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### When Organizational Advocacy and Public Advocacy Intersect in CSR: Examining Stage of Partnership and Activism in CSR Partnerships

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#### Abstract

CSR partnerships have evolved and taken various forms as companies and nonprofit organizations work toward creating societal change for the public good. This study examined public relations advocacy in the context of CSR communication through a 2 x 2 online experiment with a sample of 240 participants. Specifically, this study examined interactions between CSR fit, stage of partnership, and individuals' activism levels on individuals' attitude toward a company, a nonprofit, and skepticism levels toward the CSR partnership. High fit and philanthropic stage of partnership became significant factors on attitude toward the company. Individuals' activism levels had a positive interaction with stage of partnership in predicting skepticism toward the partnership. Theoretical implications and practical applications for public interest communications are discussed.

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## Introduction

As the public's expectations of businesses and nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are fundamentally changing, many aspects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) partnerships between companies and organizations are taking new forms (The Aspen Institute, 2013). The Aspen Institute (2002) reports that corporate involvement in public problem solving through CSR partnerships has broadened and deepened in both content and form. For example, the Coca-Cola Company has been working on community water projects as a part of water stewardship efforts in 71 countries

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by collaborating with various NPOs (The Coca-Cola Company, 2017). The company aims to provide sustainable water access around the world, and its partnership efforts are intended to inspire advocacy efforts in support of clean water initiatives around the globe (The Coca-Cola Company, 2017). However, although both the company and the NPO expect their socially responsible efforts to yield positive effects to society as well as the respective entities, such favorable outcomes are not always commonplace. For example, critics of Coca-Cola's water stewardship efforts asserted that the highly integrative partnership was simply used to deflect criticism from environmental destruction the company has caused (Ward, 2014), while supporters argued in favor of Coca-Cola's efforts, citing the partnership as a model example of best practices in developing effective CSR partnerships (Confino, 2014).

Accordingly, examples such as this one challenge organizations as they strive to engage in and communicate about socially responsible efforts and cause scholars to question the effectiveness of CSR partnership outcomes (Jamali & Keshishian, 2009). Although some research has highlighted the beneficial effects of CSR partnerships for both entities (Baur & Schmitz, 2012), other studies have identified negative impacts that the partnership may bring (Lee & Rim, 2016). In fact, public reactions to CSR partnerships have sometimes been negative, with consumers resisting rather than embracing companies' efforts to inspire action. It has been found that the public often questions a company's true intentions (Y.-J. Kim & Lee, 2009), perceiving the CSR partnership as an action taken for the company's own interests (Shim, Chung, & Kim, 2017) and a violation of the core mission of the NPO (Herlin, 2015; Waters & Ott, 2014), leading to enhanced levels of skepticism toward the company, the NPO, and the partnership altogether.

Despite the growing body of literature that has supported the general notion that engaging in CSR efforts will lead to positive outcomes (Aguinis & Glavas, 2017; Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016; Pérez, 2015), the public's growing demands and expectations of companies' CSR efforts have blurred the lines between the concept of doing good and how a company's *approach* to doing good can impact public evaluation of their advocacy-related efforts. Furthermore, although research has widely examined the impact of CSR communication efforts in the corporate sector, limited research has examined aspects of the CSR partnership (the company, the NPO, and the CSR effort) or the factors that may influence the public's perception in determining the effectiveness of the CSR partnership's efforts (Rim, Yang, & Lee, 2016).

This study examines aspects of a CSR partnership including the impact of perceived congruence of the company-NPO partnership (CSR fit) and how different types of CSR partnerships (stage of partnership) that yield different company-NPO engagement levels (e.g., philanthropic partnership vs. integrative partnership) interact. This study also examines how the interaction between stage of partnership and individuals' activism level influence CSR perceptions. Specifically, this study is novel in its approach to examining stage of partnership and activism levels as potential factors that may influence CSR perceptions. As one of the ultimate goals of CSR partnerships is to create a societal value for public good, the form of

partnership and individuals' activism may be imperative determinants to influence publics' decisions on effectiveness of CSR partnership.

Furthermore, although a plethora of studies has examined the public's perceptions of the effectiveness of CSR in the corporate sector (Bachmann & Inghoff, 2016; Kim, 2014; Kim & Yang, 2009; Liston-Heyes & Liu, 2013), this study explores individuals' perceptions of both the company and the NPO in the CSR partnership. With the growth of consumer activism and expectations for both companies and NPO entities, understanding the relationship between the public's advocacy and its reaction to CSR partnerships will provide meaningful insights into CSR partnership strategies for both companies and NPOs.

## Literature review

### Activism and CSR

CSR is defined as socially responsible actions taken by a company to contribute to societal good (Chandler & Werther, 2014). With the growth of CSR, the advent of activists who promote their causes and ethical business practices has generated significant changes in companies' efforts to do societal good (Doh & Guay, 2006; Doh & Teegen, 2003). Initially, CSR efforts were mostly seen as charitable contributions made by well-off individuals (Clark, 2000). However, as demands from society increased, a more modern model of CSR has emerged with the expectation that businesses have a responsibility to respond to needs and pressures from society (Clark, 2000).

Activism is an important part of modern social and political components in society (Cameron, Campo, & Brossard, 2003). Activists demand ultimate social change, not just modification (Tarrow, 2011). Activism is largely discussed in social movements and politics by sociologists and political scientists. In public relations, J.E. Grunig and L.A. Grunig (1997) stated that the level of activism in a society influences the development of public relations strategy. Therefore, it is argued that a society with a high degree of activism requires more strategic public relations practices (Sriramesh, 2006).

In the context of CSR, activists influence companies' practices and socially responsible initiatives (de Bakker & Den Hond, 2008). For example, Kovacs (2006) explored how activists advance CSR by targeting broadcasting companies in the United Kingdom. The author found that activist groups maintain a strategic relationship with companies and constantly offer useful feedback based on public needs. de Bakker and Den Hond (2008) examined how activists' different tactics influence company policies. The authors discussed four different types of tactics: shareholder activism, political consumerism, social alliances, and alternative business systems (de Bakker & Den Hond, 2008). Based on these various tactics by activist groups, corporations have responded to these societal demands from activist groups through various actions such as installing CSR departments, communicating constantly with activist groups, and reporting on their social performances.

In addition, the role the general public plays in implementing CSR becomes an important part when companies are involved in wrongdoing. Kang and Hustvedt (2014) indicated that consumers have the right and power to affect companies' business in several capacities. For example, social movements have put pressure on companies through boycotts and other protesting behaviors (Klein, Smith, & John, 2004). On the other hand, activist behaviors have also emerged as a result of CSR activities as an effort to enact change. Considering that the general public can turn into activists depending on their social causes and needs (J.E. Grunig, 2000), individuals' activism levels can be one of the important determinants to influence the public's perception of CSR activities and how these activities are communicated.

### Company-NPO partnerships

Literature that has examined company-NPO partnerships has focused on building the conceptual framework by examining the partnership through case studies (Arenas, Sanchez, & Murphy, 2013; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; Jamali & Keshishian, 2009) and through exploring the public's perception and some determinants to evaluate a CSR partnership (N. Kim, Sung, & Lee, 2012; Nan & Heo, 2007; Rim et al., 2016). However, several components that can shape public perceptions of a CSR partnership have not received much scholarly attention (Hyllegard, Yan, Ogle, & Attmann, 2010).

Although the primary goal of a company-NPO partnership is to create positive social change, both the company and NPO in the partnership can potentially benefit from the alliance, as scholars have noted (Bies, Bartunek, Fort, & Zald, 2007). For the NPO, the alliance creates new financial sources, awareness of the NPO brand, and involvement for its social causes (Bigné-Alcañiz, Currás-Pérez, Ruiz-Mafé, & Sanz-Blas, 2010). Likewise, companies often benefit from the association with the NPO's prosocial image for consumers to perceive less skepticism and have a more favorable attitude toward the company (Oliver, 1990). However, there are many notable factors that can impact the perceived effectiveness of the company-NPO partnership including the perceived fit of the company-NPO partnership (CSR fit) and the type of partnership formed.

### CSR fit

CSR fit considers the degree of compatibility between the company and the NPO, which is often referred to as the cause (Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright, 2004). Berger et al. (2004) noted that high company-cause fit contributes to the success of a company-NPO alliance. That is, people are more likely to have positive evaluations about a company's CSR efforts when they feel that the company and the cause are congruent. Company-cause fit is an important factor not only in initiating the partnership arrangement (Tao & Ferguson, 2015), but also in shaping the public's reaction to the CSR activities and how they are communicated. In CSR literature,

company-cause fit has been examined in various ways to determine the effectiveness of CSR communication efforts.

Although previous literature found that high fit results in more positive reactions overall (Aksak, Ferguson, & Duman, 2015; Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006; Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004), recent studies in CSR literature have suggested that high fit does not always lead to positive outcomes (Tao & Ferguson, 2015). For example, Y.S. Kim and Choi (2012) found that consumers perceive a tobacco company to be more sincere when the company engages in a low-fit cause rather than a high-fit cause. Tao and Ferguson (2015) argued that high-fit partnerships do not outperform low-fit causes when a company has an existing positive reputation. Previous studies also have found that the impact of fit can change depending on external factors and individuals' characteristics (Nan & Heo, 2007; Vock, Van Dolen, & Kolk, 2013). Thus, arguments about CSR fit and other corresponding factors that shape public perceptions have been varied and require further investigation to add further insight into this area of research.

### Stage of partnership

As the number of collaborations between a company and a NPO are increasing, the various forms each partnership takes have become strategically diverse. Austin (2000) outlined three stages of a company-NPO partnership: philanthropic, transactional, and integrative. Austin (2000) argues that as collaboration is strengthened from the philanthropic to the integrative stage, the levels of engagement, interaction, and mission importance are increased (see Table 1).

Table 1. Collaboration Continuum

Relationship Stage	Philanthropic	Transactional	Integrative
Level of engagement	Low	→→→→→→→→→→→→	High
Importance to mission	Peripheral	→→→→→→→→→→→→	Strategic
Magnitude of resources	Small	→→→→→→→→→→→→	Big
Scope of activities	Narrow	→→→→→→→→→→→→	Broad
Interaction level	Infrequent	→→→→→→→→→→→→	Intensive
Managerial complexity	Simple	→→→→→→→→→→→→	Complex
Strategic value	Modest	→→→→→→→→→→→→	Major

Source: Austin, 2000

More specifically, in the philanthropic stage, the NPO gains a traditional form of a company donation (Austin, 2000). The transactional stage indicates a specific alliance such as a cause-related marketing campaign or sponsorship (Austin, 2000; Berger et al., 2004; Jamali & Keshishian, 2009). Finally, for a partnership in the integrative stage, partner organizations are

combined with one another, which indicates that the NPO commits itself to a certain company as part of a long-term alliance (Austin, 2000; Herlin, 2015).

Although Austin (2000) stated that the collaboration continuum does not necessarily indicate that one stage is better than another, some scholars argue that the integrative stage is the most advanced, completely developed stage of partnership (Berger et al., 2004; Jamali & Keshishian, 2009). However, more integrative levels of partnership can bring a legitimacy risk to the NPO while the threat to legitimacy is minimized in a lower-level partnership (Herlin, 2015). In the philanthropic stage, each party creates sole values rather than co-formation values (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b). Although involvement in the partnership from each party is relatively limited, both the company and the NPO can create distinctive values from one another: funds (company) and social service (NPO) (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b). Herlin (2015) argued that people are more likely to have a positive attitude toward a philanthropic partnership than an integrative partnership in general because integrative partnership was regarded as commercialization of the NPO. In the integrative partnership stage, people considered that the core values of the NPO can be threatened by endorsing the NPO's brand values to specific companies. Furthermore, Waters and Ott (2014) found that NPO leaders have concerns that applying a CSR label to their efforts to do good is a threat to their mission and could lead to the loss of support from donors and volunteers.

Although there have been contrasting views on the effect of stage of partnership, few studies to date have examined the public's reaction toward different partnership stages. Because many studies (Al-Dmour, Al-Madani, Alansari, Tarhini, & Al-Dmour, 2016; Howie, Yang, Vitell, Bush, & Vorhies, 2018; Nan & Heo, 2007; Sheikh & Beise-Zee, 2011) already have explored the public's perception of transactional partnership as a form of cause-related marketing, this study attempts to explore the effects of stage of partnership through a comparison of the two different levels (philanthropic vs. integrative stages).

### CSR fit and stage of partnership

Previous studies have found that a high-fit CSR partnership leads to more altruistic attributions and higher firm credibility (Rifon et al., 2004). Nan & Heo (2007) noted that a positive effect of company-cause fit appears when consumers are high in brand consciousness. Although research has found varying information about the impact of CSR fit (de Jong & van der Meer, 2017), studies also have argued that CSR fit is effective with conditional effects (Chen, Su, & He, 2014; Menon & Kahn, 2003; Nan & Heo, 2007). Therefore, this study examines the interaction between CSR fit and stage of partnership on attitude toward the company, attitude toward the NPO, and skepticism toward the partnership. Based on arguments from previous literature, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

*H1: CSR fit (high vs. low) and stage of partnership (philanthropic vs. integrative) will generate different interaction effects in attitude toward the company (H1a), attitude toward the NPO (H1b), and skepticism toward the partnership (H1c).*

### The moderating role of activism levels

With regard to consumers' evaluations of CSR partnerships and activities, Coombs and Holladay (2013) argued that socially responsible individuals are more inclined to focus on CSR claims. Individuals with different activism levels are likely to process information differently regarding aspects of a CSR partnership. Applying arguments from J.E. Grunig's (1997) situational theory and J.-N. Kim and J.E. Grunig's (2011) situational theory of problem solving, the activist public is more inclined to focus on the given information regarding CSR issues such as the stage of partnership, actions by company, and actions by the NPO based on the public's knowledge and subjective judgment. According to J.E. Grunig's (1997) arguments, an active public is more likely to think that business needs to be involved with socially responsible activities, and this public will be more likely to seek and use CSR information when evaluating a company.

Verplanken and Holland (2002) argued that central values play an imperative role in individuals' information processing and behaviors. When confronting situations, individuals' central values are activated and this activation leads to value-congruent behavior (Verplanken & Holland, 2002). Activism is the value orientation based on altruism (Borojevic, Petrovic, & Vuk, 2014). Therefore, when individuals are more involved with social causes, it is more likely that they will perceive CSR messages actively (Berger, Cunningham, & Kozinets, 1999; Roy & Cornwell, 2004).

In this regard, individuals with high activism levels are more likely to process information in a way that focuses on the altruistic aspects of a CSR message and how message content fits into their value orientation. Because individuals with high activism levels have higher social justice values than others (Torres-Harding, Siers, & Olson, 2012), it makes sense that they are more concerned with the altruistic nature of CSR messages than the assessment of the level of fit between the company and the cause. Although CSR fit may be operationalized for the effectiveness of CSR, fit does not necessarily lead to assessment toward the entities or partnership for individuals with altruistic motives (Bigné-Alcañiz, Currás-Pérez, & Sánchez-García, 2009). Therefore, with specific regard to interaction between fit and individuals' activism level, active publics are more likely to focus on altruistic messages from CSR rather than the type of CSR fit.

However, a high level of activism is more likely to influence the relationship between stage of partnership and evaluation of the company, NPO, and the partnership. Although the inactive public is less likely to demonstrate high levels of knowledge, involvement, and focus on causes (Hallahan, 2000), an activist public is more likely to have high levels of information-seeking behaviors based on high levels of knowledge, involvement, and orientation toward the cause (Hallahan, 2000; Kim & Ni, 2010). This situation may lead the activist public to focus more on companies' philanthropic actions and NPOs' core values. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

*H2*: There is an interaction effect between stage of partnership and individuals' activism levels on attitude toward the company (H2a), attitude toward the NPO (H2b), and skepticism toward the partnership (H2c).

## Method

This study employed a between-subjects factorial online experiment in which 240 participants were randomly assigned into a 2 (CSR fit: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (stage of partnership: philanthropic vs. integrative) experimental design. To eliminate bias potentially caused by participants' existing knowledge and attitudes toward a known company and NPO, a fictitious company and NPO were created for stimuli creation.

### Participants and procedures

Participants ( $N = 240$ ) were recruited through Qualtrics, Inc., which is a panel management service. Specifically, a quota sampling method for gender (50/50 gender split) and age groups (equal representation in four groups: 18-24, 25-44, 45-65, and over 65) was employed to include a nationally representative sample of the U.S. population. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (high fit  $\times$  philanthropic; low fit  $\times$  philanthropic; high fit  $\times$  integrative; low fit  $\times$  integrative). After completing a consent form, which had been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researchers' university, participants completed a social justice measure to determine their activism level. Subsequently, they read one of four media releases per their assigned condition. Then, they were asked to answer questions that measured their attitude toward the company, attitude toward the NPO, and skepticism toward the partnership. They also answered questions to determine the effectiveness of the manipulation checks. A pretest was conducted using Qualtrics panels ( $N = 60$ ) to test manipulation, randomization, wording, survey flow, and response time. Based on response completion time and pretest completion time results, participants who completed the survey in under five minutes were removed from the final sample as a quality control check. Participants from the pretest were not included in the final sample.

Of the 240 participants in the final dataset, 123 (51.3 %) were male while 117 were female (48.8%). The average age of the participants was 45 years ( $SD = 20.29$ ). More than two-thirds of the participants self-identified as White ( $n = 195$ , 81.3%), while 23 participants self-identified as Black or African American (9.6%), 7 as Asian (2.9%), and 1 as Native American (0.4%) and Native Hawaiian (0.4%). "Other" was chosen by 13 participants (5.4%).

## Selection of company/NPO

Prior to conducting the experiment, a pretest was employed to select a fictitious company and fictitious NPO employing a high-fit partnership and cause and low-fit partnership and cause. Twenty-three participants were asked to evaluate their perceived fit between the given companies and nonprofit categories. Subjects were exposed to eight different types of company-NPO partnerships and were asked to rate their perceptions of CSR fit between the different types of companies and causes. Five questions using a 5-point semantic differential scale were used to measure CSR fit (bad fit/good fit, not compatible/compatible, not consistent/consistent, not congruent/congruent, does not make sense/makes sense) to determine what type of company-cause partnership should be included for both fit conditions in this study. For the high-fit condition, the partnership between a food company and an agriculture research organization was selected ( $M = 4.46$ ) and a partnership between a beverage company and an environmental organization was selected for the low-fit partnership ( $M = 2.69$ ). The results of the repeated measures analyses showed that the difference between the evaluations of the high-fit selection and the low-fit selection was statistically significant ( $F(7, 16) = 12.15, p < .001$ ).

## Independent variables/stimulus material

### Manipulation of CSR fit and stage of partnership

Four mock-up media releases were constructed. As indicated above, the study employed fictitious companies and NPOs. CSR fit was manipulated on two levels: high fit and low fit. The stage of partnership was also manipulated on two levels: philanthropic and integrative. The stimulus was about a CSR partnership involvement emphasizing either a donation that was made from a company to the NPO (philanthropic stage) or the development of a long-term task force (integrative stage) between the company and the cause. Participants also read information about the fictitious companies and NPOs at the end of media releases. The stimuli were identical with the exception of the manipulated factors. For example, word length was consistent across all four versions of the media release, and the only main difference was the change in company-NPO names and the descriptions of the two different types of partnerships developed (see Appendix).

## Dependent variables

### Attitude toward the NPO

Attitude toward the nonprofit was comprised of four items adopted from Rim and Song (2013) and Park, Hitchon, and Yun (2004), and included “bad-good,” “unfavorable-favorable,” “unpleasant-pleasant,” and “committed to an unimportant cause-committed to an important cause.” An index was created by averaging the items ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

### Skepticism toward the CSR partnership

Skepticism toward the partnership was measured with six items adopted from Rifon, Choi, Trimble, and Li (2004) and Rim and Kim (2016) using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree). Items such as, “This company/organization partnership is doing this CSR activity because they truly care about the public” and “I think this company/organization’s CSR partnership will make a better society” were included. An index was created by averaging the items ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

### Moderating variables

#### Activism Levels

A total of 24 items on a 7-point Likert-type scale adapted from the social justice scales developed by Torres-Harding et al. (2012) was used to measure individuals’ level of activism. This scale includes 11 social justice attitude questions, five social justice perceived behavioral control questions, four social justice subjective norms, and four social justice behavioral intentions questions such as, “It is important to respect and appreciate people’s diverse social identities” and “I am certain that if I try, I can have a positive impact on my community.” An index was created by averaging the items ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

## Results

### Manipulation check items

For the manipulation of CSR fit, one single measure was used to check if participants were able to identify the fit they viewed. The item asked participants to answer the following question: “I just read a media release about a partnership between which company and organization?” Participants were given a choice of three answers: A food company (Wilson) and an agricultural research organization (HELP), a beverage company (Viva Corp.) and a children’s hospital (William Children’s Hospital), or none of the above. A crosstabs analysis indicated significant differences in how participants identified the type of company-NPO combination they viewed,  $\chi^2(6, N=240) = 206.30, p < .001$ .

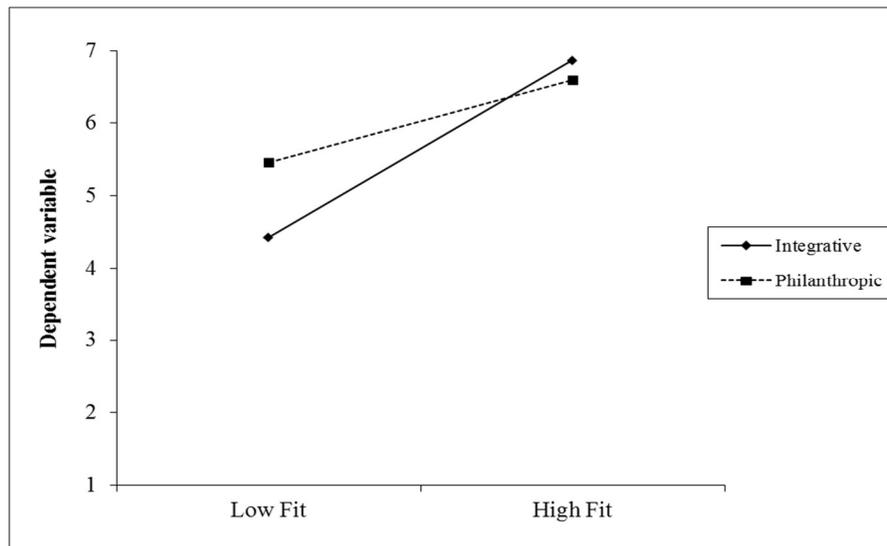
For the manipulation of stage of partnership, one single-item measure was used to check if participants were able to identify the stage of partnership. The item asked participants to answer the following question: “The media release I just read included information about” and three answer options were provided: A company announcing its commitment to make a donation to an organization, a company and organization announcing plans to create a taskforce for a new collaborative initiative, and none of the above. A crosstabs analysis revealed significant

differences in how participants identified the stage of partnership they viewed,  $\chi^2(6, N=240) = 131.90, p < .001$ . Thus, both manipulations were successful.

### Hypothesis tests

A series of two-way ANOVAs were conducted to test the first hypothesis (see Table 2). H1a posited that CSR fit (high vs. low) and stage of partnership (philanthropic vs. integrative) will generate different interaction effects in attitude toward the company. To test this prediction, a two-way factorial ANOVA of CSR fit (high vs. low) and stage of partnership (philanthropic vs. integrative) was conducted on attitudes toward the company. Findings from the analysis indicated there was a statistically significant interaction between CSR fit and stage of partnership,  $F(1, 236) = 14.04, p < .005, \eta^2 = .0541$ , offering support for H1a. As shown in Figure 1, the relationship between the philanthropic stage of partnership on attitudes toward the company was qualified by the level of CSR fit.

Figure 1. CSR fit X partnership stage on attitudes toward the company



To examine the effects of CSR fit and the stage of partnership on attitudes toward the NPO, a two-way ANOVA of CSR fit (high vs. low) and stage of partnership (philanthropic vs. integrative) was conducted. Results from the analysis indicated that there was a main effect for CSR fit on attitudes toward the NPO,  $F(1, 236) = 6.43, p < .05, \eta^2 = .026$ , with high levels of fit associated with more positive attitudes toward the NPO. Fit was the sole significant predictor in the model, as there were no significant main effects associated with the stage of partnership,  $F$

(1, 236) = 1.27,  $p > .05$ , nor were there significant interaction effect on attitudes toward the NPO,  $F(1, 236) = .73$ ,  $p > .05$ . Thus, H1b was not supported.

Table 2. Two-way ANOVA

<u>Dependent Variables</u>	<u>Factors and Interactions</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Attitudes (company)	CSR fit	1	8.16	<.05*
	Stage of partnership	1	2.58	>.05
	CSR fit x stage of partnership	1	14.04	<.05*
Attitudes (NPO)	CSR fit	1	6.44	<.05*
	Stage of partnership	1	1.26	>.05
	CSR fit x stage of partnership	1	.73	>.05
Level of skepticism	CSR fit	1	.58	>.05
	Stage of partnership	1	7.35	<.05*
	CSR fit x stage of partnership	1	3.36	=.07

Note. ANOVA: analysis of variance; df: degrees of freedom.

\* denotes statistical significance at  $p < .05$ .

Because fit was a statistically significant predictor in the analyses, alpha-adjusted follow-up comparisons were conducted to examine the nature of differences among the four groups. Based on this follow-up analysis, there was one statistically significant paired difference among the groups. Specifically, those in the low fit x integrative partnership condition ( $M = 6.19$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) expressed significantly more positive attitudes toward the NPO than were found in the high fit x philanthropic condition ( $M = 5.73$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $p = .047$ .

Skepticism toward the partnership also was examined using a two-way ANOVA of CSR fit (high vs. low) and stage of partnership (philanthropic vs. integrative). Results from this analysis also yielded a single main effect, with stage of partnership as the sole predictor of skepticism toward the partnership,  $F(1, 236) = 7.36$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Neither fit nor the interaction between the factors was a statistically significant predictor of skepticism  $F(1, 236) = 3.36$ ,  $p > .05$ . Thus, H1c was rejected.

Because there was a significant effect of stage of partnership on skepticism, alpha-adjusted follow-up procedures were conducted to examine group differences. This analysis indicated that those in the low fit x philanthropic partnership condition expressed lower levels of skepticism ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) when compared to participants in the low fit x integrative partnership condition ( $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ),  $p < .05$ .

Recall that H2 posited stage of partnership interacts with individuals' activism level in terms of a) attitude toward the company, b) NPO, and c) skepticism toward the partnership. To test this set of predictions, each of the three dependent variables was analyzed in separate OLS regression models, with the stage of partnership, level of activism, and the interaction term for the stage of partnership and activism level (denoting moderation) entered as predictors. As shown in Table 3, all three models accounted for statistically significant variance in the dependent variable, though only one moderation model (skepticism) contained a significant interaction term.

Table 3. Unstandardized model coefficients (standard errors in parentheses)

	Dependent Variables		
	Attitudes (Company)	Attitudes (NPO)	Skepticism
Stage of partnership	.13 (.012)	.42 (.12)	.37 (.13)**
Activism	.33 (.09)**	.29 (.03)*	.39 (.10)**
Stage x Activism	.08 (.14)	.04 (.18)	.29 (.15)*
Model	$R^2 = .12$	$R^2 = .07$	$R^2 = .21$
	$F(3, 236) = 10.63^{***}$	$F(3, 236) = 6.29^{***}$	$F(3, 236) = 20.94^{***}$

Note. Partnership was coded with philanthropic = 0 and strategic = 1

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .005$ .

Because there were no statistically significant interactions in the models predicting attitudes toward the company and attitudes toward the NPO, there was no support for H2a and H2b. There was, however, a statistically significant positive interaction between stage of partnership and activism in the model predicting skepticism toward the partnership ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .005$ ), indicating a moderation effect and support for H2c. To probe these effects, simple slopes analyses were performed (i.e.,  $\theta x \rightarrow y$ ) at different values of the moderator (the mean and +/- 1 standard deviation). As shown in Table 4, the association between partnership stage and skepticism was only moderated by low levels of activism. The relationship remained statistically significant at moderate and high levels of activism.

Table 4: Simple Slope Estimates

	Estimate	SE	Z	p
Average	0.3934	0.136	2.883	0.004
Low (-1SD)	0.0594	0.192	0.309	0.758
High (+1SD)	0.7273	0.192	3.782	< .001

*Note.* Partnership was coded with philanthropic = 0 and strategic =1. Table shows the effect of the predictor (Stage of partnership) on the dependent variable (Skepticism) at different levels of the moderator (Activism).

## Discussion

This study examined the impact of perceived congruence of the company-NPO partnership (CSR fit) and how different types of CSR partnerships (stage of partnership) that yield different company-NPO engagement levels (e.g., philanthropic partnership vs. integrative partnership) interact. The role of an individual's activism level was examined as a potential moderating factor for impacting public perceptions of CSR partnerships and activities. The study predicted that various interactions between the variables (CSR fit, stage of partnership, and activism levels) would generate different outcomes with regard to the public's attitudes and level of skepticism toward CSR partnerships.

As the results indicate, the relationship between the philanthropic stage of partnership on attitudes toward the company was qualified by the level of CSR fit (H1a). CSR fit was the only factor that predicted attitudes toward the NPO, thus reinforcing CSR communication literature that has argued that high-fit CSR partnerships are likely to lead to more positive attitudes (Aksak et al., 2016; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Rifon et al., 2004). However, as previous research has focused on examining attitudes toward corporations, this study's findings about the impact of CSR fit on attitudes toward the NPO are a new contribution to the literature.

H1b revealed that individuals in the low fit x integrative partnership condition expressed significantly more positive attitudes toward the NPO than those in the high fit x philanthropic condition. This finding suggests that the impact of another factor (i.e. stage of partnership) may be greater than the congruence factor alone, as scholars have suggested (Tao & Ferguson, 2015). In this case, individuals were more concerned with the type of CSR partnership than the perceived level of congruency between the company and the NPO.

The results for H1c also revealed that stage of partnership emerged as the sole predictor for levels of skepticism, showing that individuals in the low fit x philanthropic partnership condition expressed lower levels of skepticism than participants in the low fit x integrative partnership condition. Again, this finding suggests that the congruence factor may not be as vital and/or detrimental to public perception (for low-fit partnerships), but rather that the public is more skeptical of integrative partnerships than philanthropic partnerships when the congruence level is low.

This finding may be indicative of the growing societal expectations of companies' CSR efforts. Furthermore, it shows that these expectations may be accompanied by the public's increasing vigilance and interest in knowing *how* companies are doing good rather than just being content with hearing that they are, in fact, doing good. Specifically, although the public may not question a company's efforts to contribute to society in the form of a donation to any kind of NPO (philanthropic partnership), they may scrutinize more and/or be more reluctant to take action to support a cause when companies communicate about their efforts to develop long-lasting CSR partnerships with NPOs (integrative partnerships), especially if the company-cause fit is low.

Results from the regression models indicate that activism levels were a significant positive predictor of people's attitudes toward the company, the NPO, and for levels of skepticism of the partnership. However, the only statistically significant positive interaction between stage of partnership in activism in the model was in predicting skepticism toward the partnership—specifically when low levels of activism moderated this particular model. This finding reinforces J.E. Grunig's (1997) arguments about public segmentation and how activist publics seek, process, and communicate about information differently than other publics. Again, this suggests that although activists are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward both the company and the NPO, they are also more skeptical of partnerships since they are particularly interested in the altruistic reasons behind a partnership (Torres-Hardling et al., 2012) than other publics. Furthermore, details of the type of partnership are more of a driving force than the level of congruency for activist publics (Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2009). Therefore, it is especially important for both companies and NPOs to be thoughtful when generating a long-lasting partnership and when developing strategies for effectively communicating about their efforts. Publics are becoming more informed, involved, and skeptical. It is especially important that companies and NPOs strive to demonstrate that their work is intended to create positive societal changes, not just a way to gain favorable attention from the public.

### Theoretical implications

This study is novel in its approach to examining interaction effects between various components of a CSR partnership, such as the stage of partnership and perceptions toward not only the company, but also the NPO. Furthermore, studies have examined skepticism of a CSR effort (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen 2007) but not in conjunction with factors such as CSR fit, stage of

partnership, and activism levels as a moderating component. These findings provide new insights to existing literature about CSR fit, specifically regarding the impact of CSR fit on attitudes toward the NPO and how CSR fit and skepticism interact. This research reinforces the need for additional investigations in this area of research. As previously noted, this study also offers support for J.E. Grunig's (1997) arguments about public segmentation and J.-N. Kim and J.E. Grunig's (2011) arguments about activist publics and how to invoke actions that will lead to change for the public good.

### Practical implications

As this study has examined various components of a CSR partnership, there are several implications for public relations professionals and CSR communicators in both the corporate and nonprofit sectors. First, it is important that companies realize that the congruency factor is not necessarily the main driving force in determining how the public will evaluate CSR efforts. Therefore, although research has generally suggested that high-fit partnerships lead to more positive evaluations, more recent developments in CSR literature (and results from this study) have suggested that companies can certainly choose causes that are relevant to them regardless of the perception of how closely a given cause aligns with the company's mission, especially at the philanthropic level. Therefore, companies will likely generate favorable attitudes when making a donation to a cause regardless of what type of cause they choose to support and NPOs will likewise generate favorable attitudes as a result of this type of partnership. However, findings from this study also indicate that companies need to be transparent in their communication efforts when entering into an integrative partnership. Companies should indicate altruistic motives for engaging in an integrative partnership to minimize skepticism levels. On the other hand, NPOs generated more positive attitudes from the public when engaging in integrative partnerships (specifically when there is low company-cause fit), which suggests that the company partner's communication efforts may be more scrutinized than the NPO's. Finally, although communicators sometimes challenge the notion that one can segment publics prior to developing CSR communication messages, this study suggests that CSR communicators need to emphasize the altruistic motivations behind company-NPO partnerships to invoke action among activist publics. That is, CSR communicators should develop strategies with the notion that although individuals with higher activism levels may, indeed, be more likely to support a cause, they are also more likely to be impacted when skepticism about a CSR activity might arise.

### Limitations and directions for future research

There are several notable limitations from this study. First, this study was conducted as a cross-sectional experiment that essentially took a snapshot of individuals' perceptions of a fictitious CSR partnership. A longitudinal analysis could yield more thoughtful analyses about perceptions

that are developed over time and influenced by a variety of factors—not just exposure to one media release about a CSR partnership. Also, although this study aimed to measure the key differences in stage of partnership through the inclusion of the philanthropic and integrative stages, examining the middle stage (transactional stage) may have provided additional insights about this key variable. In addition, individuals' general activism levels were measured in this study. A future study may choose to focus on activism levels about a given topic and/or to segment groups prior to launching the experiment to make group comparisons in accordance with J.-N. Kim and J.E. Grunig's (2011) public segmentation arguments. Finally, although this study included a measure to examine attitudes toward the NPO, more research about CSR partnerships—specifically the NPO side of the partnership—would add more depth to a growing body of CSR communication literature.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to literature that examines public relations advocacy, specifically in the context of CSR communication. It adds an additional layer of understanding upon areas of CSR communication research that have not been widely explored, most notably through its examination of the interaction of several impacting factors that shape public perception of a company, a NPO, and the partnership as a whole. Furthermore, by examining how activism levels moderate CSR attitudes, this study offers insight for scholars and practitioners seeking to create positive societal change through organizational advocacy and public advocacy efforts.

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## Appendix: Stimuli

Low fit- philanthropic

Beverage company – children hospital

### **Media Release**

#### **Beverage Company Donates \$300,000 for Children’s Hospital**

#### **For Immediate Release:**

November 15, 2017

#### **Contact:**

Laura Davis 803-404-3868

**Dulsa-** The beverage company, Viva Corp. is donating \$300,000 for William Children’s Hospital.

Donations will be made to direct funding for clinical and research facilities, and aiding treatment of children with life-threatening disease.

“Through the donation, it is hoped that Viva Corp. can contribute to children’s healthy life and improvement of facilities in the William Children’s Hospital” Jones, director of Sustainability Project for Viva Corp. “In order to make strides toward the lifesaving mission, we are aware that funding the cause is an imperative part and we are happy to commit to lifesaving mission through the donation.”

“I am grateful for Viva Corp’s commitment to the William Children’s Hospital,” said Laura Chorbajian, director of National Outreach of William Children’s Hospital. “This donation can directly support the clinical and research facilities lead to lifesaving treatments for these precious children across the country. Lifesaving mission is imperative for us and it is hoped that this commitment may become a huge source for our lifesaving mission. ”

The donation will be given at 40<sup>th</sup>-year anniversary ceremony of William Children’s Hospital next month.

The Viva Corp. is a multinational beverage corporation that produces and distributes beverages and other snack foods. Together with its subsidiaries, it operates several major beverage brands.

The William Children’s Hospital is a leading children hospital in the nation continuing life - saving mission for childhood cancer, lifestyle diseases, and other life-threatening diseases.

High fit- strategic

Food company – agriculture research organization (aid third world)

**Media Release**

**Food Company, Agriculture Research Organization Collaborating for Research Center in Africa**

**For Immediate Release:**

November 15, 2017

**Contact:**

Laura Davis 803-404-3868

**Dulsa** – The food company, WILSON, and agriculture research organization, HELP, have announced plans to create a taskforce for the research institution in the African region. This research institution mainly focuses on the research that seeks ways to increase the crops with barren soil and less water in the third world. WILSON and HELP expect the long-term partnership through this taskforce will propel their efforts to develop sustainable development goals in the third world.

“Through the program, it is hoped that WILSON can constantly contribute to universal and equitable access to food in the third world,” said Michelle Jones, director of WILSON’s Sustainability Project.

“Through a close partnership with WILSON, we are eager to launch a new research institution in the African region that aligns with our joint commitment to providing people in the third world with equal access to food and rights to food,” said Laura Chorbajian, director of HELP’s National Outreach program. “Although the partnership process has not been easy, it is hoped that the institution can lead lifesaving research for people in the third world in the long term.”

WILSON is a multinational corporation that operates in the food industry. The company produces cereal and convenience foods and is a processor and marketer of chicken, beef and pork.

HELP, an agricultural research organization, hosts the leading research facility in the nation for the development of agriculture skills in the third world. HELP’s research aims to fulfill the mission in line with the sustainable development goals relating to universal and equitable access to food.

Low fit- strategic

Beverage company – children hospital

**Media Release**

**Beverage Company and Children’s Hospital Collaborating for the Healthy Kids Project**

**For Immediate Release:**

November 15, 2017

**Contact:**

Laura Davis 803-404-3868

**Dulsa** - Viva Corp. and William Children’s Hospital create a task force for the Healthy Kids project.

The idea for the Health Kids Project is to raise awareness about how healthy eating and active living support a child’s physical development, ability to learn and emotional well-being.

Viva Corp. develops and sells the top 5 popular flavor sodas among children and 1 percent of profits directly goes to the Healthy Kids Project over the next five years.

“The impact behind Viva Corp. on Health Kids Project is very special,” Jones, director of Sustainability Project for Viva Corp. “I am very happy to speak on their behalf and to be among children. The message is clear: ‘Healthier Life for Kids.’ I remain committed to the Healthy Kids Project.”

“Through close partnership with Viva, we are eager to launch new prevention efforts that align with our joint commitment to keeping our children safe and healthy,” Laura Chorbajian, director of National Outreach for Children’s Hospital. “Mission: Health Kids Project offers us the opportunity to directly connect with children across the country to provide tools and resources that contribute to improving the health and well-being of kids and families.”

The Viva Corp. is a multinational beverage corporation that produces and distributes beverages and other snack foods. Together with its subsidiaries, it operates several major beverage brands.

The William Children’s Hospital is a leading children hospital in the nation continuing life - saving mission for childhood cancer, lifestyle disease, and other life-threatening diseases.