

# **Public Perceptions of Cross-Sectoral Partnerships:**

The Role of Message Framing and Corporate Engagement

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## Abstract

This study examines how message framing and corporate engagement influence public perceptions of cross-sectoral partnerships, using a hypothetical collaboration between UNICEF and Chipotle. Drawing on theories of narrative persuasion and partnership continua, a 2×2 factorial online experiment (N = 94) tested the effects of narrative vs. expository messaging and high vs. low corporate engagement on perceived authenticity, partnership approval, and organisational attitudes, with pre-existing attitudes and issue support included as control variables. The results offered limited support for the proposed hypotheses. Narrative framing produced no significant effects on authenticity, partnership approval, or organisational attitudes—suggesting that CSR scepticism, although beyond the scope of this study, may constrain narrative effectiveness in practice. The corporate engagement condition did not pass the manipulation check, yet the high-engagement condition still produced a statistically significant impact on attitudes toward UNICEF rather than Chipotle. This finding suggests that in cross-sectoral partnerships, where multiple actors are involved, the absence of an existing mental schema for a highly integrated partnership may prevent participants from consciously recognising corporate engagement cues. Instead, they may interpret such cues as subtle signals of a serious partnership and attribute credit to NGOs rather than to the company itself. Across outcomes, pre-existing organisational attitudes and issue support were the strongest predictors, underscoring the central role of audience predispositions in shaping communication responses. These findings highlight both theoretical and practical implications, suggesting new factors that should be incorporated into CSR communication frameworks when applied to partnership contexts.

## **I. Introduction**

Partnership can be defined as enabling “different people and organisations to support each other by leveraging, combining and capitalising on their complementary strengths and capabilities” (Lasker et al., 2001, p. 180). Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a substantial increase in cross-sectoral partnerships between corporations and nonprofit or non-governmental organisations (NPOs/NGOs) (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). These collaborations bring together organisations with fundamentally different governance structures and missions to create value for both participating organisations and society at large (Herlin & Pedersen, 2013; Rondinelli & London, 2003).

Despite their current prominence, such partnerships are relatively recent. Historically, the relationship between businesses and NGOs was characterised by antagonism, mistrust, and conflict (Dahan et al., 2010). Rooted in competing worldviews—business in the paradigm of economic growth and NGOs in that of sustainability—tensions frequently led to confrontational dynamics, including NGO-led campaigns targeting corporate irresponsibility (Wadham, 2009). More recently, however, these adversarial relations have given way to collaboration, underpinned by the belief that partnerships can generate mutual value for society and business alike (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013; Schade et al., 2022; Wadham, 2009).

These dynamics emerged in response to broader structural and contextual factors. As traditional funding sources failed to meet the growing scale and complexity of social problems, NGOs turned to corporations as alternative sources of resources and strategic support (Austin, 2000; Utting & Zammit, 2009). At the same time, corporations began moving beyond traditional philanthropy toward approaches more closely aligned with their core business strategies, seeking not only to enhance social impact but also to meet increasing stakeholder expectations (Elkington, 1999; Spar & La Mure, 2003). Such cross-sectoral

partnerships enabled mutual benefits: corporations could enhance their legitimacy and diversify channels of stakeholder engagement, while NGOs gained access to new funding and strengthened relationships with economic actors central to addressing development challenges.

Today, cross-sectoral partnerships are widely recognised as innovative organisational models capable of offering new solutions to complex social and environmental challenges (Austin, 2000). A growing consensus holds that businesses and NGOs need each other and that no single actor can address such problems in isolation (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013). By joining forces, these partnerships are expected to create economic, social, and environmental value, with each party contributing complementary resources and capabilities that lead to both stronger corporate performance and more effective societal impact (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013; Rondinelli & London, 2003).

Although some critics within the sustainability paradigm argue that such collaborations merely reproduce incremental changes within the dominant economic framework (Lister, 2000; Macdonald & Chrisp, 2005), partnerships have nonetheless become one of the most prominent trends in sustainability and development. In particular, cross-sectoral partnerships now serve as a central vehicle for corporate social responsibility (CSR), described as one of the most exciting and challenging approaches to implementing CSR (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). CSR is commonly defined as a corporate commitment to improve societal well-being through the discretionary allocation of resources (Du et al., 2010; Kotler & Lee, 2005).

As corporations face increasing pressure to address the social and environmental impacts of their practices, partnerships with nonprofit organisations provide a mechanism to fulfil social obligations while also generating strategic benefits. Such collaborations offer

access to knowledge and innovative ideas that can help companies reimagine operational activities, identify new market opportunities, and respond effectively to stakeholder concerns (Austin, 2000; Millar et al., 2004; Rondinelli & London, 2003). Addressing stakeholder concerns is particularly critical in contemporary business, as corporations are situated at the centre of a complex web of relationships with shareholders, employees, governments, local communities, and NGOs, and must reconcile these diverse interests within their strategies and actions (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984). Empirical evidence suggests that key stakeholders—including consumers, employees, and investors—are increasingly likely to reward responsible corporate behaviour and punish irresponsibility (Du et al., 2010). CSR can influence not only consumer decisions but also employment and investment choices, demonstrating its capacity to build and strengthen stakeholder relationships (Sen et al., 2006). Accordingly, cross-sectoral partnerships, as a form of CSR, hold significant strategic value for corporations, with stakeholder perception remaining a central concern.

One of the most important stakeholder groups for CSR initiatives is consumers. Research shows that by acting as responsible corporate citizens, companies can secure significant benefits—including loyalty, willingness to pay a premium, resilience in times of crisis, and even advocacy behaviours such as positive word-of-mouth (Du et al., 2007). Consequently, active public engagement is essential to the success of CSR initiatives. However, studies reveal that external stakeholders, including consumers, often have very low awareness of a company's CSR activities, limiting the potential impact of such initiatives (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Du et al., 2007; Sen et al., 2006). Another key challenge is that, even when stakeholders are interested in learning about a company's contributions to society, they can simultaneously become sceptical of its motives (Du et al., 2010). Simply raising awareness of CSR initiatives is therefore not sufficient; how stakeholders interpret these activities is equally critical. Companies may pursue CSR for a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic

reasons, but what matters most is stakeholder attribution. When CSR efforts are perceived as intrinsically motivated—that is, aimed at serving the public—they tend to generate favourable inferences about the company’s underlying character. By contrast, when they are viewed as extrinsically motivated, or primarily self-serving, they elicit less favourable attitudes and behaviours (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Yoon et al., 2006).

Thus, the success of CSR activities—and by extension corporate-NGO partnerships—depends heavily on tackling such challenges through effective communication with external audiences such as consumers (Du et al., 2010; Schade et al., 2022).

Understanding public perceptions provides companies with a vital gauge of whether their initiatives are viewed as credible and aligned with societal expectations, making the study of communication strategies central to partnership effectiveness. Despite this importance, corporate-NGO partnerships have received relatively little empirical research attention (Kim et al., 2012; Rim & Kim, 2016). Existing CSR communication studies have focused on more general cases of CSR implementation (Schade et al., 2022). Cross-sectoral partnerships, however, may present unique communicative challenges: they involve multiple actors with distinct identities, roles, and reputations, which can create conflicting demands, amplify scepticism, and complicate stakeholder interpretation. Investigating the communication of corporate-NGO partnerships is therefore particularly important, as it extends prior CSR communication research into a context where attribution processes and audience perceptions may operate differently.

This study addresses such a gap in the literature by examining how different communication strategies—specifically message framing (narrative vs. expository) and corporate engagement levels (high vs. low)—shape public perceptions of corporate-NGO partnerships, focusing on consumer attitudes, perceived authenticity, and overall approval of



the partnership.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **A. Narrative Messaging**

#### **Narrative Persuasion and Transportation**

A narrative is “a cohesive, causally linked sequence of events that takes place in a dynamic world subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful actions performed by characters” (Braddock & Dillard, 2016). Scholarly consensus suggests that humans demonstrate a tendency to think in terms of stories (Akerlof & Shiller, 2010; Gazzaniga, 2013; McCloskey, 2016). Given the cognitive costs associated with obtaining, storing, and manipulating information, people simplify it into stories to facilitate comprehension of the world and maintain a coherent account of what happened (Taleb, 2007). Stories are also conceptualised as an expression of embodiment that constructs individual identity and enables meaning-making of the world (Basso & Herrmann-Pillath, 2024). Consequently, narratives are believed to possess significant psychological and political agency that both sustain and challenge established power dynamics and trajectories (Constantino & Weber, 2021).

One of the primary functions of narrative is conveying information (Shaffer et al., 2018). Narrative messaging enhances information transmission by increasing audience engagement and interest, particularly proving more effective for audiences who lack familiarity with the information being communicated (Dahlstrom, 2014). Narratives also facilitate recall and reduce counterarguments as they operate within the experiential system, meaning that narratives are processed holistically like real-world events, providing audiences

opportunities for mental simulations of actions as if they were personally experiencing them (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Epstein et al., 1996; Kilaru et al., 2014; Slovic et al., 2004). Existing research shows the persuasive power of storytelling, particularly in shaping health-related behaviours (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Banerjee et al., 2019; Shaffer et al., 2018). On this basis, narrative messages are often assumed to outperform expository ones, which rely on statistics and factual information. Yet the evidence is mixed: while some studies confirm the superiority of narratives, others find no such advantage (Cox & Cox, 2001; Newman, 2003; Zebregs et al., 2015).

The cognitive processing of narrative messages differs from that of argumentative or rhetorical persuasion. According to Green and Brock (2000), the mechanism underlying narrative persuasion is transportation, which is a convergent process wherein all mental systems and cognitive resources are absorbed by events unfolding within the narrative. Audiences experience transportation through two main components: empathy and mental imagery, resulting in temporary dissociation from their immediate reality (Green & Brock, 2000; Slater & Rouner, 2002). The more they are transported into this narrative, the more likely they are to change their real-world beliefs in response to the information given in the story. Given that transportation operates through distinct cognitive pathways compared to traditional processing models, highly transported audiences demonstrate reduced sensitivity to weak arguments within the narrative, thereby decreasing the probability of generating counterarguments (Escalas, 2007; Slater & Rouner, 2002).

### **Narrative Persuasion in CSR and NGO Communications**

Given its rich theoretical foundation and proven capacity for behavioural influence in commercial sectors, narrative messaging has emerged as a prevalent strategy for communicating CSR schemes or NGO programmes to external stakeholders. Empirical data

show that 83.5% of US consumers recalled exposure to CSR communication presented in storytelling formats (Krenz et al., 2025). However, relatively few studies have directly examined the comparative effectiveness of narrative and expository messaging (Krenz et al., 2025; Pérez et al., 2020; Schade et al., 2022), and existing findings exhibit mixed results. Some studies report favourable outcomes, including enhanced message credibility, improved perceptions regarding company CSR commitment, and heightened awareness of CSR impacts (Kim et al., 2022; Boukes & LaMarre, 2021; Pérez et al., 2020). Conversely, other studies fail to identify significant differences between narrative and expository framings (Schade et al., 2022) or even reveal adverse effects of stories relative to expository messages (Dhanesh & Nekmat, 2019; Krenz et al., 2025). These inconsistent findings suggest that the effectiveness of storytelling in CSR communications may be contingent upon various contextual factors and audience characteristics, which will be explored further in the following section.

Similar to CSR communications, storytelling is a common strategy in NGO, NPO and charity campaigns, predicated on the assumption that stories are more efficient in driving donor engagement (Macrae, 2022; Mitchell & Clark, 2021). Previous research shows that storytelling effectively facilitates charitable behaviours, particularly donation, among the public (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Song, 2022). Kaczorowska et al. (2024) discovered that narrative texts resulted in increased charity support behaviours through activating narrative transportation, particularly by enhancing audiences' cognitive engagement with the cause. Furthermore, charities often use narratives as a strategy to distinguish themselves from other organisations (Mitchell & Clark, 2021; Wymer & Akbar, 2019). Given that most NPOs and charities are highly dependent on external stakeholders—including donors, beneficiaries, and advocates—it is crucial for such organisations to engage stakeholders through storytelling and mobilise action for the social mission they are supporting (Mitchell & Clark, 2019; Nguyen, 2015).

However, the application of narrative persuasion in CSR and NGO communications introduces unique complexities absent from traditional commercial messaging. A fundamental distinction lies in the indirect nature of behavioural outcomes—regarding charitable behaviours, the benefits of the induced behaviour accrue to third parties rather than message recipients, thereby making persuasion additionally challenging (Kaczorowska et al., 2024). To address this, NGOs and charities often employ narratives that position the beneficiary, or “victim”, as the focal point, especially for human-related causes (Mao & Nishide, 2025).

While third sector organisations implement both individual-centred (personalised) and group-centred (non-personalised) narratives to attract donations, empirical evidence indicates that individual-centred narratives are more effective in eliciting stronger emotional responses and consequently influencing behavioural intentions (Mao & Nishide, 2025; Schelling, 1968). This difference could be explained by the Identifiable Victim Effect (IVE), whereby victims presented with personal information—even minimal identity cues—elicit stronger emotions and greater willingness to donate compared to statistical victims with no identifiable information (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Schelling, 1968; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). A meta-analysis confirms that the effect is generally robust (Lee & Feeley, 2016), although its effect size diminishes when victims were presented collectively as a group (eight people) despite maintaining individual identification (Kogut & Ritov, 2005).

Yet it is precisely this strategic deployment of beneficiaries in narratives that raises ethical concerns unique to NGO and CSR contexts. Unlike commercial settings, where persuasion primarily affects consumers themselves, humanitarian communication practices are increasingly scrutinised for how they portray victims—particularly in international development—creating tensions between effectiveness and ethical responsibility (Batty,

2022; Chouliaraki, 2013). Frequently coupled with shocking, visceral imagery of suffering designed to evoke guilt and shame, beneficiaries are often depicted as passive, lacking agency, and dependent upon Western neoliberal power—representations that do not reflect actual experiences of the beneficiaries but only perpetuate asymmetric power dynamics (Chouliaraki, 2013; Kurasawa, 2019). Additionally, as previously mentioned, contemporary fundraising strategies rely predominantly upon compelling narratives of a single identifiable victim—termed “representative beneficiaries” by Macrae (2022)—due to their powerful impact on human emotions. Such an approach faces criticisms as it distracts the audience from acknowledging the underlying socioeconomic and political factors that caused and perpetuated the problem in the first place.

Therefore, organisations should be cognizant of the cognitive and affective efficacy of storytelling, as well as the potential sector-specific challenges that may arise when implementing narrative persuasion strategies for human-centred causes, to mitigate backlash from the community.

## **B. Theoretical Frameworks for Corporate Engagement in Partnerships**

### **The Collaboration Continuum**

Corporate-NGO/NPO partnerships encompass a variety of forms, ranging from conventional philanthropic donations to the creation of integrated joint venture structures. Therefore, attempts have been made to develop classificatory models that capture the spectrum of cross-sectoral partnerships. Austin (2000) pioneered an analytical framework, the Collaboration Continuum (CC), which conceptualises the interaction between NPOs and corporations. The CC posits three distinct stages of corporation-NPO interactions:

philanthropic, transactional and integrative. Partnerships may progress along the continuum, evolving to subsequent stages over time, or regressing to lower levels if it does not benefit both parties. No stage is inherently superior to others, and the positioning simply reflects participants' resources, capacities and needs (Austin, 2000).

The philanthropic stage is characterised by a dynamic resembling that of a charitable donor and recipient (Austin, 2000). Corporation engagement remains minimal, resulting in a narrow scope of activities, infrequent interaction, and low strategic value for both organisations. The relationship at this philanthropic stage is significantly constrained in terms of resource deployment and interaction points. The alliance is often more significant to the NPO while remaining incidental to the corporation, typically taking the form of the corporation responding to charity requests. Resource exchange at this stage tends to be generic—for instance, the corporation provides funding to the charity, while the charity reciprocates with good deeds and positive feelings. Both entities gain credibility and an enhanced image from the alliance (Austin, 2000).

In the second stage, which is the transactional stage, two organisations form a mutually beneficial relationship, unlike the first stage, which predominantly benefits the NPOs. The partnership generates value for both participants (Austin, 2000). Cause-related marketing (CRM), event sponsorships, and contractual service arrangements are examples of this category. Interactions between organisations intensify compared to the initial stage, as both leverage their distinctive competencies to create mutual benefits. This transcends mere resource scarcity mitigation, which characterises the philanthropic stage. Although interactions at this stage demonstrate greater equality and reciprocity than the first stage, the project scope remains constrained, and organisational-level shared vision is absent. The transactional stage could even be referred to as “commercial” (Austin, 2000, p. 74),

resembling a buyer-seller dynamic, as both parties are pursuing specific value exchanges. This stage is vulnerable to reputational risks involving CRM, especially for NPOs, as their names become associated with company products. Not only are they affected by product or business performance, but they also may face accusations of consumer deception due to the implied endorsement inherent in such associations (Austin, 2000).

The final stage, the integrative stage, is where two partners reach an alignment of their missions, activities, and organisational structures (Austin, 2000). While not completely merged, when collaborating, they function as a single action entity. Partnerships at this stage demonstrate the highest interaction frequency and intensity across all three levels, and resource exchange reaches maximum magnitude. Partners go beyond resource exchanges and strive for joint value creation, which is unique to the partnership's existence and is not replicable. The organisations establish a shared vision, and projects are frequently co-developed across organisational hierarchies, demonstrating broader and more diverse scope. Many partnerships progress toward the integrative stage following extended periods of collaboration, though some organisations decide to remain at earlier stages when such progression conflicts with organisational objectives (Austin, 2000).

### **Corroborating Models**

Austin's (2000) tripartite categorisation aligns with subsequent scholarly frameworks that similarly conceptualise corporate-NPO engagement as evolutionary stages. In a study examining corporate-environmental NPO collaborations, Rondinelli and London (2003) developed a taxonomy based on collaboration intensity, comprising three categories: arm's-length relationships, interactive collaborations, and intensive environmental management alliances. Arm's-length relationships encompass employee volunteerism, corporate contributions and gifts, and corporate-NPO marketing affiliations. This category parallels the

philanthropic stage of CC, although Austin positions CRM activities within the transactional stage. Interactive collaborations involve NPO certification of corporate environmental practices and targeted corporate support for specific NPO projects. NPOs execute research, publish reports, and organise conferences with corporate support. This corresponds to Austin's transactional stage, which similarly occupies an intermediate position between initial and final stages. Finally, intensive environmental management alliances are equivalent to Austin's integrative partnerships, characterised by direct and formal collaboration to address internal environmental management challenges (corporations) and environmental protection (NPOs), encompassing diverse environmental programmes. The authors emphasise that the objectives and benefits of the two advanced stages differ substantially from arm's-length partnerships (Rondinelli & London, 2003).

In a systematic literature review, Bowen et al. (2010) similarly classify business community engagement strategies into three types: transactional, transitional, and transformational. While not exclusively focused on business-NPO collaborations, Bowen et al. incorporate Rondinelli and London's (2003) framework, with NPOs conceptualised as community representatives. Within this typology, arm's-length relationships—equivalent to Austin's philanthropic stage—constitute transactional engagement. This stage represents a predominantly unidirectional arrangement in which companies provide resources, such as funding, information, and time, to communities while maintaining minimal direct interaction. Conversely, transformational engagement involves frequent and proactive interaction, joint management, and elevated commitment levels, paralleling Austin's integrative stage and Rondinelli and London's intensive environmental management alliances. The transitional stage occupies a midway position between initial and final stages, akin to Austin's transactional partnerships and Rondinelli and London's interactive collaborations.



However, these frameworks examine partnership dynamics from organisational perspectives, focusing on internal processes, resource allocation, and strategic alignment. A significant research gap exists regarding how these varying levels of corporate engagement are communicated to external audiences and whether such differences influence public perceptions and attitudes toward these partnerships. In other words, while extensive literature documents the organisational benefits and challenges associated with different partnership stages, empirical research examining how external stakeholders—particularly the general public—perceive and respond to partnerships of varying engagement levels remains notably absent. This question of external perception matters considerably, given that the legitimacy and success of corporate-NGO partnerships ultimately depend on stakeholder buy-in rather than internal organisational arrangements alone (Du et al., 2010).

As contemporary businesses increasingly engage with nonprofit or charitable organisations as part of their CSR activities (Schade et al., 2022), corporate-NGO partnerships increasingly transcend purely philanthropic arrangements (Heap, 2000). Simultaneously, although known to reap significant benefits for both parties (Austin, 2000; Rondinelli & London, 2003), achieving full integrative partnerships remains challenging for most organisations in practice (Neergaard et al., 2009). Therefore, this study focuses on the distinction between lower-level (philanthropic/transactional) and higher-level (transactional/integrative) corporate engagement in partnerships with NGOs. This binary categorisation reflects the most meaningful differentiation that audiences are likely to encounter in practice while capturing the essential distinction between traditional charitable giving and more strategically integrated collaborations.

### **C. Moderating Factors of CSR Communication Effectiveness**

The effectiveness of partnership communications depends not only on partnership content itself but also on external factors. For example, stakeholders' motivation to process CSR information serves as a critical determinant of communication effectiveness (MacInnis et al., 1991). Du et al. (2010) outline a conceptual framework for analysing CSR communication that includes moderating variables, distinguishing between company-specific and stakeholder-specific contingency factors.

### **Corporate Reputation**

One of the primary moderating variables in communication effectiveness is corporate reputation (Du et al., 2010). Defined as “a collective representation of a firm's past actions and results that describes the firm's ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders” by Fombrun and Gradberg (2002), corporate reputation comprises multiple dimensions, including product or service quality, innovation capacity, investment value, and CSR performance (Du et al., 2010). Given that reputation often functions as a pre-existing schema through which stakeholders interpret unfamiliar information related to the organisation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990), it follows that reputation should moderate CSR communication effectiveness. Empirical evidence substantiates this proposition. Businesses with favourable reputations were perceived to have enhanced source credibility, thereby amplifying the positive impact of their CSR communications, whereas those with poor reputations experience diminished or counterproductive communication outcomes, including backfiring (Yoon et al., 2006). Notably, organisations with neutral ethical reputations acquired greater benefits from CSR initiatives than those with positive reputations, as the former more effortlessly exceed stakeholder expectations (Strahilevitz, 2003).

### **Issue Support**

Another moderating factor is issue support (Du et al., 2010). The degree to which

stakeholders support the social cause of the company's CSR initiative affects communication effectiveness, as it is directly related to their motivation to process the information. It is widely accepted that information perceived to be self-relevant elicits greater deliberate attention than non-relevant information (Petty et al., 1981). This principle extends to the CSR communication context—as issue support reflects stakeholders' personal needs and values, CSR communications regarding initiatives that stakeholders consider important or relevant are more likely to capture attention amidst competing information and achieve greater retention (Du et al., 2010). Furthermore, stakeholder awareness and knowledge regarding social issues correlate positively with issue support (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). This relationship explains why companies frequently emphasise the significance and urgency of the social issues when communicating CSR initiatives (Du et al., 2010). When organisations incorporate issue importance in their CSR messaging, they heighten consumer awareness, which in turn enables more effective processing of CSR appeals and stronger consumer responses (Pérez et al., 2020).

### **CSR Scepticism**

Whilst not explicitly defined as a distinct moderating factor in Du et al.'s (2010) framework, CSR scepticism emerges throughout the literature as a significant influence on communication effectiveness. Du et al. identify stakeholder scepticism, alongside low stakeholder awareness, as one of two primary challenges confronting CSR communication. Forehand and Grier (2003) define consumer scepticism as “consumer distrust or disbelief of marketer actions” (p. 350) concerning the underlying motives of CSR initiatives. Such scepticism arises as individuals learn to interpret and assess the objectives and strategies of persuasion agents (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Contemporary consumers demonstrate heightened awareness of corporate actions and motives, resulting in diminished trust across

various organisations, including corporations (Ham & Kim, 2020).

The literature distinguishes between two forms of CSR scepticism: dispositional and situational (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Ham & Kim, 2020). Dispositional scepticism is an individual's continuous tendency or personality trait characterised by suspicion towards marketers' motives. Conversely, situational scepticism is deemed a temporary state of distrust and suspicion regarding corporate motives, typically activated by specific contextual factors, including the content of the message. Empirical research focuses on the mediating effects of situational scepticism in the relationship between variables such as perceived CSR motives and behavioural outcomes, including purchase intentions and Word-Of-Mouth (Ham & Kim, 2020; Schade et al., 2022). These findings indicate that CSR scepticism may moderate the relationship between communication strategies and stakeholder responses, with implications for strategic message design. Notably, narrative messaging has been shown to reduce multiple dimensions of CSR scepticism whilst enhancing perceived altruistic motives (Xu & Kochigina, 2021), consistent with theoretical foundations of narrative persuasion and empirical findings in adjacent domains.

#### **D. Research Question and Hypotheses**

Drawing from the reviewed literature, this study addresses the following research question: How do different messaging strategies (narrative vs. expository) influence public perceptions of corporate-NGO partnerships across varying levels of corporate engagement? Specifically, this research examines partnership authenticity, partnership approval, and attitudes towards two participating organisations.

The following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1:** Narrative messaging will produce more favourable perceptions (authenticity, approval, and attitudes) than expository messaging.

**H2:** Higher corporate engagement in partnerships will produce more favourable perceptions than lower engagement.

**H3:** There will be an interaction effect between messaging strategy and partnership type on perception outcomes.

**H4a:** Corporate reputation of both organisations will moderate the effects of messaging strategy and engagement level on perceptions, with positive reputations amplifying favourable outcomes.

**H4b:** Issue support will moderate the effects of messaging strategy and engagement level on perceptions, with higher issue support amplifying favourable outcomes.

Whilst CSR scepticism represents an important moderating variable in the literature, this study focuses on corporate reputation and issue support as primary moderators to maintain methodological parsimony. The potential influence of scepticism will be addressed in the discussion.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **A. Stimulus Development**

##### **Organisation Selection**

This study employed real organisations (Chipotle and UNICEF) in a hypothetical partnership scenario. While previous empirical studies predominantly utilised entirely fictitious organisations to avoid confounding effects (Lim et al., 2021; Mao & Nishide, 2025;

Pérez et al., 2020), this approach risked limiting ecological validity since responses to unfamiliar entities may differ from those to known brands. Conversely, using existing partnerships would introduce extraneous variables related to participants' prior knowledge or attitudes about specific collaborations. Therefore, pairing two well-known organisations without an existing partnership balanced authenticity with experimental control.

Chipotle and UNICEF were selected for several reasons. Both organisations are widely recognised, ensuring participants would hold pre-existing opinions on them that would enhance response authenticity. UNICEF was particularly suitable as its diverse corporate partnership portfolio provided extensive templates for analysis. Chipotle was specifically chosen as it: (1) maintains strong brand awareness without recent reputational crises that might bias participant responses; (2) demonstrates active CSR engagement, particularly in food sustainability, lending credibility to a potential partnership; yet (3) has no existing or historical partnerships with UNICEF or similar international development organisations. This final criterion was crucial, as many prominent brands have engaged with UNICEF or comparable NGOs (e.g., Save the Children), potentially creating interference from participants' prior knowledge. Thus, the Chipotle-UNICEF pairing achieved the necessary balance of familiarity and novelty—recognisable enough to elicit genuine responses whilst avoiding contamination from existing partnership associations.

### **Content Analysis**

To ensure the hypothetical partnership communications reflected authentic messaging practices, a simplified thematic analysis was conducted on actual partnership narratives and messaging strategies currently employed by organisations. Four existing UNICEF partnerships were purposively selected to represent each cell of the 2×2 experimental design. Selection criteria included: (1) active partnerships with publicly

available communication materials, (2) clear variation in corporate engagement levels (high vs. low), and (3) variation in messaging strategies (narrative vs. expository) evident in their communications. The analysis focused on publicly accessible materials, as stakeholders typically encounter CSR initiatives through press coverage and corporate advertising rather than direct contact from the organisation (Du et al., 2010). The scope encompassed press releases, partnership announcement pages, and project descriptions published on both UNICEF and corporate partner websites during 2022-2024, totalling approximately 26 pages. Materials were sourced from official organisational websites to ensure authenticity. The selected partnerships are presented in Table 1.

	Commencement Year	Messaging Style	Corporate Engagement
Novo Nordisk	2019	Narrative	High
Primark	2018	Expository	Low
easyJet	2012	Narrative	Low
Spotify	2022	Expository	High

**Table 1. UNICEF Partnerships Selected for Content Analysis**

Thematic analysis followed an iterative coding process. Initial familiarisation involved reading all materials to identify recurring patterns. Subsequently, primarily deductive coding was applied based on the study's two predetermined dimensions: corporate engagement level (high vs. low) and messaging strategy (narrative vs. expository), as established in the literature review. Whilst these categories were predetermined, the specific linguistic markers and stylistic indicators characterising each category emerged inductively from the data. Key phrases, partnership descriptors, and communication patterns were

systematically documented in the codebook (see Appendix A).

## **Findings**

Content analysis revealed distinct patterns differentiating high and low corporate engagement levels, as well as narrative and expository messaging strategies. High-involvement partnerships (Spotify, Novo Nordisk) emphasised collaborative language such as “co-created”, “working together”, and “shared vision”, with detailed descriptions of joint programme development and integrated activities (e.g., Spotify-UNICEF’s “Our Minds Matter” hub). In contrast, low-involvement partnerships (Primark, easyJet) predominantly featured transactional language focused on “donations”, “funds raised”, and specific monetary contributions, with UNICEF positioned as the recipient of corporate support.

Messaging strategies also showed apparent stylistic differences. Narrative communications (Novo Nordisk, easyJet) incorporated individual beneficiary stories with specific names, ages, and personal quotes (e.g., Kenzo’s experience as a nutrition captain, Khadija’s educational aspirations), creating emotional connections through personalised accounts. Expository communications (Spotify, Primark) prioritised statistical evidence and programme descriptions, presenting impact through metrics such as “2.6 million children reached” and “raised over £17 million”, whilst avoiding individual narratives.

## **Stimulus Creation**

Based on the patterns identified in the content analysis, four experimental stimuli were developed for a hypothetical Chipotle-UNICEF partnership, systematically varying corporate engagement level (high vs. low) and messaging strategy (narrative vs. expository). The fictional partnership addressed childhood malnutrition in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMIC)—a plausible focus given Chipotle’s food industry positioning and



UNICEF's previous work on child malnutrition. This decision reflected previous literature that demonstrated the importance of congruence between the social cause and the business (Du et al., 2010; Pérez et al., 2020). All stimuli maintained consistent core information to ensure comparability: the partnership's objective (improving childhood malnutrition in LMIC), target beneficiaries (undernourished girls in LMIC), and the name of the programme ("A Full Plate for Girls"). Stimuli were standardised at approximately 200 words to control for length effects.

To operationalise engagement levels, high-engagement stimuli incorporated collaborative language identified in the content analysis (e.g., "working together for", "co-developing programmes"), described joint activities and shared decision-making, and positioned both organisations as active partners. Low-engagement stimuli employed unidirectional language (e.g., "donating to", "supporting UNICEF"), portraying Chipotle primarily as a financial contributor, and positioned UNICEF as the leading actor who implements the programme (e.g., "Chipotle has committed US\$4.5 million to fund UNICEF's..."). For messaging strategies, narrative stimuli featured a fictional beneficiary (Nasrin, age 10, from rural Afghanistan) with personal details and direct quotes, following the patterns of individual beneficiary stories observed in the content analysis. To avoid overly emotional or guilt-inducing framing, the narrative was kept neutral and grounded in realistic details drawn from existing reports, ensuring both plausibility and ethical sensitivity. Expository scenarios addressed the same issue through statistics and aggregate impact metrics, avoiding individual stories or emotional appeals. Both Nasrin's narrative and the statistical metrics were adapted from a World Vision report on girls' malnutrition to ensure the stimuli were realistic (Shaw & Clark, 2024). The complete stimuli and survey instruments are provided in Appendix B.

## **B. Experiment Procedure**

### **Sample**

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling via the LSE dissertation participant board, professional networks (LinkedIn), and social media platforms. Initially, a total of 126 participants completed the online survey, closely aligning with the a priori power analysis target of 128 participants (assuming  $f = 0.25$ ,  $\alpha = .05$ , power = .80) (Faul et al., 2009). After excluding incomplete responses, the final sample comprised 94 participants (70.2% female, 26.5% male, 3.3% other/prefer not to say). The majority of participants were aged 25-34 (48%), followed by 18-24 (44%), 35-44 (3%), and 45 or above (6%). Participation was voluntary, uncompensated, and restricted to adults (18+) with English comprehension.

### **Procedure**

The study was conducted as an online survey via Qualtrics. Data were collected over two weeks (13-25 July 2025). After providing informed consent, participants were explicitly informed that the partnership described was fictional and created for research purposes to ensure transparent ethical practice. Participants first completed demographic questions, then were asked about their pre-existing attitudes towards Chipotle and UNICEF, as well as their awareness and perceived importance of child malnutrition in LMIC. Participants were then randomly assigned to read one of four versions of the Chipotle-UNICEF partnership announcement using Qualtrics' randomisation function, resulting in the following distribution: Narrative-High Engagement ( $n = 24$ ), Narrative-Low Engagement ( $n = 23$ ), Expository-High Engagement ( $n = 23$ ), and Expository-Low Engagement ( $n = 24$ ). After reading the stimulus, participants completed measures assessing perceived authenticity, partnership approval, and post-stimulus attitudes towards both organisations (see Table 2).

Narrative Messaging-High Engagement (n = 24)	Expository Messaging-High Engagement (n = 23)
Narrative Messaging-Low Engagement (n = 24)	Expository Messaging-Low Engagement (n = 24)

**Table 2: Conditions of the 2 X 2 Experimental Design**

### C. Measurements

#### Dependent Variables

Four dependent variables were assessed following stimulus exposure using 5-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Partnership approval was assessed using items adapted from Russell and Russell's (2010) CSR action approval scale. Due to the shift from single-company CSR to a partnership context, the items were slightly modified. Reliability analysis of modified items indicated that two items cohered adequately: "I think the partnership's actions are worthwhile" and "I think the partnership will make a real impact on the cause they are supporting" ( $\alpha = .61$ ). The item "I approve of what the partnership is doing" showed poor item-total correlation, unlike in Russell and Russell's original study, and was excluded. While the reliability score was somewhat lower than ideal ( $\alpha = .70$ ), the two items still reflected the construct closely. Thus, the measure was kept for analysis.

Post-stimulus attitudes towards Chipotle and UNICEF were measured separately using three items each from the Emotional Appeal dimension of the Harris-Fombrun Reputation Quotient (Fombrun et al., 2000). These scales have been validated across multiple CSR studies (Kim, 2019; Pérez et al., 2020). Reliability was good for both Chipotle ( $\alpha = .93$ )

and UNICEF ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

Perceived authenticity was assessed using a single item: “This partnership feels authentic”, since there were no items in previous literature that were suitable for measuring this variable. Although single-item measures limit reliability testing, they are considered acceptable when constructs are concrete and unidimensional (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007).

### **Control Variables**

Three control variables were measured prior to stimulus exposure using 5-point Likert scales. Issue support was assessed using three items from Russell and Russell’s (2010) CSR issue importance scale ( $\alpha = .70$ ). Pre-existing attitudes towards Chipotle and UNICEF were measured separately using the same Emotional Appeal items employed for the dependent variables, and the items showed good reliability for both organisations (Chipotle:  $\alpha = .90$ ; UNICEF:  $\alpha = .92$ ).

## **IV. Findings**

### **A. Manipulation Checks**

To verify the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, participants responded to two items following stimulus exposure. For the engagement manipulation, participants rated their agreement with “Chipotle played an active role in designing and implementing the partnership activities” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). For the messaging manipulation, participants rated their agreement with the statement “The article I read was based on a personal story” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference in perceived narrative quality between message conditions ( $t(90) = -4.13$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.86$ ), with

narrative messages ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) rated as more story-like than expository messages ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ). This confirms that participants correctly recognised and differentiated between the two messaging formats, perceiving the narrative condition as containing more storytelling elements and personal experiences.

In contrast, the engagement manipulation check revealed no significant difference between conditions ( $t(90) = -0.51$ ,  $p = .610$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.11$ ). Participants rated high engagement ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) and low engagement conditions ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) similarly, indicating the engagement manipulation did not produce significantly different perceptions. Both conditions yielded ratings slightly above the scale midpoint, suggesting participants perceived moderately high engagement regardless of the intended manipulation. This failure may reflect the subtlety of the engagement cues employed or indicate that readers form engagement impressions based on factors beyond those manipulated in the experimental materials.

Tests for crossover effects confirmed that the manipulations operated independently, using additional independent samples t-tests. The messaging manipulation did not affect perceptions of engagement ( $t(90) = 0.39$ ,  $p = .697$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.082$ ), nor did the engagement manipulation influence narrative perception ( $t(90) = -0.09$ ,  $p = .924$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.02$ ), indicating that the two manipulations did not interfere with each other despite the failure of the engagement manipulation to produce its intended effect.

## **B. Hypotheses Testing**

A series of  $2 \times 2$  factorial ANCOVAs were conducted to test the effects of messaging strategy (narrative vs. expository) and engagement level (high vs. low) on four dependent

variables: perceived authenticity, partnership approval, attitude toward Chipotle, and attitude toward UNICEF. All analyses controlled for issue support and pre-existing attitudes toward both organisations to isolate the experimental effects. Table 3 presents the complete results.

<i>I</i>	Authenticity	Partnership Approval	Attitude-Chipotle	Attitude-UNICEF
	F p	F p	F p	F p
Messaging	0.84 .363	1.71 .195	0.26 .610	1.15 .287
Engagement	0.00 .985	0.75 .389	0.01 .910	5.28 .024*
Messaging × Engagement	0.99 .323	0.43 .512	0.01 .939	0.03 .860
Issue Support	4.21 .043*	0.00 .980	3.39 .069	65.56 <.001***
Pre-Chipotle	37.21 <.001***	32.46 <.001***	77.57 <.001***	6.04 .016*
Pre-UNICEF	4.40 .039*	5.03 .027*	6.14 .015*	192.42 <.001***

<sup>1</sup> \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

**Table 3. ANCOVA Results for Dependent Variables**

### Main Effects of Messaging Strategy

H1 predicted that narrative messaging would produce more favourable perceptions than expository messaging. This hypothesis was not supported. The main effect of messaging was non-significant across all dependent variables: authenticity ( $F(1, 87) = 0.84, p = .363, \eta p^2 = .010$ ), partnership approval ( $F(1, 87) = 1.71, p = .195, \eta p^2 = .02$ ), attitude toward Chipotle ( $F(1, 87) = 0.26, p = .610, \eta p^2 = .003$ ), and attitude toward UNICEF ( $F(1, 87) = 1.15, p = .287, \eta p^2 = .01$ ). Despite the successful manipulation check confirming that participants correctly distinguished between narrative and expository formats, this distinction did not translate into differential effects on partnership perceptions or organisational attitudes. The absence of message framing effects across all four outcome measures suggests that the

format of partnership communication may be less influential than anticipated in shaping stakeholder responses.

### **Main Effects of Engagement Level**

H2 predicted that higher corporate engagement would produce more favourable outcomes than lower engagement. This hypothesis received limited support. Engagement showed no significant effects on authenticity ( $F(1, 87) = 0.00, p = .985, \eta p^2 = .000$ ), partnership approval ( $F(1, 87) = 0.75, p = .389, \eta p^2 = .009$ ), or attitude toward Chipotle ( $F(1, 87) = 0.01, p = .910, \eta p^2 = .000$ ). However, a significant main effect emerged for attitude toward UNICEF ( $F(1, 87) = 5.28, p = .024, \eta p^2 = .060$ )—interestingly, participants in high engagement conditions reported more positive attitudes toward UNICEF ( $M_{adj} = 4.32$ ) than those in low engagement conditions ( $M_{adj} = 4.25$ ). This effect is particularly noteworthy given that the manipulation check revealed no conscious awareness of engagement differences between conditions, suggesting that engagement cues may influence NGO partner perceptions through implicit rather than explicit processing pathways.

### **Interaction Effects**

H3 predicted an interaction effect between messaging strategy and engagement level, proposing that narrative messaging would amplify the positive effects of high engagement. This hypothesis was not supported. The messaging  $\times$  engagement interaction was non-significant across all dependent variables: authenticity ( $F(1, 87) = 0.99, p = .323, \eta p^2 = .010$ ), partnership approval ( $F(1, 87) = 0.43, p = .512, \eta p^2 = .005$ ), attitude toward Chipotle ( $F(1, 87) = 0.01, p = .939, \eta p^2 = .000$ ), and attitude toward UNICEF ( $F(1, 87) = 0.03, p = .860, \eta p^2 = .000$ ). The absence of interaction effects indicates that messaging strategy and engagement level operate independently in shaping partnership perceptions.

## Role of Control Variables

H4 examined the influence of issue support and pre-existing attitudes as control variables. The results confirmed the importance of including control variables. Pre-existing attitudes toward Chipotle significantly predicted all outcomes except attitude toward UNICEF, with the strongest effect on post-stimulus Chipotle attitudes ( $F(1, 87) = 77.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .470$ ). Similarly, pre-existing attitudes toward UNICEF significantly influenced all dependent variables, most notably post-stimulus UNICEF attitudes ( $F(1, 87) = 192.42, p < .001, \eta^2 = .690$ ). Issue support demonstrated significant effects on authenticity ( $F(1, 87) = 4.21, p = .043, \eta^2 = .050$ ) and attitude toward UNICEF ( $F(1, 87) = 65.56, p < .001, \eta^2 = .430$ ), suggesting that participants' concern about child malnutrition substantially shaped their evaluation of the partnership's authenticity and the NGO partner. These findings indicate that pre-existing attitudes and issue involvement were far stronger predictors of partnership evaluations than the experimental manipulations.

## Summary

Of the four hypotheses tested, only H4 (control variables) received strong support, with pre-existing attitudes and issue involvement showing substantial effects across outcomes. H2 received partial support through engagement's impact on UNICEF attitudes, while H1 and H3 were not supported. Notably, engagement influenced UNICEF attitudes despite failing its manipulation check, whereas messaging, though successfully manipulated, produced no significant effects. These findings will be discussed in relation to theoretical implications and prior research in the following section.

## V. Discussion



### **A. Effectiveness of Narratives**

While existing empirical literature demonstrates mixed results regarding narrative effectiveness, with a slight tendency favouring narratives, this study found no statistical significance between narrative and expository messaging despite participants clearly perceiving the distinction between formats. This finding requires deeper examination of potential boundary conditions that may constrain narrative effectiveness in communicating partnership to the general public.

A plausible explanation for this result is dispositional CSR scepticism. As Du et al. (2010) argue, one of the key challenges in CSR communication is consumer scepticism. Their framework suggests that alongside company characteristics, stakeholder-specific factors serve as major moderators of communication outcomes. Although they don't explicitly use the term “scepticism”, the authors discuss social value orientation, which is defined as “individuals’ stable preferences for certain patterns of outcomes for oneself and others” (Van Lange et al., 1997, as cited in Du et al., 2010). Prosocial individuals are likely to be more supportive of companies’ social initiatives and thus more motivated to process CSR information with more attention, compared to those with individualistic or competitive orientations. As mentioned previously, such motivation of the stakeholder is likely to mediate the communication effectiveness.

Several empirical studies have identified dispositional scepticism as a potential moderating factor, particularly in CSR contexts. Schade et al. (2022) also failed to find evidence supporting the widely accepted belief that narratives are effective in CSR settings, and similarly suggested dispositional scepticism as an explanatory factor. While Pérez et al. (2020) found evidence for the persuasive value of storytelling in CSR contexts, they also note that consumers who are inherently sceptical of corporate motives may respond more

favourably to tangible proof—such as statistical data and factual information—than to emotionally driven narratives when judging CSR initiatives. For such audiences, narrative messaging can backfire and even undermine corporate objectives. This aligns with Appel's (2022) finding that when narrative messages are perceived as inauthentic or overly sentimental, they can trigger affective resistance, which in turn moderates the link between perceived manipulative intent and consumer attitudes.

Additional studies confirm that dispositional CSR scepticism can moderate the relationship between CSR communication tactics and consumer outcomes, with scepticism levels influencing how CSR messages are perceived (Connors et al., 2017; De Vries et al., 2015). However, the evidence is not unanimous—some studies found no mediating effect of dispositional scepticism or cynicism (Ham & Kim, 2020; Rim & Kim, 2016). Despite these mixed results, a systematic review by Nguyen et al. (2023) reveals scholarly consensus that dispositional scepticism and its effects remain understudied in CSR contexts—most research has focused on mitigating situational CSR scepticism, which is considered a temporary state of disbelief. Consumers in general tend to be critical of business practices and question the motives behind initiatives (Friestad & Wright, 1994), yet their baseline scepticism levels still vary significantly, thereby making this individual difference a critical factor (De Vries et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2023).

Consequently, it is reasonable to suggest that participants with higher general scepticism levels may have had less motivation to process the partnership information, resulting in no observable differences between narrative and expository messaging. This implies that stakeholder-specific factors might override the effects of communication strategies—even those specifically designed to mitigate scepticism—when the core issue is not about message content or delivery method, but rather about pre-existing attitudes. In fact,

for highly sceptical consumers, narrative approaches might produce worse outcomes than straightforward messaging if used without careful consideration (Appel, 2022). While this study did not measure dispositional CSR scepticism due to scope limitations (discussed further in the limitations section), this potential explanation highlights the importance of considering individual difference variables in CSR communication research.

An alternative explanation for the given results is that the narrative stimuli used in the study may not have been sufficiently compelling to elicit strong narrative transportation, the primary cognitive mechanism underlying narrative persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000). Prior research indicates that richer narratives, featuring a more developed storyline and greater detail about central characters, are more likely to generate narrative-consistent attitudes by strengthening audience identification with the protagonist (Cohen, 2001; Green & Brock, 2000; Raney, 2004). Similar patterns were observed in CSR communication contexts, where richer narratives demonstrated a positive influence on participants' attitudes and behavioural intentions (Boukes & LaMarre, 2021). These findings align with the IVE, suggesting that narratives with a distinctly identifiable beneficiary might evoke heightened emotional reactions and thus increase willingness to engage in charitable actions (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Lee & Feeley, 2016). It suggests that incorporating greater personal detail and emotional resonance in the narrative stimuli might have enhanced transportation and demonstrated narrative effectiveness.

However, such an approach also carries ethical risks. As discussed in the literature review, growing public awareness of the ethical problems inherent in such portrayals increases the potential for backlash, which could ultimately undermine organisational credibility (Batty, 2022; Chouliaraki, 2013). In recognition of these ethical concerns, the present study's narrative condition deliberately avoided emotionally intense depictions of

beneficiaries. While this decision may have limited the narrative's capacity to generate strong transportation effects, it reflects the real-world constraints that organisations encounter when communicating global partnership initiatives.

## **B. Manipulation Checks**

The manipulation check results indicated that, while the narrative framing manipulation was successful, the manipulation for the corporate engagement level did not yield the intended perceived differences among participants. Participants did not consciously register the intended difference between Chipotle's high- and low-engagement roles in the stimuli, as assessed by their agreement with the statement: "Chipotle was actively involved in designing and implementing the partnership." Although this failed manipulation likely influenced the interpretation of the related hypotheses, it nonetheless offers valuable implications in its own right.

A likely explanation is that the language cues in the stimuli were not explicit enough to signal distinct engagement levels. Although the content analysis of real-world press releases revealed linguistic markers distinguishing high from low engagement, such distinctions may not have been apparent to readers without prior familiarity with these categories. Unlike the researcher, who applied a theoretical lens during the deductive coding process, participants were not provided with a framework for interpreting engagement. They thus may have processed the text without recognising the intended differences. This aligns with research showing that lay audiences often have limited awareness of information concerning CSR initiatives (Du et al., 2010) and are unlikely to categorise partnerships according to formal engagement models such as Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum. While such frameworks can be helpful to internal stakeholders for defining the structure and

orientation of partnerships, they may have limited relevance for how the general public evaluates them since they are unlikely to exist within lay audiences' mental schemas (Bartlett, 1932). Consequently, subtle textual cues differentiating “higher” from “lower” engagement are unlikely to be noticed unless they are made explicit.

Practically, this finding suggests that advancing a partnership to a “higher” level primarily for reputational benefit may not yield the desired audience response. Such decisions are more likely to generate operational benefits if they are driven by intrinsic motives—a genuine commitment to the cause—rather than purely extrinsic, firm-serving aims. The case of Timberland in Austin's (2000) research illustrates how deeper partnerships can be effective when operational synergies and authentic social commitments underpin the decision to expand. Additionally, it implies that if companies wish to ensure that audiences perceive them as highly involved in the partnership, it may be necessary to deliberately use more explicit language that leaves little ambiguity about their level of involvement, as the audience might not be aware of such differences as opposed to practitioners.

### **C. Impact of High Chipotle Engagement on Attitude Towards UNICEF**

Although the manipulation for corporate engagement levels was unsuccessful, the high-engagement condition nonetheless produced a statistically significant effect on participants' attitudes toward UNICEF. This suggests that, even without conscious recognition, subtle cues embedded in the high-engagement wording may have influenced evaluations of the partnership. Crucially, however, this effect was observed for UNICEF rather than for Chipotle.

Two distinct patterns emerged regarding organisational attitudes. First, independent

of engagement level, the study replicated the well-documented spillover effect in brand alliances: attitudes toward Chipotle increased overall after exposure (from  $M = 2.91$  to  $M = 3.65$ ), regardless of condition. This is consistent with prior findings that the stronger or more trusted partner—in this case, UNICEF, with a pre-stimulus mean of 4.13—can transfer reputational benefits to the weaker brand (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Second, and more unexpectedly, the engagement manipulation produced a reverse effect: higher engagement by Chipotle appeared to “spillover” to UNICEF rather than toward Chipotle itself.

One interpretation is that the high-engagement wording functioned less as evidence of Chipotle’s intrinsic goodwill and more as a signal that the partnership itself was serious and long-term. Prior research suggests that greater corporate involvement in CSR initiatives can serve as a signal of long-term commitment, indirectly enhancing perceptions of credibility and initiative effectiveness (Walton, 2014). Yet in the context of partnerships—where roles and responsibilities are less clearly delineated—participants may lack the information needed to distribute credit for such commitment. When the given information is insufficient or there is a lack of knowledge, individuals are prone to rely on heuristics of availability or representativeness (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). In the case of cross-sectoral partnerships, the prototypical frame is NGO-led: historically, such collaborations have been structured with corporations acting primarily as financial supporters while NGOs assume central responsibility (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013; Wadham, 2009). By contrast, highly integrated, co-created partnerships remain relatively rare and difficult to find in the real world (Neergaard et al., 2009). Given the generally low public literacy regarding CSR structures, together with widespread scepticism of corporate motives (Du et al., 2010), it is therefore plausible that participants defaulted to this more familiar, prototypical frame in which the NGO is the central actor spearheading the partnership. In doing so, they credited the NGO with responsibility for sustaining a serious and genuine partnership.

Broader trust dynamics may have further reinforced this tendency. NGOs are generally perceived as more authentic and mission-driven (de Bruin Cardoso et al., 2024). Consistent with this literature, participants in this study also viewed UNICEF more favourably than Chipotle at baseline. Such differences matter because prior research has shown that organisations with stronger reputations are more likely to reap reputational benefits from CSR initiatives (Du et al., 2010). In other words, positive predispositions toward UNICEF may have provided a “head start”, making participants more inclined to attribute any positive partnership signals to the NGO than to the corporation. Rather than concluding that “Chipotle is deeply committed”, participants may instead have interpreted the subtle high-engagement cues as signals of a serious partnership and as evidence that “UNICEF is credible and competent enough to attract a committed corporate partner.” In this way, the engagement cue may not have directly enhanced Chipotle’s reputation, but it reinforced perceptions of UNICEF’s legitimacy and influence. This finding illustrates that credit assignment in partnerships may not follow a straightforward spillover logic. Instead, reputationally stronger NGOs appear to absorb the reputational benefits of corporate engagement cues.

The findings extend CSR communication theory in two ways. First, it highlights the limits of narrative persuasion and high-commitment cues when audience predispositions on companies, the social cause, and the concept of CSR itself (i.e., CSR scepticism) dominate, challenging the centrality of message creation in CSR communication practices. Second, it suggests that existing research on CSR’s impact on organisational reputation needs adjustment if used in cross-sectoral partnership contexts: the public tends to redistribute credit asymmetrically, amplifying the partner they already trust. Practically, corporations cannot assume that simply moving to “higher” forms of partnership on the collaboration continuum will enhance their own reputation or protect them in times of crisis unless their

role is communicated explicitly and unambiguously. For NGOs, the halo effect can strengthen credibility but also risks distorting perceptions of agency and accountability within joint initiatives.

## **VI. Conclusion**

This study examined how message framing (narrative vs. expository) and corporate engagement level (high vs. low) influenced public perceptions of a fictional corporate-NGO partnership between Chipotle and UNICEF. The results provided limited support for the proposed hypotheses. Narrative framing, while successfully recognised as distinct from expository messaging, had no significant effect on authenticity, partnership approval, or organisational attitudes. Engagement level also showed minimal influence, with no significant impact on authenticity, partnership approval, or attitude toward Chipotle. However, an unexpected effect emerged for attitude toward UNICEF: participants in the high-engagement condition reported more favourable views of UNICEF compared to the low-engagement condition. This occurred despite participants not consciously recognising differences in engagement levels—in other words, a failed manipulation check—suggesting that subtle cues of corporate involvement may still indirectly shape perceptions of the NGO partner. Across all outcomes, pre-existing attitudes toward the organisations and participants' issue support were the strongest predictors, consistent with findings in the broader literature.

These findings suggest that theories and results from CSR communication research in general can also be applied to the context of corporate-NGO partnerships. Organisational reputation and stakeholder interest for the cause acted as powerful moderators, influencing communication effectiveness and, in some cases, overriding the effects of experimental manipulations. This aligns with other CSR communication studies that found weak or



inconsistent effects of storytelling, suggesting that although narrative persuasion and its theorised transportation mechanisms are well supported in principle, their effectiveness may be constrained in practice. When employing narratives, organisations may need to balance eliciting narrative transportation with providing sufficiently rich information, while also avoiding stereotypical or ethically problematic portrayals.

A notable finding of this study is that, even under an unsuccessful manipulation check, higher engagement by Chipotle did not improve attitudes toward Chipotle itself but did enhance attitudes toward UNICEF. This points to a distinctive dynamic in partnership communication, where the presence of multiple actors complicates attribution processes and shapes how stakeholders assign credit across organisations.

These results regarding engagement levels carry practical implications for both corporations and NGOs. For corporations, the findings suggest that signals of active commitment should be made explicit and unambiguous for audiences to register them. Furthermore, it implies that the decision to advance to more integrated forms of partnerships should be guided by operational advantages and long-term strategic value, rather than expectations of immediate reputational benefits. For NGOs, the results highlight the importance of reputational capital, which can amplify the benefits of corporate engagement cues and strengthen credibility.

This study is not without limitations. The first limitation concerns sample size, which fell slightly below the a priori power analysis target. Although initial recruitment ( $N = 126$ ) was sufficient, excluding incomplete responses reduced the final sample to 94, yielding approximately 67% power to detect small-to-medium ( $f = 0.25$ ) effects. While this is below the conventional 80% benchmark, some hypotheses still produced significant results. However, the relatively small number of participants per condition limited statistical power,

and a larger sample would have provided stronger confirmation of the findings.

A second limitation concerns the failed manipulation check for engagement level. The phrasing used to signal high engagement may simply have been too subtle, an issue a pilot study could have identified. While further altering the language risked compromising ecological validity, which was the key reason for using real-world organisations and press release-based stimuli, pre-testing would have clarified whether the failure reflected insufficient salience rather than theoretical constraints.

A further limitation concerns Chipotle's limited brand recognition in certain regions, particularly Central and Eastern Europe. While most participants were based in Western Europe, North America, and South Korea and therefore did not face this issue, a few noted that Chipotle was not present in their regions. Although participants unfamiliar with the brand were instructed to select the neutral option, lack of awareness may still have biased their responses. A more rigorous approach would have been to screen for brand familiarity prior to collecting attitude measures.

Finally, the study did not account for CSR scepticism as a potential moderator. Given the use of real brands with pre-existing beliefs attached, the number of variables was already substantial. For scope management, dispositional CSR scepticism, or individuals' inherent tendency to distrust CSR claims, was excluded. However, as discussed earlier, scepticism may have significantly moderated the effects of both narrative framing and engagement cues. Therefore, future research should investigate the role of dispositional scepticism more directly, exploring how it interferes with communication strategies and how its influence might be mitigated.

Ultimately, this study shows that partnership communication effectiveness is shaped less by message framing or corporate commitment cues than by pre-existing perceptions and

reputational asymmetries. For research, this highlights the need to integrate these dynamics into CSR communication theory. For practice, it suggests areas to focus on when communicating cross-sectoral partnerships to the public, given that outcomes depend less on the style of communication and more on how audiences' predispositions filter and redistribute credit between partners.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Codebook for Partnership Communications

Dimension	High Engagement	Low Engagement
Partnership Language	"Co-created" (Spotify) "Working together" (Novo Nordisk) "Shared vision" (Novo Nordisk) "Combines expertise" (Spotify)	"Donated" (Primark) "Raised funds" (easyJet) "Committed US\$4.5 million" (Primark) "Made a donation" (easyJet)
Activity Description	- Specific programmes developed for the partnership "Partnership has led to the creation of the Our Minds Matter" (Spotify) "Generating evidence, strengthening supportive policies" (Novo Nordisk)	- Financial support to existing programmes "Raise funds towards UNICEF's education programmes" (easyJet) "Donated to UNICEF's emergency response operations" (Primark)
Organisational Roles	- Mutual agency implied "Spotify and UNICEF know" (Spotify) "Novo Nordisk and UNICEF renewed and expanded" (Novo Nordisk)	- UNICEF as the recipient "Primark renewed its support" (Primark) "Supporting UNICEF's ambition" (easyJet)

Dimension	Narrative Framing	Expository Framing
Individual Stories	"Kenzo, a 10-year-old student" (Novo Nordisk) "Sror, age 10, was forced to flee" (easyJet)	- No named individuals - Focus on aggregate impact
Use of Quotes	"I want to become a doctor when I grow up" (easyJet) "If my classmates don't..." (easyJet)	- Only organisational spokespersons quoted
Impact Description	- Emotional language, personal transformation "This includes children like Khadija in	- More statistical outcomes "Impact over ten million children" (Novo Nordisk)

	Afghanistan who attends school thanks to the community-based classroom established by UNICEF” (easyJet)	“Support interventions for over 2.6 million Ukrainian Children” (Spotify)
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## Appendix B. Stimuli

### i. Narrative Messaging-High Engagement

Nasrin, a 10-year-old girl living in rural Afghanistan, is noticeably shorter than her peers. She often feels tired, looks pale, and struggles with symptoms of anaemia, making it difficult to focus in class. Years of food insecurity in her family and community have taken a toll on her development. “Even when we have food, it always goes first to my dad and brothers,” she explains. Some days, she feels too drowsy or nauseous to even focus in class.

Child malnutrition remains a critical yet under-addressed issue in many low- and middle-income countries, disproportionately affecting girls. It undermines their health and education while increasing their vulnerability to violence and chronic stress.

Chipotle and UNICEF are tackling this issue through a joint initiative called “A Full Plate for Girls.” The partnership combines Chipotle’s expertise in sustainable food sourcing with UNICEF’s longstanding experience supporting children’s well-being. Together, they co-developed a community-based nutrition programme that delivers emergency food kits, family nutrition guidance, and locally adapted sourcing strategies to improve access to healthy food for girls like Nasrin.

### ii. Narrative Messaging-Low Engagement

Nasrin, a 10-year-old girl living in rural Afghanistan, is noticeably shorter than her peers. She often feels tired, looks pale, and struggles with symptoms of anaemia, making it difficult to focus in class. Years of food insecurity in her family and community have taken a toll on her development. “Even when we have food, it always goes first to my dad and brothers,” she explains. Some days, she feels too drowsy or nauseous to even focus in class.

Child malnutrition remains a critical yet under-addressed issue in many low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), disproportionately affecting girls. It undermines their health and education while increasing their vulnerability to violence and chronic stress.

Chipotle is partnering with UNICEF to contribute to the charity's work on tackling child malnutrition issues. Chipotle has committed US\$4.5 million to fund UNICEF's "A Full Plate for Girls," a community-based nutrition programme that delivers emergency food kits, family nutrition guidance, and locally adapted sourcing strategies to improve access to healthy food for girls like Nasrin. In addition, Chipotle has made an extra donation of US\$1.5 million to support UNICEF in scaling up life-saving efforts in LMIC.

### **iii. Expository Messaging-Low Engagement**

Malnutrition remains a major threat to girls' health and futures across low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). According to UNICEF, more than 1 billion adolescent girls and women today suffer from various forms of malnutrition. Women and girls account for 60% of the world's chronically malnourished and are especially vulnerable to economic, climate, and conflict-related shocks. A recent report estimates that 3.1 million girls are currently at risk from the effects of malnutrition—including over 140,000 babies at risk due to low birth weight and 2.5 million girls under age five facing vitamin A deficiencies.

Beyond immediate health concerns, hunger threatens girls' education, future earnings, and maternal health outcomes and is projected to cost the global economy \$1.6 trillion each year in lost productivity. Eliminating stunting and anaemia alone could allow an estimated 15.8 million more girls to complete secondary school annually.

Chipotle is partnering with UNICEF to contribute to the charity's work on tackling child malnutrition issues. Chipotle has committed US\$4.5 million to fund UNICEF's "A Full Plate for Girls," a community-based nutrition programme that delivers emergency food kits, family nutrition guidance, and locally adapted sourcing strategies to improve access to healthy food for girls. In addition, Chipotle has made an extra donation of US\$1.5 million to support UNICEF in scaling up life-saving efforts in LMIC.

### **iv. Expository Messaging-High Engagement**

Malnutrition remains a major threat to girls' health and futures across low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). According to UNICEF, more than 1 billion adolescent girls and women today suffer from various forms of malnutrition. Women and girls account for 60% of

the world's chronically malnourished and are especially vulnerable to economic, climate, and conflict-related shocks. A recent report estimates that 3.1 million girls are currently at risk from the effects of malnutrition—including over 140,000 babies at risk due to low birth weight and 2.5 million girls under age five facing vitamin A deficiencies.

Beyond immediate health concerns, hunger threatens girls' education, future earnings, and maternal health outcomes and is projected to cost the global economy \$1.6 trillion each year in lost productivity. Eliminating stunting and anaemia alone could allow an estimated 15.8 million more girls to complete secondary school annually.

Chipotle and UNICEF are tackling this issue through a joint initiative called “A Full Plate for Girls.” The partnership combines Chipotle's expertise in sustainable food sourcing with UNICEF's longstanding experience supporting children's well-being. Together, they co-developed a community-based nutrition programme that delivers emergency food kits, family nutrition guidance, and locally adapted sourcing strategies to improve access to healthy food for girls.

## **Appendix C. Survey Questionnaire**

(In order)

### **Demographics**

### **Issue Support**

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (*1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree*)

- I believe that child malnutrition in low- and middle-income countries is an important issue.
- I think it is vital to address child malnutrition in low- and middle-income countries.
- I believe that businesses have a responsibility to help tackle global issues like child malnutrition.

### **Pre-existing Attitudes**

Please indicate how you currently feel about the following organisation: **Chipotle**  
(*1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree*)

(If you haven't heard of the brand, please select “neither agree nor disagree”).)

- I have a good feeling about this organisation.
- I trust this organisation.
- I admire or respect this organisation.

Please indicate how you currently feel about the following organisation: **UNICEF**

(1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)

(If you haven't heard of the organisation, please select “neither agree nor disagree”).)

- I have a good feeling about this organisation.
- I trust this organisation.
- I admire or respect this organisation.

Please read the following article on a fictional partnership, and answer the questions.

(Randomly assigned to one of the four stimuli)

### **Authenticity**

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statement:

(1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)

- This partnership feels authentic.

### **Partnership Approval**

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

(1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)

- I approve of what the partnership is doing.
- I think the partnership's actions are worthwhile.
- I think the partnership will make a real impact on the cause they are supporting.

### **Post-stimulus Attitude**

Please indicate how you currently feel about the following organisation: **Chipotle**

(1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)

- I have a good feeling about this organisation.
- I trust this organisation.
- I admire or respect the organisation.

### **Post-stimulus Attitude**

Please indicate how you currently feel about the following organisation: **UNICEF**

*(1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)*

- I have a good feeling about this organisation.
- I trust this organisation.
- I admire or respect the organisation.

### **Manipulation Check**

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statement:

*(1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)*

- Chipotle played an active role in designing and implementing the partnership activities.

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statement:

*(1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)*

- The article I read was based on a personal story.

### **Appendix D. R codes**

```
data <- read_excel("cleansheet_1.xlsx")

# Calculate Cronbach's Alpha for each scale

# Issue Support

alpha(data[, c("IA1", "IA2", "IA3")])$total$raw_alpha

# Pre-attitude Chipotle
```

```

alpha(data[, c("prechip1", "prechip2", "prechip3")])$total$raw_alpha

# Pre-attitude UNICEF

alpha(data[, c("preuni1", "preuni2", "preuni3")])$total$raw_alpha

# Partnership Effectiveness

alpha(data[, c("eff1", "eff2", "eff3")])$total$raw_alpha

# Post-attitude Chipotle

alpha(data[, c("chip1", "chip2", "chip3")])$total$raw_alpha

# Post-attitude UNICEF

alpha(data[, c("uni1", "uni2", "uni3")])$total$raw_alpha


# Check the effectiveness scale in detail

eff_items <- data[, c("eff1", "eff2", "eff3")]

# Full alpha output - Alpha if item dropped

alpha_result <- alpha(eff_items)

print(alpha_result)


# alpha if each item is removed

alpha_result$alpha.drop


# Create factor variables from condition

data <- data %>%

  mutate(

    engagement = ifelse(condition %in% c("Expo-High", "Narr-High"), "High", "Low"),

    messaging = ifelse(condition %in% c("Narr-High", "Narr-Low"), "Narrative", "Expository")

  )

```

```

# man check 1: Engagement

t.test(man_eng ~ engagement, data = data)

# Check means

aggregate(man_eng ~ engagement, data = data, mean)


# man check 2: Messaging

t.test(man_narr ~ messaging, data = data)

# Check means

aggregate(man_narr ~ messaging, data = data, mean)


# crossover effects

t.test(man_narr ~ engagement, data = data)

t.test(man_eng ~ messaging, data = data)


library(readxl)

library(dplyr)


# Read data

data <- read_excel("cleansheet_1.xlsx")


#ANCOVA

# Create factor variables

data <- data %>%

  mutate(

    messaging = factor(ifelse(grepl("Narr", condition), "Narrative", "Expository")),

```



```

engagement = factor(ifelse(grepl("High", condition), "High", "Low"))

)

# ANCOVA for Authenticity

model_auth <- aov(auth ~ messaging * engagement + IA + prechip + preuni, data = data)

print("AUTHENTICITY:")

summary(model_auth)

# ANCOVA for Partnership Approval (eff)

model_eff <- aov(eff ~ messaging * engagement + IA + prechip + preuni, data = data)

print("PARTNERSHIP APPROVAL:")

summary(model_eff)

# ANCOVA for Chipotle Attitude

model_chip <- aov(chip ~ messaging * engagement + IA + prechip + preuni, data = data)

print("ATTITUDE - CHIPOTLE:")

summary(model_chip)

# ANCOVA for UNICEF Attitude

model_uni <- aov(uni ~ messaging * engagement + IA + prechip + preuni, data = data)

print("ATTITUDE - UNICEF:")

summary(model_uni)

# Engagement perception in expository conditions only

expo_data <- data[data$messaging == "Expository", ]

```

```
t.test(man_eng ~ engagement, data = expo_data)
```

```
# Engagement perception in narrative conditions only
```

```
narr_data <- data[data$messaging == "Narrative", ]
```

```
t.test(man_eng ~ engagement, data = narr_data)
```

```
# ADJUSTED MEANS (accounting for covariates)
```

```
# Run the ANCOVA model
```

```
model_uni <- lm(uni ~ messaging + engagement + messaging:engagement + IA + prechip +  
preuni, data = data)
```

```
# Get estimated marginal means
```

```
emmeans(model_uni, ~ engagement)
```

```
data <- read_excel("cleansheet_1.xlsx")
```

```
library(psych)
```

```
describe(data[, c("auth", "eff", "chip", "uni", "IA", "prechip", "preuni", "man_eng",  
"man_narr")])
```