

# The impact of message framing on perceptions of controversial CSR in hotels

Impact of  
message framing  
controversial  
CSR

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to understand how hospitality companies can best explain controversial corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities to consumers who may not agree with the CSR activity. This research explores message framing through emotional and cognitive appeals to influence consumer perceptions of the Gideon Bible in USA hotel rooms. The study uses the theory of deontic justice to measure the impacts of messaging on consumer perceptions of the morality of the Gideon Bible as suicide prevention in hotels and its relation to controversial CSR initiatives.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study uses an experimental study design via a self-administered survey to analyze participants' perceptions of the placement of the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms and participants' attitudes toward CSR initiatives based on deontic justice and religion using different message framing conditions.

**Findings** – Results show that religion was a major determinant of attitude towards the Gideon Bible, but the sentiment analysis also revealed that negative perceptions can be mitigated through message framing via emotional and cognitive appeals. Additionally, the cognitive appeal did impact CSR perceptions, as did identifying as Christian. Moral outrage emerged as a significant moderator for the relationships between message framing, attitudes toward the Gideon Bible and CSR.

**Originality/value** – This study provides an extension of deontic justice research to examine justice traits in accepting controversial CSR.

**Keywords** Deontic justice, Controversial CSR, Hotels, Messaging, Emotional appeal, Cognitive appeal

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In the U.S., there is a fervent atmosphere of debate and discussion surrounding contentious ideas, opinions and beliefs (Dutton & Residorf, 2019). As the influence of individuals grows through social media, people readily disseminate their opinions and arguments, regardless of their accuracy (Dutton & Residorf, 2019). Companies are caught in the middle of these conversations as they try to navigate public opinion and divisive topics while simultaneously engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Hydock, Paharia, & Weber, 2019). CSR is defined as any activity a company engages in including but not limited to charitable

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donations, advocacy, lobbying activities, sustainability practices and employee relations policies that are aimed at contributing to the public good rather than the profit of the company (Sheehy, 2015). In response to social causes and stakeholder pressure, organizations have started to take social actions that could be seen as controversial (Turner, McIntosh, Reid, & Buckley, 2019). For example, Starbucks received both support and backlash with a refugee hiring initiative in 2017 (Reuters Staff, 2017), while Bud Light faced backlash and scrutiny by using a transgender spokesperson for their beer (Caruso, 2023). Thus, controversial CSR is defined as CSR activities that can be seen as taking a political or social stance on a subject which have strongly divided opinions in the public discourse (Hydock *et al.*, 2019).

Hoteliers are not immune to the demands of investors and socially conscientious global voices. Increasingly, investors are requiring organizations to consider their environmental, social and governance (ESG) score before investing (Napoletano, 2023). This score, determined by a series of metrics from outside consulting firms, determines whether the company is meeting global standards for socially conscious organizations and global causes such as climate change and social injustice (Napoletano, 2023). With the changing business environment that now includes requirements for investments in ESG and CSR, the clear path for staying isolated from social issues is not always possible. Also, with the diversity of viewpoints and beliefs, creating new CSR initiatives can become controversial. While most CSR initiatives in the hotel industry focus on employee relations (e.g. diversity) and sustainability, there is little mention of CSR towards guests except in persuading them to participate in sustainability initiatives (Abaeian, Khong, Yeoh, & McCabe, 2019). Wong, Kim and Lee (2022) found that the current literature on customer-based CSR focuses on CSR's influence on loyalty and repurchase intentions. While socially controversial CSR and corporate wokeness have been implemented by the numerous organizations (Farmaki, 2022) as of the writing of this paper, there is scant literature related to controversial CSR in hospitality and tourism. The purpose of this paper is to determine the best method of communicating controversial CSR activities to the public by examining the impact of cognitive and emotional appeals related to the use of the Gideon Bible as a form of suicide prevention in hotels.

Message framing has long been an important area for study in marketing and advertising literature as it is crucial in guiding perceptions and persuading action (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). This study looks at message framing through marketing appeals to influence consumer perceptions about a controversial item found in hotel rooms, the Gideon Bible. The Gideon Bible is placed in hotel rooms by the Gideon Society which provides them free to the hotels to increase awareness of Christianity (Nelson, 2020). However, the U.S. has a diverse variety of religions (Cox, 2020), the presence of the Christian Bible may not always be welcome (e.g. Brayton, 2015). An increase in religious diversity within American society, a perceived decline in the influence of Christianity and an increase in individuals identifying as atheist or agnostic may all impact these attitudes (Pew Research, 2021).

A search in media and news outlets shows a heated debate between supporters and opposers over the presence of bibles in hotel rooms. Reports of declining numbers of bibles in hotel rooms have increased in the last ten years with writers like Sampson of the Washington Post claiming "hotel bibles are still a thing. But for some brands, they're on their way out" (2020). Despite this claim, more than 60% of hotels still have the book in their rooms (Siegel, 2018). In a comprehensive academic search on the role of the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms, there were no articles specifically evaluating perceptions of the text in hotel rooms or their value. This makes the Gideon Bible a good case study for exploring the impact that message framing and marketing appeals can have on consumer perceptions of a controversial topic especially considering the dearth of knowledge about bibles in hotel rooms.

The two aims of this study are: (1) to evaluate perceptions of the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms and (2) to examine effective messaging to convince consumers to accept a controversial CSR initiative. This study extends the work in CSR through the lens of theory of justice,

specifically deontic justice. Deontic justice covers three different dimensions: moral obligation, moral accountability and moral outrage (Beurge, 2012). This study adopted these dimensions to measure the impacts of effective messaging on consumer perceptions of the morality of the Gideon Bible in hotels as a form of accepting controversial CSR initiatives.

## Literature review

### *Message effectiveness*

Message effectiveness is an important attribute used to evaluate success in changing consumer perceptions and/or creating action by those who view the message. It is used to evaluate a wide variety of applications from political elections to health messaging to marketing and advertisement. Message effectiveness is defined by two dimensions, message perceptions which indicate evaluations of the message and its attributes (convincing, believable, attention grabbing) and effect perceptions which focus on the impact of the message on the target audience (Popova & Li, 2022). Essentially, for a message to be effective it must not only catch the attention of the intended target audience, but it also must reinforce a desired behavior or attitude. Dillard, Shen and Vail (2007) found that perceived message effectiveness is a causal antecedent of actual message effectiveness which includes behavioral intentions and post message attitudes.

When delivering persuasive messaging, the information can be delivered emotionally or cognitively to try to sway attitudes or behaviors (Septiano & Pratiwi 2016). Emotional appeals use affective language and imagery to appeal to feelings and emotions (Panda, Panda, & Mishra, 2013). Past research indicates that emotional messaging is the most effective form of persuasion (Lang & Yegiyan, 2008). Generally, emotional appeals grab viewer attention, increase viewer involvement and increase remembrance of the content which results in greater mental resources spent in message encoding and storage (Lang & Yegiyan, 2008). Cognitive appeals rely on logic, rationality and problem-solution benefits with a focus on utility of action or attitude (Panda *et al.*, 2013). Differences in appeal effectiveness have been attributed to product type; utilitarian products benefit from cognitive appeals while emotional appeals have a greater impact on hedonic consumption (Septiano and Pratiwi, 2014). This study used both appeals to relate information about the Gideon Bible to potentially influence attitudes towards a controversial CSR initiative. In this case, the message effectiveness would either reinforce positive perceptions of bibles in hotel rooms or change attitudes of those who view the text negatively. The goal is to evaluate if message framing influences customers' evaluations of the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms, using either an emotional or a cognitive appeal.

- H1. Message framing using (a) emotional appeal and (b) cognitive appeal compared to neutral appeal will have a stronger positive effect on customers' evaluations of Gideon Bible in hotel rooms.

### *Controversial corporate social responsibility*

CSR relies on the concept that organizations have moral and ethical obligations towards society that require them to act in the interest of the greater good (Holcomb, Upchurch, & Okmus, 2007). The motivations for such organizational actions and policies are both intrinsic and extrinsic as organizations consider economic benefits, employee engagement, public demand, investor relationships and perceived altruistic moral responsibility (Holcomb *et al.*, 2007). While making and disclosing CSR decisions, organizations bring awareness about their activities to match societal expectations.

Researchers started to explore socially controversial CSR in response to the increase polarization worldwide (Turner *et al.*, 2019). Traditional CSR focus on widely accepted

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activities like recycling practices; socially controversial CSR includes efforts some may consider debatable. Examples are open support for social movements such as #Blacklivesmatter and practices like hiring refugees, support for untraditional marriage and specific religions. Guzzo, Cobos and Vargas (2023) explored how socially controversial CSR in a job post affected hospitality job seekers' organizational attraction. They found that liberalism values moderated the indirect relationship between socially controversial CSR and organizational attraction through perceptions of fit and anticipated organizational support. Liptak and Pronay (2020) investigated Coca-Cola's #loveislove Facebook campaign that supported untraditional relationships. Through netnographic research, the authors found that Hungarian Coca-Cola's followers' reactions on the Facebook post were predominantly positive and generated a higher level of activity while compared to other general social media posts. Nonetheless, two-thirds of comments had a negative tone. Still, the negative comments received less supportive reactions while compared to the positive tone comments (Liptak & Pronay, 2020).

Consumers' reactions toward organizations as well as its products and services may vary based on their views of CSR. Research has also shown a positive correlation between CSR activities by hotels and consumer-company identification and hotel brand positioning which increased loyalty and, ultimately, financial performance (Akbari, Naszarian, Foroudi, Amiri, & Ezatabadipoor, 2020). Hanson, Jiang, Ye and Murthy (2019) found that consumers view social sustainability efforts as more positive than environmental suitability efforts from service providers. Given the positive impacts of CSR on brand and financial well-being as well as the belief that organizations have a moral obligation towards society (Akbari *et al.*, 2020), then hotels that can educate customers both emotionally and cognitively about the reasons for having the Gideon Bibles in hotel rooms should be able to increase positive evaluations of CSR. This form of guest-specific controversial CSR has not been evaluated and may provide new evidence of how consumers view CSR activities.

H2. Message framing using (a) emotional appeal and (b) cognitive appeal compared to neutral appeal will have a stronger positive effect on customer's evaluations of CSR.

### *Theory of justice and deontic justice*

Justice refers to what is known as "just" or "fair" as it conforms to specific standards of ethics (Crawshaw, Cropanzano, Bell, & Nadisic, 2013). The three main traditions of justice include virtue ethics (do good), which focuses on the moral character of individuals as their guide; deontology (do the right thing), which combines rights and duties; and consequentialism (do the math), which reflects on the reverse perspectives of deontological ethics, considering the consequences of acts instead of motives and duties (Jensen, 2020). The three traditions of justice have informed contemporary thinkers, such as Rawls and Habermas, in a better understanding of justice. Rawls (1971) initially focused on justice as fairness and subsequently revisited the theory to emphasize that principles and procedures of justice cannot be considered comprehensive due to the diverse worldviews in society. Rawls (1971) mentions the deontological response, connecting individual responses to duty or obligation to safeguard justice. For Habermas, justice is deeply connected to proceduralism and as such, reason needs to be considered through universal norms (Krause, 2005). While there has not been a consensus on procedures and principles of justice, justice theory offers lens to clarify how to enhance justice and remove injustice (Sen, 2009).

Folger (1998) developed the concept of deontic justice to explain the role of fairness as a moral virtue, based on deontic response Deontic justice theory states that people care about justice for justice's sake, not just for the personal impact of an action on them (Rupp & Bell, 2010). When people witness an injustice, they act to rectify it (Rupp & Bell, 2010). In organizational behavior literature, deontic justice has been applied to studies investigating workplace fairness (Cropanzano, Goldman, & Folger, 2003), employees' relationship to CSR

(Rupp *et al.*, 2006) and turnover intentions (Houshmand, O'Reilly, Robinson, & Wolff, 2012). In hospitality research, deontic justice has been found to impact customer satisfaction (Mattila, Hanks, & Wang, 2014). While deontic justice is considered a personal disposition, Beugre (2012) explains that it should not be considered an immutable trait. Deontic justice has also been evaluated as a reaction to specific situations (deontic state). For example, Purwanto, Rostiani, Widyaningsih and Jati (2023) found that food package waste literacy had an influence on customers' deontic justice, which in turn had an effect on individuals' emotions, impacting their attitudes. A scale developed for deontic justice breaks it down into three dimensions: moral obligation, moral accountability and moral outrage (Beugre, 2012) described in the following subsections.

In terms of deontic justice, moral obligation is defined as the sense of duty to react to an injustice to correct it (Folger, 2012). The level of moral obligation a person feels has been found to significantly impact an individual's pro-environmental behaviors when engaging in tourism activities (Wu, Font, & Liu, 2020). For example, the choice of a green hotel or traditional hotel is significantly impacted by moral obligation (Chen & Tung, 2014). This type of morality has been found to impact behavioral intentions to dine at restaurants that are part of the Slow Food movement (Youn, Yin, Kim, & Li, 2020) and purchase organic and fair-trade products (Hwang, Lee, & Diddi, 2015). Moral obligation has also been found to moderate the relationship between volunteers' attitude, subjective norms and intentions to volunteer (Bang, Odio, & Reio, 2014). These findings demonstrate the key role played by moral obligation in strengthening prosocial behaviors. In a similar line, this study predicts that moral obligation will also strengthen the relationship between message framing, perceptions about the Gideon Bible and CSR perceptions:

*H3i.* Customer's sense of moral obligation will strengthen the positive relationship between message framing using (a) emotional appeal and (b) cognitive appeal and customers' evaluations of Gideon Bible in hotel rooms compared to neutral appeal.

*H3ii.* Customer's sense of moral obligation will strengthen the positive relationship between message framing using (a) emotional appeal and (b) cognitive appeal and customer's evaluations of CSR compared to neutral appeal.

Moral accountability relates to (1) the individual's sense of justice and (2) to acting to act morally (Beugre, 2012). When someone views that an action/inaction may threaten a person's well-being, they are more likely to view the person responsible for that action/inaction as blameworthy (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001). Moral accountability for hotels is a subject fraught with controversy. For example, there is a fine line between preventing sex trafficking and making moral judgment about guests. However, society now believes that hotels should be more accountable for preventing sex trafficking (Rothberg, 2019). Previous research into CSR activities has found that corporations need to communicate the moral accountability of their CSR activities to get employee and consumer buy-in (Stoll, 2008). Kushwah, Dhir, Sagar, and Gupta (2019) highlighted the importance of environmental concern as a moderating factor between value barrier and organic food purchase intentions. Similarly, customer's moral accountability should also enhance the positive relationship between message framing, perceptions about the Gideon Bible and CSR perceptions:

*H4i.* Customer's sense of moral accountability will strengthen the positive relationship between message framing using (a) emotional appeal and (b) cognitive appeal and customers' evaluations of Gideon Bible in hotel rooms compared to neutral appeal.

*H4ii.* Customer's sense of moral accountability will strengthen the positive relationship between message framing using (a) emotional appeal and (b) cognitive appeal and customer's evaluations of CSR compared to neutral appeal.

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Mortal outrage is defined as the response of anger, resentment and indignation in response to a perceived injustice (Beugre, 2012). When there is a perception of unfairness, the result is moral outrage, even if the person feeling that emotion was not the recipient of the moral transgression (Folger, 2001). Moral outrage is closely related to the concept of altruism, where the individual acts in a way they think is right and moral even when it does not have positive outcomes for them (Lotz, Baumert, Schlösser, Gresser, & Fetchenhauer, 2011). In terms of consumer behavior, moral outrage has been linked to boycotting (Lim & Shim, 2019). Additionally, research supports the concept of moral outrage as a collective response to suicide and a motivation for community-level suicide prevention efforts (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Moral outrage has been vastly studied as a mechanism between specific situations and attitudes and behaviors. For example, Chu, Zhao, Gao and Wang (2023) investigated the mediation effects of moral outrage between moral identity and cyberbullying behavior. As a trait, moral outrage should also influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors:

- H5i.* Customer's sense of moral outrage will strength the positive relationship between message framing using (a) emotional appeal and (b) cognitive appeal and customers' evaluations of Gideon Bible in hotel rooms compared to neutral appeal.
- H5ii.* Customer's sense of moral outrage will strengthen the positive relationship between message framing using (a) emotional appeal and (b) cognitive appeal and customer's evaluations of CSR compared to neutral appeal.

## Methodology

The study included an experimental study design via a self-administered survey to analyze participants' perceptions of the placement of the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms based on deontic justice, CSR and message framing. The first part of the survey included an open-ended question allowing participants to discuss their views on the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms to prime participants to consider the Bible when answering the rest of the survey. Participants were then randomly placed in one of three different conditions. The conditions were based on the premise from Fazio, Powell and Herr (1983) that suggest additional information priming helps bring forth an individual's beliefs and attitudes towards an object.

The first condition served as a control and included no additional information. Since participants were already primed to consider the Gideon Bible, this allowed for a seamless transition into questions of justice and CSR. The two experimental conditions used message framing with cognitive and emotional appeals. The emotional frame provided an anecdotal story of an individual that was persuaded to not commit suicide because they had access to the Gideon Bible in their hotel room. The cognitive frame provided statistics and data about the number of people who were positively impacted by the Gideon Bible in their hotel rooms (Appendix A).

Suicide prevention was used as the positive outcome of the controversial CSR initiative (bibles in hotel rooms) because there has been anecdotal evidence that this occurs (French, 2019; Garrett, 2019) which leads to believability as a test subject for this experiment. While demographic characteristics can help to identify individuals at risk of committing suicide (Chen *et al.*, 2022) still not much is known about how hotels can have a role in preventing suicides. People generally believe suicide to be a tragedy, therefore suicide prevention aligns with people's worldviews, which has been found to be key in communicating CSR activities to consumers to prevent skepticism (Magee, 2022). Psychology studies have also mentioned the Bible as a tool to help patients at risk of suicide. For instance, Britton, Patrick, Wenzel and Williams (2011) observed how Bible verses can be included in a hope kit which is a collection of reasons for living reminders. From this perspective, hotels take on the role of intermediary of moral obligation towards society (the customer) through providing resources that may help prevent negative consequences like suicide. If a person believes the hotel has a moral

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responsibility to prevent guest from committing suicide, then individuals who are presented with information about the positive impacts of the Gideon Bible for that purpose should have a more positive view of the resource availability in hotel rooms.

All participants responded to measurement items measuring deontic justice using the scale from [Rupp and Bell \(2010\)](#): moral obligation (7 items), moral accountability (6 items) and moral outrage (4 items); CSR adapted from [Joo, Miller, and Fink \(2019\)](#) (3 items); and attitudes towards the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms (5 items plus 1 open-ended question). The attitude questions were adopted from [Fabrigar, Krosnick and MacDougall \(2005\)](#). These questions were designed to evaluate dimensions of the positive or negative nature of the Gideon Bible.

Finally, participants were asked a series of demographic questions including religion, ethnicity, education level, gender and income. Specifically, religion was used as a covariate because personal relationship with religion may impact guests' view of the Gideon Bible. Since the Bible is only a religious text for Christians (with the Old Testament being the basis of the Torah in Judaism), the view of members of other religions may be significantly different ([Burdine, 2014](#)). The religion categories included 5 different kinds of Christian divisions based on Pew Research designations, Judaism, Islam, all other religious affiliations and no religion. See [Appendix B](#) for the survey.

To test the hypotheses, a survey was conducted of 848 participants on Mturk. Participants were eliminated who failed to pass the attention check (114), abandoned the survey (79), or answered inappropriately on religious tourism, like copying and pasting the stimuli into the open-ended question (222). All analysis was run in SPSS 28. Specifically, Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test [H1](#) and [H2](#), while Process Macro Model 1 was used to test [H3](#), [H4](#) and [H5](#). A sentiment analysis was conducted to evaluate one qualitative question in the survey, aiming to better understand participants' feelings about the Gideon Bible. Sentiment analysis aims to assess textual responses, classifying them as either positive or negative in relation to a particular idea or experience ([Taboada, 2016](#)). While this approach is commonly employed to evaluate online reviews through technology and computer algorithms, as demonstrated in this study, manual review of content for coding as positive, negative, or neutral is also a viable method. In essence, sentiment analysis extracts essential sentiments from the text by leveraging contextual clues and analyzing the linguistic structure of the content ([Taboada, 2016](#)).

## Results

### *Pilot study*

The pilot study tested the authenticity and realism of the survey questions. [Appendix B](#) details the stimuli given in both studies. 300 participants were recruited from Mturk. They were: 49% male, 48% female and 3% preferred not to answer. 75% were Christian, 10% were Jewish, 5% were Muslim and 5% were Hindu, Buddhist, or Sikh. The participants were randomly assigned to one of three scenarios. At the end of the survey, they were asked about any concerns regarding the stimuli using a 7-point Likert scale for realism (highly unrealistic to highly realistic). No concerns were noted regarding the realism of the scenarios or the experimental design. A one-way ANOVA, with the dependent variable being the attitude towards the Gideon Bible, was run to determine if the three different scenarios (control, cognitive and emotional) elicited different responses. As expected, there was a significant difference between the three scenarios (Control  $F = 14.551, p < 0.001, M = 4.400$ , standard error (SE) = 1.036; Cognitive  $F = 21.630, p < 0.001, M = 5.300, SE = 0.976$ ; Emotional  $F = 20.200, p < 0.000, M = 6.500, SE = 0.936$ ).

### *Main study*

For the main study, we gathered 433 responses on Mturk. First, we examined the demographics of the sample population ([Table 1](#)). By religion, 80.2% were Christian, 11.1%

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	Frequency	Percent
<i>Religion</i>		
Christian-Protestant	102	23.6
Christian-Catholic	176	40.6
Christian-Mormon	71	16.4
Jewish	48	11.1
Muslim	10	2.3
Buddhist, Hindi, and Sikh	9	2.1
No religion	17	3.9
Total	433	100.0
<i>Race</i>		
White/European-American	346	79.9
Black/African-American	51	11.8
Hispanic	11	2.5
Asian/Asian-American	18	4.2
Native-American	1	0.2
Middle-Eastern	2	0.5
Hawaiian/Pacific-Islander	4	0.9
Total	433	100.0
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	225	52.0
Female	203	46.9
Transgender	3	0.7
Prefer not to say	2	0.5
Total	433	100.0
<i>Education</i>		
High school	34	7.9
Some college	57	13.2
2-year degree	36	8.3
4-year degree	228	52.7
Professional Degree	70	16.2
Doctorate	8	1.8
Total	433	100.0
<i>Income</i>		
>\$29,999	48	11.1
\$30,000–39,999	49	11.3
\$40,000–49,999	53	12.2
\$50,000–59,999	71	16.4
\$60,000–69,999	80	18.5
\$70,000–79,999	24	5.5
\$80,000–89,999	31	7.2
\$90,000–99,999	20	4.6
\$100,000–149,999	19	4.4
<\$150,000	38	8.8
Total	433	100.0

**Table 1.**  
Demographics

**Source(s):** Table by authors

were Jewish, 2.3% were Muslim, 9% were Buddhist, Hindi, or Sikh and 3.9% had no religion. According to [Pew Research \(2022\)](#), 64% of American identify as Christian. By race, the population was close to the U.S. Census data with 79.9% European American (76% for the general population) and 11.8% African-American (13% for the general population) but not as representational for the other ethnicities (see [Table 1](#)) ([U.S. Census, 2021](#)). By gender, 52%

were male, 46.9% were female, 0.7% were transgender and 0.5% preferred not to answer. 70.7% had a 4-year degree or higher. By income, 51% made \$59,999 or less. 95.4% stay in a hotel at least once a year.

A one-way ANOVA on the manipulation check indicated that the manipulation was successful. Participants who were given the emotional stimuli indicated that they had an emotional reaction to the passage they read compared to the cognitive group ( $M_{emotional\ stimuli} = 6.351$ , standard deviation (SD) = 0.771 vs  $M_{emotional\ stimuli} = 1.375$ , SD = 0.702;  $F = 46.556$   $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests the manipulation worked as intended.

This study used ANCOVA and Process (version 4.2) Model 1 to examine the results of an experimental study design which tested the impact of different stimuli on attitudes towards to Gideon Bible. First, assumptions tests were conducted. The results were generally linear and there were no outliers. Skewness and kurtosis were in the normal range with the skewness ranging from  $-0.718$  to  $-1.405$  and kurtosis ranging from 0.850 to 2.420 with the normal range for skewness at  $\pm 3$  and kurtosis at  $\pm 10$  (Brown & Greene, 2006). The Cronbach's Alpha for almost all variables were in the acceptable range above 0.70 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011): moral obligation (0.919), moral accountability (0.900), moral outrage (0.908) and CSR (0.892) (See Table 2). Attitudes toward the Gideon Bible had two reversed score items that presented low factor loadings (0.147 and 0.174 respectively), verified through principal component analysis. As the factor loadings were below the commonly acceptable threshold of 0.50 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2016) and were causing reliability issues, the items were deleted. After removing these two items, the scale reliability was 0.826. The data for the demographic information was dummy coded. As Christians represented the majority of respondents in this study (80.60%), they were dummy coded as 1 and all other religions as 0.

Tables 3 and 4 show the ANCOVA results. There were no significant differences between messages appeals and attitudes toward the Gideon Bible ( $F = 0.470$ ,  $p = 0.624$ , M control = 4.570, M emotional appeal = 4.740, M cognitive appeal = 4.660), rejecting H1. While analyzing CSR as an outcome variable, message framing had an overall significant effect on CSR ( $F = 3.710$ ,  $p < 0.050$ ). Specifically, the results of the Bonferroni comparisons show a significant difference between the control message and the cognitive appeal message

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Skewness Statistic	SE	Kurtosis Statistic	SE
Moral obligation	0.919	-1.334	0.117	2.330	0.234
Moral accountability	0.900	-0.866	0.117	1.059	0.234
Moral outrage	0.908	-1.405	0.117	2.420	0.234
CSR	0.892	-0.718	0.117	0.850	0.234
Attitude	0.826	-0.564	0.117	0.072	0.234

Source(s): Table by authors

**Table 2.**  
Assumption's testing

Source	Sum of squares	F	Significance	Partial eta squared
Message framing	1.795	0.472	0.624	0.002
Religion	203.197	106.936	<0.001	0.200
Error	815.173			
Total	10409.889			

Note(s): R-squared = 0.201

Source(s): Table by authors

**Table 3.**  
ANCOVA results  
dependent variable  
attitude

( $p < 0.050$ ), with cognitive appeal message having a significantly higher effect on CSR perceptions ( $M = 5.030$ ,  $SD = 1.360$ ) than the control message ( $M = 4.690$ ,  $SD = 1.480$ ), in support of H2b. Christianity was also found to significantly influence CSR perceptions ( $F = 116.614$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As no other demographic variable was found to have an effect on the outcome variables, they were excluded from further analysis.

To test hypotheses 3, 4 and 5 Process Model 1 was used. Between all three senses of deontic justice, only moral outrage was found to be a significant moderator between message framing, attitudes toward the Gideon Bible and CSR. Hypotheses 3ia ( $b = 0.252$ ,  $p = 0.200$ ), 3ib ( $b = 0.043$ ,  $p = 0.824$ ), 3iia ( $b = 0.129$ ,  $p = 0.468$ ), 3iib ( $b = 0.016$ ,  $p = 0.927$ ), 4ia ( $b = 0.333$ ,  $p = 0.075$ ), 4ib ( $b = 0.185$ ,  $p = 0.303$ ), 4iia ( $b = 0.332$ ,  $p = 0.075$ ) and 4iib ( $b = 0.104$ ,  $p = 0.516$ ) were refuted (see Table 5 for detailed results). However, when customer's sense of moral outrage was high (+1SD), moral outrage strengthened the relationship between emotional appeal ( $b = 0.735$ , [0.236, 1.234]) and attitudes toward the Gideon Bible ( $R^2 = 0.042$ ), in support of hypothesis 5ia. The overall model was also significant ( $F = 3.769$ ,  $p < 0.010$ ). Despite

**Table 4.**  
ANCOVA results  
dependent  
variable CSR

Source	Sum of squares	F	Significance	Partial eta squared
Message framing	11.199	3.710	0.025	0.017
Religion	175.993	116.614	<0.001	0.214
Error	647.445			
Total	11275.667			

**Note(s):** R-squared = 0.224

**Source(s):** Table by authors

**Table 5.**  
Conditional direct  
effects of message  
framing on attitudes  
and CSR at different  
levels of moderator

Hypothesis	Variables	Moderator	Effects	SE	LLCI 95%	ULCI 95%
H3ia	EA × MO → AttB		0.252	0.196	-0.134	0.639
H3ib	CA × MO → AttB		0.043	0.194	-0.338	0.424
H3iia	EA × MO → CSR		0.129	0.177	-0.220	0.478
H3iib	CA × MO → CSR		0.016	0.175	-0.328	0.360
H4ia	EA × MA → AttB		0.333	0.186	-0.033	0.700
H4ib	CA × MA → AttB		0.185	0.180	-0.168	0.539
H4iia	EA × MA → CSR		0.332	0.166	-0.005	0.660
H4iib	CA × MA → CSR		0.104	0.160	-0.211	0.420
H5ia	EA × MOt → AttB	-1.127 (-1SD)	-0.390	0.252	-0.886	0.105
		0.000 (mean)	0.172	0.179	-0.180	0.525
		1.127 (+1SD)	0.735	0.253	0.236	1.234
H5ib	CA × MOt → AttB	-1.127 (-1SD)	-0.178	0.247	-0.665	0.308
		0.000 (mean)	0.093	0.176	-0.253	0.440
		1.127 (+1SD)	0.366	0.247	-0.120	0.852
H5iia	EA × MOt → CSR	-1.127 (-1SD)	-0.071	0.225	-0.515	0.372
		0.000 (mean)	0.319	0.160	0.013	0.635
		1.127 (+1SD)	0.710	0.227	0.263	1.157
H5iib	EA × MOt → CSR	-1.127 (-1SD)	0.111	0.221	-0.324	0.548
		0.000 (mean)	0.328	0.158	0.017	0.639
		1.127 (+1SD)	0.544	0.221	0.108	0.980

**Note(s):** Significant paths highlighted. EA, emotional appeal; MO, moral obligation;

AttB, attitudes toward the Gideon Bible; CA, cognitive appeal; CSR, customers evaluations of CSR; MA, moral accountability; MOt, moral outrage

**Source(s):** Table by authors

obtaining low R-squared values, the significance of individual predictors and overall model fit should be evaluated alongside other diagnostic measures, supported by methodological and statistical justifications discussed in the literature (Hair, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). In addition, when customer's sense of moral outrage was at the mean level and high, it also strengthened the relationship between emotional appeal (mean  $b = 0.319$ , [0.003, 0.635]; +1SD  $b = 0.710$ , [0.263, 1.157]) and cognitive appeal (mean  $b = 0.328$ , [0.017, 0.639]; +1SD  $b = 0.544$ , [0.108, 0.980]) and evaluations of CSR ( $R^2 = 0.060$ ), in support of hypothesis 5iia and 5iib. This overall model was also significant ( $F = 5.448$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

At the end of the survey, there was a qualitative question that asked about participants feelings about the Gideon Bible. The sentiments were coded as positive, negative, or neutral and then analyzed by the type of stimulation they received as seen in Table 6. An example of a negative comment was, "It is a bizarre relic of a puritanical past and needs to be done away with. I personally find it repulsive." An example of a neutral responses was, "I'm ambivalent about this." Positive responses were both supporting the CSR mission and the religion like: "Now that I know why it is in hotel rooms, I absolutely love it! I had no idea it was for suicide prevention. Makes a lot of sense why they would have it in the room. I really had no clue why it was there, but think they should always be in the room as an option of comfort!" Table 5 details the breakdown. Positive responses were almost equal between the control and cognitive groups while they were slightly higher for the emotional group. However, the number of negative responses was reduced by more than 50% between the control group and both the cognitive and emotional groups.

## Discussion

While the analyses show no significant differences in attitudes toward the Gideon Bible based on message appeals, for CSR perceptions, message framing had a significant impact, particularly the cognitive appeal message compared to the control message. This supports the foundational work on CSR that purports that a business needs to be socially responsible to exist (Moir, 2001). Christianity significantly influenced CSR perceptions, while other demographics had no effect. The participants who identified as a member of one of the Christian religions were more likely to have a favorable view of the Gideon Bible. While having the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms can be seen as a controversial CSR practice, this study's results demonstrate the benefits of educating customers on potentially controversial organizational practices to mitigate adverse reactions and change attitudes.

Among deontic justice senses, only moral outrage significantly moderated the relationships between message framing, attitudes toward the Gideon Bible and CSR. When moral outrage was high, it strengthened the link between emotional appeal and attitudes toward the Gideon Bible and between emotional/cognitive appeal and CSR perceptions. Research in neuroscience suggests that different parts of the brain are activated when responding to cognitive or emotional stimuli designed to create an empathic response (Oliver, Vieira, Neufeld, Dziobek, & Mitchell, 2018). This supports previous literature related

Count of sentiment	Control	Cognitive	Emotional	Total
Positive	98	99	104	301
Negative	28	11	13	52
Neutral	20	29	33	82
Grand total	146	139	150	435

Source(s): Table by authors

**Table 6.**  
Sentiment analysis by  
treatment

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to deontic justice and consumer behavior which found that deontic justice was an appropriate framework for understanding sustainable consumption (Ibrahim & Al-Ajlouni, 2018).

The study also included a qualitative question about participants' feelings toward the Gideon Bible. While positive responses were similar between control and cognitive groups and slightly higher for the emotional group, negative responses decreased over 50% from control to cognitive and emotional groups. This is a significant finding as it suggests that the emotional and cognitive pulls of understanding that the Gideon Bible prevented someone from suicide is more important than one's personal religious views and therefore has implications for promoting other controversial social welfare and sustainability initiatives.

### Conclusion

This study sought to assess hotel guests' perceptions of the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms and to examine effective messaging strategies to encourage consumers to accept controversial CSR initiatives. We used the theory of deontic justice, focusing on moral obligation, moral accountability and moral outrage to measure the impacts of messaging on consumer perceptions of the morality of the Gideon Bible in hotels and its relation to controversial CSR initiatives. We also examined the impact of religious affiliation on the perceptions of CSR and attitudes towards the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms.

Results showed that religion was a major determinant of attitude towards the Gideon Bible, but the sentiment analysis also revealed that negative perceptions can be mitigated through message framing via emotional and cognitive appeals. Additionally, the cognitive appeal did impact CSR perceptions as did identifying as Christian. This study underscores the benefits of educating customers about potentially controversial organizational practices to mitigate negative reactions and change attitudes, even in cases of controversial CSR practices.

Regarding deontic justice, moral outrage emerged as the significant moderator for the relationships between message framing, attitudes toward the Gideon Bible and CSR. When moral outrage was high, it strengthened the connections between emotional appeal and attitudes toward the Gideon Bible, as well as between emotional/cognitive appeal and CSR perceptions.

### *Practical implications*

With the growing trend of removing the Gideon Bible from hotel rooms (Sampson, 2020), hotels that feel strongly about the presence of the item in their rooms should reexamine their policies and consider including a description of its potential value. One of reasons hotels may be reluctant to do this is due to the increasing secular attitudes of Americans (Shimron, 2021). However, the results of this paper demonstrate that by providing additional information using emotional or cognitive appeals, hotels may utilize consumer preferences for responsible organizations to offer bibles (or other texts) to promote CSR initiatives. As Gideon Bibles are provided to hotels for free, this form of CSR financially costs the hotel nothing and is a sustainable practice that could potentially benefit society at large. The key is to inform consumers and employees of the benefits of having the bible present in rooms to positively influence perceptions and acceptance either in the guest room, on the website, or through a media campaign.

Best Western currently has a description of the Gideon Bible on their website which describes the history of the Gideon Society and describes antidotal stories related to people leaving money in Bibles for other to find (Western, 2023). However, we would encourage Best Western to instead describe the impact that Bibles have on suicide prevention or other CSR initiatives to lead to wider acceptance and to describe any other efforts the chain takes to

prevent suicide in hotels rooms. When Marriott launched their campaign against human trafficking, they released press releases and had a social media campaign to increase awareness (Airoldi, 2021). A similar strategy could be undertaken to explain this form of CSR. There might also be a need to provide religious texts from other religions in the hotel rooms. Many of the qualitative responses indicated that there was a desire to have a more inclusive selection, however to the best knowledge of the authors the Gideon Society is the only society that provides free religious texts. Hotels could either partner with other religious organizations to see if they are also willing to provide complimentary religious texts or they could better educate guests as to the fact that the Gideon Bible is provided free of charge (Appendix C).

Finally, based upon the preponderance of evidence from other disciplines related to the prevalence of suicide in hotel rooms (Shimron, 2021), we would encourage hotels to take specific, measurable actions to help people considering suicide. Just as many airports now display signs in women's restrooms to help those who are trapped in human trafficking (Garnett, Curtin, & Stone, 2022), we would encourage hotels to display helpful information for those who are suicidal. The Gideon Bible may be a first step in suicide prevention and awareness in hotel rooms, and by explaining its purpose, this may indeed encourage people to find help. However, hotel chains are encouraged to partner with mental health professionals to provide training to their staff and information for their guests to aid with suicide prevention.

#### *Theoretical implications*

The application of deontic justice theory to consumer behavior in hospitality has been limited, with previous studies in hospitality focusing on the impacts of deontic justice on consumers' perceptions of mistreatment of hospitality employees (e.g. Jiang, Shum, Min, & Ding, 2023). The results of this study extended the application of deontic justice theory to consumer behavior for hotel guests by examining its impact on their perception of CSR. This supports previous research which found that consumers respond with moral outrage when there is a perceived injustice (e.g. child labor) and then support companies that engage in ethical behavior (Yang, 2014). Therefore, the results of this study indicate that hotels which communicate (1) that the Gideon Bible is a method of suicide prevention and (2) communicate it with an emotional appeal, are more likely to attract consumers than hotels who do not engage in this behavior. For this study, deontic justice feelings were aroused (especially the sense of moral outrage), and it impacted consumers from different religious affiliations and attitudes. This supports previous hospitality research which found that an emotional brand attachment was more likely to result in a positive view of a brand's CSR activities (Hur, Moon, & Kim, 2020).

This research is the first to the knowledge of the authors to explore the concept of the Gideon Bible as a form of controversial CSR. It extends the understanding of CSR activities in hospitality to include suicide prevention. While previous research has found that suicide prevention is an expected form of CSR in technology (Scherr, Haim, & Arendt, 2019) and for railroad companies (Van der Veer & Nijhuis, 2017), this study is among the first to determine how to best communicate suicide prevention efforts in hotels. For hotels, typical CSR activities at hotels like towel reuse or community volunteering (Mohammed & Al-Swidi, 2019), yet these findings indicate that consumers view the responsibility of organizations to include activities wholly unrelated to the organization's core purpose. If an organization can successfully provide a service to society, then it has an obligation to do so. This extends the concept of controversial CSR beyond going along with popular social movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual and more (LGBTQ+) to examining problematic guest behaviors and providing help for those guests regardless of the popularity of the solution.

*Limitations and future studies*

No study is without limitation. First, while this study tested different religious groups, it did not have equal distribution amongst these groups; we were not able to differentiate between different branches of Judaism or Islam. Future researchers can concentrate on a more equal distribution of Christian vs Non-Christians and determine if there is a difference in attitudes based on different branches of those religions. We also did not differentiate between the level of religious adherence; future researchers could determine if the levels of religious adherence influence attitudes towards the Gideon Bible. This study did not measure the mental health of the participants or if they had experience with a loved one committing suicide. These factors could also be measured by future researchers. All the participants in this study were U.S.-based; a cross-cultural study might yield different results. Finally, while the Gideon Bible may be an effective way to prevent suicide in hotel rooms, future researchers could explore other interventions like staff training or messages related to the new suicide prevention hotline.

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## Appendix

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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Dr Elizabeth A. Whalen is currently Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator for Tourism and Hospitality Management at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Houston Conrad N. Hilton College in 2018, specializing in consumer behavior marketing, strategic management and lodging operations. With over a decade of experience in higher education, Elizabeth has also held key management roles in the restaurant and hotel industries. Notably, she served as the Executive Director of the AH&LA Information Research Center and as the Program Director for the Hilton College's Executive Master's Program of Hospitality Management at the University of Houston. Elizabeth's research interests include decision making, risk perceptions and online communities, reflecting her commitment to advancing knowledge in the field. Elizabeth A. Whalen is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [elizabeth.whalen@mtsu.edu](mailto:elizabeth.whalen@mtsu.edu)

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