 thousands of refugees, who were stranded in Budapest after the Hungarian Government had closed the border to Austria, started a “march of hope” from the Hungarian capital toward the Austrian border. Assessing the situation, the Austrian and German chancellors decided to suspend mandatory registration of asylum seekers in the country where they first entered the EU (i.e. Hungary along the Balkan route), and to fully open their borders. From then on, thousands of refugees crossed the Austrian border daily and headed to the Austrian capital of Vienna. “Given these dimensions, the crisis represented an immense humanitarian and logistical challenge” (Kornberger *et al.*, 2018, p. 4).

During this time, not only governmental authorities and civil society were challenged to provide support, but also the business sector. Various companies responded to the challenge by organizing relief actions, among them Austrian Federal Railways (OEBB). As a main provider of passenger transportation OEBB was in the center of the critical situation. In an interview, the company's CEO stressed the two main challenges, namely, keeping up its operations for its customers and at the same time fulfilling its humanitarian responsibility to help the refugees (Köckritz, 2016). Together with various nonprofit organizations, OEBB provided first care for refugees as well as transportation by means of special trains; additionally with their apprenticeship program for young refugees the company also engaged in long-term CSR activities. Although many people in Austria supported the relief efforts for refugees, there were opposing parties that heavily criticized the “welcoming culture.”

In this research, we analyze the effects of OEBB's activities during the refugee crisis, comprising concrete actions and communication measures, on the perceptions and behavioral intentions of the company's stakeholders. The activities represent a special case in that they were conducted during a critical and contested socio-political situation. The case can be seen as a hybrid between political CSR and crisis management, as the company acted in the political sphere to a social challenge (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011) while trying to prevent the train service, i.e. the company's business, from collapsing.

This paper contributes to the extant knowledge on the effects of CSR activities by examining stakeholder reactions. The focus is on customers as one of the most important stakeholder group. Because OEBB is the largest provider of train services in Austria, the group of customers and citizens largely overlaps. Specifically, we answer research questions regarding the factors influencing CSR awareness and the effects of CSR awareness on customer perceptions and behavior. We also shed light on the process underlying this effect during a critical situation. Aside from testing the influence of individual factors like involvement and values we also analyze the role of CSR communication, thereby answering questions regarding the effects of corporate CSR communication. By analyzing the specific case of OEBB, the paper furthermore contributes to the research on political CSR and its effects on the corporate image.

### Theoretical framework

To develop our hypotheses regarding the effects of a CSR initiative on stakeholders' cognitions and behaviors we drew on Bhattacharya and Sen's (2004) CSR framework. As proposed here, CSR activities can lead to CSR awareness. Additionally, CSR communication is critical as it allows the company to raise awareness of CSR initiatives and foster desired

attitudinal and behavioral responses (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001). Awareness is called a “key stumbling block” (Sen *et al.*, 2006, p. 159) in companies’ quest for generating benefits from CSR, and it is contingent on certain factors within the individual. These include general perceptions regarding CSR and support or involvement with the CSR issue. Only when awareness was raised, certain internal outcomes, including attitudes and identification with the company, and external outcomes, like purchase behavior, loyalty and word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, can arise (Sen *et al.*, 2006). According to Hildebrand *et al.* (2017), the type of CSR also has an influence on these outcomes. They find that in-kind contributions to CSR issues that are perceived to be largely uncontrollable have a more positive effect than monetary contributions. As our case is an example of a company providing in-kind humanitarian support in a largely uncontrollable situation, we expect positive outcomes to arise when stakeholders became aware of the firm’s CSR initiative.

### **Antecedents of CSR awareness**

Previous research shows that awareness of CSR activities among stakeholders is generally low (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Sen *et al.*, 2006). However, whether awareness can be raised for a CSR initiative is dependent on a number of conditions that lie in the company, the CSR cause and in the recipient (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004).

On the part of the company, this includes size, prominence and the firm’s level of CSR positioning (Whole Foods or Toms Shoes serve as examples for strong CSR positioning). The quality and intensity of CSR communication, that is “communication that is designed and distributed by the company itself about its CSR efforts” (Morsing, 2006, p. 171), also plays a role whether stakeholders become aware or not. As to OEGB, the case example of this research, size and prominence are strongly pronounced; OEGB is Austria’s largest mobility services provider with about 40,000 employees. On its website the firm also praises itself as one of Austria’s leading eco-friendly companies operating on 92 percent traction power from renewable sources (<http://personenverkehr.oebb.at/en/>). In the course of the critical refugee situation in the Summer of 2015, the company developed a number of specific communication activities. These included a communication campaign “Menschlichkeit fährt Bahn” (Humaneness goes by train). With this campaign the company aimed to raise consciousness and sympathy during the critical situation and to generate understanding for restraints in railway service, while demonstrating ethics of care (Sellnow and Seeger, 2013). OEGB was also very active on Facebook and Twitter giving regular updates on the situation; additionally the company ran a blog which was frequently updated. Interviews with the company’s CEO were also part of the communication strategy. The rush of refugees and the situation in and around the train stations in Vienna was also a frequent topic in the national news media.

With regard to the CSR cause, Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) mention its reputation and fit as important factors to raise awareness and other outcomes. The “reputation” of the cause was and still is mixed; in any case, the cause is perceived as a major socio-political and humanitarian challenge. As a proxy for public opinion, coverage by Austrian newspapers during the critical phase in 2015 employed issue-specific frames regarding the management of the refugees’ arrival as well as several frames, including security threat, economization and – to a lesser extent – victimization (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017). Considering the strong focus on logistic management, the fit of the cause with the business of a railway company is very high.

While company and cause factors can be expected to lead to high levels of awareness for OEGB’s activities during the critical refugee situation in the Summer of 2015, the decisive factors influencing awareness can be found in the firm’s stakeholders. These factors include people’s support for or involvement with the CSR issue as well as their general attitudes and values (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). According to Lee *et al.* (1999), issue involvement increases search effort especially when prior knowledge is low. Because of the complexity and novelty of the refugee situation, prior knowledge can be considered low. Thus, people who had personal

involvement in the refugee issue, by either helping or donating, were likely more attentive to information about the situation and thus aware of it than people without issue involvement. On a more general level, research shows that universalistic values of self-transcendence (e.g. Schwartz, 2012) are positively related to CSR perception (González-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2016). Thus, individuals who place high importance on universalistic values can be expected to be more attentive to and thus more aware of specific CSR activities such as a company's activities for refugees. This leads to the first hypothesis:

- H1.* (a) Issue involvement and (b) universalistic values raise stakeholders' awareness for the company's CSR initiative.

Stakeholders' general awareness of the CSR initiative should be closely related to their concrete knowledge of specific CSR activities and the company's communication efforts in the context of the issue. Thus, we hypothesize:

- H2.* General CSR awareness is positively related to stakeholders' (a) awareness of specific CSR communication measures and (b) specific CSR activities of the company.

### Consequences of CSR awareness

Awareness of CSR activities is key for any cognitive or behavioral outcomes to arise (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Sen *et al.*, 2006). First of all, being aware of a CSR initiative is expected to increase the likelihood that stakeholders develop a positive attitude toward the initiative as such, as familiarity positively influences attitudes (Moreland and Zajonc, 1982). More importantly, being aware of a company's CSR activities has been found to influence people's perception that the respective company is socially responsible (e.g. Du *et al.*, 2007; Kim, 2011; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2004; Sen *et al.*, 2006). Thus, we expect the CSR-related image individuals have of the company to increase with CSR awareness. The CSR image is an identity-based corporate image that embodies stakeholders' perceptions of the way a company presents itself, either deliberately or accidentally, with respect to its socially responsible activities (Plewa *et al.*, 2015; Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009). As CSR reveals information on the moral character of the company (Brown and Dacin, 1997), literature also reveals CSR's influence on a deeper rooted relationship between the company and its stakeholders that is individuals' identification with the company (Sen *et al.*, 2006) or brand (He and Li, 2011). Identification with a company refers to the degree to which individuals feel a sense of belongingness to the entity (Mael and Ashforth, 1992) and the way in which they define themselves by the same attributes they believe define the organization (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Consequently, we expect individuals who became aware of OEGB's CSR initiative to have a more favorable attitude toward the initiative itself, to hold a more positive CSR image of the company and to also identify more strongly with it:

- H3.* CSR awareness is positively related to stakeholders' (a) attitude toward the CSR initiative, (b) CSR image of the company and (c) identification with the company.

The CSR image is said to support the appeal of corporate identities (Turban and Greening, 1997), and stakeholders will only identify with such companies they perceive close to their own identity and with whom they share common attributes and values (Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Scott and Lane, 2000). Accordingly, CSR image is found to induce a sense of connection and strengthen stakeholders' identification with a company (Matute-Vallejo *et al.*, 2011; Pérez and del Bosque, 2015). Thus, we expect the effect of CSR awareness on identification to be mediated by CSR image. Alongside CSR image, we expect that people's attitude toward the initiative mediates this effect:

- H4.* The effect of CSR awareness on identification is mediated by stakeholders' CSR image and attitude toward the CSR initiative.

Awareness of CSR activities is not only related to cognitive but also to behavioral outcomes (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). Research in various consumption contexts reveals that consumers' product choice can be positively influenced by their perception that the offerings are socially responsible. This positive influence has been demonstrated in experimental studies (Auger *et al.*, 2008; Henderson and Arora, 2010) and also in field settings (Du *et al.*, 2008; Sen *et al.*, 2006). CSR has also been shown to positively influence consumers' loyalty intentions and behavioral loyalty (Ailawadi *et al.*, 2014; Mandhachitara and Poolthong, 2011). But stakeholders' behavioral responses to CSR are not restricted to purchase; they also show in advocacy behaviors such as positive word of mouth (PWOM) (Lacey *et al.*, 2015; Xie *et al.*, 2015). WOM provides vital information about a firm to its stakeholders. Because of its presumed independence, it is generally perceived more credible than communication efforts by a company (Allsop *et al.*, 2007). Extant research shows the positive effect of PWOM over traditional marketing (Trusov *et al.*, 2009). Especially in the CSR context, where company initiated CSR communication is often viewed with skepticism (Waddock and Gogins, 2011), PWOM is important for generating positive effects from CSR. Based on the previous findings of CSR's influence on behavioral outcomes, we hypothesize:

*H5.* CSR awareness is positively related to stakeholders' intention to (a) use the company's services, (b) be loyal to and (c) spread PWOM about the company.

Awareness of CSR activities exerts its effect on external behavioral outcomes through internal outcomes (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). This indirect route is supported by models of decision making such as the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The effect of awareness on behavior may be mediated not only by the evaluation of the CSR initiative but also by stakeholders' perceptions of the company's CSR image. This leads us to our final hypothesis:

*H6.* The effect of CSR awareness on behavioral intentions is mediated by stakeholders' CSR image and attitude toward the CSR initiative.

## Method

### *Sample*

Data were collected via web-based questionnaire between May 17 and June 3, 2016, about eight months after the height of the refugee crisis situation at Vienna's main railway stations. Potential respondents were approached via personal networks of the authors as well as colleagues and students at an Austrian university. Invitations to the survey were diversified with respect to age, gender, occupation as well as place of residence across Austria. In total, 170 people fully completed the questionnaire. The sample was 66 percent female, the average age was 29 (range: 19–55). Respondents were well educated; 44 percent had completed secondary education and 51 percent post-secondary education or held a university degree at the time of the survey. In all, 39 percent were employees, 4 percent were self-employed persons, 44 percent were students (including post-graduates) and 13 percent had some other occupation (e.g. house wife/husband).

### *Measures and procedure*

The survey started with assessing respondents' general attitudes toward three large Austrian companies, including the target company OEBB, and the frequency of using their products/services. Questions pertaining to the other two companies were asked to reduce the transparency of the survey. Then the survey turned the focus to only one of the companies, OEBB. To assess participants' awareness of the firm's CSR activities during the refugee situation in the Summer of 2015, participants were asked to remember any social initiative by OEBB within the past 12 months and to write it down in an open response field. Next, participants were asked to evaluate the company's CSR image using the scale

developed by Plewa *et al.* (2015). After the unaided recall task and a first CSR image evaluation, the company's CSR activities and communication measures during the critical refugee situation were brought to everybody's attention by presenting a corresponding press report. This was necessary in order to measure respondents' awareness of the firm's CSR communication measures and specific CSR activities. All respondents were asked to indicate, how much they had known about each communication measure and activity before reading the press report. This was followed by measures regarding respondents' attitude toward OEBB's activities during the refugee situation (scale by authors), their attributions of CSR motives (Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006), CSR image again using the same scale (Plewa *et al.*, 2015), respondents' identification with OEBB (Einwiller *et al.*, 2006) and various behavioral intentions (adapted from Grégoire *et al.*, 2009). The survey concluded with a question regarding respondents' voluntary commitment and aid for refugees to assess their issue involvement (by authors) and their individual importance of universalistic values (scale adapted from Schwartz *et al.*, 2012). All measures and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of internal consistency are included in Table AI in the appendix. Five-point scales were used for all items, except for the semantic differential to assess respondents' attitude toward OEBB's CSR initiative – this scale used six points.

## Results

### CSR awareness

Of the 170 survey participants, 95 (66 percent) remembered some CSR initiative by OEBB. The majority ( $n = 77$ ) mentioned one or more of the company's activities during the critical refugee situation in 2015. Other mentions referred to pro-environmental and cultural initiatives by the company. For the main analyses, we classified respondents into two groups – one group comprising those who unaidedly recalled OEBB's activities for refugees ( $n = 77$ , 45 percent), and the other group comprising those who did not ( $n = 93$ , 55 percent) – in order to assess the antecedents and consequences of people's awareness of the relevant CSR initiative.

### Antecedents of CSR awareness

To test *H1* stating that issue involvement and universalistic values raise people's awareness for the company's CSR initiative, we used logistic regression with unaided awareness of OEBB's CSR activities for refugees as the binary dependent variable. Apart from values and issue involvement, respondents' frequency of using OEBB's services and sociodemographics (gender, age) were also included as predictors in the regression analysis (forward stepwise method with a significance level 0.05 as criterion for entry). Results show that CSR issue involvement exerts a significant effect on CSR awareness, supporting *H1a*, but universalistic values do not, which disconfirms *H1b*. We furthermore find a minor influence of age, indicating that older respondents tended to be more aware of OEBB's CSR activities than younger individuals. Gender and frequency of using the company's services exerted no significant influence on CSR awareness. The final logistic regression model comprising issue involvement and age as significant predictors of CSR awareness is depicted in Table I.

	<i>B</i> (SE)	Wald (df)	<i>p</i>	Odds ratio	95% CI for odds ratio	
					lower	upper
Constant	-1.66 (0.57)	8.55 (1)	0.003	0.191		
Age	0.037 (0.02)	3.86 (1)	0.049	1.04	1.00	1.09
Issue involvement	1.10 (0.34)	10.57 (1)	0.001	3.02	1.55	5.87

**Notes:**  $R^2 = 0.094$  (Cox & Shell);  $R^2 = 0.126$  (Nagelkerke); Model  $\chi^2(2) = 16.77$ .  $p < 0.001$

**Table I.** Results of forward logistic regression analyses to predict CSR awareness from individual difference variables

To test whether general CSR awareness is related to remembering specific CSR communication measures and CSR activities (*H2*), we ran several ANOVAs with unaided awareness as independent variable. Results reveal that those who were unaidedly aware of OEBC's CSR initiative were also more aware of several of the company's CSR communication measures and specific activities compared to those who were unaware (see Table II). Particularly, regular information updates on Facebook and Twitter and the interview with the CEO were remembered significantly better by those with unaided awareness. Among the concrete actions taken by the railway company, the provision of special trains and busses and emergency shelters as well as employees' voluntary services for refugees received significantly more attention by those with unaided awareness than by those without.

To test which of the communication measures and activities were most influential on respondents' unaided awareness of OEBC's CSR initiative, we conducted a binary logistic regression (foreword stepwise method with a significance level 0.05 as criterion for entry). The resulting model included three predictors of the probability to unaidedly recall the CSR initiative: the degree to which respondents noticed the interview with the CEO, the provision of special trains and busses, and the provision of emergency shelters (see Table III).

*Consequences of CSR awareness*

To test the relationships between CSR awareness and internal and external outcomes, we conducted several ANOVAs (see Table IV). In support of *H3a*, respondents with CSR awareness, i.e. who unaidedly recalled activities for refugees, had a more positive attitude toward OEBC's CSR initiative than those who did not recall the initiative. Those who were aware also had a significantly better CSR image of the company than those who were not aware (CSR Image 1: before reading the press article about the firm's CSR initiatives), which

Dependent variable	Unaided awareness		F(1, 168), p
	Yes (n = 77) M (SD)	No (n = 93) M (SD)	
<i>Communication measures</i>			
Regular posts on Facebook and Twitter	2.71 (1.39)	2.16 (1.24)	7.56, p < 0.01
Interview with CEO	3.19 (1.48)	2.18 (1.31)	22.27, p < 0.001
Campaign "Humaneness goes by train"	2.18 (1.33)	1.94 (1.11)	1.74, p = 0.189
OEBC blog	2.09 (1.35)	1.86 (1.15)	1.45, p = 0.230
<i>Activities</i>			
Special trains and busses	4.32 (0.92)	3.39 (1.26)	29.49, p < 0.001
Emergency shelters	3.69 (1.35)	2.56 (1.36)	29.35, p < 0.001
Employee volunteering	3.21 (1.35)	2.31 (1.35)	18.53, p < 0.001
Apprenticeships for young refugees	2.08 (1.32)	1.76 (1.11)	2.87, p = 0.092

**Note:** Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they had perceived each measure or activity on a scale from 1 "nothing" to 5 "very much"

**Table II.** Differing degrees of noticing specific communication measures and actions taken by OEBC during the refugee crisis

	B (SE)	Wald (df)	p	Odds ratio	95% CI for odds ratio	
					lower	upper
Constant	-3.88 (0.78)	25.15 (1)	0.000	0.021		
Interview with CEO	0.26 (0.13)	3.82 (1)	0.051	1.29	0.999	1.67
Special trains and busses	0.52(0.19)	7.15 (1)	0.007	1.68	1.15	2.45
Emergency shelters	0.31 (0.14)	4.90 (1)	0.027	1.37	1.04	1.81

**Notes:** R<sup>2</sup> = 0.213 (Cox & Shell); R<sup>2</sup> = 0.285 (Nagelkerke); Model χ<sup>2</sup>(3) = 40.77. p < 0.001

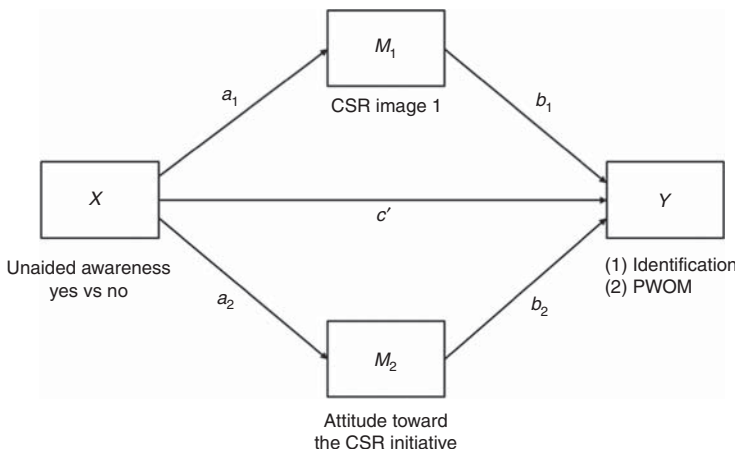
**Table III.** Results of forward logistic regression analyses to predict unaided awareness from communication measures and actions taken by OEBC

supports *H3b*. This difference in CSR image remained significant after all respondents were presented with information about the initiative (CSR Image 2). Although those who did not unaidedly recall the CSR initiative showed a stronger improvement in image perception ( $\Delta_{\text{CSR Image 2-1}} = 0.27$ ) than those who did ( $\Delta_{\text{CSR Image 2-1}} = 0.14$ ), this difference in improvement is not significant as indicated by a non-significant interaction of CSR image and unaided awareness ( $F(1, 168) = 1.45, p = 0.23$ ). Significant differences between respondents who were unaidedly aware of the initiative and those who were not were also prevalent for respondents' identification with the company confirming *H3c*. In support of *H5c*, the intention to spread PWOM about the company's CSR initiative was higher for those aware than for those unaware of it. However, the differences regarding use of the company's services and loyalty did not reach significance. *H5a* and *H5b* must therefore be dismissed.

To test the assumed mediated effects of unaided CSR awareness on respondents' identification with the company (*H4*) and their behavioral intentions (*H6*), we ran a multiple mediator model with PROCESS 2.15 for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) for each outcome variable using the bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2004; Preacher and Hayes, 2004). Because use of services and loyalty did not differ between those aware and unaware of the CSR initiative, mediation models were analyzed only for identification and PWOM as dependent variables. CSR image and attitude toward the specific engagement for refugees were included as parallel mediators in the models (see Figure 1).

Dependent variable	Unaided awareness		$F(1, 168), p$
	Yes ( $n = 77$ ) $M$ (SD)	No ( $n = 93$ ) $M$ (SD)	
<i>Internal outcome</i>			
Attitude toward the CSR initiative	5.38 (1.01)	4.95 (1.15)	6.46, $p < 0.05$
CSR Image 1	3.41 (0.79)	2.94 (0.80)	14.29, $p < 0.001$
CSR Image 2	3.55 (0.83)	3.21 (0.85)	6.52, $p < 0.05$
Identification	2.90 (0.92)	2.55 (0.93)	6.26, $p < 0.05$
<i>External outcome</i>			
Use of services	3.96 (1.38)	3.72 (1.39)	1.27, $p = 0.261$
Loyalty	3.49 (1.35)	3.27 (1.46)	1.07, $p = 0.304$
PWOM	3.10 (1.23)	2.58 (1.16)	8.15, $p < 0.01$

**Table IV.** ANOVA results for differing cognitive and behavioral reactions dependent on unaided awareness



**Figure 1.** Mediated effects of CSR awareness on identification and PWOM



As previous research has established a significant influence of consumers' attributions of CSR motives on cognitive and behavioral outcomes (e.g. Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006), we included respondents' attributions of OEBB's CSR motives as a covariate in all analyses in order to statistically control for these effects. In both models, the effect of unaided CSR awareness was fully mediated through the supposed mediators. Unaided CSR awareness had neither a direct effect on identification ( $c' = 0.08$ ,  $t = 0.64$ ,  $p = 0.522$ ) nor on the intention to spread PWOM ( $c' = 0.18$ ,  $t = 1.15$ ,  $p = 0.252$ ). However, in both models the indirect effects were significant as indicated by 95 percent bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs) entirely above 0. CIs were based on 10,000 bootstrap samples. Regarding identification, the indirect effect through CSR image was  $a_1b_1 = 0.07$  (CI: 0.012 to 0.181) and the indirect effect through attitude toward the engagement for refugees was  $a_2b_2 = 0.07$  (CI: 0.021 to 0.150). Regarding respondents' intention to spread PWOM, the indirect effect through CSR image was  $a_1b_1 = 0.07$  (CI: 0.002 to 0.199) and the indirect effect through attitude toward the engagement for refugees was  $a_2b_2 = 0.10$  (CI: 0.029 to 0.206).

### Discussion of results

This study set out to provide a test of the effects of CSR awareness on stakeholder perceptions and behavior using a real case in the context of a critical situation and contested socio-political issue, and shed light on factors that drive CSR awareness. In contrast to previous research that finds that awareness of CSR initiatives is low (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Sen *et al.*, 2006), we find rather high awareness of OEBB's CSR initiative for refugees. That almost half of the participants in our survey recalled at least some of the activities performed by the company eight months after the events in the Summer of 2015 is certainly due to the fact that the refugee crisis captured people's attention. During that time, media coverage on the critical situation in and around the railway stations and train service was intensive, increasing the likelihood that people would become aware of OEBB's activities. Despite the chance for everyone to learn about the company's CSR activities, unaided awareness was significantly higher among those who are or were involved in the refugee issue. The finding that awareness increased with age can be ascribed to the fact that older people donate more than younger people (Neumayr and Schober, 2009). As the general importance of universalistic values (Schwartz, 2012) did not influence awareness of OEBB's CSR initiative, our findings point to the importance of stakeholders' specific involvement in the CSR issue.

Aside individual factors like involvement and values we also looked into the role of CSR communication. The company was very active in communicating its activities and information all around the critical situation on its own social media channels. Results show that awareness of the CSR activities was strongly related to being aware of the firm's Facebook and Twitter communication. Media presence by OEBB's CEO also got noticed and may have driven the level of awareness. Because of the cross-sectional design of the study, we can, however, not determine the direction of this effect, whether higher CSR awareness caused becoming aware of the specific communication measures and specific activities or the other way around. What we can say is that public appearances by the CEO and people's awareness of OEBB's provision of special trains and shelters played a central role for the effects of the CSR initiative.

As emphasized by Sen *et al.* (2006), awareness is key for generating benefits from CSR. Our study confirms this notion showing that CSR awareness serves as the driving force for psychological effects to arise. It is not only related to more favorable evaluations of the CSR initiative and the CSR image of the company, but it also positively relates to stakeholders' identification with the company and their willingness to speak favorably about its CSR activities. Importantly, the effects of awareness on identification and PWOM are fully mediated by the CSR image and stakeholders' evaluation of the initiative. This shows that an initiative which people notice and evaluate favorably has the power to foster a

deeper-level connectedness between a company and its stakeholders (identification) as well as advocacy behavior (PWOM). Identification that is based on CSR associations can also insulate a company from unfavorable effects of negative publicity (Einwiller *et al.*, 2006). Such CSR-based resistance to negative information has also been shown in the context of a product-harm crisis (Klein and Dawar, 2004). The hypothesized effect of CSR awareness on the use of the company's services or customer loyalty did, however, not prove to be true. An explanation can be that the use of train services is primarily a necessity and not so much an act of preference. Although OEBB has smaller competitors in the country, their services are comparatively limited which limits selection options for customers.

## Implications

### *Theoretical implications*

The special case of OEBB's activities for refugees raises questions regarding the conceptualization of CSR. The social challenge created by the arrival of such a large number of refugees in the Summer of 2015 put enormous strain on the company, forcing it to come up with appropriate measures to first and foremost prevent the country's train service from collapsing. Thus, many of OEBB's activities during that situation were not deliberate CSR activities but crisis prevention measures. Yet, the company did not just focus on crisis prevention but exhibited an ethic of care, which requires a supportive response to those who have suffered and are in need (Johannesen, 2001 cited in Sellnow and Seeger, 2013). As mentioned by the company's CEO at the time, it was the goal to secure train service for customers while fulfilling the company's humanitarian responsibility to help the refugees (Köckritz, 2016). Responsibility as a core concept is also emphasized in OEBB's (2015a) annual report: "Its [OEBB's] self-perception includes the idea of responsibility. Responsibility for the people who travel by train; responsibility to society as a whole; responsibility for the environment. None of which is mentioned in any laws. This feeling of responsibility is more something that is simply assumed, or what you might call inherent in ÖBB" (p. 40). In their campaign with the tagline "Humaneness goes by train," OEBB communicated their ethical stance to their customers, asking them to be considerate and forbearing during this critical situation. With their apprenticeship program for young, unattended refugees that had been initiated already in 2012 the company also demonstrated long-term engagement in the issue.

Thus, the case can be seen as a hybrid between political CSR and crisis management. While trying to prevent the train service, i.e. the company's business, from collapsing, the company responded to a socio-political challenge with concrete actions that reflected an ethic of care for the refugees and responsibility for their customers. As our study shows, the company's customers perceived the aid for refugees provided by the company in collaboration with other organizations and private individuals as a demonstration of social responsibility, leading to positive effects on perceptions and behavior. Yet, helping refugees to continue their journey on their quest for asylum in Europe was and is a contested issue not only in Austria, but in other countries also. Thus, by helping the refugees OEBB also took a political stance, which was not perceived positively by everyone. Our results show that issue involvement, i.e. being engaged in helping refugees, served as a driver of awareness and consequently the positive image effect. An online survey among 2018 Austrians between 15 and 69 revealed that about every fourth gave aid to refugees; most people provided donations in kind (*Die Presse*, 2015).

### *Practical implications*

The study yields several implications for practice. Aside from reemphasizing the importance of CSR awareness, it accentuates the significance of stakeholders' specific

involvement in the CSR issue. Companies should study their stakeholders' sensitivities and preferences closely before deciding which issues to get involved in. As issue involvement exerts a significant influence on CSR awareness, engaging in issues that are important to stakeholders poses a crucial step in generating psychological CSR effects on the part of a company's stakeholders. Public awareness of the issue certainly helps to get attention for the CSR initiative. As in our case example, the critical refugee situation meant a great challenge and risk for OEBB, but the company managed to use this challenge as an opportunity to demonstrate its social responsibility in a time of heightened public awareness. The positive effect of CSR awareness on PWOM furthermore shows that CSR communication can also be assigned to the company's stakeholders. Providing them with good stories on social media accompanied by visuals to spread in their network can strengthen the positive effects, because CSR communication by a third party is more credible than by the company itself (Morsing *et al.*, 2008).

Apparently aware of the "Catch 22" of communicating CSR" (Morsing *et al.*, 2008), OEBB did not communicate much about their CSR initiative for refugees, even though the company was awarded for its communication during the critical refugee situation with the PR State Award in 2016 and for its refugee apprenticeship program with the State Mobility Award 2015. In its annual report 2015 (OEBB, 2015a), the presentation of the refugee engagement is embedded in a report about the company's various initiatives for the benefit of the environment and humanity, both on the large and the small scale. Only in the sustainability magazine 2015 (OEBB, 2015b) the different activities including the apprenticeship program, employee volunteering for refugees, the communication campaign and the "trains of humanity" are featured comprehensively.

### **Limitations and future research**

The findings of this research have to be interpreted in the light of certain limitations. The external validity of the study entails problems regarding the study's internal validity. People's unaided awareness of the CSR initiative was measured and not induced. Thus, we did not control for all possible factors that may also influence unaided awareness, as is usually done in a laboratory experiment by randomly assigning participants to the experimental conditions. It may be that other factors not taken into account in our study also influenced participants' awareness of the CSR initiative. Most likely, frequency of media use also played a role to become aware of this intensely covered situation. Likewise, social media use may have driven awareness as OEBB was highly active on various social media channels to communicate on the situation and on its activities. Furthermore, the refugee crisis and institutions' reactions to it are highly politicized issues, and hence respondents' evaluations of OEBB's engagement might have equally been driven by their political affiliations and beliefs. However, it is assumable that these factors correlate to some degree with respondents' personal engagement for refugees, which served as a proxy for issue involvement in our study and emerged as a main driver of CSR awareness. Another limitation refers to the sampling. The study applied convenience sampling. Thus, the results are not based on a representative sample of the country's population (which would basically correspond to OEBB's current and potential customers). Therefore, the level of CSR awareness may not correspond with the level of awareness among the company's customers in general.

The case chosen for this research is special as it represents a hybrid between political CSR and crisis communication. To evaluate the effects of such activities, more research is needed on the effects of humanitarian or other ethical activities through which companies also demonstrate a political stance. As such activities on socio-political issues are contested, analyzing the drivers of potential negative effects for a company's image is of interest. The case of Austrian Federal Railways furthermore opens up a theoretical discussion on the conceptualization of CSR.

As shown here, the initiative was not strategically planned as such throughout. Yet, because of the company's humanitarian act and exhibition of ethic of care during a social challenge we perceive it as political CSR. Yet, one may argue that CSR requires strategic planning and/or the freedom of action. This is worthwhile to be discussed further.

#### Note

1. The term "refugee crisis" is used to describe the critical situation in the year 2015 caused by the soaring number of refugees entering the European Union. It does not imply a corporate crisis for the company under investigation. In fact, by conducting measures like providing special trains OEBB was able to prevent a corporate crisis which would have erupted had the railway system collapsed because of the massively increased passenger volume in the trains and railway stations.

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Construct Items (translation from German)	Source	Cronbach's $\alpha$
CSR image How do you assess OEGB's social engagement with respect to the following statements? (1 "do not agree" to 5 "fully agree") OEGB is a good corporate citizen of the communities in which it does business OEGB works to satisfy its social responsibilities to the communities it serves As a business OEGB fulfills its social obligations to the community	Plewa <i>et al.</i> (2015)	0.84
Attitude toward the CSR initiative (semantic differential with following endpoint labels) Bad/good Useless/useful Meaningless/meaningful	Authors	0.97
Attributions of CSR motives (semantic differential with following endpoint labels) Self-interested/community interested Profit-motivated/socially motivated	Becker-Olsen <i>et al.</i> (2006)	0.77
Identification I feel somewhat associated with OEGB I have a sense of connection with OEGB OEGB shares my values I consider myself as belonging to the group of people who is in favor of OEGB I feel that customers of OEGB are probably similar to me Being a customer of OEGB is part of my sense of who I am	Einwiller <i>et al.</i> (2006)	0.89
Behavioral intentions How likely is it that you do the following in the near future? (1 "very unlikely" to 5 "very likely") Use: I will use OEGB Loyalty: I will prefer OEGB to other transportation providers PWOM: I will say positive thing about OEGB's CSR initiative to other people	Grégoire <i>et al.</i> (2009)	
Universalistic values Please indicate how you assess the following statements concerning your general values. (1 "not at all" to 5 "very much") Protecting society's weak and vulnerable members is important to me I think it is important that every person in the world have equal opportunities in life I want everyone to be treated justly, even people I do not know I strongly believe that I should care for nature It is important to me to work against threats to the world of nature Protecting the natural environment from destruction or pollution is important to me I work to promote harmony and peace among diverse groups It is important to me to listen to people who are different from me Even when I disagree with people, it is important to me to understand them	Adapted from Schwartz <i>et al.</i> (2012)	0.85
Frequency of using OEGB's services How often do you use OEGB (1 "never" to 5 "almost daily")	Authors	
Issue involvement Are you actively engaged in helping refugees, or have you assisted at the train station as a volunteer or donated for refugees? (yes/no)	Authors	

Table AI. Measures

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