

Partners in Purpose: How message framing, source credibility, and partnership fit  
influence CSR outcomes in Business-NGO partnerships

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**ABSTRACT**

The plethora of current social and environmental challenges compels collaboration between different organizations, such as businesses and NGOs, to address them effectively. Since the late 1990s, more and more companies have incorporated partnerships with NGOs into their CSR plans, leading to a notable increase in cross-sector collaborations. Although collaborating with NGOs helps businesses maintain a favorable reputation and gain positive consumer responses, increasing instances of ethically questionable business actions, known as corporate misconduct, provoke consumer skepticism toward these CSR practices. Considering the growing discrepancies between what corporations say and what they do, ranging from consumer fraud to financial scandals, and the involvement of NGOs in financial scandals, there is a rising trend of consumer skepticism toward corporate engagement in social initiatives. For this reason, communication is crucial in rebuilding trust and ensuring the transparency of Business- NGO partnerships.

In this context, the current study examines the effects of different CSR communication strategies on consumer skepticism and purchase intention within the context of NGO-business partnerships. More specifically the following research question was investigated: How does the communication, particularly the message framing (narrative vs. expositive), source credibility (high vs. low) and partnership fit (high vs. low), of NGO-business partnerships in the realm of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives impact consumer skepticism and purchase intention?

To address the research question, a 2x2x2 factorial between-subjects design was employed. The three independent variables (message framing, source credibility, and partnership fit) were operationalized across eight experimental scenarios illustrating the partnership of a fictional tech company, Techkey, with a fictional NGO named HopeHarbor. The data for the experiment were gathered online through Prolific, a paid platform for recruiting participants. After final data cleaning, the initial dataset of 260 participants ( $N=260$ ) was reduced to 255 valid participants ( $N=255$ ), aged from 19 to 73 years old ( $M=30.49$ ,  $SD=9.72$ ).

The findings of the study revealed no significant main effects of message framing, message source credibility, or partnership fit on consumer skepticism and

purchase intention. However, a significant interaction effect was found between message framing and message source. Specifically, it was found that expositive messages from a company's Instagram account can enhance purchase intention, indicating that clear and informative communication by companies can positively influence consumer behavior. The findings highlight the complexity of CSR communication and underscore the need for further research to identify effective strategies for enhancing consumer outcomes in NGO-business partnerships. In parallel, the significant interaction effect suggests that the interplay between message framing and message source can significantly influence consumer behavior, demonstrating the importance of carefully tailoring communication messages based on the message source.

KEY WORDS: CSR Communication, Business- NGO partnerships, consumer skepticism, purchase intention, message framing

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## 1. Introduction

Tackling global multifaceted social and environmental challenges requires joint efforts involving Non-profit Organizations and businesses (Moshtari & Vanpoucke, 2020, p.104). In the face of pressing global challenges such as climate change and socioeconomic inequality, this evolving environment underscores the importance of fostering collaboration between profit-driven entities and NGOs, as these partnerships offer innovative solutions and drive positive societal change (Forbes, 2022). Since the late 1990s, there has been a notable trend of increasing partnerships between businesses and NGOs, characterized by a rise in both frequency and value (Van Huijstee, 2010, p.15). Globalization has facilitated this trend, enabling both large companies and NGOs to expand their reach by forming networks. Additionally, technological advances have played a crucial role in shrinking the world, bringing people and organizations closer together and raising awareness of global issues (Van Huijstee, 2010, p.15).

Partnerships like Coca Cola's with WWF for Arctic polar bear habitat protection (MarketingWeek, 2013) showcase a changing landscape of shared social responsibility. Another example of a renowned NGO-business partnership is Unilever's collaboration with the NGO Save the Children to aid the NGO's efforts in China and developing nations like Nigeria and Kenya, aiming to deliver high-quality healthcare services to mothers and infants and combat malnutrition and other threats facing women and children (Unilever, 2012).

Traditionally, NGOs and businesses were often positioned as opposing forces. However, in recent years, there has been a notable increase in collaboration between the two sectors, reflecting a shared commitment to sustainability-focused programs (Heap, 2000, p. 557). In the past, NGOs viewed businesses as drivers of environmental problems, whereas today they recognize their potential for positive societal impact (Overbeek & Harms, 2011, p.254). Moreover, NGOs initially used to prioritize raising awareness about businesses' social and ecological impacts in a more aggressive manner. However, they now engage in direct communication with businesses, fostering cooperation and holding them accountable for their actions. (Overbeek & Harms, 2011, p.254). As the years go by, the boundaries between sectors are less distinct, with mutual influence blurring distinctions further. Both sectors now emphasize concepts like branding, targeted marketing, and customer satisfaction (Heap, 2000, p.557). Although, NGOs traditionally focused on principles and

companies on profits, today, both prioritize principles alongside financial success, reflecting a convergence of values and goals (Heap, 2000, p.557).

In today's landscape, stakeholders, such as customers and suppliers, are placing increasing pressure on businesses to minimize their societal and environmental impacts. To uphold their reputation and social acceptance, businesses must not only generate financial value but also contribute to social and environmental well-being (Overbeek & Harms, 2011, p.256). In response, companies are adopting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies to improve their brand image and showcase their dedication to societal concerns (Overbeek & Harms, 2011, p.256). In this context, NGO-business collaborations, cross-sector partnerships or social alliances, are pivotal for driving CSR and sustainability efforts (Chaudhri & Hein, 2021, p.9).

As the CSR movement gains momentum and firms face greater pressure concerning their nonfinancial impact, including ESG reporting, the landscape for NGO-Business partnerships is set to undergo significant evolution (Forbes, 2022). These involve diverse-sector organizations teaming up with corporations, necessitating shared commitment and resources to address issues and exchange expertise (Waddock, 1988, p.18; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, p.12). In other words, by partnering with NGOs, businesses gain access to resources and expertise that strengthen their CSR initiatives, furthering their commitment to sustainable practices and positive societal influence (Overbeek & Harms, 2011, p.256).

However, in light of ongoing instances of corporate misbehavior and dissonance between what corporate says and what they do, ranging from consumer fraud to financial scandals and environmental disasters, there is a growing trend of consumer skepticism toward corporate engagement in social initiatives (Bernstein, 2009, p.609). The prevalence of conflicting information regarding CSR initiatives often leaves consumers unsure about the authenticity of companies' commitments and the actual societal benefits derived from such efforts (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p.1831; Bernstein, 2009, p.609). This uncertainty amplifies consumer skepticism, characterized by doubts about the sincerity of CSR motives due to discrepancies between corporate communication and actual practices. Consequently, this skepticism poses a significant challenge to the effectiveness of CSR endeavors (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p.1831).

Effective communication, emphasizing transparency to build trust (Austin,

2000, p.86), counters skepticism and boosts purchase intentions. Also, a high partnership fit which refers to the alignment of a corporation's values with the cause can mitigate skepticism and positively influence consumer attitudes (Chaudhri & Hein, 2021, p.14). Even though partnership fit can be influenced by several factors such as stakeholders' familiarity with previous CSR initiatives of the business and the type of NGO-Business partnership, a high fit is important to yield positive consumer behavior (Chaudhri & Hein, 2021, p.14). Additionally, the credibility of the communication source significantly affects stakeholders' perceptions for the partnership (Shumate & O'Connor, 2010, p.577). NGOs generally enjoy higher public trust on social and environmental issues compared to corporations (Shumate & O'Connor, 2010, p.577).

Existing research on NGO-business partnerships emphasizes on various partnership dimensions such as selection criteria, partnership design, motivations, and types of collaboration (e.g. Jonker & Nijhof, 2006, p.456; Seitanidi & Crane, 2008, p.413; Shumate & O'Connor, 2010, p.577). Moreover, other studies focus on the strategic purpose behind such collaborations, investigating how both parties involved can be strategically benefited (Loza, 2004, p. 299). Furthermore, there is literature that articulates the legal and ethical considerations that these types of partnerships bring, while more recent studies have begun to shed light on the broader societal implications of NGO-Business collaborations (Seitanidi & Crane, 2008, p. 414). Even though there are some explored topics in the context of NGO-Business partnerships, limited in-depth attention has been given to the actual communication strategies that are employed in these cases (Chaudhri & Hein, 2021, p.1).

However, it is a crucial topic since communication of NGO-Business partnerships plays a pivotal role in establishing corporations as socially responsible and reputable entities, thus contributing to their legitimacy (Chaudhri & Hein, 2021, p.14). Moreover, despite the extensive research on CSR communication (Sohn et al., 2015, p. 133; Elving, 2013, p. 277), there is still not enough research specifically focusing on how NGOs are involved in collaborating with businesses and the impact of this collaboration. Correspondingly, although there is research on the general CSR's effect on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2019, p. 206; Sharma et al., 2018, p. 23), focused studies on the link between NGO-business partnerships and consumer attitudes are limited. Therefore, the current study seeks to investigate the following research question **(RQ)**:



**RQ:** *How does the communication, particularly the message framing (narrative vs. expositive), source credibility (high vs. low,) and partnership fit (high vs. low), of NGO-business partnerships in the realm of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives impact consumer skepticism and purchase intention?*

### 1.1 Scientific relevance

The scientific significance of the present study lies in its aim to explore communication strategies within Business-NGO partnerships, thus adding to the analysis of how various components of CSR communication influence consumer perceptions and behavior.

Although there is an extensive body of research on the role of businesses as sponsors of causes (e.g., Rifon et al., 2004, p. 30; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006, p. 154) and the overall field of CSR communication and its impact on consumer outcomes (e.g., Sen et al., 2009, p. 198; Du et al., 2010, p. 9), studies specifically focused on Business-NGO partnership communication remain limited (e.g., Chaudhri & Hein, 2021, p. 1; Schade et al., 2022, p. 39; Perez et al., 2020, p. 360). The literature gap is even bigger when it comes to message framing (expositive vs narrative framing) of Business-NGO partnership communication, whereas in some cases the results of the studies are contradictory (e.g. Schade et al., 2022, p. 39; Perez et al., 2020, p. 360). For instance, Schade et al. (2022, p. 49) did not confirm the perceived superiority of narrative over expositive messages, while Perez et. al. (2020, p.360) supports that narrative messages form favorable consumer perceptions. Similar gap in NGO-Business partnership communication literature is observed both for message source credibility and partnership fit. Therefore, additional research is required to delve deeper into how the different strategies in Business-NGO partnership communication influence consumer responses. The present study by investigating the influence of message framing, source credibility, and perceived partnership fit on consumer behavior, it offers potential advancements in CSR communication literature, and consumer behavior theories, enriching academic understanding and insights. Additionally, by employing an experimental design, this study enhances methodological approaches, diverging from prior qualitative methodologies used by other researchers (e.g. Austin, 2000).

## 1.2 Societal relevance

The societal relevance of the study lies in the fact that understanding the impact of communication in NGO-business partnerships can provide valuable guidance for both businesses and NGOs. Considering that more businesses and NGOs are recognizing that the factors uniting them are greater than those dividing them, leading to impactful partnerships (Heap, 2000, p. 557), this underscores the need for effective communication strategies to maximize the benefits and influence of these collaborations. However, the heightened disbelief in these partnerships is a significant burden for stakeholders in realizing the value of CSR initiatives (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p. 1831). For this reason, the present study aims to inform both sides on effective message framing, message source, and partnership fit choices, to help businesses and NGOs tackle skepticism and gain favorable consumer attitudes through their partnerships. A successful communication strategy will not only lead to higher profits and positive consumer responses for businesses, but it will also benefit NGOs with increased awareness, new resources, and support. Through such collaborations, impactful initiatives can be developed and implemented, leading to positive social change and serving as examples of socially responsible business practices that inspire others to follow. Thus, the findings of the present study will provide valuable insights for both businesses and NGOs, guiding them in crafting effective communication strategies that foster trust and amplify the positive impact of their CSR initiatives.

## 1.3 Chapter outline

The rest of the research is organized as follows: chapter two presents the theoretical framework of Business-NGO partnerships, focusing on their significance as a CSR practice and key concepts around cross-sector partnerships such as partnership types and their benefits and risks. It also demonstrates the crucial role of CSR communication for the success of these partnerships by explaining the value of message framing, message source credibility, and partnership fit as communication strategies. Furthermore, an important part of chapter two is the development of hypotheses about the differences in the effects of different types of message framing (narrative vs. expositive), message source credibility (high vs. low), and partnership fit (high vs. low) on consumer skepticism and purchase intention, as well as the potential interaction effects between these practices. In the third chapter,

methodological aspects and research design are presented. Specifically, this chapter explains why quantitative analysis, and particularly the experimental method, was chosen as the methodological approach. It details the experimental scenarios, procedures, and data gathering process, while also presenting the operationalization of variables and the characteristics of the sample. The fourth chapter concentrates on the results of the statistical analyses and, consequently, presents whether the hypotheses were accepted or rejected. The fifth chapter discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of the research results, and finally, the conclusion provides a summary of the results, key limitations of the research, and directions for future research.

## 2.Literature review

### 2.1 NGO-Business partnerships and CSR Communication

In the existing literature, the plethora of definitions of CSR illustrate the considerable confusion around this concept and the absence of a universally accepted definition (Dahlsrud, 2008, p.1). However, the majority of existing definitions share five common dimensions: environmental, social, economic, stakeholder, and voluntariness (Dahlsrud, 2008, p.4). Among the plenty definitions for CSR, an indicative one is Visser's (2011, p. 7): “CSR is the way in which business consistently creates shared value in society through economic development, good governance, stakeholder responsiveness, and environmental improvement. Put another way, CSR is an integrated, systemic approach by business that builds, rather than erodes or destroys, economic, social, human, and natural capital.” By prioritizing CSR initiatives, companies gain favorable internal and external stakeholder attitudes and behaviors (Du et al., 2010, p.17). Over time, this also strengthens brand image, employee loyalty, purchase intention and word-of-mouth (Du et al., 2010, p.17).

The growing importance of CSR compels companies to extend their engagement beyond traditional stakeholders, such as consumers, and to collaborate with a diverse array of entities, including NGOs, to effectively address their emerging responsibilities (Jonker & Nijhof, 2006, p. 457). In this context, the partnerships between NGOs and businesses are a driving force for advancing corporate social responsibility (CSR) and fulfilling mutual socio-economic goals (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012, p.728). The term NGO that is used interchangeably with the term NPO (non-profit organization) “mainly refers to non-profit organizations and the literature emphasizes on their role in “development, relief and social change and NGO relations with states and donors” (Seitanidi, 2010, p.6). Importantly, NGO-Business partnership necessitates active commitment and resources exchange from involved parties (Jonker & Nijhof, 2006, p.457). For instance, businesses contribute with financial support, specialized industry knowledge, advanced production processes and with their strong brand reputation, while NGOs bring assets such as their community network and knowledge, pool of volunteers and community reputation (Jonker & Nijhof, 2006, p.457).

### 2.1.1 Partnership types

The main purpose of cross-sector partnerships is the co-creation of remarkable economic, social, and environmental value for society (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012, p.728). However, the value created varies depending on the type of partnership among the entities (Austin & Seitanidi, p. 729). Austin (2000, p. 71) proposes a collaboration continuum that illustrates the three different types of NGO-Business partnerships and how the level of involvement and resource exchange changes as they develop: Philanthropic, Transactional, Integrative. The philanthropic type is characterized more as conventional charity, limited to financial donations by the company, with minimal resource exchange and involvement from both parties, especially in high-level positions (Austin, 2000, p. 73). In the transactional type, there is high engagement between the business and the NGO, with mutual resource exchange that benefits both parties, as they address each other's expertise or financial gaps (Austin, 2000, p. 74). Finally, in the integrative type, the NGO and the business reach the level of a “mutual mission relationship,” as they work collectively towards the common goal of doing good and, most significantly, integrate into each other’s operational culture (Austin, 2000, p. 75).

### 2.1.2 Benefits and Risks of partnerships

Besides improving their reputation and legitimacy, businesses gain two main benefits from partnerships (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013, p.10). First, they minimize the risk of confusion regarding products they consider as beneficial to specific stakeholders (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013, p.10). Second, by engaging with NGOs, they acquire valuable community knowledge and develop skills that improves their products and solutions for their target groups (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013, p.10). In parallel, NGOs gain significant financial support and expertise by businesses to fulfill their mission (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013, p.10). Finally, NGOs are associated with significant assets like advocacy, credibility, and specialized knowledge, empowering them to gather support and influence corporate actions for broader societal issues (Heap, 2000, p.560).

However, an NGO-Business partnership can often pose risks for both parties. This can be illustrated by the fact that such partnerships can reduce NGOs’ legitimacy, as they must serve a dual role: business critic and partner (Heap, 2000, p. 559). The benefits of the partnership may influence them, potentially compromising their ability

to remain as critical as they should be, in alignment with their values (Heap, 2000, p. 559). Moreover, the multidimensional missions and profiles of NGOs create challenges for companies in understanding their representation and roles, leading to increased skepticism and make collaboration more difficult (Arenas et al., 2009, p.183). Another major risk is the possibility of conflicting priorities, mismatched expectations and unclear communication between the company and the NGO (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013, p.10).

## 2.2 The importance of CSR Communication

Empirical research in this field shows that these partnerships, as a CSR practice, thrive only when the public, notably consumers, are informed about and support them (Chaudhri & Hein, 2021, p.15). Specifically, consumers' awareness and understanding of a company's CSR initiatives are essential for these efforts to positively influence consumer outcomes (Sen et al., 2009, p.198). In the literature, it is argued that effective communication within CSR initiatives serves the dual role of raising stakeholder awareness and addressing skepticism, both of which are pivotal for the success of the partnerships (Du et al., 2010, p.9). Regarding skepticism, by communicating social initiatives honestly and effectively, companies build a favorable identity that reduces skepticism (Du et al., 2010, p.10). Consequently, stakeholders will be less skeptical of the motives behind CSR initiatives if they recognize that the company's motives are genuine rather than self-serving (Du et al., 2010, p.10). The necessity for well-coordinated CSR communication is underscored by studies revealing the very low level of awareness among consumers and employees regarding CSR initiatives, which blocks the benefits of these practices (Sen et al., 2009, p.198).

## 2.3 CSR communication, consumer skepticism and purchase intention

As companies invest more in CSR activities, consumer skepticism towards these initiatives and their communication has also increased (Rim & Kim, 2016, p. 248). Consumer skepticism significantly impacts the effectiveness of CSR communication, as research shows that it can undermine the benefits of CSR by causing negative consumer behavior, such as negative word-of-mouth (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p. 1837). In literature, the concept of "skepticism" has been extensively researched in the context of advertising and media studies (e.g. Moreno & Kang, 2020, p.1; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013; p.1837, Forehand & Grier, 2003, p. 350). One broad but widely-used definition for skepticism related generally to

advertising is "the tendency toward disbelief of advertising claims" (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, p. 160).

Attribution theory, rooted in the work of Heider (1958) and Kelley (1967), offers valuable insights for understanding consumer skepticism toward CSR (Forehand & Grier, 2003, p. 350). According to Schmitt (2015, p.1), "Attribution theory aims at explaining how individuals determine the causes of an event or behavior, as well as the consequence of such attribution on their subsequent behavior." In other words, this theory examines how people attribute motives and reasons to others' actions and explains how these attributed motives influence their future attitudes and behaviors (Forehand & Grier, 2003, p. 349). Whether consumers attribute public-serving motives or motives centered on benefiting the company directly to CSR practices significantly influences their skepticism toward these practices (Forehand & Grier, 2003, p. 349). This means that the way a company communicates the reasons for its CSR initiatives is a major factor in either increasing or decreasing skepticism (Rim & Kim, 2016, p. 250).

Particularly, two types of skepticism are identified in studies: dispositional skepticism, which refers to distrust as an inherent personality trait that is general and continuous, and situational skepticism, which is caused by specific marketing messages and activities rather than an inherent inclination for disbelief (Forehand & Grier, 2003p. 350). The majority of current studies is focused on situational skepticism, its antecedents and effects on consumer attitude and behavior (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p. 1832).

Rim and Kim (2016, p.248) highlight three main factors of CSR skepticism that influence consumer responses to CSR, including skepticism toward a company's altruism, disbelief of CSR messages and CSR activities, and skepticism toward CSR informativeness. Moreover, emphasis is paid on the significant effect of the content of CSR messages and communication media on the skepticism level (Moreno & Kang, 2020, p.1). Finally, academics suggest that even when cautious consumers question a company's genuine motives behind supporting a cause, a strong level of trust in the company can lessen the impact of skepticism on the intention to make a purchase (Patel et al., 2016, p.14).

In parallel, numerous studies on CSR's influence on business outcomes indicate increased purchase intentions toward companies investing in CSR activities, as a consumers' response to reward their efforts (e.g Lee & Shin, 2010,p.194; Gupta

et al.,2021, p. 1217; Brown & Dacin, 1997,p.68). Purchase intention has two dimensions, as it can be associated both with the intention to re-purchase a product or service and with the likelihood of choosing one specific product over others (Bianchi et al., 2018, p.210). According to Sen et al. (2009, p.201) favorable perceptions for a company's CSR activities lay the foundation for an emotional, closer connection between the brand the consumer, leading to higher purchase intention (Sen et al, 2009, p.201). Similarly, Chu and Chen (2019, p.459) propose in their research that when consumers can identify with the brand, meaning they recognize their own values on brands' CSR communication on social media, they evaluate more positively the products resulting in increased purchase intention. Moreover, some researchers consider the variable of motives, as it has been observed that purchase intention is influenced by the motives consumers perceive in CSR communication (Ellen et al., 2006, p. 147). Consumers tend to reward CSR initiatives with society-driven motives by purchasing more from these brands (Ellen et al., 2006, p. 147). However, Bhattacharya and Sen (2004, p.18) found the correlation between CSR and purchase behavior is significant only when specific conditions co-exist: consumer alignment with the CSR issue, strong congruence between the company and the cause, high product quality, and no additional cost for social responsibility. Consequently, they suggest the hesitation to sacrifice essential attributes like price explains why CSR initiatives often lead to favorable perceptions of the company but do not necessarily increase purchasing intention and behavior (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, p.18).

#### 2.4 Message framing in CSR communication

In the realm of CSR communication, the framing and content of messages is pivotal for favorable consumer responses (Moreno & Kang, 2020, p.1). Message framing is the practice of selecting and highlighting certain aspects of reality in communication to emphasize specific problem definitions, interpretations, evaluations, or recommendations (Entman, 1993, p.52). It impacts how information is interpreted and influences the opinion that people form, which in turn shapes their attitudes and behavioral intentions (Dalla-Pria & Rodriguez-de-Dios, 2022, p.546). Shumate and O'Connor (2010, p.577) highlight the significance of how organizations and stakeholders use messages to communicatively construct the meaning and value of NGO-business partnerships.

Information Processing Theory (IPT) lays the foundation for explaining how



individuals perceive and process communication messages, and how brands can design messages that align with consumers' information processing needs (Moreno & Kang, 2020, p. 2). In the marketing context, IPT suggests that consumer behavior is influenced not only by the information provided but also by how consumers view and interpret that information (Moreno & Kang, 2020, p. 2). IPT explains consumer responses to information and their behavioral intentions, focusing on the methods consumers use to process, evaluate, and connect with the information they receive rather than individual characteristics (Moreno & Kang, 2020, p. 2). Similarly, IPT in CSR considers how consumers collect and interpret CSR messages (Busse et al., 2016, p. 106).

Recent literature debates the efficacy of narrative versus expositive message framing (e.g. Perez et al., 2020, p. 360; Schade et al., 2022, p.39; Lewis & Sznitman, 2017, p.181). Narrative framing is associated with storytelling, "follows a particular structure that describes the cause-and-effect relationships between events that take place over a particular time period that impact particular characters" (Dahlstrom, 2014, p.13614). In the Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT), Fisher (1989, p. 56) highlights that narrative discourse encourages audiences to believe in and be motivated by the stories it presents, while narrative rationality prompts individuals to interpret and evaluate these narratives. Thus, narrative-framed CSR messages is perceived as an inspirational, interesting and engaging way for companies to communicate their initiatives (Dahlstrom, 2014, p.13614).

In contrast, expositive messages focus on transparent facts, delving into CSR without heavy storytelling and emotion (Perez et al., 2020, p.364). They are defined as "expositive and didactic forms of communication that present propositions in the form of reasons and evidence supporting a claim" (Kreuter et al., 2007, p. 222). Linguistically, they are closely linked with clear statements, demonstrations, evidence, and verbal expressions that convey information with confidence and a high level of assurance in its accuracy (Weick & Browning, 1986, p. 246).

Previous studies yield conflicting outcomes, with some endorsing the advantages of narrative message framing (e.g., Escalas, 2004, p. 168; Grill, 2011, p. 4), whereas others support expositive messages (e.g., Dhanesh & Nekmat, 2019, p. 30). Scholars drawing from narrative paradigm theory (NPT; Fisher, 1989) argue that storytelling through narrative messages enhance emotional ties between consumers and brands, yielding favorable impacts on CSR perceptions (Grill, 2011, p.4; Escalas,

2004, p.168). For instance, Escalas (2004, p.168) emphasizes that narrative processing strengthens consumer-brand connections because people naturally interpret experiences as stories, so when they encounter a story-driven ad, they relate it to their own memories and connect with the brand.

Concerning skepticism, skeptical consumers, seeking concrete evidence and rational arguments, might demand factual information over emotional narratives to alleviate uncertainties about corporate motives and contributions to CSR causes (Perez et al., 2020, p.375). In parallel, Kim et al. (2020, p. 4) argue that rational message framing in advertisements for sustainability initiatives emphasizes the utilitarian value of these initiatives, significantly enhancing cognitive trust and credibility, which consequently reduces skepticism. Moreover, consumers with high situational skepticism tend to analyze meticulously CSR campaign information and based on their evaluation they form their attitudes and decisions (Zhang & Hanks, 2016, p. 2078). Thus, rational, information-rich messages cater to their preference for detailed, technical content, resulting in reduced skepticism about the campaign (Zhang & Hanks, 2016, p. 2078).

Also, when it comes to purchase intention, which is the second dependent variables in the current research, the CSR communication literature consistently shows that expositive message framing is more effective. Perez et al. (2020, p.374) suggest that important attributes of CSR message content, such as CSR impact and CSR motives, had a more significant effect on purchase intention in the expositive messages condition of their experiment than in the narrative condition. In the same vein, Schade et al. (2022, p.49) suggest narrative framing might not inherently improve consumer behavior or e-WOM intentions compared to expositive frames in corporate-NGO communications. Finally, Dhanesh and Nekmat's (2019, p. 30) study proposes that when CSR messages present concrete facts instead of stories, they enhance positive attitudes and purchase intention, with the restriction that this finding applies more to consumers who are highly involved with the topic. Based on the aforementioned rationales, the Hypotheses 1 a,b (H1 a,b) are shaped as follows:

**H1:** Expositive messages within the communication of NGO-Business partnerships will lead to a) lower consumer skepticism than narrative messages, b) higher purchase intention compared to narrative-based messages.

## 2.5 Message Source Credibility in CSR Communication

One of the factors that influence the credibility and the consequent dynamic and positive effects of the message in CSR communication is the source of the message (Skard & Thorbjørnsen, 2013, p. 149). According to Pornpitakpan (2004, p.244) the two main dimensions of message source credibility are the perceived expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise refers to how skillful and experienced the source is perceived to be in providing accurate information, and trustworthiness indicates the audience's level of confidence that the speaker is honest and sincere in their claims (Pornpitakpan, 2004, p.244).

CSR initiatives are usually communicated both through corporate sources, such as company's owned media and non-corporate sources, such as supported causes media or influencers (Dalla- Pria & Rodriguez-de-Dios, p. 545). A survey conducted in Europe showed that Europeans believe some of the most suitable methods for companies to communicate their CSR activities include package labeling and voluntary reports, as well as editorials featured on mass media (Dawkins, 2004, p.116). However, the level of skepticism and perceived credibility differs between corporate and non-corporate message sources, since corporate sources are seen as more biased and self-interested, thereby increasing skepticism (Dalla- Pria & Rodriguez-de-Dios, p. 545; Skard & Thorbjørnsen, 2013, p. 149). In contrast, non-corporate sources are perceived as more independent and trustworthy, thereby decreasing skepticism (Skard & Thorbjørnsen, 2013, p. 149). This can be illustrated in Yoon et al.'s (2006, p. 385) study, which revealed that consumers viewed a company's CSR activities more positively and as more credible when they were communicated through a non-corporate, neutral source. Similarly, Szykman et al. (2004, p. 18) found that participants in their experiment perceived an anti-drinking and driving message as more credible, honest and driven by social motives when it was published from an NGO, compared to the same message coming from a beer corporation.

Notably, society views NGOs as highly credible sources due to their trustworthiness and ethical work on issues concerning the environment, human rights, and health, while governments and corporations enjoy less trust in these fields (Shumate & O'Connor, 2010, p. 577). The rise in NGO-corporate collaborations reflects a partnership where organizations with differing levels of public trust collaborate, with NGOs increasingly serving as trusted sources of credible information (Shumate & O'Connor, 2010, p. 577). For this reason, Simmons and

Becker-Olsen (2006, p. 165) argue that it can be more beneficial for companies to communicate their CSR activities through the NGOs they support, especially in cases of low congruence between the company and the NGO. This credibility of NGOs, rooted in their accreditation systems, enables the partner companies to effectively communicate the sustainability attributes of their products, further influencing positively consumer behaviors and perceptions (Poret, 2019, p.5).

Moreover, when people recognize their personal values reflected in a source, they perceive it as more expert and trustworthy, leading to positive consumer attitudes and behaviors, such as increased purchase intention (Wang, 2017, pp. 11-12). The significant effect of message source credibility on purchase intention is confirmed by several studies in the existing literature, which examine various message sources such as celebrity endorsers and consumer testimonials (e.g., Pornpitakpan, 2004, p. 245; Seiler & Kucza, 2017, p. 1; Til & Busler, 2000, p. 1). Taking into consideration the high credibility that NGOs possess as message sources compared to businesses and the resultant positive effects on consumer skepticism and purchase intention, Hypotheses 2a and 2b (H2a, H2b) are formulated as follows:

**H2:** Messages presented in NGOs' Instagram account will be perceived as more credible than those presented in company's Instagram account, leading to a) lower consumer skepticism, b) higher purchase intention.

## 2.6 Partnership fit and CSR Communication

Partnership fit refers to the perceived alignment between a company's values, attributes, target audience, products, mission or other key associations and the cause it supports through collaboration (Kim et al., 2011, p. 163). The multifaceted nature of partnership fit influences consumers' perceptions in multiple dimensions, especially when it interacts with the type of partnership (Chaudhri & Everett Hein, 2021, p. 14). It has been found that consumers can have favorable attitudes even toward a lower-fit partnership in the integrative type, where there is active resource exchange and collaboration between the business and the NGO (Chaudhri & Everett Hein, 2021, p. 14). Additionally, there are different types of fit, such as functional fit, which refers to the alignment between a firm's product functions and the type of sponsored cause, and image fit, which indicates the alignment between the firm's positioning and the NGO's identity (Kim et al., 2011, p. 164). For the current research both functional and image fit were taken into consideration.

In present literature, it is widely accepted that a high Business-NGO fit yields more favorable consumer attitudes and behaviors compared to low fit, as high-fit partnerships reflect consumer expectations from the company (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006, p. 155). Specifically, when companies partner with NGOs that are congruent with their brand image and positioning, it helps them keep the clarity of their positioning (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006, p. 155). Consequently, a clear positioning elicits positive consumer responses and behaviors towards both the partnership and the brand overall, enhancing brand equity (Fahy & Jobber, 2019, p. 242). Drawing from Symbiotic Sustainability Theory, Maktoufi et al. (2020, p. 1) state that high fit is so crucial that the value of NGO-business partnerships is communicatively constructed through strategic messaging. This messaging creates a perception of fit even in low-fit corporate-nonprofit collaborations, thereby shaping stakeholder perceptions (Maktoufi et al., 2020, p. 1). A low CSR fit leads to unfavorable examination of the partnership, negative attitude towards the brands, diminishing firm's value (Du et al., 2010, p. 12). Furtherly, low fit stimulates deeper cognitive processes since these partnerships are not expected by consumers, leading to doubts about the honesty of the motives behind the collaboration, thereby decreasing positive responses (Du et al., 2010, p. 12).

In the same vein, Moreno and Kang (2020, p.1) support that CSR fit is crucial for either raising or eliminating consumer skepticism, since high-fit tends to reduce the disbelief levels. This happens because a strong alignment between the company and the cause fosters the perception that company's actions are driven by genuine altruism and not self-interest, reduces consumers' skepticism regarding the company's intentions (Rifon et al., 2004, p.29). Additionally, a high fit positively influences purchase intentions, as consumers prefer products from companies engaged in cause-related marketing initiatives over competitors (Barone et al., 2000, p. 248). However, the recognition of socially-driven motives remains a prerequisite for this increase in purchase intention (Barone et al., 2000, p. 248). Moreover, Bhattacharya and Sen (2004, p. 18) argue that a strong partnership, along with good product quality and reasonable pricing, is essential for consumers to be willing to purchase products from a company that engages in CSR initiatives. Finally, if consumers have a favorable attitude toward a brand before the NGO-business partnership and recognize a high partnership fit, they will transfer this positive attitude to the partnership (Dickinson & Barker, 2007, pp. 79-80). This leads not only to favorable evaluations of the

partnership, but also to increased purchase intentions (Dickinson & Barker, 2007, pp. 79-80). Drawing from the aforementioned studies for the benefits of high partnership fit on purchase intention and consumer skepticism, Hypotheses 3a and 3b (H3a, H3b) are as follows:

**H3:** A high fit of NGO-business partnership will lead to a) lower consumer skepticism, b) higher purchase intention, compared to a low fit.

### 2.7 Interaction effect between message framing and message source

Although message framing and message source credibility can individually impact communication strategy, research has also explored their interaction effects on consumer perceptions and behaviors (Kim & Kim, 2013, p.64). Despite the relatively limited literature on the interaction between message framing and source credibility, some scholars have examined this topic from various angles. For instance, studies have delved into how message sidedness and source credibility influence communication strategies for cancer prevention (Arora & Arora, 2006, p.35), as well as the interactive impact of message framing and source credibility of green messages on customers' attitudes in hospitality (Kim & Kim, 2013, p.64).

However, a noticeable gap exists in literature regarding the joint influence of message framing—focused on expository or narrative framing—and source credibility on consumer attitudes and behaviors, particularly within the context of NGO-corporate collaborations. Gill (2011, p.4) suggests that when companies use narrative message framing in the form of storytelling to convey their CSR messages, it leads to enhanced relationships with both internal (employees) and external stakeholders. However, Pérez et al. (2020, p.377) propose that consumers' overall skepticism concerning corporations and CSR can influence how effective narrative CSR message frames are perceived. They suggest that individuals with heightened levels of skepticism may favor expository messages, prioritizing factual and logical arguments over storytelling (Perez et al., 2020, p.377). Also, regarding purchase intention as it aforementioned expository messages can have a more significant result than narrative (Perez et al., 2020, p.376). Consequently, given the higher skepticism towards corporate social responsibility practices, it can be assumed that expository messages offering more rational arguments for NGO-business partnerships will result in reduced skepticism, especially when the message comes from a less credible source, such as a corporation (Shumate and O'Connor, 2010).

On the contrary, NGOs are usually viewed as inherently credible organizations due to their dedication to ethical causes, focused on volunteerism and donations, free of profit-driven motives (Wong, 2012, p.88). Thus, it can be assumed that narrative message framing can be more suitable for a more credible message source such as NGOs. Following this rationale, Hypotheses 4a and 4b (H4a, H4b) are formed as:

**H4:** The effect of message framing on a) consumer skepticism and b) purchase intention is different for NGO message source than it is for corporate message source. Specifically, while expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing for corporations as message sources, narrative framing is more effective than expositive framing for NGOs as message sources.

## 2.8 Interaction effect between message framing and partnership fit

An influential factor that defines how people process information is the degree to which they have developed a well-organized framework of knowledge (schema) about a particular topic (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p.165). This also applies to NGO-business partnerships, as a key variable influencing consumer perceptions of the congruence between a company and a cause is how people analyze the information about the collaboration (Schade et al., 2022, p.44). This can be illustrated by the fact that when there is high alignment between a company's CSR with a cause, consumers are expected to respond more favorably because they can easily match this new information with what they already know (Lim, 2019, p.57; Rifon et al., p.31, 2004). On the other hand, a low company-cause fit demands a deeper process of analyzing the relationship between the cause and the company due to unfamiliarity, often resulting in negative reactions such as skepticism (Lim, 2019, p.57; Rifon et al., p.31, 2004).

Petty and Cacioppo (1986, p.168) found in their research that emotional signals might have a more significant impact in shaping positive behaviors when consumers have limited prior knowledge compared to when their prior knowledge for a topic is extensive. Moreover, in the realm of crisis communication, a higher CSR fit combined with a narrative communication can reduce skepticism more effectively than a rational message, even when the rational message also is combined with a high fit condition (Lentferink, 2018, p.29). Drawing from these researches, Hypotheses 5a) and 5b) (H5a, H5b) are defined as follows:

**H5:** The effect of message framing on a) consumer skepticism and b) purchase intention is different for a high fit partnership than it is for a low fit partnership. Specifically, while narrative framing is more effective than expositive framing for a high fit partnership, expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing for a low fit partnership.

## 2.9 Conceptual model

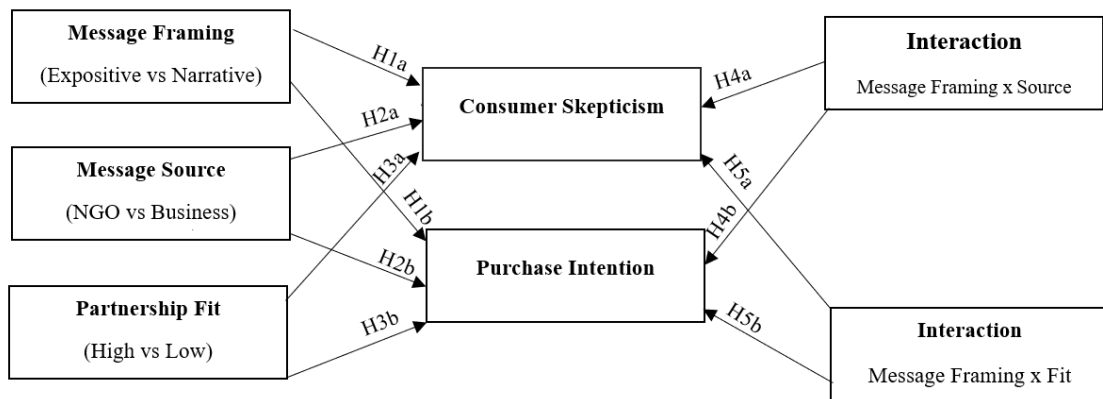


Figure 2.1. Conceptual model of Hypotheses H1a, H1b, H2a, H2b, H3a, H3b, H4a, H4b, H5a, H5b



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

This study utilized quantitative research methods to test hypotheses and address the research question. Quantitative analysis enables the measurement and quantification of human behavior, allowing for the exploration of correlations between behaviors using numerical data analysis (Allen, Titsworth & Hunt, 2008, p.8). Whether conducted through surveys or experiments, quantitative studies utilize a valid and representative sample of individuals, enabling the formation of generalized conclusions about similar behaviors within larger groups and populations (Allen, Titsworth & Hunt, 2008, p.7). The generalizability of the results will help get more informed insights for a broader population of consumers regarding the impact of NGO-business partnerships on their thoughts and behavior. Understanding these dynamics is key to fostering meaningful collaborations that resonate with stakeholders and drive positive social change. Also, the nature of the examined variables, purchase intention and consumer skepticism that are mostly numerically measured led to quantitative analysis instead of qualitative analysis that captures the data in more nonstandard forms, such as words and symbols that prevent the uniformity and generalizability of results (Neuman, 2014, p.202).

Specifically, for this study, an experiment was chosen because it not only identifies correlations between variables, like surveys do, but also reveals causal relationships between the examined variables and determines whether an independent variable significantly affects a specific dependent variable (Neuman, 2014, p.287; Query, 2009, p.86). This aspect of experiments is crucial for this study's aim of investigating the impact of message framing, source credibility, and partnership fit on consumer purchase intention and skepticism. Additionally, experiments allow for the manipulation of different types of CSR messages and partnership fit, providing insights into which approaches are most effective in influencing consumer perceptions and actions. Moreover, after reviewing existing literature on the influence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication strategies on consumer perceptions and behavior, it is evident that experiments are commonly used for this type of research (e.g., Schade et al., 2022; Pérez et al., 2020). Consistent with this approach, this research utilized an experimental design in the form of an online survey conducted through Qualtrics (Appendix 1).

To address the research question and hypotheses, a 2x2x2 factorial between-subjects design was employed. In total, three primary factors were manipulated: Message Framing (Narrative Framing vs Expositive Framing), Source Credibility (high credibility vs low credibility), and Perceived Partnership Fit (High fit vs Low fit) generating eight different experimental conditions, as indicated in Table 3.1. Due to the between-subjects design, the eight conditions were assigned randomly to all the participants and each participant was exposed to only one condition. Assigning conditions randomly helped ensure that the results are less biased, since this process guaranteed that neither researcher’s inclination to confirm a hypothesis nor the personal interests of participants influenced the selection process (Neuman, 2014, p.288). Participants were not assigned based on the researcher's personal preferences, cultivating fairness across the study.

Table 3.1. Research Conditions

<b>Condition</b>	<b>Message framing</b>	<b>Source Credibility</b>	<b>Partnership Fit</b>
1	Expositive	High	Low
2	Narrative	High	Low
3	Expositive	Low	Low
4	Narrative	Low	Low
5	Expositive	High	High
6	Narrative	High	High
7	Expositive	Low	High
8	Narrative	Low	High

### 3.2 Experimental scenarios

The three independent variables (message framing, source credibility and partnership fit) were operationalized across eight experimental scenarios illustrating the partnership of a fictional tech company that sells smartphones named Techkey with a fictional NGO named “HopeHarbor”. Each scenario began with a brief description of the company and its mission, as depicted on the company's website. Following this, an Instagram post announcing the corporate-NGO partnership was presented, either from the NGO's account or the company's account, depending on the assigned condition.

Instagram was chosen among other social media for its global popularity with 2 billion active users per month (Statista, 2023). Also, a tech company was chosen to be featured in the scenarios because of sustained and substantial growth of this industry the last decades (Forbes, 2021). As these companies continue to thrive, consumers increasingly expect them not only to enhance their services but also to prioritize societal well-being and make a tangible impact on society. So, the choice for using a tech company was influenced by the growing demand from consumers for tech companies to contribute positively to society, as highlighted in a recent Forbes report (2021).

To mitigate biases associated with real-life entities, as previously mentioned, participants were presented with stimuli depicting a fictional NGO-business collaboration between Techkey and a fictitious NGO for women's rights, named "HopeHarbor." This collaboration focused on jointly developing a smartphone app aimed at aiding victims of domestic violence. To evaluate partnership fit and minimize biases, a second fictional partnership between Techkey and another fictitious NGO, also named "HopeHarbor," was established, this time focused on providing food aid to children in Africa. Since the first partnership revolves around smartphone app development, it was expected that participants would perceive a stronger alignment with Techkey, a tech company specializing in smartphone sales, compared to the second partnership, which does not involve technology or smartphones. For the experiment, Canva app was utilized to create a webpage visual for the fictional Tech company and visuals representing Instagram posts. Each case adhered to the prevailing terminology found on relevant websites, ensuring that the manipulations were closely similar to real-life scenarios (Appendix 2).

In all conditions participants were initially presented with introductory webpages outlining the mission of the fictional tech company Techkey, which specializes in smartphone sales. After the introductory webpage, participants were presented with the post announcing the collaboration. For message framing manipulation, participants were provided randomly with either expositive messages or narrative messages. In expositive message framing conditions, the collaboration was announced in a straightforward and informative manner without emotional tones. For narrative framing conditions, participants saw a post with storytelling for either domestic violence or children malnutrition that aimed to motivate emotionally the participants.

Concerning the message source credibility manipulation, participants in the high credibility condition saw a post published by the Instagram account of the NGO. For the low credibility condition, participants were presented with a post published by the Instagram account of the business.

Regarding the partnership fit manipulation, participants in the high partnership fit condition were exposed to a post about the collaboration between the business Techkey and the NGO for women's rights, HopeHarbor, for the development of the "STOP" mobile app. In contrast, participants assigned to the low partnership fit condition saw a post about the collaboration between Techkey and the NGO for children's rights, HopeHarbor, aimed at providing food aid to children in Ethiopia.

### 3.3 Procedure

Before participating in the actual experiment, participants read the presentation message I wrote on the Prolific platform, which informed them about the experiment's topic and the monetary compensation they would receive. Once they decided to participate, they encountered the introductory section, which provided further information about the experiment's purpose. This section offered a brief and general overview of the research topic to avoid biasing participants. Specifically, participants were informed that the experiment aimed to gather their opinions on the NGO-Business partnership between the corporation Techkey and the NGO HopeHarbor. Additionally, participants were notified that their participation would be voluntary and anonymous, and the duration of the experiment would be approximately 4 minutes. They were assured that all provided data would be treated confidentially and used strictly for academic purposes. Participants were also informed that they could exit the experiment at any time without consequences and were provided with my contact details for any further questions. Following this, participants were required to give their permission to the terms and conditions. In the event of disagreement, they were automatically redirected to conclude the survey.

In the main part of the experiment, as mentioned earlier, participants were presented with an image of a fictional webpage of Techkey providing information about the company. Subsequently, they were shown an Instagram post announcing the NGO-Business collaboration, with the content varying across different conditions. Participants were required to wait 15 seconds before proceeding to the next part, ensuring careful observation of the images. After exposure to the partnership content,

participants completed Likert scales assessing consumer skepticism and purchase intention. Next, manipulation check questions related to message framing, partnership fit, message source, message source credibility, and the post's topic were presented to the participants. Finally, participants were asked to provide demographic information regarding their age, nationality, gender, educational level, and current employment status.

### 3.4 Sampling and data collection

Before the official data collection, a pre-test was conducted to ensure that all the information and questions presented in the experiment were comprehensive and clear. Also, this pre-test aimed to confirm that respondents could clearly understand the manipulation checks across the eight different conditions, so as to avoid any misunderstandings and invalid responses during the actual distribution of the experiment. Thus, the experiment was distributed through WhatsApp and Messenger to 15 respondents, aged 22-28 years old who half of them were requested to do the experiment via mobile phone and half of them via laptop or computer to ensure that all the information and images were presented properly in all device's formats. All pre-test responses were removed from the final dataset, ensuring the integrity of the data, whereas the people who participated in the pre-test did not take part in the final experiment.

After pre-test only few minor changes were proposed by the respondents that were implemented to improve understanding. First, an extra feature requesting to upload a photo that was inserted accidentally was removed. Also, the estimated time of the experiment was fixed to 4 minutes instead of the initial 3 minutes since this was the average time for completing all the questions. Furthermore, three participants became confused by the timer set to prevent them from proceeding to the next question before 15 seconds had elapsed. They mistakenly believed something was blocking their progress, leading inability to continue. Consequently, the instructions in sections with timers were rephrased to clarify more that respondents needed to wait for 15 seconds before clicking "next." All these changes were addressed before the official distribution, thus the process was smoother for the final participants.

The data for the official experiment were gathered online through Prolific, a well-recognized, paid platform for recruiting experiment participants, with each participant randomly assigned to one of the eight scenarios. Tailored to meet the

requirements of the scientific community, Prolific offers a reliable platform with unique participants verified to be free from AI interference and incapable of participating in multiple experiments simultaneously (Prolific, 2024). Moreover, this platform ensures transparency by informing participants about payments, treatment, and their rights, alongside researchers also benefit from increased transparency in screening participants (Palan & Schitter, 2018, p.26). Furthermore, Prolific was chosen because participants in similar platforms are perceived to be less focused on the task and often engage in multitasking, decreasing the attention to the experiment at hand (Palan & Schitter, 2018, p.23).

Data collection occurred on April 17th and April 21<sup>st</sup> 2024. A total of 260 ( $N=260$ ) responses were collected, comprising 210 responses during the first round and 50 responses during the second round. The second round of data gathering aimed to augment the dataset, considering that the initial 210 participants from the first round may be insufficient. After data cleaning 255 respondents ( $N=255$ ) were valid and considered for the analysis. During the data cleaning process, participants who had incorrectly answered all the manipulation check questions or had completed the experiment unrealistically quickly, within 1 minute or less, were excluded. After manually verifying that responses were valid, each participant received a reward of £0.45. Finally, 32 participants took part in the first condition, 33 in the second, 32 in the third, 31 in the fourth, 33 in the fifth, 31 in the sixth, 32 in the seventh, and 31 in the eighth.

### 3.5 Operationalization

The dependent variables of consumer skepticism and purchase intention were measured by using validated Likert- scales, as presented in Table 3.2. After the data was collected, new variables were computed for the analysis through equally weighting the items measuring each variable.

#### 3.5.1 Consumers skepticism

*Consumer skepticism.* This study employed a validated 4-item Likert scale developed by Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013, p.1835), to assess participants' skepticism through a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Participants had to assess the following items: “*It is doubtless that Techkey is a socially responsible company*”, “*It is certain that Techkey is concerned to improve the well-being of society*”, “*It is sure that Techkey follows high ethical*

*standards as a company*”, *“It is unquestionable that Techkey as a company acts in a socially responsible way”*. The 4 items were entered into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues ( $>1.00$ ),  $KMO = .80$ ,  $\chi^2 (N=255, 6) = 418.20$ ,  $p < .001$ . The resultant model explained 67.0% of the variance in consumer skepticism. Only one factor loading of individual items was found. The reliability analysis showed a Cronbach’s Alpha of  $\alpha = .82$  which is desirable.

### 3.5.2 Purchase intention

*Purchase intention.* To measure purchase intention a 3-item Likert scale adapted from green product purchase intention scale developed by Chan (2001) was used. Participants had to assess through a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) the following items: *“I intend to buy tech products from companies like Techkey because of my social concern”*, *“I expect to purchase tech products from companies like Techkey in the future because of its social benefits”*, *“Overall, I am glad to purchase products by companies like Techkey that give back to society”*. The scale was chosen because the research aims to study how NGO-Business partnerships affect purchase intention, focusing specifically on purchase intention driven by CSR initiatives rather than general purchase intention. The 3 items were entered into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues ( $>1.00$ ),  $KMO = .72$ ,  $\chi^2 (N=255, 3) = 439.30$ ,  $p < .001$ . The resultant model explained 80.8% of the variance in purchase intention. Only one factor loading of individual items was found. The reliability analysis showed a Cronbach’s Alpha of  $\alpha = .88$  which is desirable.

Table 3.2. Overview operationalization of variables

Scale	Items	Source	Measurement	Cronbach’s Alpha
<b>Consumer Skepticism</b>	<i>“It is doubtless that Techkey is a socially responsible company”</i> , <i>“It is certain that Techkey is concerned to improve the well-being of society”</i> ,	Skarmeas & Leonidou (2013, p. 1835)	Seven-point Likert Scale	.82

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	<i>"It is sure that Techkey follows high ethical standards as a company",</i>			
	<i>"It is unquestionable that Techkey as a company acts in a socially responsible way".</i>			
<b>Purchase Intention</b>	<i>"I intend to buy tech products from companies like Techkey because of my social concern"</i>	Chan (2001)	Seven-point Likert Scale	.88
	<i>"I expect to purchase tech products from companies like Techkey in the future because of its social benefits",</i>			
	<i>"Overall, I am glad to purchase products by companies like Techkey that give back to society"</i>			

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### 3.5.3 Demographics

*Demographics.* Participants were required to provide information on their biological sex, age, country of origin, level of education, and current employment status. For biological sex, they were presented with options to choose from: "male, female, non-binary, or prefer not to say", based on their self-identification. Age was indicated by entering the numerical value into the designated answer box. Country of origin was selected from a list of 197 countries. Education level was reported by choosing the highest level completed from the following options: "Less than high school, High school, Bachelor's degree or equivalent, Master's degree or equivalent, PhD/Doctorate or equivalent, other". Finally, employment status was selected from six categories: "Full-time employed, Part-time employed, Unemployed, Student, Retired, Other".

### 3.6 Manipulation checks

At the end of the experiment, participants were tasked to answer five manipulation check questions, both in the form of a Likert scale and in multiple choice, to check whether the manipulation conditions of message frame, message source credibility, and partnership fit were comprehensive and effectively



operationalized. In order to test if participants paid attention and could clearly understand their assigned condition, either Chi-Square tests or two-sample t-tests were conducted.

### 3.6.1 Message framing

For the CSR message frame manipulation check, participants were queried regarding the writing style observed in Techkey's Instagram post. They were presented with two answer options, mirroring the two CSR message frame conditions (expositive and narrative), and were required to make a choice. In order to make the wording clearer, they were asked to assess whether the message was information-oriented (expositive framing) or emotion-oriented (narrative framing). A chi-square test was conducted to test if all the participants answered correctly the manipulation check question. However, as it is indicated in Table 3.3, the Chi-square test revealed that the manipulation of Message Framing was not successful,  $\chi^2(1, N=255) = 2.706$ ,  $p=.1$ .

*Table 3.3. Manipulation Check – Message framing*

Message framing	How would you define the writing style of the post you just saw?		
	Expositive	Narrative	Total
Emotion-oriented	72	83	155
Information-oriented	57	43	100

### 3.6.2 Message Source credibility

Participants were tasked to rate how credible did they find the information source that they were exposed to. To assess source credibility, an adapted version of the validated scale originally developed by Ohanian (1991) as outlined in Weismueller (2020) was employed. The initial scale encompasses three dimensions of source credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. However, in this study, the dimensions of attractiveness and expertise were deemed unsuitable and consequently excluded. Additionally, the item pertaining to the sensual allure of source trustworthiness was also excluded for the same rationale. Therefore, participants

evaluated the following items using a 4-point semantic differential scale: Source Trustworthiness: *Untrustworthy – Trustworthy, Undependable – Dependable, Dishonest – Honest, Unreliable – Reliable*. The 4 items were entered into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues ( $>1.00$ ),  $KMO = .82$ ,  $\chi^2 (N=255, 6) = 555.75$ ,  $p < .001$ . The resultant model explained 74.0% of the variance in source trustworthiness and only one factor loading of individual items was found. The reliability analysis showed a Cronbach's Alpha of  $\alpha = .88$  which is desirable.

In order to ascertain if participants were clearly aware of the message source they evaluated, they were asked to indicate whether the post they viewed was published by a corporation or an NGO. A chi-square test was then conducted to assess the success of the manipulation. As indicated in the Table 3.4, the chi-square test revealed that the manipulation of message source was successful,  $\chi^2(1) = 23.122$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Table 3.4. Manipulation Check – Message source

Message source	Was the post you saw published by an NGO or by a corporation		
	NGO	Corporation	Total
NGO	105	67	172
Corporation	24	59	83

To further evaluate the manipulation check regarding message source credibility, a two-sample t-test was conducted to determine whether credibility differed between posts published by NGO accounts and corporation accounts. However, the two-sample t-test indicated no significant differences in perceived credibility between posts from NGO accounts ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) and posts from corporation accounts ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $t(253) = -1.08$ ,  $p = .281$ , suggesting that the manipulation was not successful.

### 3.6.3 Partnership fit

To manipulate the partnership fit, participants were instructed to assess the compatibility between Techkey and the partnering NGO using a 5-point Likert scale. They were asked to indicate whether they perceived the partnership they were

assigned to as having a high or low fit. Additionally, to ensure participants' attention and comprehension, they were asked to evaluate whether the post they were exposed to was related to women or to children.

A two-sample t-test was then conducted to compare participants' evaluations of the partnership fit between the corporation and the NGO for women's rights versus the partnership between the corporation and the NGO for children. The analysis revealed significant differences in perceived partnership fit, with participants rating the fit between the corporation and the NGO for women's rights higher ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) than the fit between the corporation and the NGO for children ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .92$ ),  $t(253) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .001$ . These findings suggest that the manipulation was successful.

### 3.7 Sample Description & Demographics

After the final filtration process, the initial data set of 260 participants ( $N=260$ ) was reduced to 255 valid participants ( $N=255$ ). Analyzing demographics, respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 73 years old ( $M=30.49$ ,  $SD= 9.72$ ). Of the participants, 42.4% identified as male, 56.5% as female, and 0.8% as non-binary, indicating a balanced gender distribution in the sample. Geographically, the sample represented 38 different countries, with the highest participation rates from South Africa (28.2%), Portugal (14.9%), and Poland (9.0%). Regarding educational attainment, 46.3% held a Bachelor's Degree, 27.8% had graduated only from High School, and 22.4% held a Master's Degree. Recognizing income as a significant variable influencing purchase intention, participants were queried about their current employment status, with 52.9% reporting full-time employment, 16.1% part-time employment, and 21.2% being students.

### 3.8 Validity, Reliability, Ethics

Validity in quantitative analysis refers to how accurately a measuring tool assesses the specific behavior or quality it aims to measure, fulfilling effectively its intended purpose (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020, p. 2696). In order to ensure validity in the current study, validated pre-existing scales, employed in previous researches, were used (e.g. (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013; Chan, 2001; Ohanian, 1991). Additionally, the incorporation of correlated items in pre-existing scales, along with querying similar aspects in different manners, enhanced convergent validity, underscoring the precision of the scale (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020, p. 2701). Moreover, pre-test process

ensured that all the items and scales were comprehensive and clear, another factor that enhanced validity of the findings.

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measuring instrument over time and it entails the ability of the instrument to produce consistent results when utilized on different occasions (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020, p. 2707). In this study, the measuring instruments had high reliability, since after reliability analyses, all Cronbach's alpha values were above of .70 which is considered the acceptable rate. Specifically, all Cronbach's alpha values exceeded .80, a rate that is highly desirable.

Furthermore, strict adherence to ethical guidelines was followed throughout the study. All participants were required to provide informed consent by consenting to specified terms and conditions before starting the experiment. Importantly, participant anonymity was rigorously safeguarded, and their responses were exclusively utilized for academic purposes, ensuring the ethical treatment of research data.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 H1a) Message framing (expositive-narrative) and consumer skepticism

Hypothesis 1a) suggested that expositive messages would lead to lower consumer skepticism compared to narrative-framed messages. A non-significant Levene's test  $F(1, 253) = .02, p = .961$  revealed that equal variances could be assumed. An independent -sample t-test revealed no significant difference in consumer skepticism induced by expositive messages ( $M=5.10, SD=1.12$ ) versus narrative messages ( $M=5.13, SD=1.08$ ) in NGO-business partnership communication,  $t(253)=-.20, p=.838$ . Therefore, H1a) was rejected.

### H1b) Message framing (expositive-narrative) and purchase intention

Hypothesis 1b) assumed that in the context of NGO-Business partnership communication, expositive messages would lead to higher purchase intention compared to narrative-framed messages. A non-significant Levene's test  $F(1, 253) = .13, p = .719$  revealed that equal variances could be assumed. However, an independent-sample t-test indicated that there was no significant difference in purchase intention resulting from expositive messages ( $M=4.82, SD=1.31$ ) compared to narrative messages ( $M=4.84, SD=1.31$ ) in NGO-business partnership communication,  $t(253)=-.10, p=.918$ . Therefore, H1b) was rejected.

### 4.2 H2a) Message source credibility and consumer skepticism

Hypothesis 2a proposed that messages presented in NGO's Instagram account would be perceived as more credible than those presented in company's Instagram account leading to less consumer skepticism. A non-significant Levene's test  $F(1, 253) = 2.52, p = .114$  revealed that equal variances could be assumed. An independent-sample t-test showed no significant difference in consumer skepticism generated by NGO as the message source ( $M=5.05, SD=1.05$ ) compared to corporation as the message source ( $M=5.18, SD=1.14$ ) in NGO-business partnership communication,  $t(253)=-.95, p=.345$ . Hence, H2a) was rejected.

### H2b) Message source credibility and purchase intention

Hypothesis 2b posited that messages presented in NGO's Instagram account would be perceived as more credible than those presented in company's Instagram account leading to higher purchase intention. A non-significant Levene's test  $F(1, 253) = .08, p = .780$  revealed that equal variances could be assumed. In line with the

previous findings, an independent-sample t-test showed no significant variance in purchase intention resulting from NGO as the message source ( $M=4.74$ ,  $SD=1.33$ ) versus corporation as the message source ( $M=4.92$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ) in NGO-business partnership communication,  $t(253)=-1.10$ ,  $p=.275$ . Consequently, H2b) was rejected.

#### 4.3 H3a) Partnership fit and consumer skepticism

Hypothesis 3a) suggested that a high fit of NGO-business partnership would lead to lower consumer skepticism compared to a low fit. A non-significant Levene's test  $F(1, 253) = 1.85$ ,  $p = .175$  revealed that equal variances could be assumed. An independent-sample t-test showed no significant difference between the expected high-fit partnership ( $M=5.20$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ) and the expected low-fit partnership ( $M=5.02$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ) in NGO-business partnership communication,  $t(253)=1.33$ ,  $p=.183$ . Consequently, H3a) was rejected.

#### H3b) Partnership fit and purchase intention

Hypothesis 3b) suggested that a high fit of NGO-business partnership would lead to higher purchase intention compared to a low fit. A non-significant Levene's test  $F(1, 253) = .16$ ,  $p = .686$  revealed that equal variances could be assumed. However, an independent-sample t-test revealed no significant difference in purchase intention between the expected high-fit partnership between Techkey and the women's rights NGO ( $M=4.90$ ,  $SD=1.36$ ) and the expected low-fit partnership between Techkey and the NGO for children ( $M=4.80$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ) in NGO-business partnership communication,  $t(253)=.44$ ,  $p=.661$ . Therefore, H3b) was rejected.

#### 4.4 Interaction effect between variables on consumer skepticism

A three-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the interaction effects of message framing, message source, and partnership fit on consumer skepticism. However, neither significant main effects nor significant interaction effects were found. Specifically, neither partnership fit,  $F(1, 247) = 1.77$ ,  $p = .185$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .007$ , nor message source,  $F(1, 247) = .86$ ,  $p = .356$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .003$ , nor message framing  $F(1, 247) = .05$ ,  $p = .831$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .00$ , had a significant effect on consumer skepticism. Regarding interaction effects, neither the interaction between partnership fit and message source  $F(1, 247) = .77$ ,  $p = .381$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .003$ , nor the interaction between partnership fit and message framing  $F(1, 247) = .31$ ,  $p = .579$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ , nor the interaction between message source and message framing,

$F(1, 247) = 2.42, p = .121$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ , nor the interaction between message source, partnership fit and message framing  $F(1, 247) = .002, p = .965$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .00$  reached significance. Thus, Hypothesis 4a, which proposed that expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing in reducing consumer skepticism for corporations as message sources, and that narrative framing is more effective in reducing consumer skepticism for NGOs as message sources, was rejected. Similarly, Hypothesis 5a, which suggested that narrative framing is more effective in reducing consumer skepticism for high-fit partnerships and that expositive framing is more effective for low-fit partnerships, was also rejected.

#### Interaction effect between variables on purchase intention

A three-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the interaction effects of message framing, message source, and partnership fit on purchase intention. However, no significant main effects of the independent variables were observed. Specifically, neither partnership fit,  $F(1, 247) = .19, p = .665$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ , nor message source,  $F(1, 247) = 1.20, p = .274$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .005$ , nor message framing  $F(1, 247) = .008, p = .929$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .00$ , had a significant effect on purchase intention.

Regarding interaction effects, the only significant interaction effect was found between message source and message framing,  $F(1, 247) = 4.23, p = .041$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ . To specify the exact condition where this significant interaction effect was observed, a post-hoc test was conducted. It revealed increased purchase intention in the condition of expositive messages on the company's Instagram account announcing collaboration with a women's rights NGO ( $M=5.19, SD= 1.24$ ). No other significant interaction effects were found, as neither the interaction between partnership fit and message source  $F(1, 247) = .52, p = .473$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .002$ , nor the interaction between partnership fit and message framing  $F(1, 247) = 3.44, p = .065$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ , nor the interaction between partnership fit, message source, and message framing  $F(1, 247) = .05, p = .822$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .00$  reached significance. Thus, Hypothesis 4b, which predicted the effect of message framing on purchase intention is different for NGO message source than it is for corporate message source was partially accepted. Specifically, H4b suggested that expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing for corporations as message sources, which was accepted. However, Hypothesis 4b also suggested that narrative framing is more effective than expositive

framing for NGOs as message sources, which was rejected. Additionally, Hypothesis 5b, which suggested that narrative framing is more effective than expositive framing for a high-fit partnership in terms of purchase intention and that expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing for a low-fit partnership in terms of purchase intention, was rejected. Table 4.1. presents the overview of all hypotheses test results.

Table 4.1. Overview hypotheses test results

Hypotheses	Results
<p><b>H1a:</b> Expositive messages within the communication of NGO-Business partnerships will lead to lower consumer skepticism than narrative messages.</p>	<p><b>Rejected</b></p>
<p><b>H1b:</b> Expositive messages within the communication of NGO-Business partnerships will lead to higher purchase intention compared to narrative-based messages.</p>	<p><b>Rejected</b></p>
<p><b>H2a:</b> Messages presented in NGOs' Instagram account will be perceived as more credible than those presented in company's Instagram account, leading to lower consumer skepticism.</p>	<p><b>Rejected</b></p>
<p><b>H2b:</b> Messages presented in NGOs' Instagram account will be perceived as more credible than those presented in company's Instagram account, leading to higher purchase intention.</p>	<p><b>Rejected</b></p>



**H3a:** A high fit of NGO-business partnership will lead to lower consumer skepticism, compared to a low fit.

**Rejected**

**H3b:** A high fit of NGO-business partnership will lead to higher purchase intention, compared to a low fit.

**Rejected**

**H4a:** The effect of message framing on consumer skepticism is different for NGO message source than it is for corporate message source. Specifically, while expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing for corporations as message sources, narrative framing is more effective than expositive framing for NGOs as message sources.

**Rejected**

**H4b:** The effect of message framing on purchase intention is different for NGO message source than it is for corporate message source. Specifically, while expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing for corporations as message sources, narrative framing is more effective than expositive framing for NGOs as message sources.

**Partially accepted**

**H5a:** The effect of message framing on consumer skepticism is different for a high fit partnership than it is for a low fit partnership. Specifically, while narrative framing is more effective than expositive framing for a high fit partnership, expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing for a low fit partnership.

**Rejected**

**H5b:** The effect of message framing on purchase intention is different for a high fit partnership than it is for a low fit partnership. Specifically, while narrative framing is more effective than expositive framing for a high fit partnership, expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing for a low fit partnership.

**Rejected**

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## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

Hypothesis 1a suggested that expositive messages would lead to lower consumer skepticism compared to narrative-framed messages. The independent-sample-t test- rejected Hypothesis 1a since no difference between expositive and narrative framing was found on consumer skepticism. Contrary to Kim et al. (2020, p. 4) and Zhang and Hanks (2016, p. 2078), who propose reduced skepticism for expositive-framed CSR communications, this study did not demonstrate the benefits of expositive messages. This may derive from the unsuccessful manipulation check or from the characteristics of the participants (Du et al., 2010, p. 15), who may not have inherently lower levels of skepticism.

The same applies for hypothesis 1b which posited that when Business-NGO partnerships are communicated through expositive message framing, it would lead to higher purchase intention compared to narrative message framing. However, the results of the experiment did not support this hypothesis, indicating that expositive and narrative messages did not have a significant difference concerning purchase intention. The findings contradict previous studies that identify expositive messages as the most effective framing for increasing consumer purchase intention (Perez et al., 2020, p. 374; Schade et al., 2022, p. 49; Dhanesh and Nekmat, 2019, p. 30).

Although the initial hypotheses, based on the work of Perez et al. (2020, p. 374), Schade et al. (2022, p. 49), and Dhanesh and Nekmat (2019, p. 30), suggested the superiority of expositive messages, the final results align more closely with the Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT) proposed by Fisher (1989, p. 56), which posits that people are inherently storytellers and "narrative beings" (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). Specifically, the findings support positions such as those of Escalas (2004, p. 168) and Grill (2011, p. 4), which suggest that people can more easily identify with and build stronger relationships with brands through CSR storytelling, thus eliciting favorable responses from stakeholders, including consumers. This deviation from the initial assumption of expositive message superiority may be due to the failure of the message framing manipulation check, which indicated that participants did not consistently recognize the expositive and narrative conditions correctly.

Regarding the second set of hypotheses (H2a, b), which suggested that messages presented on an NGO's Instagram account would be perceived as more

credible than those presented on a company's Instagram account, leading to lower consumer skepticism and higher purchase intention, the findings rejected these hypotheses as well. This outcome contradicts the majority of existing literature on message source credibility, which posits that non-corporate sources such as NGOs are perceived as more credible. Consequently, NGO-business partnership communication through these sources typically enhances positive consumer attitudes and behaviors, such as increased purchase intention and decreased skepticism toward the partnership (Dalla-Pria & Rodriguez-de-Dios, p. 545; Skard & Thorbjørnsen, 2013, p. 149; Shumate & O'Connor, 2010, p. 577).

In contrast, the results align with studies suggesting no significant difference between corporate and non-corporate message sources, as indicated in Rantanen's (2020, p. 1) study on CSR communication on social media. Similarly, the results follow Maronick's (2005, p. 76) research on celebrity versus company as a message source, where no difference was detected in purchase intention.

One possible explanation for the absence of a difference in the impact of message source on consumer skepticism and purchase intention could be the credibility crisis NGOs face due to continuous scandals, which may equate their credibility with that of corporations (Keating & Thrandardottir, 2016, p. 134). Also, again the unsuccessful manipulation for perceived credibility between posts from NGO accounts ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) and posts from corporation accounts ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ), might explain the results.

The third set of hypotheses (H3a,b), which proposed that a high fit between NGO-business partnerships would lead to lower consumer skepticism and higher purchase intention compared to a low fit, was rejected. An independent-sample t-test conducted showed no significant difference between high and low fit conditions on these two dependent variables. This result contradicts the general argument of previous studies on Business-NGO partnership communication, which suggested that high fit partnerships elicit more positive feelings from consumers, thereby boosting purchase intention and counteracting skepticism about the motives of the partnership (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006, p. 155; Du et al., 2010, p. 12; Moreno & Kang, 2020, p.1). Considering the widespread perception that companies initiate CSR activities primarily for financial and PR benefits and the consequent increase in consumer skepticism towards these initiatives (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p. 1831), the results may indicate that consumers view all partnerships with skepticism

regardless of the fit. Increasing consumer cynicism and skepticism towards CSR activities can explain the fact that people are less influenced by the perceived fit between an NGO and a business (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p. 1831).

Next, the fourth set of Hypotheses (H4a,b) that investigated the interaction effect between message framing and message source was partially (H4b) accepted. More specifically, Hypothesis 4b, which predicted a significant interaction effect on purchase intention between expositive message framing and companies as message source, was accepted. The accepted hypothesis aligns with Perez et al. (2020, p. 376), which suggests that expositive messages for communicating NGO-business partnerships can have a more significant impact on purchase intention than narrative messages. This is especially true in cases that increase skepticism, such as when the message comes from less credible sources like companies (Shumate and O'Connor, 2010). In such situations, people prefer more factual information delivered through expositive messages (Perez et al., 2020, p. 377). On the other side, Hypothesis 4a which proposed that expositive framing is more effective than narrative framing in reducing consumer skepticism for corporations as message sources, and that narrative framing is more effective in reducing consumer skepticism for NGOs as message sources, was rejected. This rejection contradicts existing literature, which suggests that more rational information reduces skepticism, particularly when the message is from a less credible source such as a company (Perez et al., 2020, p. 377; Shumate and O'Connor, 2010). Although expositive messages from companies had a significant interaction effect on purchase intention, there was no significant interaction effect on consumer skepticism. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that consumer skepticism and purchase intention are influenced by different factors (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p.180; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, p. 167). For example, behavioral intentions like purchase intention can be influenced by ad argumentation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p.180), whereas the level of skepticism is greatly affected by consumer experiences and personality traits such as cynicism (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, p. 167).

Finally, the fifth set of Hypotheses (5a,b) which posited that the effect of message framing on a) consumer skepticism and b) purchase intention is different for a high fit partnership than it is for a low fit partnership was rejected. Specifically, Hypotheses 5a,b suggested that narrative framing is more effective than expositive framing for a high fit partnership, while expositive framing is more effective than

narrative framing for a low fit partnership. This result contradicts initial studies by Petty and Cacioppo (1986, p.168) and Lentferink (2018, p.29), which found that narrative messages combined with high CSR fit can significantly influence favorable consumer behaviors and attitudes more than expository messages. The current findings do not support this approach. One possible explanation could be the high levels of general skepticism towards CSR initiatives (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p.1831), which may be less influenced by the fit between partnered NGOs and businesses.

## 5.2 Managerial Implications

One of the first and most significant managerial implications of the aforementioned findings is related to CSR message framing. Despite initial hypotheses suggesting the superiority of expositive message framing for increasing purchase intention (Perez et al., 2020, p.364; Dhanesh and Nekmat, 2019, p. 30), the findings indicate no significant difference between expositive and narrative framing in NGO-business partnership communication. This suggests that communication managers can follow Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT; Fisher, 1989) to create compelling and engaging stories around their partnerships, their common mission, and vision to enhance their connection with consumers, elicit positive stakeholders' attitudes, and influence behavioral intentions such as increased purchase intention and reduced skepticism (Escalas, 2004, p. 168; Grill, 2011, p. 4). Considering that the majority of companies have not yet realized the power of CSR storytelling (Perez et al., 2020, p.363), creating emotional stories and strong social associations around NGO-business partnerships can help companies differentiate themselves from the competition.

However, the significant interaction effect on purchase intention between expositive message framing and companies as the message source indicates the need for people to receive more information and the rationale behind the partnerships in order to boost their intention to purchase a product by a brand that engages in NGO-Business partnerships. Thus, companies could combine narrative framing with factual and detailed expositive messages to cater to different consumer preferences and enhance overall effectiveness.

The second managerial implication is focused on effectively addressing consumer skepticism. The rejection of all hypotheses related to decreasing consumer

skepticism shows that skepticism cannot be easily reduced by merely selecting a specific type of message framing or a perceived credible message source such as NGOs (Wong, 2012, p. 88). This high resistance in consumer skepticism highlights the need for communication managers to prioritize transparency and authenticity throughout all stages of communication in NGO-business partnerships to persuade consumers of the honesty of their initiatives (Kim & Lee, 2018, p. 118). Through concrete information and suitable message choices, PR and communication managers should maintain a high level of transparency in NGO-business partnership communication to tackle disbelief and enhance trust, a strategy that can be effective even for low-fit partnerships (Kim & Lee, 2018, p. 118). Also, companies should consistently invest in NGO-business partnerships, as the more consumers are exposed to CSR initiatives by a company, the more trustworthy they evaluate them (Chaudhri & Everett Hein, 2021, p. 14).

Moreover, the fact that no significant difference was found in the credibility level between businesses and NGOs as message sources, even though participants successfully identified the sources, highlights a credibility crisis for NGOs. This underscores the need for careful selection of NGOs that businesses collaborate with, as a less credible NGO can also harm the company's reputation. A significant part before the initiation of the partnership must be the selection process where risk assessment, reputation evaluation and other profile criteria should be taken into consideration (Seitanidi & Crane, 2008, p. 417).

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary

The rise of CSR initiatives has shed light on the role of various organizations such as companies and NGOs in tackling social and environmental challenges, laying the foundation for cross-sector collaborations (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013, p.7). Over the past two decades, the relationships between businesses and NGOs have evolved from adversarial to more collaborative, as both sectors recognize the mutual benefits of partnering on sustainability initiatives (Heap, 2000, p.557). This shift has led to an increase in business-NGO partnerships where there is active resource exchange, such as expertise, networks, assets, volunteers, and financial support (Jonker & Nijhof, 2006, p.457). The value of these partnerships is shared with stakeholders through CSR communication efforts that aim to both increase stakeholder awareness and overcome skepticism, which are crucial for the success of the partnerships (Du et al., 2010, p.9).

Given the importance of Business-NGO partnership communication, empirical studies have focused on various aspects of CSR communication strategies, such as message framing, motives and partnership fit and their effects on consumer perceptions and behavior (e.g., Chaudhri & Everett Hein, 2021, p.1; Schade et al., 2022, p.39; Perez et al., 2020, p.361). However, achieving significantly positive consumer outcomes through business-NGO partnership communication is challenging due to the high levels of consumer skepticism towards CSR practices (Skarmas & Leonidou, 2013, p.1837). In this context, the current study examined the effects of different CSR communication strategies on consumer skepticism and purchase intention within the context of NGO-business partnerships. More specifically by conducting a 2x2x2 factorial between-subjects experiment to answer the following research question: *How does the communication, particularly the message framing (narrative vs. expositive), source credibility (high vs. low) and partnership fit (high vs. low), of NGO-business partnerships in the realm of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives impact consumer skepticism and purchase intention?*

The findings of the study revealed no significant main effects of message framing, message source credibility, or partnership fit on consumer skepticism and



purchase intention. However, a significant interaction effect was found between message source and message framing, indicating that expositive messages from a company's Instagram account can enhance purchase intention in specific partnership contexts. The findings highlight the complexity of CSR communication and underscore the need for further research to identify effective strategies for enhancing consumer outcomes in NGO-business partnerships. In parallel, the significant interaction effect suggests that the interplay between message framing and source credibility can significantly influence consumer behavior, demonstrating the importance of carefully tailored communication strategies in CSR initiatives.

## 6.2 Limitations

Even though this study offers some useful observations, several limitations should be taken into consideration to contextualize the findings and inform future research. The main limitation encountered in this study was the unsuccessful manipulation of message framing and message source credibility. Despite efforts to create distinct experimental conditions, the manipulations did not produce significant differences in participant responses. The issue of unsuccessful manipulation checks may have affected significantly internal validity by not confirming that the experimental conditions achieved the desired effects, making it difficult to ensure that the independent variables accurately reflect the theoretical concepts (Neuman, 2014, p.302). When manipulation checks fail, it is hard to eliminate potential threats to internal validity, as the variables and conditions may not function as intended, resulting in unclear results. (Neuman, 2014, p.302).

Another limitation of this study is that employing a fictitious company and creating fictional CSR messages can constrain the extent to which the findings can be generalized. (Pérez et al., 2019, p. 377). Even though fictitious organizations and condition help the participants to overcome any biases they might have for real organizations and consequently boost the internal validity of the study (Schade et al., p.57), the experiment's external validity and hence generalizability is constrained by concentrating exclusively on fictional entities (Pérez et al., 2019, p.377).

Moreover, the sample, which was geographically diverse, consisted of participants from 38 different countries and varied in age from 19 to 73 years old ( $M=30.49$ ,  $SD= 9.72$ ). However, this diversity may hinder the formation of

conclusions specific to particular target groups and representative samples. Additionally, regarding the sample, since participants conducted the experiment in non-controlled conditions, at their own pace, and not in a lab, the level of their attention to the questions and the experiment cannot be guaranteed. Lastly, one of the limitations of web surveys like the current one is the unequal access to the Internet and electronic devices necessary to participate in the experiment, potentially excluding older, low-income, less educated and rural individuals (Neuman, 2014, p. 345).

### 6.3 Directions for future research

Except for addressing the aforementioned limitations, future research can investigate new variables and contexts to further understand the dynamics of Business-NGO partnership communication. Particularly, future studies can focus on the effect of Business-NGO partnership communication on other behavioral outcomes, such as e-word-of-mouth and social media engagement. Nowadays, the internet has enabled consumers to provide their advice and reviews on brands, products, and services online through various means such as “web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, boycott websites, and newsgroups” (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). This trend highlights the increasing power and influence of consumer-generated content, emphasizing the importance of further investigating the effect of Business-NGO partnership communication on this variable. Similarly, considering that the rapid expansion of social media has enabled consumers to share content and information more easily, fostering a two-way communication with brands (Chu et al., 2020, pp.260-261), it would be insightful for future researchers to explore the impact of CSR communication on social media engagement.

Additionally, investigating in the future the mediating role of some variables such brand loyalty and brand image will be highly beneficial. Brand loyalty stands as one of the most paramount objectives for businesses because customers who are loyal to a brand are less likely to switch to competitors, tend to spend more money on the company's products or services, and feel strongly positive about the brand (Martinez, 2015, p. 899). Likewise, a positive brand image fosters favorable consumer perceptions, leading to increased behavioral intentions, including increased purchase likelihood and more positive attitudes towards the brand (Mayer et al., 2012, p. 180).

Thus, it would be valuable both for researchers and professionals to explore how both brand loyalty and brand image mediate the relationship between Business- NGO partnership communication strategies and different dependent variables.

Moreover, the current study focused on the impact of Business-NGO partnership communication strategies on overall CSR skepticism (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p. 1835), without distinguishing between dispositional and situational skepticism (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013, p. 1831). This exclusive focus on general CSR skepticism opens avenues for future research to explore the distinct roles of either situational or dispositional CSR skepticism. Interestingly, Ham and Kim (2020, p. 12) propose the research of interaction effect of dispositional and situational skepticism, presuming that people with high dispositional CSR skepticism are more likely to exhibit higher situational CSR skepticism compared to those with low CSR skepticism, under identical conditions.

Furthermore, future studies should shed light on the outcomes of Business-NGO partnerships from the perspective of NGOs, particularly by using dependent variables tailored to NGOs' needs, such as donation increases, awareness, and volunteer pools. This approach will provide valuable insights into how these partnerships enhance resources and build capacity, including management, marketing, and technical skills, which are essential for creating fruitful partnership models. In the context of NGO-focused studies, researchers could enhance the external validity and generalizability of their findings by incorporating real organizations instead of fictitious ones (Pérez et al., 2019, p. 377). By examining these specific outcomes, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the most effective strategies for Business-NGO partnership communication, benefiting the NGOs involved.

Lastly, given that stakeholders' individual characteristics influence their perceptions and responses to CSR communication (Du et al., 2010, p.11), it would be beneficial for future researchers to focus on specific sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, such as age and nationality, to better understand how these factors affect their reactions to business-NGO partnership communication and CSR initiatives.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### *Qualtrics screenshots from the online experiment*

**Erasmus School of  
History, Culture and  
Communication**



Dear participant,

Thank you for your interest in this study. In the context of my Master's thesis in Media & Business at Erasmus University Rotterdam, I am conducting an experiment on Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)-Business partnerships communication and I kindly request your participation in it.

The aim of this experiment, a non-commercial experiment, done for scientific purposes, is to learn about your opinions on the partnership of the brand Techkey with the NGO Hope Harbor. The experiment should take no more than 4 minutes of your time. Please respond thoughtfully and honestly; your personal opinions matter to me. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers, thus I would highly appreciate your honest opinion. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. Your responses will remain confidential, and no personally identifiable information will be disclosed. The collected data will be used for academic purposes only. If at any point you choose to stop filling out the questionnaire, your decision will have no consequences.

If you have any questions regarding the survey, feel free to contact me via the following e-mail: [700177ma@eur.nl](mailto:700177ma@eur.nl)

Thank you for your participation!  
Rodanthi Alexandri

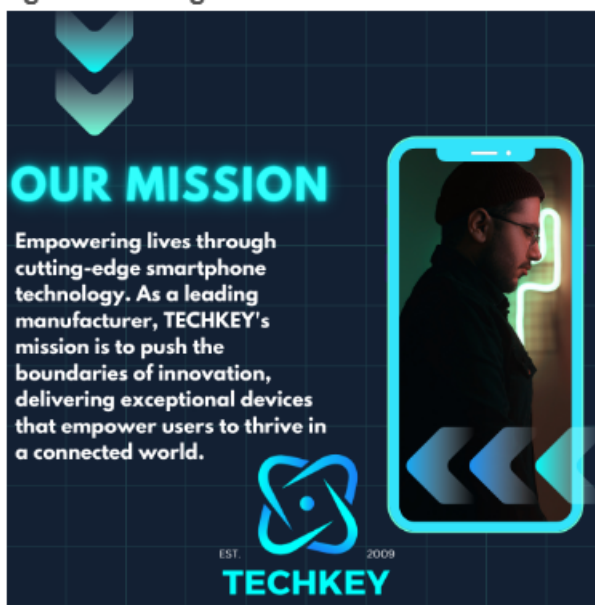
Do you confirm that you are over 18 years old and consent to the use of your answers for research purposes?

Yes

No

Let's start! Imagine you're exploring the website of Techkey, a leading smartphone manufacturer, and you come across the following information about their mission.

**Note:** You can click to next page after 15 seconds! Once you click the arrow to continue, you won't be able to see the visual again. Take a good look now.



**OUR MISSION**

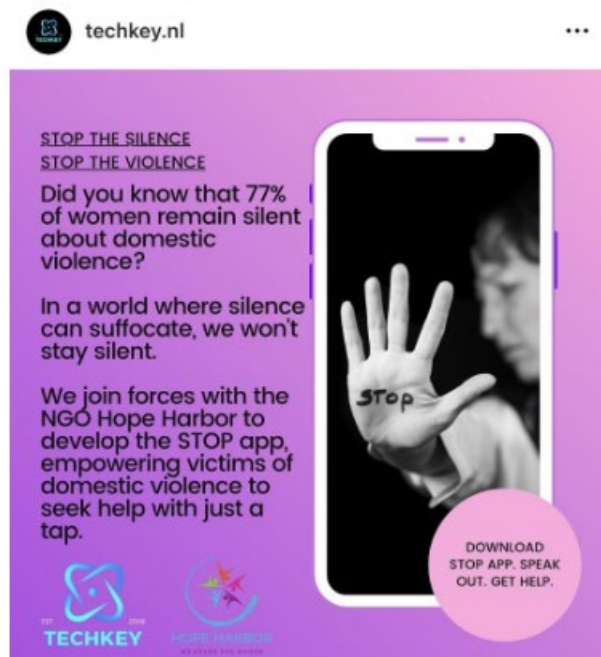
Empowering lives through cutting-edge smartphone technology. As a leading manufacturer, TECHKEY's mission is to push the boundaries of innovation, delivering exceptional devices that empower users to thrive in a connected world.

EST. 2009  
**TECHKEY**

The graphic features a dark blue background with a grid pattern. At the top left, there are two downward-pointing chevrons. The text 'OUR MISSION' is in large, bold, light blue letters. Below it is a paragraph of white text. To the right is a smartphone frame containing a photo of a man in profile. At the bottom left is the Techkey logo, a stylized blue atom-like symbol, with 'EST. 2009' and 'TECHKEY' below it. At the bottom right, there are three left-pointing chevrons.

Now, let's imagine you come across the following Instagram post announcing the partnership between Techkey and the NGO Hope Harbor. After carefully examining the post, please proceed to answer some questions about it in the upcoming sections.

**Note: You can click to next page after 15 seconds! Once you click the arrow to continue, you won't be able to see the visual again. Take a good look now.**



Erasmus School of  
History, Culture and  
Communication



It is doubtless that Techkey is a socially responsible company

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Agree

Strongly agree

It is certain that Techkey is concerned to improve the well-being of society

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Agree

Strongly agree

It is sure that Techkey follows high ethical standards as a company

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Agree

Strongly agree

It is unquestionable that Techkey as a company acts in a socially responsible way

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree

Agree

Strongly agree



I intend to buy tech products from companies like Techkey because of my social concern

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

I expect to purchase tech products from companies like Techkey in the future because of its social benefits

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Overall, I am glad to purchase products by companies like Teckey that give back to society

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Please choose the answers that most reflect your opinion on the post you saw.

How would you define the writing style of the post you just saw?

Emotion-oriented

Information-oriented

Was the post you saw published by an Non- Governemntal Organization or by a corporation?

NGO

Corporation

In my opinion, the Instagram account that published the post is

Untrustworthy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Trustworthy
Undependable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Dependable
Dishonest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Honest
Unreliable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Reliable

Was the post you saw about women or children?

Women

Children

How would you rate the fit between Techkey and Hope Harbor in this partnership?

**Note:** Fit refers to how well two entities match or complement each other in a partnership, including how aligned the cause is with the brand. It involves factors like shared goals and values.

Very low

Low

Neither low nor high

High

Very high

What gender do you identify with?

Male

Female

Non-binary

Prefer not to say

What is your age? (Please use full numbers only)

Where are you from?

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Less than High School

High School

Bachelor's Degree or Equivalent

Master's Degree or Equivalent

PhD, Doctorate, MBA or equivalent

Other

What is your current employment situation?

Full-time employed

Part-time employed

Unemployed

Student

Retired

Other

**Erasmus School of  
History, Culture and  
Communication**

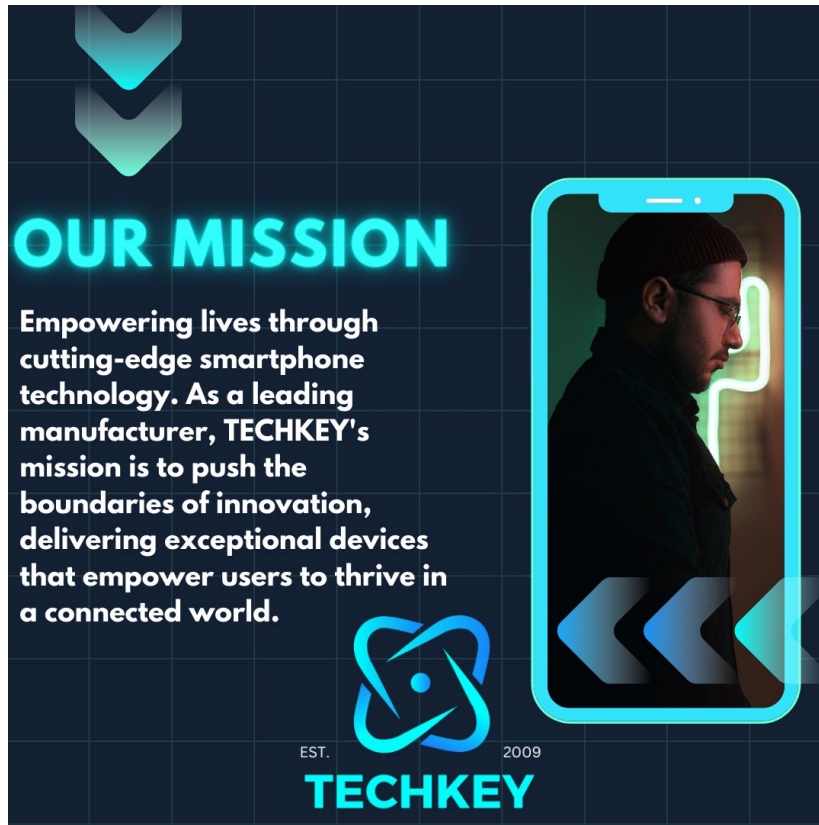


Thank you for participating in this survey!

Please click the arrow to complete submission!

This study contributes to research for NGO- Business partnerships. Nowadays, more and more businesses collaborate with NGOs in the context of their Corporate Social Responsibility programs, however the communication of these partnerships often is faced with skepticism by stakeholders. So it is crucial to explore how effective communication strategies can mitigate consumer skepticism, enhancing trust and credibility in joint initiatives. Understanding these dynamics is key to fostering meaningful collaborations that resonate with stakeholders and drive positive social change.

Within this experiment, all participants were assigned to one of eight experimental conditions, whereby different aspects of NGO-business partnerships were manipulated to see which combinations are more effective. Both the presented business and the NGO were fictitious and created for the purpose of our research.



*Introductory visual- Techkey's webpage*



hopeharbor.nl



EVERY MEAL COUNTS

**We join forces  
with TECHKEY  
to provide  
120,000  
nutritious  
meals for  
children in  
Ethiopia in  
2024.**



hopeharbor.nl 🌟 Exciting Announcement! 🌟 We're thrilled to partner with smartphone manufacturer TECHKEY to make a positive impact in Ethiopia! Together, we're on a mission to provide 120,000 nutritious meals for children in 2024.

*Visual for Condition 1*



hopeharbor.nl



Can you imagine going to bed hungry, wondering when your next meal will come?

For more than 200 million malnourished children in Africa, it's not just imagination; it's everyday reality.

We join forces with smartphone manufacturer Techkey to provide 120,000 meals to children in Ethiopia.



hopeharbor.nl Every statistic represents a life, a story, and a struggle. Today, we're joining forces with the smartphone manufacturer TECHKEY to confront the harsh reality faced by over 200 million malnourished children in Africa. Together, we're making a tangible difference by providing 120,000 meals to those in need in Ethiopia. #endhunger #Ethiopia

*Visual for Condition 2*



techkey.nl



EVERY MEAL COUNTS

**We join forces  
with the NGO  
Hope Harbor  
to provide  
120,000  
nutritious meals  
for children in  
Ethiopia in  
2024.**



techkey.nl 🌟 Partnership Announcement! 🌟 Techkey is proud to announce our collaboration with the NGO @hopeharbor.nl to make a meaningful impact in Ethiopia. Together, we're committed to providing 120,000 nutritious meals for children in 2024. Stay tuned for updates on this exciting initiative! 💙🍲 #CorporateResponsibility #Ethiopia #MakingADifference

*Visual for Condition 3*





Can you imagine going to bed hungry, wondering when your next meal will come?

For more than 200 million malnourished children in Africa, it's not just imagination; it's everyday reality.

We join forces with the NGO Hope Harbor to provide 120,000 meals to children in Ethiopia.



techkey.nl Every statistic represents a life, a story, and a struggle. Today, we're joining forces with the NGO Hope Harbor to confront the harsh reality faced by over 200 million malnourished children in Africa. Together, we're making a tangible difference by providing 120,000 meals to those in need in Ethiopia. #CorporateResponsibility #Ethiopia

*Visual for Condition 4*



FIGHT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**We join forces with smartphone manufacturer TECHKEY to develop the STOP app, empowering victims of domestic violence to seek help with just a tap.**



DOWNLOAD STOP APP. SPEAK OUT. GET HELP.




HOPE HARBOR WE STAND FOR WOMEN EST. 2009 TECHKEY



hopeharbor.nl Empowerment in action! Proud to announce our collaboration with smartphone innovators TECHKEY to create the STOP app. Together, we're harnessing technology to provide a lifeline for victims of domestic violence. With a simple tap, they can access help and support when they need it most. Join us as we stand united against domestic violence. #STOPApp #TechForGood #Empowerment"

*Visual for Condition 5*



STOP THE SILENCE  
STOP THE VIOLENCE

Did you know that 77% of women remain silent about domestic violence?

In a world where silence can suffocate, we won't stay silent.

We join forces with the smartphone manufacturer TECHKEY to develop the STOP app, empowering victims of domestic violence to seek help with just a tap.



DOWNLOAD  
STOP APP. SPEAK  
OUT. GET HELP.



hopeharbor.nl Let's stand together against silence and empower change. Together with smartphone manufacturer TECHKEY, we're creating the STOP app to give victims of domestic violence a lifeline. Every tap is a step towards freedom. #STOPtheSilence #Empowerment

*Visual for Condition 6*



FIGHT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**We join forces with the NGO Hope Harbor to develop the STOP app, empowering victims of domestic violence to seek help with just a tap.**



DOWNLOAD STOP APP. SPEAK OUT. GET HELP.



techkey.nl Empowerment in action! Proud to announce our collaboration with the NGO for women's rights Hope Harbor to create the STOP app. Together, we're harnessing technology to provide a lifeline for victims of domestic violence. With a simple tap, they can access help and support when they need it most. #CorporateResponsibility #STOPApp #TechForGood #Empowerment

*Visual for Condition 7*



STOP THE SILENCE  
STOP THE VIOLENCE

Did you know that 77% of women remain silent about domestic violence?

In a world where silence can suffocate, we won't stay silent.

We join forces with the NGO Hope Harbor to develop the STOP app, empowering victims of domestic violence to seek help with just a tap.



DOWNLOAD  
STOP APP. SPEAK  
OUT. GET HELP.



techkey.nl Let's stand together against silence and empower change. Together with the NGO for women's rights Hope Harbor, we're creating the STOP app to give victims of domestic violence a lifeline. Every tap is a step towards freedom. #CorporateResponsibility #STOPtheSilence #Empowerment

*Visual for Condition 8*

## Appendix 3

### Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

#### Student Information

Name: Rodanthi Alexandri

Student ID: 700177

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Yijing Wang

Date: 27/06/2024

Declaration:

#### Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT 3.5, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

#### Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

#### Ethical and Academic Integrity


I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and

attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

**Clarification on generative AI tools usage:**

I have used only ChatGPT 3.5 for grammar and spelling checks, synonyms, and some more academic phrases, by providing prompts such as "Please check the grammar and spelling of this sentence", "Can you suggest synonyms for these words?", "Which words would improve the academic tone of this sentence?". All the information and content presented are derived solely from academic sources and research.

Signature: 

Date of Signature: 27/06/2024