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Comparing Perceptions of NGOs and CSR: Audience Evaluations and Interpretations of Communications

Gitanjali Co Devan Anderson,
MSc in Media, Communication and Development

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The Author can be contacted at: Gcdevan@hotmail.com

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Gitanjali Co Devan Anderson

ABSTRACT

Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes are reflecting a changing media landscape and competitive aid field in their communications. This study takes a qualitative approach to understand how audiences respond to those communications and make sense of NGOs and CSR in a comparative sense. This paper will present results from individual interviews with nine respondents with ties to the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. Using thematic analysis, three themes were identified around relevant messaging, persuasive branding and organisational effectiveness. Findings indicate that audience perceptions of NGOs and CSR are influenced by complex values-based criteria, including trustworthiness, relevance and transparency. They signal a need for NGOs and CSR to align their communications with the interests and morality of a media-savvy audience in order to inspire positive perceptions of their organisations.

INTRODUCTION

According to the most recent *Giving USA* annual report, the amount of aid given in the United States in 2012 totalled US$316.23 billion. Of that, individual giving grew by 1.9% after inflation from 2011 to US$228.93 billion. Whilst this shows a modest rise in donations from individuals and the charitable organisations they support, the most significant increase by comparison was from corporate philanthropy which gave 9.9% more in aid with a reported US$18.15 billion in publicly disclosed corporate donations ('Giving USA 2013: Giving Coming Back Slowly and Different After Recession,' 2013). This surge in corporate giving, most commonly known as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), highlights a need to study how donors and consumers understand the changing dynamics of the aid field.

In recent years, ‘engagement’ has been a key buzzword in both non-profit and corporate communications. It is one of many buzzwords, such as ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’, which allows organisations to justify their outreach to their audiences and involvement in their communities (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). Archie Norman, the chairman of ITV, a British media company, defends the need for more engagement by arguing that ‘commitment has to be connected to something people want to be part of and a way in which they can personally effect change. Forging a more engaged culture starts with the values of the business, who you recruit, and how you communicate with them’ (Norman, 2013, para. 25).

Mediated platforms such as social media facilitate the engagement needs of organisations by widening their audience reach and distinguishing themselves from an increasingly competitive media market (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Dichter, 1999; Schmeltz, 2012). Branding themselves as socially responsible is an added measure for organisations to relate to their audiences and inspire their support. Audience engagement is a highly competitive activity for both NGOs and corporations because ‘from a marketing perspective, the first thing to consider is that our consumer environment has become increasingly noisy, and it is exceedingly difficult for any one message – charitable or otherwise – to be heard above any other’ (Einstein, 2012: 3). Expectations and standards for communications to make an impact is much greater - the bar has been set higher than ever before.

However, more media exposure inevitably has led to increased criticism of their effectiveness. Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in particular have been facing greater criticism, particularly over their credibility and moral responsibilities. Despite large funds being donated to aid projects over the past several years, the long-term sustainability of development initiatives remains questionable (Easterly, 2008). In an attempt to address perceived ineffectiveness, many NGOs are taking traditionally corporate measures to legitimise their presence by commercialising their messages and building brand recognition (Einstein, 2012).

In the same vein, ‘globalisation has spread certain values and ideas about development’ (Dichter, 1999: 40) and social expectations also exist for corporations to contribute to development aid initiatives (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009). In response, there is strong public demand for CSR as a means to demonstrate their commitment to the needs of both their consumers as well as disadvantaged communities in the ‘global village’ in which they co-exist (Bronn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009). However, the sincerity and motives for establishing

CSR are often debated (Schmeltz, 2012).

It seems societal demands exist for NGOs to become 'corporatised' and corporations to become 'charitised' (Einstein, 2012). Even traditional definitions of 'non-profit' and 'business' have seemingly become obsolete as there is such a wide spectrum of understanding of what the two types of organisations mean (Edwards, 2010). Moreover, the blurring of the lines between NGOs and corporations (Dichter, 1999) has led to the rise of what Mara Einstein (2012) calls the 'hypercharity' in which corporations partner with charities to package and promote consumer products as a means to raise funds for humanitarian causes, such as the RED campaign, Livestrong and the Susan G. Komen Foundation (Einstein, 2012: 71).

NGOs and CSR have been studied from a variety of perspectives, with recent interest targeted at NGO and CSR communications. NGOs are commonly characterised by their altruism, adaptability and cost-effectiveness (Dichter, 1999), whilst CSR applauds sharing social responsibilities and 'giving back' (Schmeltz, 2012). Scholars have explored their psycho-social motives (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009; Bronn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009) and organisational effectiveness (Aldrich, 2003; Lecy, Schmitz, & Swedlund 2009). A different area of research also explores the strategic processes driving NGO and CSR communications, such as branding (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009), cause-marketing (Einstein, 2012) and persuasive tactics (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). A vast amount of literature is comprised of studies about, broadly speaking, the morality of mediation (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Cohen, 2001; Silverstone, 2007; Tester, 2001) and the representational consequences of development communications on aid recipients (Dogra, 2012; Hall, 1997; Said, 1978).

The area which warrants further exploration is the effects of NGO and CSR communications from the audience's perspective. Recognising that audiences have to navigate through a changing media landscape and are faced with a plethora of choice, it is critical to understand how audiences evaluate and make sense of NGOs and CSR. This study is underscored by a strong appreciation of the valuable societal contributions made by NGOs and CSR, and so this paper's intent is to enhance their work based on practical research findings. Furthermore, this will not be a study measuring donation activity or representations of aid recipients, but rather will seek to qualitatively analyse the audience's perceptions of NGOs and CSR by conducting in-depth interviews to explore how they interpret communications and judge organisational effectiveness. In this study, I will argue that NGOs and CSR have to move beyond solely emotive appeals to persuade their audience to support their

initiatives, and must generate more relevant, honest and logical communications to satisfy an increasingly sophisticated, media-savvy audience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section provides a critical review of the relevant academic literature around mediation, audience studies, NGOs and CSR. This will be followed by an explanation of the conceptual framework that will be applied to the qualitative analysis, including the key research questions this study will seek to provide answers to. There is a wide array of existing literature around this particular research topic and so it should be noted that the following selections in some way support or challenge the research objectives and findings.

A changing media landscape

In keeping with Roger Silverstone's (2007) argument that 'we *must* study the media' (Silverstone, 1999: 12), it is logical to begin the literature review by positioning the media as integral to modern society. Advancements in media technology have arguably led to greater demand for new media, and thus higher rates of media consumption than ever before. Asa Briggs and Peter Burke (2009) assert that media studies must be put into historical context in order to fully grasp the overwhelming developments and, as such, appreciate the varied responses to the media by people and institutions alike. They postulate that the media has been judged by its perceived merits and downfalls from when it simply constituted the written word to our current new media age of the Internet (Briggs & Burke, 2009).

Much attention has been galvanised toward studying the media from various vantage points. For example, from a political economy perspective in which media and audiences are viewed as resources, some argue that 'new media deepen and extend tendencies within earlier forms of capitalism by opening new possibilities to turn media and audiences into saleable commodities' (McChesney, 2000; Mosco, 2009: 54). Moreover, studies also explore whether social media is truly transforming the 'mediation of suffering' (Madianou, 2012: 250). From a cultural perspective, Pertti Alasuutari (1999) argues that we are in the third generation of media when studies are moving beyond simply encoding and decoding text, but toward understanding 'the cultural place of the media in the contemporary world' (Alasuutari, 1999: 7).

The morality of mediation

A pioneer in media studies, Silverstone (2007) situates mediation as a moral and political process. He posits an interesting question about the media's capacities to encourage reflexivity: 'the media have extended reach, but have they also extended understanding?' (Silverstone, 2007: 47). In this sense, the audience's ability to actively make meaning from communications is also constitutive of mediation whereby they can attribute moral judgements based on the messages they receive. Moreover, the audience can exercise their power over the media by accepting, resisting or challenging messages depending on their personal interpretations (Silverstone, 2005, 2007).

Moving away from the audience for a moment, media content is also examined in context, with Stanley Cohen (2001) arguing that 'humanitarian organisations should not use the same filters as the mass media…these are not merely "newsworthy" events: they are the most deserving cases that need urgent help' (Cohen, 2001: 184). In other words, the media and content producers have a moral responsibility to raise awareness of humanitarian suffering and promote action.

Numerous studies have focused on the decision-making aspect of mediation. The issue of relevance is arguably key to understanding how audiences respond to and are influenced by the media. According to the uses and gratifications theory, rational decisions such as whether to donate funds to an NGO are guided by the personal needs of the individual (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Blumler & Katz, 1974). The notion of an active audience is assumed in audience reception studies which attempt to understand how audiences 'choose, use and make sense of media to construct and share meanings about their everyday experiences.' Departing from the uses and gratifications theory and audience reception studies which are criticised for their overemphasis on the active audience, diffusion studies focus on the effects of interpersonal networks within which 'imitation and contagion communication processes are as important as persuasion in understanding interpersonal influence and social change' (Lievrouw, 2009: 307). From this perspective, technology is argued to be the main determinant of decisions, particularly within a new media context.

Trust is another major component of mediation as it dictates how others approach the mediated situation. Luc Boltanski (1999) argues that the ability of the audience to trust the producer of a certain message is dependent upon what the audience believes the intentions of the producer to be. When intent is not clear or the message is disorganised, the ability to

trust is impaired as the audience arguably cannot see the full picture, so to speak (Boltanski, 1999: 151).

Branding and persuasion

The process of branding can play a large role in establishing trust and its efficacy has been studied across a variety of media platforms (Hobsbawm, 2009). Using Grimaldi's (2003) psycho-social definition of a 'brand,' it is 'a combination of attributes, communicated through a name, or a symbol, that influences a thought-process in the mind of an audience and creates value' (Grimaldi, 2003, para. 3). Branding is regarded as an important communicative process for any organisation to build rapport with their target audience and it is believed that customers will respond favourably if they trust the brand (Johnson, 2007).

Branding is often achieved by appealing to audiences' ethos using emotional narratives and characters which the audience can relate to (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009). Some organisations recruit celebrities as their spokespeople in an attempt to appeal to media outlets and audiences (Einstein, 2012; Richey & Ponte, 2011). According to Alan Johnson, 'your brand is a short cut for the market to understand who you are, what you do, what you stand for, how you do it and for how much' (Johnson, 2007, para. 2).

Taking the concept of persuasive communications, Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) theorises that analysing the variables of awareness, relevance, accessibility and motivation can reveal how audiences' attitudes change according to how they interpret messages. ELM assesses how organisations leverage these variables to persuade audiences to support them and inhibit scepticism (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The audience as donors and consumers

'Institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption' (Silverstone, 2005: 189). In this sense, the audience is viewed as active consumers, rather than passive receivers, and they are able to express their opinions and attribute their own meaning to organisations (Silverstone, 2007). In this section, the perspective of the audience will be cross-examined across NGO and CSR communications. Arguably, 'given that making a donation to charity is an economic activity, as well as a social activity, it is reasonable to suggest that the investigation of donor decision making has much to gain from reference to the advances made in consumer behavior research (Hibbert & Horne, 1996: 5).

There is a plethora of research studying the donor audience in development aid literature, such as viewing them as part of an 'atrocity triangle' of victimizer, victim and bystander in which attempts are made to interpret audience reactions to humanitarian appeals (Cohen, 2001); or as spectators of suffering and distant sufferers (Chouliaraki, 2006) pitying those needing aid (Boltanski, 1999). Phenomena such as desensitisation to media images of the developing world is argued to lead to 'compassion fatigue' where the audience stops noticing the suffering of others (Tester, 2001: 13).

Assuming the audience are rational decision-makers (Hibbert & Horne, 1996), Irene Bruna Seu (2010) analyses how contemporary, media-savvy audiences 'do denial' through intelligent consumerism in which denial is a sophisticated process. Here, audiences can evaluate organisations on both 'consumerist and moral grounds' as they 'position themselves simultaneously as the victim of a marketing ploy and at the same time declaim a lack of moral consideration' (Bruna Seu, 2010: 452). Others argue that issue relevance, or personal fit, and motivation are determining factors in the evaluative process (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Schmeltz, 2012).

Fahri Apaydin (2011) urges for more research into non-profit communications as he believes that they significantly impact 'how donors perceive the management of the organisation, its performance and a variety of benefits that might accrue to the individual and to the society from the giving' (Apaydin, 2011: 421). Returning to the concept of branding, effective NGO communication can either satisfy or dissuade donors as the messages evoke subjective judgements (Apaydin, 2011). These judgements are also evaluated for their behavioural implications to understand what drives action and inaction on the part of the audience (Boltanski, 1999; Tester, 2001). The act of giving aid has been studied as a channel through which to redress emotional catalysts, such as guilt and pity, as a means to satisfy audiences' sense of responsibility (Cohen, 2001; B. Martens, 2008). Other studies contextualise the media in audience studies where the 'technologisation of action' allows audiences to participate in development through online donations and campaigns at a distance (Chouliaraki, 2011; Madianou, 2012: 253).

Analysing consumer responses to CSR is arguably just as complex (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006) with their various characteristics and roles. Studies show that audience engagement is most integral to CSR communications but that promoting awareness is challenging (Schmeltz, 2012). Overall, consumers view CSR as important, but have been found to be sceptical of overt communications of corporate altruism. Studies have found that

evaluations of CSR intent are dependent upon the 'degree to which consumers associate egoistic (self-centred) or altruistic (other-centred) motives' (Ellen, et al., 2006: 148). Moreover, some scholars have argued that although people are interested about CSR, 'the actual outcome or result of that interest is almost non-existent and rarely realised' (Schmeltz, 2012: 34).

Nongovernmental Organisations

Defining NGOs is a challenge as it is difficult to pinpoint any one standard definition used by academic scholars as there has been a wide array of interpretations put forth over the years (K. Martens, 2002). However, it is agreed that NGOs are separate from political and corporate organisations. Some NGOs are further classified according to interest, such as fundraising for poverty relief, providing medical services, mobilising citizen participation, or human rights advocacy (Baur & Schmitz, 2011).

Most cited in literature is Kerstin Martens' (2002) definition of NGOs as 'formal (professionalised) independent societal organisations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or the international level' (K. Martens, 2002: 282). NGOs are also 'very often referred to as non-profit-making entities' (K. Martens, 2002: 278).

The effectiveness of for-profit organisations is normally assessed against quantifiable measures, such as profit and revenue (Acar, Aupperle, & Lowy, 2001). Conversely, the effectiveness of NGOs is normally evaluated qualitatively by assessing the human impact and social value of their work (Lecy, et al., 2009). 'Image motivation' drives NGOs to communicate their social value to society by 'doing good' for society because this is perceived as pro-social behaviour (Ariely, et al., 2009: 544). Consequently, the legitimacy and effectiveness of NGOs are both praised and scrutinised.

During the Poverty Reduction Strategies Forum hosted by the World Bank on 29 October 2002, Miklos Marschall of the anti-corruption NGO Transparency International[1] further qualifies the measures of NGO 'effectiveness' and 'legitimacy' as encompassing trust, flexibility, mobility, representation and accountability (Marschall, 2002). In order to enhance the analysis of this study, I will use Marschall's subcategories as the matrix against which to elaborate on how studies deconstruct, support and critique NGOs in and around a mediated context:

[1] Transparency International's official website is www.transparency.org.uk

Trust

NGOs are expected to be trustworthy by the general public and are held to high standards by virtue of their efforts to provide humanitarian aid. Marschall suggests that while this is an advantage, it can also simultaneously be a disadvantage when an NGO does not meet this expectation. 'Many years are needed for NGOs to build up a good reputation, and it takes one bad move to lose it' (Marschall, 2002: para. 4). There is an inherently normative character about NGOs in that their organisational objective is to provide aid. In short, people generally expect NGOs to 'do good' (K. Martens, 2002).

Lack of trust or scepticism sometimes stems from reports of donation abuse and corrupt distribution of funds by NGOs (Apaydin, 2011). As such, fund management in particular is of utmost concern for donors and watchdog organisations, with increasingly greater insistence for transparency as to how and where funds are distributed (Baur & Schmitz, 2011).

Historically, NGOs have focused their media efforts on appealing to journalists and managing media relations to raise awareness. Now, research indicates that social media presence is effective for enabling trust in organisations, as long as the messages make sense and strategically aligned with the organisations' objectives. However, traditional media such as mainstream news outlets and television are also viewed to be more reliable because they are less easily changeable than, for example, blogs and public forums, and remain a source of pride for NGOs to be associated with. As social media is still new and technology is rapidly changing, some view NGOs to be more reliable if they continue to engage with audiences through mainstream media platforms. As such, NGOs have been relatively slow to leverage new media despite the opportunities they present and their cost-effectiveness (Seo, et al., 2009).

Taking a political economy view, ongoing economic challenges have forced organisations to review their engagement strategies as 'consumers have limited disposal income, charities are compelled to present themselves as valuable commodities, products (not only services) that are worthy of people's dollars' (Einstein, 2012: 3). In order to compete, non-profits 'must justify their existence to donors, secure new contracts, and fend off competitors' (Cooley & Ron, 2002: 38-39). The 'corporatisation of charity' seems to be the inevitable response to the changing global economy (Einstein, 2012: 69).

Applying classic corporate marketing tactics to NGO management is increasingly popular and integrated in overall donor engagement strategies. Mainly, NGO branding is undertaken as a means to construct a positive image and communicate their intentions to their potential donors (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). 'Brand names can greatly aid a donor's understanding of the non-profit organisation concerned and suggest very potent reasons why it might be worthy of support' (Apaydin, 2011: 423). Maria Rodriguez, president of social change agency Vanguard Communications, says 'building a strong brand is just as critical for social change-focused entities as it is for the corporate world' ('Vanguard Communications,' 2013: para. 4).

Audiences want to trust NGOs to fix development problems, for their intentions to match their outcomes, and to demonstrate value and ethical responsibility in their work (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). As such, NGO communications need to match these expectations in order to be perceived as trustworthy.

Flexibility

Taken as another measure of effectiveness, flexibility is viewed as a unique advantage for NGOs allowing for innovation, adaptability and fast results in the development aid field at low-cost. Marschall suggests that NGOs are better able to focus on their objectives without bureaucratic limits and contestations (Marschall, 2002). Essentially, 'their independence of commercial and governmental interests puts them in position to put pressure for change on those interests' (Dichter, 1999: 43).

NGOs are taking more advantage of new media to increase interactivity and provide channels to independently distribute information and raise awareness (Seo, et al., 2009: 123). Communications such as viral video and social media campaigns are pioneering the way NGOs engage with audiences in that that they allow for increased visibility, scalability of aid campaigns and reduced proximity between donors and recipients (Madianou, 2012). The Internet has changed the way NGOs communicate with their audiences and has resulted in increased awareness and funding activity (Gordon, 2008).

However, NGOs are also criticised for being narrow-minded and single-issue focused, sometimes being charged with focusing immediately on short-term solutions without first addressing underlying problems (Easterly, 2008; Richey & Ponte, 2011). Moreover, insensitivity to donor and recipient needs can backfire on NGOs which abuse their flexibility

to exercise its own judgement as an 'aid agency's margin for mediation is constrained by diverging donor and recipient interests' (B. Martens, 2008: 299).

Mobility

New media propels interconnectivity, with local events becoming global ones and global events becoming local ones (Giddens, 1991; Tomlinson, 1994). 'These media enable activists to mobilise citizens across the globe by efficiently transcending national boundaries at minimal costs' (Seo, et al., 2009: 123). As such, 'NGOs have gained very visible power in mobilising public opinion' (Marschall, 2002: para. 6).

NGOs are well-known for using strong emotive appeals to compel donors to participate in aid initiatives and social media can be especially useful for spreading those messages. The use of celebrities as spokespeople are popular methods to attract donors and mobilise caring and affect. By association, 'aid celebrities become trusted advisors on issues of international development' and present themselves as 'the faces of doing good, credibility and believability.' As celebrities are recognised in a local context, however, their influence is limited and subjective (Richey & Ponte, 2011: 35, 47).

NGOs are caught between contradicting 'media logic' where, on the one hand, they need to use the media to mobilise public support; but on the other hand, they employ media strategies which may not support their overall humanitarian mission (Cottle & Nolan, 2007: 863-864). When not deployed strategically, NGO mediation can damage brand recognition so that rather than mobilise donors, it dissuades donors from participating at all.

Representation

This study is not specifically about representations of aid, but it would be remiss not to mention the literature around discursive consequences toward aid recipients, or who Stuart Hall terms 'the Other' (Hall, 1997) and who Gayatri Spivak refers to as 'subalterns' (Spivak, 1988).

Marschall argues against holding NGOs responsible for representations of those in the developing world by arguing that they exist to 'do development' rather than represent or speak for any one group: 'It is what it does, and not representation, that makes an NGO legitimate. NGOs and their networks are legitimised by the validity of their ideas, by the values they promote, and by the issues they care about (Marschall, 2002: para. 13) Rather,

he proposes that 'we need civil society organisations not because they "represent the people"; we need them because through them we can get things done better' (para. 15).

On the other hand, there is extensive research about the impact NGOs and development organisations have had on perpetuating negative stereotypes of people and cultures in the developing world (Dogra, 2012; Escobar, 1995; Spivak, 1988), as well as on oppressing those who do not have a voice along Becker's so-called 'hierarchy of credibility' (cited in Cohen, 2001: 175). Moreover, it is argued that the media have a substantial role in reinforcing incorrect and ultimately harmful representations and beliefs about aid recipients (Chouliaraki, 2006; Cohen, 2001; Silverstone, 2007; Tester, 2001).

In the latter sense, media representations of 'the Other' encourage the portrayal of a developing world in need of a hero to rescue it from a cycle of poverty, starvation, misery and death (Hall, 1997). As a result, Silverstone (2007) argues that carelessly crafted messages actually mediate evil as 'the signal expression of otherness' (Silverstone, 2007: 75) which both become embedded in culture as well as provide familiar scripts of good and bad (Silverstone, 2007). Images and emotions are commodified and used as leverage to attract donations through advertising campaigns and fundraising drives. For donors, Ilan Kapoor (2005) argues that long-term development is compromised because NGO media reiterate a 'fantasy of consensus' that all donations go directly to the helpless person or persons displayed on their television screen or Facebook page. By filtering the full story so that audiences are not bombarded with the real complexities facing development efforts, 'the tendency of consensus making is towards closure and hence towards the privileging of some voices and the simplification, suppression and exclusion of others' (Kapoor, 2005: 1210).

Accountability

Donors expect NGOs to professionalise their operations and corporatise their messages so as to be able to present quantifiable measures of their success (Edwards, 2010). NGOs are responding to demands for accountability by thinking and acting like businesses do (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Easterly, 2008). 'This would imply that an aid agency's performance should not be assessed in terms of improving welfare in beneficiary countries, but rather in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of its mediation' (B. Martens, 2008: 287).

By corporatising their message, NGOs are arguably better placed to 'generate support within donor countries by reassuring sceptical legislators that foreign assistance is being spent responsibly and efficiently' (Cooley & Ron, 2002: 12). As Marschall states, 'the best way

NGOs can make up the natural "accountability gap" is to generate public trust by full transparency and high standards of performance' (Marschall, 2002: para. 18).

The demand for accountability is often viewed as a by-product of intense global competition 'for media attention and donor funds in an increasingly crowded humanitarian aid field' (Cottle & Nolan, 2007: 863). Regarding the narratives and images the media selects for audiences, Cohen (2001) argues that 'human suffering is a commodity to be worked on and recast' (Cohen, 2001: 169).

Corporate Social Responsibility

Expanding the scope from the non-profit to the profit sector, much interest also surrounds corporations which juxtapose their profit-making objectives with philanthropic initiatives. The latter are constituted in what is commonly known as Corporate Social Responsibility programmes, or 'CSR' for short. Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte describe CSR as diverse corporate programmes aiming to achieve the 'triple bottom line – based on financial, social and environmental objectives' (Richey & Ponte, 2011: 127). Recognising that there is no single definition, Marcel van Marrewijk (2003) categorises the various interpretations into three approaches (Marrewijk, 2003):

- The *shareholder approach* in which the company is solely concerned with a CSR agenda which directly maximises profit for the company (p. 96).
- The *stakeholder approach* in which the scope extends to all stakeholders of a business but the objective of CSR is still to benefit the business (p. 96).
- The *societal approach* is arguably the most commonly understood by the public today, in which CSR is set up for the benefit of society (p. 97).

Motives

The underlying motives of establishing CSR programmes are frequently evaluated. These include intrinsic motivations guided by emotion and altruism, such as the ethical norms championed by corporate employees. Extrinsic motives include those guided by financial incentive, such as corporate reputation, profit, industry development and productivity (Graafland, Mazereeuw, & Schouten, 2012) in which consumers are commodities.

Opting to evaluate CSR from a corporate lens, Peggy Brønn and Deborah Vidaver-Cohen (2009) surveyed several executive managers across 500 Norwegian companies to

understand their reasons for pursuing CSR initiatives and subsequently derived three motivating factors from their findings: legitimacy, sustainability and profitability. Similar to the approach taken in Section 2.3, this 'tri-partite classification' (Bronn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009: 102) is useful as a basis for deconstructing the various judgements about CSR.

Overall, Brønn and Vidaver-Cohen found that the legitimacy factor was deemed the most important by survey respondents to enhance corporate reputation and image, lending credence to the 'growing consensus among businesses worldwide that a strong social agenda may be critical for meeting stakeholder expectations and protecting reputation at a time when the Internet and global media coverage spotlight corporate failings almost instantaneously' (Bronn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009: 102-103). The profitability factor was also considered a strategic one where investing in societal development is seen to be financially advantageous for the company. Rather than CSR being viewed merely as a strategic tool (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009), the sustainability factor is where most of the intrinsic motives lie, where employees believe CSR to be a moral responsibility to the society (Bronn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009). Here, CSR is viewed as a societal need and not a strategic benefit.

Some are suspicious of the sustainability of CSR and question whether it 'distracts attention from the root causes of poverty and environmental destruction' (Richey & Ponte, 2011: 122). Whilst techniques such as cause-marketing (Einstein, 2012) and humanitarian branding (Chouliaraki, 2006) help to promote CSR initiatives and, by association, build corporate brands, some argue that the ubiquitous influence of big brands has led to the masses viewing businesses as 'the obvious solution to solving global problems in a context in which it can be the only solution' (Richey & Ponte, 2011: 17).

Communicating CSR

A particularly important aspect of CSR is around communication and, alongside that, corporate branding. Michael Polonsky and Colin Jevons (2009) identify 'communication complexity' as a key focus area for corporations to address when building a CSR strategy so that a 'firm not only clearly understands its brand identity and positioning, but that it understands how the brand and the wider organisation relate to CSR' (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009: 337). CSR has become a crucial component of corporate branding strategy in recent years as a company's 'distinctive responsibility then helps to define and differentiate the global organisation's identity, providing an attractive element of its overall branding' (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009: 334).

Drawing from existing literature about CSR communications, Line Schmeltz (2012) identifies five recurring themes to support his argument that consumer values influence attitudes and expectations. Firstly, *buying behaviour* is often used as a simplistic measure of the effect of CSR on corporate consumers in which it is generally assumed that the more positively a consumer associates a corporation based on its CSR programme, the more likely that consumer would be to support the corporation. The next theme is a relatively new area of study in which *consumer response and attitude* is examined to understand the value of CSR from the consumers' standpoint.

Many studies indicate that consumers expect corporations to engage in some form of CSR; however, consumers also report that they don't trust organisations which aggressively market their philanthropic messages. The third is *rhetorical strategies* where research looks into the choice of various CSR communications, such as language style. Closely intertwined with this is *credibility* where the choice of rhetoric influences corporate reputation and garners public respect. Lastly, studies look at how corporations use CSR communications to *overcome scepticism*, such as aligning the CSR agenda with business objectives to reduce scepticism surrounding intent (Schmeltz, 2012: 33-36).

Conceptual framework and research questions

The rise of NGOs in the globalised world we live in today is influencing the way business is conducted; simultaneously, businesses are effecting the way NGOs are managed (Marrewijk, 2003). Perhaps, 'the most important blurring now occurring among NGOs is that between the culture of the for-profit and the non-profit world' (Dichter, 1999: 43). The conceptual framework for this study will support the analysis of how audience perceptions of NGOs and CSR are shaped given their communications pursue similar development initiatives.

This is not a study about representation or about quantitative measures of effectiveness. Rather, this is a qualitative study which will seek to address the relative lack of knowledge about the extent to which communications influence how audiences perceive NGOs and CSR (Apaydin, 2011). It will attempt to distinguish itself from other research by studying both NGOs and CSR in relation to each other to recognise the increased competition and demand they face in the changing media landscape.

Moreover, most research in this area narrowly studies the audience from a receiver standpoint as bystanders and spectators (Schmeltz, 2012). Whilst these approaches yield interesting data, it arguably does not recognise the complexity behind how audiences

consciously evaluate organisational effectiveness by taking into account such variables as value systems and personal experiences.

As such, the audience will be assumed to be actively in control of their own media consumption and able to understand, evaluate and be reflexive. Ultimately though, audiences can still 'only work with what they're given' (Bird, 2003: 3), so this research will contextualise the social, political and economic variables influencing the content of NGO and CSR communications within the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to understand what audiences are persuaded by.

Exploring the concept of perception, this study will attempt to understand how the legitimacy and effectiveness of organisations are evaluated by the audience. Perception itself is the 'key to understanding an organisation's effectiveness given that perception determines an organisation's ability to operate in a given community or industry, retain customers, raise capital for growth or during times of crisis, gain protection from political or regulatory figures, and attract dynamic employees' (Aldrich, 2003; Lecy, et al., 2009: 6).

It will conceptualise the communicative processes of branding and mediation and take a values-based approach to allow the researcher to deconstruct how audiences interpret communications and form judgements. For this study, a working definition of 'attitude' is taken to mean 'evaluations people hold in regard to themselves, other people, objects, and issues.' Moreover, the extent to which NGO and CSR communications shape audience attitudes will be analysed using the concept of 'influence' as a 'very general term that refers to any change in these evaluations' (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986: 4).

Research questions

Drawing on the conceptual framework, this study will seek to qualitatively answer the primary research question: How are audiences' perceptions and attitudes of NGOs and CSR influenced by their organisational communications?

This question will be further supported with sub-questions to allow for more compelling exploration of the data:

- How does the audience differentiate between NGOs and CSR?
- How do audiences evaluate the effectiveness of NGOs and CSR?
- How do audiences make sense of the various branding and media strategies employed by NGOs and CSR?

METHODOLOGY

This section will provide the rationale for using qualitative, in-depth interviewing as the research method, and thematic analysis to analyse the findings in comparison to alternative research methods. After conducting a pilot study and reassessing the topic guide and sampling strategy, nine individual in-depth interviews with three male and six female respondents were conducted for this study.

Rationale

Interviews were determined to be the ideal method to assess audience perceptions because the research question called for a deeper qualitative understanding of those answers. As Arthur Berger (1998) notes, 'a depth interview is a kind of probe' (A. Berger, 1998: 55). A high level of trust had to be established with the interviewees in order to pursue research objectives and draw meaning from them, as 'meaning is created as human beings relate to each other, taking into account past and anticipated future experience' (Holdaway, 2000: 163; Stroh, 2000).

Alternative methods were also considered, including surveys and focus group interviews. Whilst the responses would most likely still have yielded interesting data, this study was particularly interested in capturing responses with the multi-layered variety and emotion that interviewing can yield (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Gaskell, 2000).

Whilst surveys would have allowed for possible generalisation of the findings, they would not have been able to address the full scope of the research question as responses would have been limited to a standardised questionnaire, rather than a semi-structured interview topic guide (Gaskell, 2000). As such, opportunities for follow up questions and further exploration would have been lost (Stroh, 2000). In comparison to interviews, the quality of survey responses would not have allowed for the 'richness and diversity of meaning people attribute to a phenomenon' (Holdaway, 2000: 166).

In situations involving more than two people, focus groups characteristically inspire more active debate but also leaves more potential for the interviewer's role to be rendered obsolete as the environment is not conducive for focused discussion. Focus group interviews would be appropriate for representation studies or for particularly introverted respondents (Oates, 2000). Multiple competing personalities in focus group interviews can effect their

willingness and openness to answer certain questions in the presence of other participants (A. A. Berger, 2011).

Content and discourse analysis would have yielded interesting data about NGO and CSR communications content itself by identifying representational and linguistic patterns in text and images. However, like surveys, more thorough analysis would have been limited by strict coding frameworks and by the selected documents (Fairclough, 1992; Hansen, 1998).

Ultimately, the interview method was chosen as it allowed for engaging conversation and a more trusting environment within which the respondents could answer questions openly. As such, a semi-structured interview topic guide with open-ended questions was essential to reduce potential for biased questions and response and to encourage reflexivity. Interviewing allows for adaptability, flexibility and contextualisation so as to concentrate on particular areas of interest and, importantly, to stimulate 'conversation with a purpose' (A. Berger, 1998; Gaskell, 2000; Stroh, 2000: 203).

However, individual interviewing can present some limitations. It can be difficult to recruit people who are willing to be questioned and recorded. On the other hand, fewer respondents also permits greater 'time to observe and gain insight into other people's lives' (Holdaway, 2000: 165). Some uncertainty also lies in analysing a wide array of responses as these can't be anticipated until after responses are collected when a thoughtful evaluation of the type of analysis to apply can be determined. Again, responses are subject to the varied personalities and moods of both the interviewer and respondents, as well as the timing of the interviews themselves (Gaskell, 2000; Stroh, 2000). Despite the inability to generalise findings, potential for biased responses, time constraints and unpredictable outcomes (A. Berger, 1998), interviews were still the most optimal method for this study.

Research design

Sampling

Nine respondents were selected using the targeted sampling technique within the researcher's own social network. It was important that the sample comprised of respondents who have reasonable exposure to and understanding of the non-profit and development sectors. As such, Washington D.C., a well-known international hub for a variety of organisational types, was selected as the ideal metropolitan area from which to recruit respondents.

Targeted sampling allowed for the researcher to recruit respondents who were known to be knowledgeable of topics relevant to this study. However, the researcher recognised that the controlled nature of targeted sampling is open to bias in both responses as well as analysis in that respondents also knew the researcher in a personal capacity (Crow, 2000; Stroh, 2000). Snowball sampling was also considered, in which respondents within the researcher's personal network would refer their own contacts to the researcher (Burton, 2000), but this would not have ensured that the respondents would have been from the particular 'social milieu' the research required or representative of diverse backgrounds. Ultimately, the sample was selected by accounting for George Gaskell's (2000) point that 'the real purpose of qualitative research is not counting opinions or people but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue' (Gaskell, 2000: 41).

Whilst people selected for the study have all spent a lengthy amount of time in the Washington D.C. area, some currently work or study in other US cities and were interviewed in either Washington D.C. or London, UK. Overall, basic respondent profiles are as follows in alphabetical order by their corresponding initials, which are used for citation purposes in the analysis section of this paper:

- 25 year old man working in New York City for a luxury jeweller as a social media analyst (AD)
- 31 year old woman working in Washington D.C. in government communications (CK)
- 40 year old man working in Washington D.C. as an economist in a non-profit organisation (JM)
- 30 year old woman working in Washington D.C. in a strategic planner for a university (JW)
- 26 year old woman studying dentistry in Baltimore, Maryland (PA)
- 39 year old woman working in Washington D.C. as a corporate banker (SC)
- 31 year old man working in Washington D.C. as a trader (TA)
- 28 year old woman working in Boston, MA as a hospital analyst (VC)
- 29 year old woman working in New York City as a lawyer (VD)

Topic guide

The topic guide is an important base to garner quality interview responses. It was comprised of several key topic headings and related supporting questions using a semi-structured format in order to ensure the interviewer's preparedness going into the interviews, and resultantly instil confidence in the respondents. Moreover, it permitted flexibility and encouraged diverse responses (A. A. Berger, 2011; Stroh, 2000). Key topics and questions were designed so as to ensure interviewees felt they could respond openly without feeling judged or pressured to answer in a way which would 'please' or 'upset' the interviewer (Crow, 2000).

The topic guide was created after pilot testing an initial version two months prior to this study on three respondents. After assessing the pilot interviews, the researcher revised the topic guide so as to include more opportunities for reflexivity and adaptability. The revised topic guide served as a better 'prompt' for the interviewer to conduct the interviews (Gaskell, 2000: 40).

The topic guide was comprised of seven sections, with each focused on a different key topic. Supporting questions were then listed below each section to serve as additional prompts dependent upon the flow of conversation. The topic guide begins with a standard explanation of informed consent for every respondent. This was followed by general demographic questions. Subsequent sections then concentrated on NGOs, media, development aid, CSR and branding. Invariably, most sections included questions about perceived advantages and disadvantages of using the media to communicate organisational messages. The final section allowed for the respondents to ask questions and further explore certain topics with the interviewer before thanking the respondents and ending the interview.

Ethical considerations

To ensure ethical boundaries were upheld during the entire interview process, each respondent was asked to read and sign an informed consent form to acknowledge their acceptance to take part in this research study, as well as a verbal consent statement at the beginning of the interview. As Gerry Kent (2000) explains, 'consent is needed to protect the important ethical principle of autonomy – the right to exercise self-determination' (Kent, 2000: 81). The informed consent explained the basis of the research as well as reminded them that their identities would be kept anonymous by citing their initials in the

dissertation. They all expressly understood that the interviews would be recorded, but the recordings would not be heard by anyone except the researcher for transcription purposes. Respondents also understood that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose which questions to answer or not answer. In order to reduce bias in the situation in which 'the interviewee may be rather self-conscious' or they 'limit answers to what is presumed to be relevant and informative' (Gaskell, 2000: 45), the researcher reminded respondents that their answers would never be judged as 'right' or 'wrong.'

Conducting the interviews

Nine interviews were conducted in Washington D.C. or London to ensure a comfortable and familiar atmosphere (Gaskell, 2000). The researcher scheduled each interview either during a three-week time period spent in Washington D.C. or in London when two respondents visited the city. The length of the interviews varied depending on respondents' interest, willingness and availability with each lasting between a range of 20 to 45 minutes. It should be noted here that the terms 'NGOs', 'non-profits', and 'charities' were used interchangeably during the interview process.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Following the interview phase, each recording was transcribed, reviewed and annotated by the researcher. These notes allowed the researcher to categorise specific lines of response according to a rough pattern identification system (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Initially, this provided a way to organise the data by identifying significant moments of conversation (Boyatzis, 1998). Following this data search, the researcher decided that thematic analysis would be the most appropriate method as the patterns could be regarded as themes and the 'emerging themes become the categories for analysis' (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 82).

The assumption of an active audience is evidenced by the respondents' diverse responses and interpretations. Still, it is important to note that some respondents will be cited more than once in one thematic category as their comments were deemed as relevant and essential to the overall analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 86).

Results and thematic analysis will be presented together to complement the rich body of data. This section will be divided by the three main themes identified during the coding process: 1. Getting the message right, 2. Brand value, and 3. Perceptions of organisational

effectivness. The themes will be illustrated with excerpts from the interview transcripts. Quotes will be cited with the respondents' initials to conceal their identities as per the anonymity gurantee in the informed consent. This section will close with the researcher's self-critical assessment of the entire process and recommendations for future research.

Getting the message right: balance, content, relevance

The media, especially social media, were agreed by most respondents to be integral for raising awareness and connecting people and communities to not only each other but also to organisations. Findings confirmed that audiences regard social media as an integral engagement tool, with implications being that the audience positively associates organisations with a social media presence with proactively taking social initiative. Respondents made confident assertions particularly about the media, in keeping with the view of a sophisticated media-savvy audience (Bruna Seu, 2010; Schmeltz, 2012):

> Ok so I think social media is so important…because it opens up the ways we interact with customers. It connects me with them even though I'm in an office. And then I can get…can understand…what they want. It's definitely powerful. (AD)

> When you have an intellectual community talking positively about what you do, that truly adds credibility. (CK)

> It definitely helps increase awareness. (JW)

> I would definitely use Facebook […] You've got to mobilise people, I think it's the most important thing. And then they'll Facebook it. So you get people to do things out of their own volition to start blogging or tweeting about it. Livestrong did such a good job because it became a trend and everyone knew what they were doing. (PA)

> I think social media definitely helps… when corporations start their own Facebook page. It connects you to everyone and everything. (SC)

> No I don't think it effects their credibility. I just think they're trying to use all possible avenues to reach out to as many people as possible. Not a bad thing. (VD)

Findings reveal that attitudes towards social media are similar to their attitudes toward the use of celebrities as spokespeople for humanitarian initiatives. Analysis seems to confirm that celebrity culture and 'charitainment' are appreciated by audiences as a way to raise humanitarian awareness. Here, celebrity is regarded as an effective form of what could be

termed 'role model mediation' in which audiences can relate to a familiar figure whilst also feeling good about their societal involvement (Einstein, 2012):

> I guess I should not be too harsh. If what they are doing can draw in one more millionaire or billionaire to contribute to fighting poverty, that's a great thing. (JM)

> Even if they're not doing it to actually help the children or they want to help their image. It doesn't matter. Ultimately they're raising awareness. [...] If ultimately they are making money to help someone and also helping their image, it's ok. It's a mutually beneficial relationship. (PA)

> I follow Oprah and Alicia Keys on Instagram. They are big into donating and giving back. (VD)

Interestingly, some respondents contradicted themselves by also expressing their frustration with an over-abundance of communication and feeling compelled to disconnect from the media from time to time. These findings confirm a moral aspect of media where audiences can actively filter the messages they receive, but making that decision also reveals an ability to 'switch off' a sense of responsibility to 'act in a meaningful and morally sustainable way' (Silverstone, 2005: 202). Thus, analysis indicates a need for NGOs to balance their communications output whilst also ensuring message content attracts attention and remains relevant:

> I think I followed Human Rights Watch on Facebook but I stopped getting their updates in my feed because they were repetitive [...] I got tired of getting too many emails. (JW)

> Even Save the Children send too many mailers. I'm thinking it's just too much and a lot of money they're wasting. I dunno. I'm not a sponsor anymore. It made me think. They should switch to e-newsletters or online stuff. I don't think about that when Ronald McDonald House sends promos like that. (PA)

> Well, we touched on it before with NGOs about how everywhere you look they really bombard you. (TA)

Significantly, many respondents commented on the necessity for NGOs particularly to streamline their messaging with emphasis on consistency, strategic direction and message clarity. Drawing from Silverstone's (1997) discussion of the limits of the media's reach, this implies that audiences are sensitive to communication and that message content should be specific and relevant to the receiver. Within a context of a crowded media environment in which organisations are vying for audience attention (Cottle & Nolan, 2007), these

responses also indicate an appreciation of message quality over quantity. Findings confirm the audience's desire to actively comprehend what organisations stand for, rather than passively receive information (Madianou, 2012; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009):

> I think social media can help but not always. They'd have to be clear [...] I just don't have time for people who aren't clear about what they need. I won't just look online to check what an NGO is doing randomly. I need to know what they are supporting first then I'll reach out. (CK)

> I do like those that bring a message with information. I would go with any NGO that is run effectively and that has shown that it has made a difference. It's not all about the money. (JM)

> I can see that some organisations think they have to be on social media but don't do it right. They don't approach it with an organised strategy [...] Right now NGOs probably just want to aim to create a presence but need to go a bit further to refine what they want their message or brand should be (JW)

Interestingly, issue relevance was identified by respondents as the most important indicator of message quality, and findings indicate that this is very important for organisations to distinguish themselves from their competitors by engaging their audience. Findings revealed that memorable organisations stood out for their ability to personally connect with their audience. Results imply that audiences do attach meanings to organisations based on their personal experiences and values (Schmeltz, 2012), reinforcing the importance of 'creating brand imagery that ultimately arouses feelings and thoughts within the donor and forms the bases for non-profit brand attitude' (Apaydin, 2011: 430).

> I think there are way too may out there all competing for a limited space in the market. Go figure. So, the key question to me is how they can engineer a message that resonates and clears the white noise. (JM)

> They make me stop and think at least. They bring real things to life. They prick your consciousness. That is the kind of advertisement that I can live with. Not the ones that sell an idea but the ones that show me what the challenges are. They make me feel like I can do something to help. (JM)

> They strike a chord. Save the Children is one my mother used to work with when I was younger. Guide dogs for the Blind because for some reason or another, I have a lot of blind friends. And Help for Heroes, I come from a military family and so um, that's something that's quite close to my heart. (TA)

> I think cause is more important to me. A well-known NGO doesn't appeal to me as much as an NGO that's supporting a cause that I find meaningful. (VC)

Brand Value: trust, recognition, association

Not only is branding a way for organisations to stand out from the competition, but it also 'informs their strategic use of communications and how they facilitate media access to the field' (Cottle & Nolan, 2007: 866). In this sense, brand name should matter to audiences because the way organisations communicate to their audiences is usually a projection of the image they want audiences to associate them with. 'Branding isn't about giving away T-shirts with your logo on it. It's about creating an experience or emotion that is memorable enough to talk about or to recommend' (Clancy, 2007: para. 6).

From the analysis, brand recognition was cited by many respondents as a measure of organisational trustworthiness and credibility (Apaydin, 2011). However, trust can be tempered by moral evaluations of intent and motive:

> I have to admit I guess I like good brand names. It just makes it easier to decide on stuff. Like buying things. Or I guess giving money. (AD)

> I think some corporations have been effective in branding [...] For NGOs, clearly it's about getting donor interest and winning political arguments. For corporations it's mainly to show that they care about society. Which is a good thing. But I do think that sometimes it comes across as insincere. (JM)

When pointedly asked how they choose amongst NGOs, respondents primarily cited brand recognition as a critical factor. This implies that effective branding can determine the credibility of one NGO over another in a 'crowded aid field' (Cottle & Nolan, 2007: 864). This indicates that attitudes towards NGOs are circumstantial, with respondents viewing NGOs more favourably when they have stronger brand recognition over comparable NGOs. Organisational branding makes it easier for the audience to 'recall the benefits of non-profit organisations' services' to form judgements and make decisions (Apaydin, 2011: 423):

> I totally understand the need to brand. I really applaud the platforms for working to create a safe place for people to engage. To be engaged is so important I think. And yeah I'm more likely to donate if I know who they are. Or volunteer sometimes. (CK)

> I would support NGOs which I know and their reputation is sound. (SC)

> If I were to donate money, certainly it would only be to a charity or company that I recognise. (VC)

Interestingly, the more NGOs brand themselves, the less trustworthy they are perceived to be if the messages are considered to be distasteful, forceful and overt. Findings from the vast majority of respondents verify scholarly caution that donors are dissuaded by NGOs which seem to focus more on promoting their own image than on aid work. Indeed, responses indicate that NGO branding detracted from their overall humanitarian message (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). The implication of this is that whilst brand recognition helps to distinguish organisations, the process must be approached strategically to balance the need to build awareness for humanitarian causes and the need to build awareness of their brand. 'The reason for that is communications that are not for market purpose are believed to have more credibility for the public' (Apaydin, 2011: 423).

Conversely, overall analysis found that respondents were less judgemental about CSR branding as perhaps they primarily perceive CSR to be for corporate profitability and don't necessarily challenge corporations which don't proactively communicate their social initiatives (Bronn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009):

> I think their mission is noble and definitely needed. It's all relevant to the world. But the amount of wheeling and dealing with the political side of the house can muddle things. […] I think this is what keeps me from trusting them as much as I could. (CK)

> Well, one I wouldn't trust the organisation if I knew they were purposely trying to brand. Like in church when they come around collecting money. I would give to them because I know they're associated with the church. But I wouldn't give to that same organisation on the street. (PA)

Moreover, analysis revealed that negative press about one NGO has a corresponding impact on audience perceptions of other NGOs, indicating a generalisation of perceived morality. Again, this indicates a need for NGOs to fine-tune their brand so that audiences are able to discern positive traits from their competitors (Apaydin, 2011):

> And other strong brands like that do a great job explaining what they are, what they offer and also can strengthen related brands. […] So it has a trickle-down effect. But then see with NGOs, if one is corrupt which we read about then I just kind of think all of them are like that. So goes both ways. (JW)

> I used to donate money to the Red Cross for disaster relief but after I heard some interesting news saying the Red Cross only donates small portion of your donation to relief it put me off. (VC)

A number of respondents brought up the topic of philanthropic partnerships between NGOs and corporations to strengthen brand credibility (Richey & Ponte, 2011). Findings indicate that both NGOs and corporations can rebuild a damaged brand if they are seen to be associated with a reputable partner. Specifically, respondents believed a profit and non-profit partnership to be mutually beneficial where, for example, an NGO partnered with a reputable corporation and a CSR programme associated itself with a reputable NGO:

> What I think makes more sense is the stuff [...] about creating shared value. That is how corporations can create value with the community that would benefit their bottom line as well as the community. I mean, at least do something honestly. There is no problem with making profit and doing good at the same time, is there? (JM)

> If corporations or people are tied with NGOs, it definitely helps them because they are seen in a much better light. (PA)

> I love the idea of a joint venture of an NGO and corporation. I think things are hectic and the lines are blurred and people don't really know what they're doing. So it would be a great idea. (TA)

> Then you would have the brains and drive of a corporation and help streamline and help an NGO achieve their goals. There are also the clichés about tough love, but I think a lot of NGO workers don't have that whereas maybe you need some ruthlessness to get the end goal achieved. (TA)

Perceptions of organisational effectiveness: scepticism and cautious optimism

Scepticism and perceptions of untrustworthiness were predominately associated with responses about NGOs and what they perceive to be confusing and unrealistic communications. The way audiences decode NGO and CSR communications were correlated with how they view broader structural components, including personnel and resources. Here again findings reinforce the important of strategic, well-planned and relevant communications.

A particularly interesting finding was how the majority of respondents perceived NGO employees, referring to them as too idealistic and disorganised to be effective in furthering

development goals. These findings imply that audiences match their perceived values of organisations to perceived abilities and characteristics of their employees. Arguably, audience perceptions of ineffective NGOs could stem from a sense of compassion fatigue whereby audiences are desensitised to communication about suffering and calls to action (Tester, 2001). Alarmingly, these associations seem to imply a stereotype of the corporate employee as more intellectually superior to his NGO counterpart. This presents an opportunity to reshape perceptions through human resources, as Norman (2013) argues: 'We compete on our knowledge, ingenuity, innovation and creativity. That means we need to win through our people' (Norman, 2013: para. 34).

> Sometimes I am weary if a charity will actually accomplish what they set out to do though. I think a lot of time, corruption or inefficiency get in the way. I hate inefficiency. But charities should have stuff organised so people get help and…not die or starve. They have to be more organised to make a difference or they'll be running around in circles. (AD)

> I guess I think they're do-gooders and altruistic. They seem nice and maybe naïve…or like um…almost starry-eyed. Optimistic but dreamy. If they are a local NGO and smaller I think they're more do-gooder-y and if it's larger I think of them as more corporate-like. (JW)

> In general, NGOs do good. So I think their work is good. They I think…well, they start out with the best intentions. But since they are run by people, you can't help get into mismanagement, and other organisational problems. It's natural. Some are better run than others and are truly out there to serve whatever cause they believe in. (SC)

> I don't know how you quantify effort but these NGOs are filled with people that want to make the world a better place in their particular way. How successful they are or not is almost immaterial as long as they're trying. (TA)

> I think NGO people are incredibly idealistic and ambitious but not as driven as corporate people. Again, this may be why CSR programmes work better. […] I think a lot of people who go into NGOs are too vague. Their striving to do good is too un-channelled. It's too wishy washy. […] I think in order to be successful at something you have to be specific and have a goal. (TA)

Many respondents took issue with resource availability and fund distribution as an indicator of organisational transparency and effectiveness. Findings indicate people are more suspicious of how NGOs distribute funds than how CSR initiatives are managed, despite relative consensus that CSR motives are profit-driven and insincere *('I think it is pressure on corporates to do something that they really, at heart, don't care about.' JM):*

> I suspect they don't have the resources that larger for-profits do to brand effectively. […] It's a resource thing I think but then again that being said some larger NGOs have done well developing a recognised brand, like Susan G. Komen […] more likely to give to a larger organisation because I suppose I think that would be the most impactful and might be more active. (JW)

> For RED campaigns, I don't worry about how much money they are spending on printing t-shirts. But for Save the Children, I worry about how they're spending their money when I get a pamphlet in the mail costing like a dollar each. (PA)

> I'm paranoid because you hear a lot about fake NGOs who get thousands a year but none go to the people. It's more believable that Coca-Cola will be able to deliver aid to Africa than some random NGO. (PA)

> I don't know but are NGOs wasting their money on boosting their brand rather than using the money to donate to their causes. […] I'd give money to a charity but not a CSR because the point of CSR is that they have the backing of a company anyway. (TA)

The findings above are indicative of strong scepticism and lack of faith in NGOs to effect sustainable change. Analysis around perceived organisational effectiveness reveal a general consensus that NGOs are well-intentioned but ineffective and CSR as insincere but effective. Findings revealed that 'consumers may care less about what firms are doing than about why they are doing it' (Ellen, et al., 2006: 148), implying that audiences judge organisational effectiveness not by external measures of success but by internal factors, such as motive and values. Arguably this demonstrates that whilst studies show that NGOs and CSR claim to be driven by a sense of moral responsibility and that audiences appreciate those intentions (Kilby, 2006; Schmeltz, 2012), they don't judge these organisations based on values alone. As such, communicating good intentions and morals cannot be relied upon for sustainable change; rather, NGOs and CSR programmes should be mindful that audience perception rests on their ability to effectively engage and demonstrate transparency, accountability and expertise in their communications.

Self-critical assessment and recommendations for future research

It should be noted that the interview process and data should be reviewed within context of their limitations. As respondents all spent significant time in the Washington D.C. area, the findings cannot be deemed representational of the entire audience to whom NGOs and CSR communications target. Moreover, whilst respondents shared their demographic

information was the interviewer, these details were not taken into consideration during analysis. Although, accounting for demographic information could yield interesting data in future research, as could a gender and age-balanced sample.

Personal connections to the interviewer were also not taken into consideration during analysis, although this most certainly produced some biased responses. The interview attempted to pre-empt this problem by making the interview environment as comfortable, open and judgement-free for the respondents as possible. Indeed, there were several moments where the interviewer was asked whether certain answers were ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and so used those opportunities to assure respondents that all their opinions were of value to the research project.

As the interviewing yields unpredictable results and respondents may have formed responses without ever having thought of or discussed the research topic before the interviews, the thematic analysis was a complicated endeavour. The interviewer was cognisant of thematic overlaps and contradictions made by some respondents, but sought to organise the data around what the interviewer perceived to be vital patterns of conversation. As such, a degree of interviewer uncertainty and relative inexperience conducting interviews most likely effected the analysis.

Future research could benefit from a larger sample size so as to perhaps reveal more themes and patterns to audience perception. Moreover, the inclusion of NGO and CSR communications material to act as visual prompts for respondents would have provided for a focused discussion on specific organisations. A comparative analysis of how employees view the NGOs and CSR programmes they work for would also be particularly interesting, given the audience’s perceptions of those employees. Likewise, a focus group interview of respondents with career experience in media and branding could provide lively debate to explore their understanding of the audience.

CONCLUSION

This research has attempted to study audience perceptions of NGOs and CSR within the broad area of media and communications. Rather than conduct a quantitative analysis of audience giving, statistical analysis of organisational effectiveness or textual analysis of representations, this study undertook a qualitative study to understand how NGOs and CSR are viewed from the audience’s perspective. The choice of the interview method allowed for

deeper exploration of the experiences, values and perceptions of an active, media-savvy audience. It particularly situated NGOs and CSR within a comparative context in recognition of a complex aid field in which both NGOs and corporations are contributing significant support, as well as in a changing media environment in which organisations are competing for audience attention.

The research consisted of nine individual interviews which were thematically analysed and revealed three major themes. Findings reveal that the audience expects organisations to have a social media presence and that they actively make sense of NGOs and CSR from their communications, indicating the need for clear, realistic and relevant information. The next theme included mixed responses to branding, where the audience appreciates the need for both NGOs and corporations to brand themselves in order to promote their respective social initiatives, but audience interpretations were sensitive to perceptions of trustworthiness and sincerity. Lastly, the results indicate that audiences attribute their perceptions of organisational effectiveness to the characteristics of NGO and corporate employees. In the same vein, the audience cite their sceptical attitudes towards resource management as reasons for perceived organisational ineffectiveness. Findings here imply an urgent need for NGOs and corporations to communicate greater transparency of their internal and external motives, strategy and processes.

What is apparent from these findings is that donors and consumers depend on complex evaluative criteria to assess organisational effectiveness, and are not persuaded by superficial and emotional communications. It is evidenced that as the media landscape and aid sector are changing, so too is the audience. Their perceptions of NGOs and CSR are guided by their personal experiences, values and motivations. To be persuasive and engaging in the modern media world, NGOs and CSR would benefit from aligning their communications with the interests and morality of a sophisticated audience in order to maximise their image, drive their humanitarian initiatives and inspire positive perceptions of their organisation.

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