

## Embedding a Social Cause in News Features

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**Embedding a Social Cause in News Features: The Effects of Corporate Sponsorship and Localization on Audience's Attitudes toward Nonprofit Coverage**

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## Abstract

The current two studies, one testing college students and the other testing adults, showed nearly identical comparative effects of news features about either a nonprofit organization alone or about that same nonprofit but sponsored by a commercial company. There were two exemplars of nonprofit and commercial company pairings, and each was presented as “localized.” That is, the nonprofit and commercial company were located in the same city as the respondents or non-localized. Surprisingly, there was almost no indication that the commercial sponsor damaged positive responses, but there was some indication that under the localized condition, there was more negativity toward the commercial sponsorship. The ELM and attribution theory provide theoretical space for understanding these effects.

# **Embedding a Social Cause in News Features: The Effects of Corporate Sponsorship and Localization on Audience's Attitudes toward Nonprofit Coverage**

## **Introduction**

Social marketing is defined as “a process of designing, implementing, and controlling programs to increase the acceptability of a pro-social idea among population segments of consumers” (Dearing et al., 1996, p.345). Social marketers often use mass media in an attempt to change people's attitudes and behaviors (Perloff, 2001). Indeed, research indicates that social marketers are often able to influence news agendas and contents (Curtin, 1999; Hale, 2007; Qiu & Cameron, 2008). Despite the strategic importance of the news media for nonprofit marketing, the literature of media and nonprofits is still in its infancy (Grosenick, 2005; Hale, 2007; Helmig, Spraul, & Tresp, in press). Hale (2007) argued that although media coverage of nonprofits may have significant effects on the public's perception of a social cause, “there is little empirical research about media coverage of nonprofits and almost none that is framed by communication theories” (p.465). The present study aims to extend the literature by examining the impact of news features covering a nonprofit and its social cause on the public's attitudes and related behavioral intentions.

For the last two decades, many corporations have attempted to include social dimensions in their marketing activities by sponsoring various social marketing activities. Companies co-sponsor pro-social causes of nonprofits with a two-fold intention: (1) to associate the company with a nonprofit partner and appeal to the customers and (2) to generate goodwill and enhance the image of the business (Dean,

2002; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Schmidt & Hitchon, 1999). Although many researchers have examined how such partnerships promote the potential gains for both the profit and nonprofit partners, a majority of the studies have been conducted in the context of advertising or cause-related marketing (CRM) (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Grau & Flose, 2007; Liston-Heyes & Liu; 2010). That is, even though the news media have been a main channel for social marketing, there has been little research examining the strategic importance of social marketing messages through *news outlets*. The current study aims to investigate whether associating a commercial co-sponsor with a nonprofit in news feature stories would have the desired positive impact on both parties. In this study, sponsorship is defined as the philanthropic sponsorship of a nonprofit event for a social cause (Calderon-Martinez et al., 2005), rather than a traditional definition of commercial sponsorship, which refers to a form of advertising.

In sum, the purpose of the present study is to examine how publics process social marketing messages specifically embedded in the news context. Zhang and Swanson (2006) suggest that the news media are crucial for corporate sponsorships because it is primarily the news media that tell the public the story of a firm's efforts to support pro-social causes. Zhang and Swanson content analyzed major newspapers and found that the newspapers tend to see corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts as positive and therefore provide positive coverage of businesses pursuing such efforts. This study aims to advance Zhang and Swanson's study by examining how consumers actually process pro-social messages when delivered in the form of news features, in interplay with sponsorship type and localization. Two experiments were used, one testing college students and the other testing adults.

## **The Impacts of Corporate Sponsorship**

Based on the assumption that consumers process news and advertising in different ways (McLeod, Pan, & Rucinski, 1988), researchers have empirically tested the superiority of news publicity over advertising. Cameron (1994) showed that editorial content produced better recall than did advertisements. Straughan, Bleske, and Zhao (1994) also found more positive attitudes and behavioral intention generated by news publicity than by advertising. Recently, Gallagher et al. (2001) showed that consumers tended to be more skeptical when processing advertising compared to news stories in the context of online communication.

In the context of social marketing, researchers found that superiority of news publicity over advertising might be moderated by the sponsorship type behind the stories. For instance, Salmon, Reid, Pokrywczynski, and Willett (1985) found that an advocacy message from a nonprofit (i.e., the American Cancer Society) was perceived as more credible in a news format than in advertising, but this was not the case for a story featuring a commercial soft drink (e.g., Pepsi). This finding is in line with previous studies that found consumers sometimes attribute profit-driven motives to corporate sponsorships and become skeptical (Bae & Cameron, 2007; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Dean, 2002; Rifon et al., 2004; Webb & Mohr, 1998).

Researchers have explained such tendencies by applying attribution theory. Attribution theory posits that individuals are social perceivers who make causal inferences about events they observe and shape the attribution of motive (Heider, 1958). Specifically, in the context of persuasive communication, researchers have assumed that consumers tend to attribute the motives of endorsers to two main inferences: intrinsic

motives and extrinsic motives. Intrinsic motives refer to doing the right thing (e.g., being altruistic). Extrinsic motives are done for selfish reasons like improving the corporation's reputation or increasing profits. When consumers attribute extrinsic motives, their perceptions of the credibility of the endorsers were found to decrease (Moore, Mowen, & Reardon, 1994; Sparkman, 1982).

Based on attribution theory, Rifon, Choi, Trimbel, and Li (2004) applied the concept of motive attributions to the context of CSR marketing. Specifically, they posited that a company will be perceived to sponsor a social cause because of either intrinsic or extrinsic motives. Using an experiment, Rifon et al. (2004) found that consumers who read the CSR message with more commercial cues tended to attribute more extrinsic motives to the company and, in turn, have the less favorable attitudes toward the messages.

Closely related to attribution theory, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) posits that consumers have hypotheses about how marketers attempt to persuade them with mass media messages (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Based on PKM, Szykman, Bloom, and Blazing (2004) conducted an experiment using pro-social messages (e.g., anti-drunken driving messages) with two different types of sponsors (profit vs. nonprofit). Their findings revealed that participants' attitudes toward the message were more positive when the message was sponsored by the nonprofit than when it was sponsored by the commercial corporation. The results suggest that consumers might discount the value of pro-social messages by using their own persuasion knowledge in attributing the motives of the sponsors.

In another test of the PKM model, Rodgers (2005) suggested that consumers

specifically had hypotheses about corporate sponsorships. She defined “sponsorship knowledge” as “a specific type of persuasion knowledge that can be used to evaluate a corporate sponsor and its motives.” In the context of an online newspaper, Rodgers, Lim, and Bae (2005) assessed how consumers perceive the e-news contents sponsored by commercial companies. The study showed that when the content of the e-news was highly related to the commercial products, it actually lowered the credibility of the messages.

In sum, the literature suggests that the motives that consumers attribute to a corporation’s sponsorship of a nonprofit are crucial to how they respond to both the nonprofit and the corporation. It also suggests that a message from a nonprofit by itself might be more persuasive than a message from a nonprofit that is being sponsored by a commercial company. This is because a combined-source message can be accompanied with negative attributions that will make attitudes more negative, and even decrease the intentions to support the cause of the nonprofit.

**H1:** News feature stories will be more effective when the causes are sponsored by a nonprofit organization alone than co-sponsored by a commercial company. Effectiveness will be indexed by resultant attitudes toward the nonprofits and the commercial companies.

### **Feature Localization**

Research shows that news perceived as more proximal to the consumer gets more attention. For instance, Donnelly (2005) conducted an experiment to examine how story localization is related to news versus editorial format and how both localization and format affect recall and awareness. The results showed that participants displayed



greater news awareness for local stories than non-local stories. Similarly, Heath (1984) found that people who read newspapers that printed a high proportion of local crime news reported higher levels of fear than people who read a low proportion of local crime news. Based on such findings, it is assumed that localized stories will influence readers' attitudes toward the news and, accordingly, behavioral intentions.

In the context of corporate sponsorship of social marketing, Grau and Folse (2007) utilized the signaling theory to examine how donation proximity (non-local vs. local) in corporate sponsorship campaigns influenced consumers' campaign attitudes and participation intentions. Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) posits that certain indicators (e.g., observable cues) can provide signals to potential buyers/investors so that they can predict unobservable attributes of the issue under examination. Grau and Folse (2007) applied signaling theory to the corporate sponsorship context, positing that corporate donations might appear "abstract or unobservable" to consumers, and that CRM donations associated with a local community would signal "a greater or more tangible offer to consumers." Grau and Folse hypothesized therefore that a corporate sponsorship campaign would be more effective when the campaign was localized rather than targeted nationally, and their hypothesis was supported. Based on this finding, in the present study, this study expects that social marketing messages in news features will be more effective when the features are localized than when they are not. This study therefore hypothesizes:

**H2:** News feature stories are more effective when social causes are localized than when they are not localized.

We will also examine the interaction between localization and whether there is a

commercial sponsor. In reviewing PKM research, Campbell and Kermani (2008) argued that consumers are more likely to use persuasion knowledge when they have higher cognitive resources, which is required for the consumers to critically consider the ulterior motives of marketers (Campbell & Kermani, 2000). In this current study, the localized features will enhance the personal relevance of the messages and thus increase the level of cognitive elaboration. Such cognitive resources would in turn activate persuasion knowledge by leading participants to consider the corporate sponsors' commercial motives more critically as compared to the non-localized features.

Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

**H3:** There will be an interaction between sponsor type and localization on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions, such that, in the localized features, the advantage of sole-sponsorship of nonprofits over co-sponsorship with corporations will be greater than it is in the non-localized features.

## **Method**

### **Design**

To test the proposed hypotheses, this study conducted a 2 (sponsor type) x 2 (localized) x 2 (type of social causes) mixed design experiment. The first between-subjects factor is type of sponsorship (nonprofit alone vs. co-sponsorship by commercial company). Here the sponsorship is defined as the philanthropic sponsorship of a nonprofit event for a social cause (Calderon-Martinez et al., 2005). Localization is the second between-subject factor (localized vs. non-localized). The only within-subject factor consists of two different causes (hunger relief vs. environmental efforts) which represent the most common issues in social marketing field. The two stories were both altered to produce

four versions, and the order of the stories was counter-balanced across the conditions.

## STUDY 1

### Participants

A total of 146 undergraduate students were recruited from a large Midwestern university and participated in this study for extra class credit. About 35 participants were assigned to each condition. Approximately 78% were female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 ( $M = 19$ ).

### Stimulus

In this study, each participant was exposed to two different news features. Two fictitious news features promoting social causes were created by a professional editorial syndicate for this study<sup>1</sup>. Fictitious names were used for the commercial sponsors to control for potential confusion such as brand familiarity or prior bias.

The hunger relief feature (*“Share the Bounty”*) involved various activities aimed at helping feed the hungry and promoted by a hunger relief nonprofit organization. The environmental efforts feature (*“Go Green”*) involved several activities focused on saving the environment as a “good eco-citizen,” and promoted by an environmental nonprofit organization. As stated earlier, the two stories were altered to produce four versions; the length and contents of the features were kept identical except for the manipulated factors across the conditions.

The sponsor type was manipulated by including information related to the commercial company’s sponsoring efforts as well as its product-level ad cues. The

hunger relief feature included a fictitious food company called *Major Foods Corporation*. The environmental efforts feature also included a fictitious home furnishing company called *Your Home Store*. For the nonprofit-only condition, the contents regarding commercial sponsorship were removed or substituted by information about nonprofits (e.g., “Visit [www.YourHomeStore.com](http://www.YourHomeStore.com) for more energy-saving tips to use at home” substituted by “More tips for going green at home can be found at [www.TheGreenEarthFund.org](http://www.TheGreenEarthFund.org).”)

Localization was manipulated by including localized information in the headlines and the contents about the city where the participants resided (e.g., a local branch of a nonprofit organization, a local campaign event, etc.). In sum, a total of eight news features were created for this study.

### **Procedure**

The experiment involved asking participants to read two news features, and complete questionnaires. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four conditions: (1) nonprofit \* localized, (2) nonprofit \* non-localized (3) nonprofit and commercial company \* localized, (4) nonprofit and commercial company \* non-localized.

Once the experiment began, each participant was asked to read the first news feature, and then answer questions about it. Once they finished answering the questionnaire, the procedure was repeated with a second news feature. At the end of the second questionnaire, demographic measures as well as questions for manipulation checks for two IVs were presented.

### **Measures**

The dependent variables included credibility perceptions of and attitudes toward the

news messages, nonprofit organizations, the newspapers that carried the stories and corporate sponsors, as well as related behavioral intentions. The questions about corporate sponsors were asked to those in conditions 3 and 4 only.

***Credibility perceptions.*** Message Credibility was defined as the degree to which a message is perceived as objective and unbiased. It was measured by six items on a 7-point adjective bipolar scale: unbiased-biased, accurate-inaccurate, believable-unbelievable, convincing-unconvincing, trustworthy-untrustworthy, and telling the whole story- not telling the whole story.  $\alpha = .88$ . Nonprofit credibility was measured by three items on a 7-point adjective bipolar scale: reliable-unreliable, sincere-insincere, and trustworthy-untrustworthy (Ohanian, 1990).  $\alpha = .86$ . Corporate credibility was measured by six items on a 7-point adjective bi-polar scale: honest-dishonest, dependable-undependable, reliable-unreliable, unselfish-selfish, sincere-insincere, and trustworthy-untrustworthy.  $\alpha = .92$ . Newspaper credibility was measured by three items on a 7-point Likert scale. The items were “It provides important community information,” “It is concerned about the community’s well-being,” and “It cannot be trusted.” (item reversed)  $\alpha = .71$ .

***Attitudinal responses.*** Attitudes toward the nonprofit and the corporation were measured by three items on 7-point semantic differential scales: good-bad, favorable-unfavorable, and pleasant-unpleasant ( $\alpha = .84$ , and  $\alpha = .86$ , respectively). Attitudes toward the activities suggested in the news features and attitudes toward the products of the corporate sponsors were also measured using three items on 7-point scales: good-bad, favorable-unfavorable, and pleasant-unpleasant ( $\alpha = .89$ , and  $\alpha = .96$ , respectively).

***Participation intention.*** Participation intention was measured by four items on a 7-point

Likert scale. The items were: “I would donate money to [the name of the nonprofit] if I had the opportunity to donate money to nonprofit organizations in the future,” “I would participate in [the name of the nonprofit] program if I had the opportunity to participate in pro-social activity in the future,” “I would recommend that my friends support the name of the nonprofit] if they considered donating money to nonprofit organizations,” and “I would participate in one or more of the suggested activities in the story if I had the opportunity” (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005; Malhotra & Mukherjee, 2003).  $\alpha = .89$ .

***Purchase intention.*** Purchase intention was measured, based on the Bearden, Lichtenstein and Teel (1984) scale, using two items on a 7-point semantic differential scale (very likely-very unlikely, and probable-improbable) in response to the following question: “Given the opportunity, how likely would you be to purchase [the name of the corporation] products?”  $\alpha = .97$ .

## Results

### ***Manipulation checks***

The manipulation of independent variables was checked by independent *t*-tests. A manipulation check for sponsorship was assessed by participants’ response to a single-item question on a 7-point scale: “The story you read involved: (1 = A commercial company, 7 = No commercial company)”. A *t*-test analysis revealed that participants correctly identified the conditions to which they were assigned. For the environmental feature, nonprofit only ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ) vs. commercial co-sponsorship ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) [ $t = 3.17$ ,  $df = 142$ ,  $p = .002$ ]; for a hunger relief feature, nonprofit only ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ) vs. commercial co-sponsorship ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ) [ $t = 4.00$ ,  $df = 142$ ,  $p < .001$ ].

The manipulation of localization was also checked by assessing participants' response to a single-item question on a 7-point scale: "The story you read involved: (1 = A specific city, 7 = No specific city)". A *t*-test showed that there was a significant mean difference in participants' indications of specific city's involvement. For an environment feature, localized ( $M = 3.46, SD = 2.25$ ) vs. non-localized ( $M = 5.99, SD = 1.43$ ) [ $t = 7.96, df = 138, p < .001$ ]; for the hunger relief feature, localized ( $M = 3.06, SD = 2.25$ ) vs. non-localized ( $M = 5.79, SD = 1.76$ ) [ $t = 7.97, df = 137, p < .001$ ]. Therefore, the manipulation of both independent variables was successful.

### ***Tests of the Hypotheses***

We ran 2\*2\*2 ANOVAs and found that the social cause type interacted with the other two variables on dependent variables<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, we decided to analyze the data for each news feature, respectively. A series of 2\*2 ANOVAs were conducted to test the hypotheses and research question.

H1 predicted that the news feature would be more effective when it was sponsored by a nonprofit organization than when co-sponsored by a commercial company. The main effect of sponsor type was tested on consumers' credibility perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions for both news features (i.e., environmental efforts and a hunger relief). However, a series of ANOVA analyses revealed that none of the dependent variables was significantly different in the two conditions, failing to support H1. There were no main effects of sponsor type on nonprofit credibility [for an environmental feature,  $F(1, 136) = .762, p > .05$ ; for a

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hunger-relief feature,  $F(1, 134) = 1.08, p > .05$ ], attitudes toward nonprofit [for an environmental feature,  $F(1, 132) = .061, p > .05$ ]; for a hunger-relief feature,  $F(1, 133) = .136, p > .05$ ], and behavioral intentions [for an environmental feature,  $F(1, 132) = .007, p > .05$ , for a hunger-relief feature,  $F(1, 128) = .375, p > .05$ ]. That is, with or without the commercial partners, the participants generally held positive perceptions of the nonprofit credibility, attitudes toward the nonprofits, and intention of supporting the cause the nonprofits advocated, demonstrating the unexpected results (See Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 here]

H2 predicted that localized feature stories would create more positive responses than the removed context. The main effect of localization was tested on credibility perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions for both news features. Counter to expectations, the ANOVA tests did not find the main effects of localization on nonprofit credibility [for an environmental feature,  $F(1, 136) = .225, p > .05$ ; for a hunger-relief feature,  $F(1, 134) = .017, p > .05$ ], attitudes toward nonprofit [for an environmental feature,  $F(1, 132) = .360, p > .05$ ; for a hunger-relief feature,  $F(1, 133) = .046, p > .05$ ], and behavioral intentions [for a hunger-relief feature,  $F(1, 128) = .050, p > .05$ ]. The only exception was a significant main effect of localization on behavioral intentions in the environmental effort feature. That is, in the environmental effort feature, participants who read the *non-localized* feature tended to show higher participation intention ( $M = 5.26, SD = 1.23$ ) than did those who read the localized feature ( $M = 4.69, SD = 1.35$ ) [ $F(1, 132) = 6.32, p = .013, \eta^2 = .046$ ].

The impact of localization was also examined for the responses to commercial companies for those in commercial sponsorship conditions (i.e., condition 3 & 4). First,



in the environmental efforts feature, a series of *t*-tests were conducted and found significant effects of *non-localization* on corporate credibility, attitudes toward the company, attitudes toward the products, and purchased intentions. That is, for those who read the environmental feature sponsored by a commercial company, participants in the non-localized condition perceived higher corporate credibility, more favorable attitudes toward the company, attitudes toward the products, and greater purchase intentions of the products, as compared to those in the localized condition (See Table 2). In the hunger relief feature, the results of *t*-tests revealed similar patterns to the environment feature, but did not reach statistically significant levels (See Table 2). In sum, there was no significant main effect of localization for both features. Rather, there was significant positive effect of non-localization for the environment feature, contrary to the study's expectation. Thus, H2 was not supported.

[Insert Table 2 here]

H3 predicted an interaction between sponsorship and localization. Although the ANOVAs revealed no significant interactions between sponsorship and localization for the environment feature, there were some limited but significant interactions found for the hunger relief feature. First, a marginally significant interaction between sponsorship and localization for nonprofit credibility perception was found [ $F(1,134) = 3.61, p = .060, \eta^2 = .026$ ]. The *Bonferroni* pair-wise comparisons test indicated that, in the localized condition, participants perceived the nonprofit more credible when the cause was promoted by the nonprofit alone ( $M = 6.12, SE = .147$ ) than when it was co-sponsored by a commercial company ( $M = 5.68, SE = .161$ ) [ $F(1, 134) = 4.13, p = .044, \eta^2 = .030$ ]. On the other hand, in the non-localized condition, there was no significant

difference between the two conditions [ $F(1, 134) = .386, p = .536$ ]. There was no interaction between sponsorship and localization for the other dependent variables (see Figure 1). Therefore, H3 was only partially supported.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

### ***Post Hoc Analyses***

Post hoc analyses were conducted to assess how social marketing messages in news features influenced consumer perceptions of the profit and nonprofit organizations as well as the news organization. The results of the correlations demonstrated that responses toward the nonprofits, the commercial sponsors, and the news organization were closely inter-correlated. In both news features, the perceived credibility of the nonprofit was positively correlated with the perceived credibility of its commercial sponsor, attitudes toward the company, and attitude toward the products. Attitudes toward the nonprofit also were positively correlated with the perceived credibility of its commercial sponsor, attitudes toward the company, attitudes toward the products, and purchase intentions of the products. Participants' credibility perceptions and attitudes toward the three parties were all highly correlated (See Table 3 and Table 4).

[Insert Table 3 here]

[Insert Table 4 here]

## **STUDY 2**

### **Overview**

Study 2 was conducted to extend Study 1 results by generalizing the findings to adult consumers. Experimental design, stimuli, measurement and procedures were the same as those used in Study 1. Study 2 was conducted with adult participants over age 25 and

residing in the city where the previous study was conducted.

## **Participants**

The sample consisted of 126 local citizens in a Midwestern city where Study 1 was conducted. Five participants were randomly selected and compensated with gift cards. The ages ranged from 25 to 72 ( $M = 37$  years), and 72 percent of the participants were female. Each of the four conditions had an average of 32 participants.

## **Results**

### ***Manipulation checks***

The manipulation checks for both sponsorship and localization were tested with the same questions as those used in Study 1. For sponsor type manipulation, there was a significant mean difference in participants' indications of the commercial company's involvement. For the environmental feature, nonprofit only ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ) vs. commercial co-sponsorship ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) [ $t = 10.31$ ,  $df = 118.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ]; for a hunger relief feature, nonprofit only ( $M = 5.50$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) vs. commercial co-sponsorship ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ) [ $t = 7.72$ ,  $df = 123$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. For the localized manipulation, there was a significant mean difference in participants' indications of specific city's involvement. For an environment feature, localized ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ ) vs. non-localized ( $M = 6.11$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ) [ $t = 6.30$ ,  $df = 103.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ]; for the hunger relief feature, localized ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ) vs. non-localized ( $M = 6.02$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) [ $t = 8.10$ ,  $df = 116.65$ ,  $p = .003$ ]. Therefore, the manipulation of both IVs was successful for Study 2.

### ***Test of the Hypotheses***

We conducted 2\*2\*2 ANOVAs and found that the social cause type interacted with

another independent variable on a dependent variable<sup>3</sup>. That is, the social cause type did not serve a message variation purpose in Study 2 as well as in Study 1. Thus, we analyzed the data for each news feature separately, and a series of 2\*2 ANOVAs were conducted to test the hypotheses and research question.

H1 predicted that news features stories would be more effective when the causes were sponsored by a nonprofit organization than co-sponsored by both the nonprofit and a commercial company. For the environmental feature, no main effect of sponsorship type existed for the two dependent variables, credibility perceptions [ $F(1, 121) = 1.167, p = .282$ ] and attitudes [ $F(1, 121) = 3.310, p = .071$ ] toward the nonprofit organization. For behavioral intention, however, a main effect of sponsorship was observed [ $F(1, 121) = 5.123, p = .025, \eta_p^2 = .041$ ]. As expected, news stories with a nonprofit sponsorship alone encouraged participation intention among participants ( $M = 4.61, SD = 1.48$ ) more than did the one with a corporate sponsorship ( $M = 3.99, SD = 1.53$ ). For the hunger-relief feature, none of the dependent variables were affected by the sponsorship type [for nonprofit credibility,  $F(1, 122) = .203, p = .653$ ; for attitudes toward nonprofit,  $F(1, 122) = 1.050, p = .308$ ; for participation intention,  $F(1, 122) = .232, p = .631$ ].

H2 predicted the advantage of localization in the news feature stories. The effect of localization was tested on credibility perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions for both news features. Results showed that none of the dependent variables were affected by localization either for the environmental feature [for nonprofit credibility,

$F(1, 121) = .085, p = .771$ ; for attitudes toward nonprofit,  $F(1, 121) = .527, p = .469$ ; for participation intentions,  $F(1, 121) = .448, p = .505$ ] or for the hunger-relief feature [for nonprofit credibility,  $F(1, 122) = .1.292, p = .258$ ; for attitudes toward nonprofit,  $F(1, 122) = 1.071, p = .303$ ; for participation intentions,  $F(1, 122) = .262, p = .609$ ].

For condition 3 and 4 with commercial sponsorship, additional dependent variables were measured to further explore the effect of localization. A set of  $t$ -tests yielded a significant effect of *non-localization* on purchase intentions in the environmental feature [ $t = -2.72, df = 59, p = .008$ ]. That is, participants in the non-localized condition ( $M = 5.27, SD = 1.23$ ) had greater intentions to purchase the product presented in the news story than those in the localized condition ( $M = 4.32, SD = 1.46$ ).

H3 predicted an interaction between sponsor type and localization on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions. Similar to the results of Study 1, there was no significant interaction for the environment feature, but some significant interactions were revealed for the hunger relief feature. In the hunger relief feature, ANOVA results showed a marginally significant interaction between sponsor type and localization on nonprofit credibility [ $F(1, 122) = 3.584, p = .061, \eta_p^2 = .029$ ]. The *Bonferroni* pair-wise comparisons showed that, in the nonprofit only condition, the localized story encouraged greater credibility perceptions ( $M = 5.51, SE = .19$ ) among participants than did the non-localized story ( $M = 4.95, SE = 1.89$ ) [ $F(1, 122) = 4.18, p = .043, \eta_p^2 = .033$ ]. On the other hand, in the corporate sponsorship condition, the mean pattern was reversed although the mean difference failed to reach the significance level [ $F(1, 122) = .237, p > 1.0$ ].

Next, an interaction between sponsor type and localization was also found on

nonprofit attitudes. In the localized condition, participants evaluated the nonprofit more favorably when the cause was promoted by the nonprofit alone ( $M = 6.25, SE = .189$ ) than when it was co-sponsored by commercial company ( $M = 5.69, SE = .189$ ) [ $F(1, 122) = 4.19, p = .044, \eta^2 = .033$ ]. On the other hand, in the non-localized condition, there was no significant difference between the two conditions [ $F(1, 122) = .383, p > 1.0$ ]. Finally, a similar mean pattern was also found on participation intention, but the mean difference did not reach a statistical significance level (see Figure 2). Thus, H3 was partially supported.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

### ***Post Hoc Analyses***

The positive correlations among participants' responses to the nonprofits, corporate sponsors, and news organizations were revealed in Study 2, just as in Study 1. In both the environmental and hunger-relief feature stories, the perceived credibility and attitudes toward the nonprofits were positively correlated with the stories of the corporate sponsors. The attitudes and purchase intentions toward the products were also correlated. As for the adult consumers' responses to the news organization that conveyed the social marketing news features, in the environmental feature story, newspaper credibility was highly correlated with the perceived credibility of the nonprofit, attitudes toward the nonprofit, attitudes toward the cause, attitudes toward the company, attitudes toward the products, and purchase intention. The same high correlations were also observed in the hunger-relief feature story, with additional high inter-correlation between the newspaper credibility and perceived credibility of the company (See Table 5 and Table 6).

[Insert Table 5 here]

[Insert Table 6 here]

### **Discussion**

This study examined how consumers would process nonprofits' social marketing messages embedded in news features, focusing on the effects of sponsor type and news localization on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions. Based on attribution theory and PKM literature, the key expectation of this study was that news feature stories would be more effective when social causes were sponsored by a nonprofit alone vs. co-sponsored by a commercial company and when localized vs. non-localized. As opposed to the expectation, however, this study revealed some unexpected yet interesting findings regarding the effects of sponsor type and localization in the context of news features.

First, as for the effects of sponsor type, Study 1, using young adult student participants, showed positive impacts of both types of news features on attitudes toward nonprofits and commercial companies. That is, with or without a commercial sponsor of a social cause, the young adults tended to show positive responses. The results of Study 2 indicated similar findings to the findings of Study 1. The only exception was that the adult consumer participants had greater intention to participate in an environmental cause when the cause was sponsored by a nonprofit alone vs. co-sponsored by a commercial company. This may be because the older age group has greater skepticism toward corporate sponsorship and how co-sponsorship works between the two organizations. Webb and Mohr (1998) showed that the more knowledgeable consumers are about CRM, the more skeptical they will be toward CRM campaigns. Still, it is also

noteworthy that the older group's attitudes toward the nonprofit and the commercial sponsor were fairly positive regardless of the sponsor type.

The results of Studies 1 and 2 were quite clear regarding the effect of sponsor type for both the environmental and the hunger relief stories. The presence of the commercial company sponsor in the stories produced not only the same positive attitudes toward the nonprofits as the no-sponsor condition, they also produced highly favorable attitudes toward the commercial company itself. The real-world implications are quite straight-forward. Commercial sponsorship represented in news story features could be an effective strategy for both commercial companies and the nonprofits they sponsor, especially when the social marketing targets young adult consumers.

This result may not seem in accordance with the previous studies that demonstrated the superiority of nonprofit sponsorship over for-profit sponsorship. However, it should be noted that the present study did not compare nonprofit sponsorship versus for-profit sponsorship, as most previous studies did. Rather, this study compared nonprofit sponsorship alone versus corporate co-sponsorship, in an attempt to examine how the presence of commercial co-sponsors would influence consumers' responses to social marketing messages. The findings suggest that individuals' negative perceptions of commercial sponsorship might be ameliorated when it is presented along with a nonprofit partner.

One possible explanation for this result is that the context of news features might influence participants' favorable responses to the messages regardless of the sponsor type. Notably, many previous studies have found the disadvantage of a commercial sponsor in the context of advertising and CSR marketing (e.g., Rifon, Choi, Trimbel, &



Li, 2004). On the other hand, the current study adopted the context of news features. Considering the superiority of news features over advertising in generating favorable attitudes and credibility perceptions (e.g., Gallagher et al., 2001; Straughan, Bleske, & Zhao, 1994), it is plausible that the pro-social message in a news format might be processed in a less skeptical way as compared to the message in advertising.

Another possible explanation is that individuals' favorable attitudes toward nonprofits would positively influence their evaluations of the commercial sponsors in a partnership with the nonprofits. This is in line with the findings of Bae and Cameron (2007), who called attention to transfer effects between two parties involved in a social marketing campaign; the transfer effect refers to "the positive or negative movement of people's evaluation on both parties generated by corporate social marketing activity from profit companies to nonprofit organizations or from nonprofit organizations to profit companies (p. 39)." This is also in line with a principle of "meanings as integrating factors" that attribution theorists claim. According to attribution theory, individuals tend to attribute underlying causes of their experience based on various factors such as prior knowledge, expectations, motives, or affects. Specifically, Heider (1954) suggests that an individual tends to perceive the world as a consistent and integrated system by constructing an integrated representation of the world. That is, if an individual observes A and B fighting each other and he finds A to be a good party, then he will likely perceive B as a bad party (i.e., a principle of "meanings as integrating factors"). The current study provides empirical evidence that individuals tend to attribute their experiences as a consistent and integrated system. That is, in the social marketing context, consumers' attitudes and credibility perceptions of the nonprofits,

the commercial partners, and even the newspaper featuring the cause were all positively correlated with one another. For companies considering doing CSR marketing targeted at young adults, therefore, this present finding offers a practical implication that the partnership with nonprofits would be an effective strategy. The exception was that adult consumer participants showed greater participation intention when the cause was sponsored by a nonprofit alone vs. co-sponsored by a commercial company. It is not clear why this was the case, but given that the positive responses to the commercial sponsorship condition were so much more common, the conclusion that co-sponsorships are effective remains strong.

As for the effects of localization, Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated similar results: the *negative* impact of localizing stories. Although there was significant reason to expect that “localizing” the stories would have an additional positive impact on attitudes and intentions, this study did not find this to be the case. Rather, in both Studies 1 and 2, results showed a *negative* impact with localizing stories, especially when the cause was co-sponsored by a commercial company. For an environmental feature involving a commercial company, the participants in the non-localized condition showed more favorable attitudes and behavioral intentions as compared with those in the localized condition. For the hunger-relief feature, Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated a clearer picture of the interaction between localization and sponsor type. That is, in the localized condition, participants indicated more favorable credibility perceptions (Study 1) of and attitudes toward the nonprofit (Study 2) when the cause was sponsored by a nonprofit only vs. when it was co-sponsored by a commercial company. On the other hand, in the non-localized condition, there was no significant difference between the sponsor types.

This interaction is consistent with our expectation (H3) that the localized feature would increase participants' personal relevance and cognitive elaboration, which would lead them to evaluate the message more critically and with greater persuasion knowledge. That is, for a localized feature, participants might perceive the commercial co-sponsorship as an activity that contributes to the commercialization of local events. This explanation is in line with Speed & Thomson's (2000) findings that people perceived corporate sponsorship more negatively (i.e., as commercializing a community) when the social causes were amateur events, as compared to when the causes were professional events. Meanwhile, for most cases involving a commercial co-sponsor, the non-localized conditions were more effective. This finding suggests that when a social cause involves commercial sponsors, the work of "localizing" may not be worth what it costs the newspaper to carry out that localization. It is noteworthy that this was the case for both young adult students and adult consumers. In Study 1, the participants were college students, who might not have the same "connection" with the localized city as adult residents would. However, Study 2 confirmed the previous findings regarding the interaction between localization and sponsor type with adult participants who reside in the same city.

Future studies may need to investigate how other types of pro-social messages would affect news readers' perceptions. Since this study utilized general issues such as environmental efforts and hunger relief for the experimental stimuli, future studies may need to explore how controversial pro-social issues could generate different results from the ones presented in this study. Although this study investigated participation intention as one of the dependent variables, this variable deserves more research since an

increasing number of nonprofits are dependent on donations and volunteering.

In conclusion, Study 1 and 2 show strong verification of each other, even though one tested college students and the other tested adults. That fact further strengthens the generalizability of the findings. These studies are important because they identify and verify the positive impact of commercial sponsorship of nonprofits within the environment of news features on various social causes promoted by nonprofits. The managerial implications are clearly that combining nonprofit and commercial co-sponsors in a news feature produces predominantly positive responses. There is not the same downside as previous studies comparing commercial alone and nonprofit alone have found.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the current experiment, this study employed a mat feature release, which is a formatted article that is sent in “mat” form ready for publication. The concept was to provide helpful consumer information about a variety of subjects with a brief mention of the nonprofit or corporation that distribute the release (Wilcox & Cameron, 2008). The mat release practice in the U.S. has been steadily expanding. However, little is known about how effective this form of promotion is. Virtually nothing is known about how people feel about newspapers that run this format of news featuring nonprofits and social causes. The present study aims to answer these questions by employing this type of news feature as an experiment stimulus. It is noteworthy, however, that when conducting the experiment, we presented the stimuli as news stories and did not include any further indication where it came from. The eight news features were identical replica of real news stories that participants would be normally exposed to. As the focus of the study was examining the message effect from the audience’s perspective, participants were introduced to the stimuli as a mere news feature article.

<sup>2</sup> The social cause type interacted with the other two independent variables in attitudes toward the campaign [ $F(1, 134) = 5.89, p = .017$ ] and nonprofit credibility perceptions [ $F(1, 134) = 3.81, p = .053$ ].

<sup>3</sup> The social cause type interacted with the sponsor type on behavioral intentions ( $F(1, 121) = 5.82, p = .017$ ).

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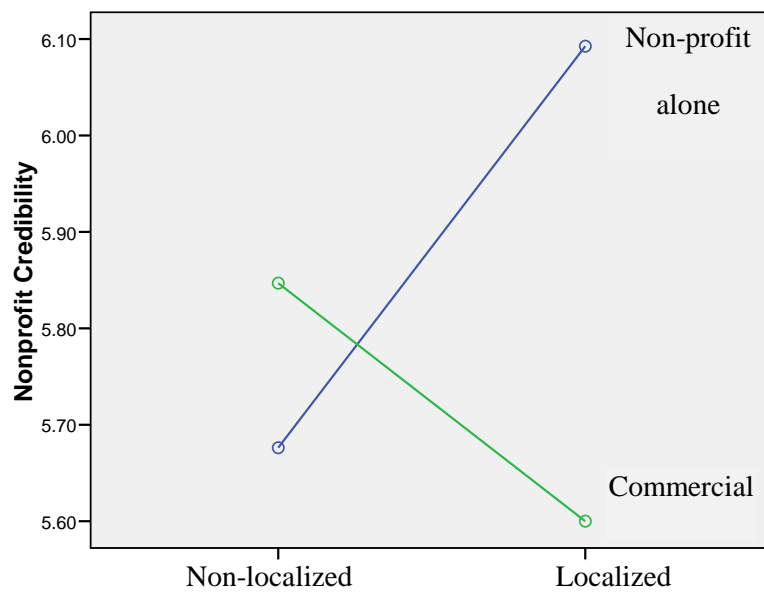
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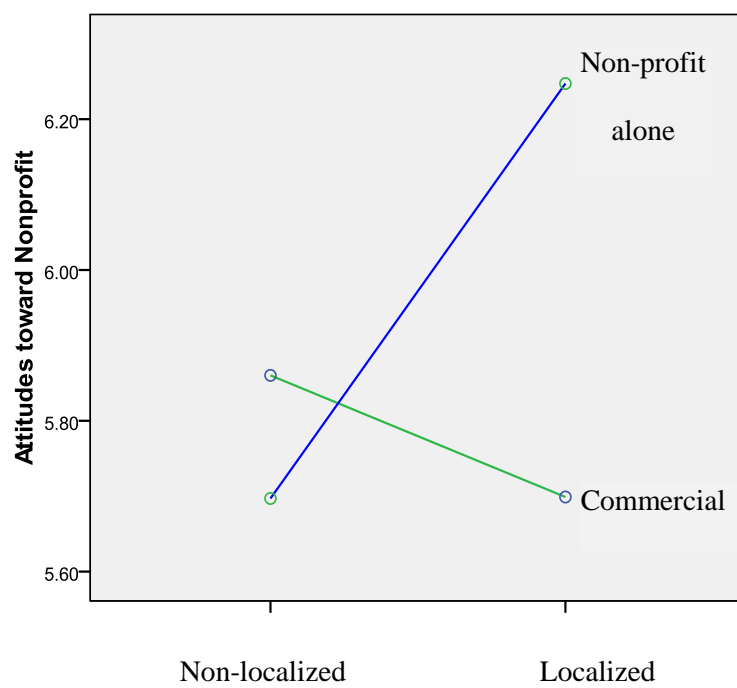
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**Esther Thorson**

**Figure 1** An interaction between sponsor type and localization for the perceived credibility of the nonprofit organization (STUDY1)



**Figure 2** An interaction between sponsor type and localization for the attitudes toward the nonprofit organization (STUDY2)



**Table 1** Means and standard deviations for non-profit credibility, attitudes toward the non-profit, and participation intentions (STUDY 1)

<i>Variables*</i>	<i>Environmental effort feature</i>							<i>Hunger relief feature</i>						
	<i>Non-profit only</i>		<i>Commercial co-sponsor</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Non-profit only</i>		<i>Commercial co-sponsor</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>				<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Non-profit credibility	5.98	.77	5.86	.79	.762	1, 136	.384	5.97	.87	5.83	.89	1.08	1, 134	.299
Attitudes toward non-profit	5.94	.87	5.91	.72	.061	1, 132	.806	6.04	.90	6.00	.793	.136	1, 133	.713
Participation intentions	4.99	.15	4.99	.10	.007	1, 132	.935	5.12	1.51	5.27	1.02	.375	1, 128	.542

\* Ranging from 1 to 7.

**Table 2** Independent t-tests for corporate credibility, attitudes toward the company, attitudes toward the product, and purchase intentions by localization (STUDY 1)

<i>Variables*</i>	<i>Environmental effort feature</i>					<i>Hunger relief feature</i>				
	<i>Local</i>		<i>Non-</i>			<i>Local</i>		<i>Non-</i>		
	<i>mean</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>(SD)</i>				<i>(SD)</i>	<i>(SD)</i>			
Corporate credibility	3.90 (.69)	4.18 (.69)	1.67	66	p = .099	3.89 (.93)	4.18 (.84)	1.35	66	p = .179
Attitudes to company	5.03 (.78)	5.41 (.76)	2.03	65	p = .046	5.02 (.98)	5.39 (.99)	1.55	67	p = .125
Attitudes to product	5.59 (1.09)	6.25 (.90)	2.75	67	p = .008	4.89 (1.41)	5.37 (1.27)	1.47	67	p = .146
Purchase intentions	4.16 (1.17)	5.32 (1.27)	3.86	67	p = .000	3.98 (1.56)	4.62 (1.48)	1.70	65	p = .092

\* Ranging from 1 to 7.

**Table 3** STUDY 1: Pearson correlation coefficients among participants’ responses towards the non-profits, the commercial sponsors, and the newspapers (The environmental efforts feature story)

	Message credibility	Non-profit credibility	Att. to non-profit	Att. to cause	Participation intentions	Corporate credibility	Att. to corporation	Att. to products	Purchase intentions	Newspaper credibility
Message credibility	1									
Non-profit credibility	.585**	1								
Attitudes to non-profit	.476**	.795**	1							
Attitudes to cause	.281*	.394**	.437**	1						
Participation intentions	.316**	.271*	.262*	.337**	1					
Corporate credibility	.200	.375**	.422**	.149	.206	1				
Attitudes to corporation	.111	.351**	.387**	.197	.322**	.812**	1			
Attitudes to products	.104	.287*	.418**	.513**	.327**	.302*	.347**	1		
Purchase intentions	.031	.208	.262*	.037	.289*	.266*	.452**	.438**	1	
Newspaper credibility	.373**	.418**	.271*	.249*	.531**	.288*	.361**	.443**	.225	1

\* p < .05, \*\*p < 0.01.



**Table 4** STUDY 1: Pearson correlation coefficients among participants' responses towards the non-profits, the commercial sponsors, and the newspapers (The hunger relief feature story)

	Message credibility	Non-profit credibility	Att. to non-profit	Att. to cause	Participation intentions	Corporate credibility	Att. to corporation	Att. to products	Purchase intentions	Newspaper credibility
Message credibility	1									
Non-profit credibility	.686**	1								
Attitudes to non-profit	.607**	.801**	1							
Attitudes to cause	.341**	.238	.500**	1						
Participation intentions	.441**	.426**	.559**	.654**	1					
Corporate credibility	.448**	.630**	.434**	.147	.296*	1				
Attitudes to corporation	.373**	.528**	.429**	.177	.380**	.852**	1			
Attitudes to products	.325**	.477**	.361**	.249*	.379**	.582**	.611**	1		
Purchase intentions	.241*	.270*	.250*	.235	.368**	.429**	.471**	.630**	1	
Newspaper credibility	.379**	.378**	.395**	.374**	.491**	.369**	.490**	.384**	.328**	1

\* p < .05, \*\*p < 0.01.

**Table 5** STUDY 2: Pearson correlation coefficients among participants’ responses towards the non-profits, the commercial sponsors, and the newspapers (The environmental efforts feature story)

	Message credibility	Non-profit credibility	Att. to non-profit	Att. to cause	Participation intentions	Corporate credibility	Att. to corporation	Att. to products	Purchase intentions	Newspaper credibility
Message credibility	1									
Non-profit credibility	.777**	1								
Attitudes to non-profit	.749**	.878**	1							
Attitudes to cause	.677**	.686**	.702**	1						
Participation intentions	.585**	.635**	.669**	.595**	1					
Corporate credibility	.653**	.615**	.586**	.418**	.561**	1				
Attitudes to corporation	.705**	.624**	.645**	.502**	.602**	.922**	1			
Attitudes to products	.611**	.684**	.650**	.656**	.593**	.576**	.644**	1		
Purchase intentions	.533**	.626**	.588**	.559**	.627**	.549**	.633**	.714**	1	
Newspaper credibility	.426**	.390**	.454**	.446**	.540**	0.217	.312*	.496**	.483**	1

\* p < .05, \*\*p < 0.01.

**Table 6** STUDY 2: Pearson correlation coefficients among participants’ responses towards the non-profits, the commercial sponsors, and the newspapers (The hunger relief feature story)

	Message credibility	Non-profit credibility	Att. to non-profit	Att. to cause	Participation intentions	Corporate credibility	Att. to corporation	Att. to products	Purchase intentions	Newspaper credibility
Message credibility	1									
Non-profit credibility	.713**	1								
Attitudes to non-profit	.712**	.893**	1							
Attitudes to cause	.657**	.572**	.589**	1						
Participation intentions	.578**	.576**	.597**	.726**	1					
Corporate credibility	.707**	.518**	.513**	.521**	.577**	1				
Attitudes to corporation	.735**	.519**	.583**	.515**	.523**	.917**	1			
Attitudes to products	.449**	.324*	.357**	.337**	.480**	.621**	.588**	1		
Purchase intentions	.430**	.355**	.408**	.396**	.523**	.598**	.616**	.803**	1	
Newspaper credibility	.419**	.400**	.493**	.479**	.592**	.521**	.497**	.454**	.465**	1

\* p < .05, \*\*p < 0.01.