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### Social interactions for economic value? A marketing perspective

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## Chapter 3

### Micro-Level Interactions in Business-Nonprofit Partnerships

#### Abstract

While most research on business-nonprofit partnerships has focused on macro and meso perspectives, this paper pays attention to the micro level. Drawing on various theoretical perspectives from both marketing and management, we conceptually relate the outcomes of active employee participation in such partnerships to consumer self-interest. We also explore empirically whether and when self-interest affects consumers' responses towards firms in relation to business-nonprofit partnerships. The study reveals that self-interest can directly influence consumers' behavioral responses towards firms (i.e. switching and buying intentions, and word of mouth), whereas the impact on evaluative responses in terms of attitude and trust is only weak. The fit between the firm and the nonprofit partner (company-cause fit) turns out to moderate this effect, with consumer self-interest only playing a role if fit is high. Implications for research and practice are discussed<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter is based on an article that has been accepted for publication in *Business & Society* (co-authored by W. van Dolen and A. Kolk). The authors would like to thank Sabine Feirabend for her valuable contribution to the implementation of this research.

## Introduction

In the past decade, much attention has been paid to the emergence of new forms of cooperation between firms and nonprofit actors to address societal challenges that are considered too great and too complex to be solved by one actor alone (Austin, 2000; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Lucea, 2010). Such business-nonprofit collaborations, which are known as partnerships in the management literature and social alliances in the marketing field, are seen as a strategic approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright, 2006; Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007; Selsky & Parker, 2005). They have been described as “close, mutually beneficial, long-term” partnerships that involve more than philanthropy, sponsorship or cause-related marketing (Berger et al., 2006, p.129). Different from such tactical (or transactional) types of CSR, which are mainly associated with marketing goals and resources, partnerships denote “the synergistic use of organizational core competencies and resources to address key stakeholders’ interests and to achieve both organizational and social benefits” (McAlister & Ferrell, 2002, p. 690).

As such, partnerships go beyond financial contributions, demanding resource commitments in terms of time, knowledge and efforts from both partner organizations (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Waddock, 1988). For instance, the firm may provide managerial advice, technological support or a volunteer work force to the non-governmental organization (NGO) that it partners with (Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright, 2004). Such partnerships are hence described as highly integrative, and frequently characterized by active employee involvement by potentially all organizational members (Austin, 2000; McAlister & Ferrell, 2002). They therefore require concerted efforts by various organizational departments. While tactical CSR approaches usually target relatively short term, product- or brand-related outcomes, partnerships are seen as a long-term investment seeking to affect and benefit various stakeholder groups simultaneously, thereby addressing both economic and non-economic objectives (McAlister & Ferrell, 2002).

So far, partnerships have mainly been studied from either a macro, or a meso cross-sector perspective, i.e. at societal and (inter)organizational levels. This study, however, pays attention to the micro perspective which focuses on effects or interactions among

individuals (i.e. consumers and employees). Organizational benefits derived from partnerships, such as employee learning or non-financial resource exchanges, have been underexposed, and so has research on the potential implications of such benefits, particularly with regard to consumers and the firm (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007). Although researchers increasingly recognize that not only the focal firm may have an interest in CSR initiatives (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), few studies have addressed the question whether consumers could derive personal benefits from partnerships as well, let alone the potential interrelatedness of benefits for different stakeholder groups or their implications for the firm. To implement partnerships effectively, however, it is important to understand stakeholders' needs and how benefits for different stakeholder groups can be integrated into an organizational strategy (McAlister & Ferrell, 2002). Bhattacharya, Korschun and Sen (2009) referred to this gap when asserting that CSR initiatives first need to bring about benefits for individual stakeholders in order to be beneficial for firms.

This study aims to contribute both empirically and theoretically. Drawing on organization and marketing studies we theorize how partnerships, and active employee participation in particular, may affect employees, and how those effects may spill over to consumers. We argue that employee participation in partnerships may affect consumers either favorably or unfavorably, depending on whether or not consumers perceive that employees' involvement with the cause during work hours distracts them from serving customer needs well, being referred to as high versus low 'consumer perceived self-interest' in this study. Our theoretical contribution lies in the conceptualization of a link between employees and customers. Surprisingly, this link has been neglected by previous CSR studies, although employees have been identified as important advocates who may create awareness of and engagement with social causes among external constituents (Berger et al., 2004; Drumwright, 1996). Furthermore, we empirically investigate how consumers respond to perceptions of high versus low self-interest. In particular, drawing on attribution research and consistency theories, we test hypotheses that consumers will not always favor high self-interest, but that their responses towards the firm will depend on the level of company-cause fit. By doing so this study aims to contribute to the self-interest literature in the context of CSR by investigating boundary conditions to the generally emphasized importance of self-interest.

This paper is structured as follows: first we conceptualize the impact of active employee participation in partnerships on employees' perceptions and work-related behaviors, and how those in turn may spill-over to customers. Second, we review the literature on self-interest which is subsequently used to develop hypotheses related to the level of self-interest and the moderating effect of company-cause fit. This is followed by an explanation of our methodology and a presentation of the results. The paper ends with a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

## Conceptual Framework

### Partnerships: Linking Employees and Consumers

While past research has focused on how partnerships, or CSR more generally, can impact employees *or* consumers, there are neither conceptual nor empirical studies on how consumers can be affected via employees, thus involving both stakeholder groups. Drawing on the literature on CSR, particularly partnerships, the service-profit chain, and related psychological mechanisms, we argue that in a partnership context the effects of employees' active partnership participation may spill over to consumers, impacting them either favorably or unfavorably, depending on whether or not consumers believe that their personal self-interests are positively or negatively impacted by employees' involvement with the cause.

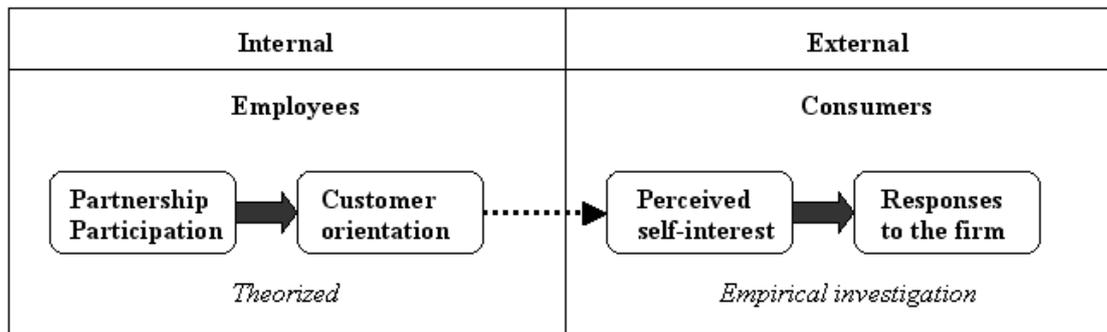
As stated earlier, partnerships can be characterized as an integrative form of CSR, often requiring an active commitment of time and efforts not only from managers, but also from employees of the partnering organizations (Waddock, 1988). For instance, employees of the firm may volunteer for the partnering non-governmental organization (NGO) or use their professional skills to help NGO staff during business hours (Smith, 1994). Due to this integrative approach employees may gain emotional rewards or acquire career-enhancing skills by conducting tasks outside their daily work environments. Similarly, partnership initiatives may help employees to integrate their private and work lives, for instance if such initiatives are linked to employees' own social communities (Bhattacharya, Sen, &

Korschun, 2008). Such benefits have shown to trigger employee identification with firms (Berger et al., 2006; Bhattacharya et al., 2008), which in turn can result in favorable work-related perceptions and behaviors, including job satisfaction, pride, commitment and loyalty to the firm (Bhattacharya et al., 2008).

Building on the service-profit chain concept, Homburg, Wieseke, and Hoyer (2009) demonstrated that the effects of identification are not only limited to employees' work-related perceptions and behaviors, but that they are transferred to customers as well. The authors demonstrated empirically that employee-company identification can impact customers' identification with an organization either directly (i.e. via emotional contagion) or indirectly (i.e. due to employees' customer orientation or productivity). Customer identification, in turn, triggers customer loyalty and willingness to pay, and hence firms' financial performance (Homburg et al., 2009). As CSR has been identified as a major driver of employee and customer identification, the processes outlined above are considered relevant in a partnership context as well (Berger et al., 2006; Bhattacharya et al., 2009). Kolk, Van Dolen and Vock (2010) suggested similar psychological mechanisms that might cause spillover effects of partnerships from employees to customers. For instance, an employee who is enthusiastic about the partnership and talks about it during interactions with a customer might trigger favorable partnership thoughts on the part of the customer as well.

According to the service-profit chain concept, satisfied (service) employees impact customers favorably through increased levels of productivity, affecting customer satisfaction and in turn firm profitability (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994). Employee volunteering, which constitutes an important element of partnership initiatives, has been associated with improved work motivation, customer orientation and productivity, which may in turn benefit consumers, thereby strengthening their personal self-interest in the partnership (cf. Basil, Runte, Easwaramoorthy, & Barr, 2009). For instance, employees might experience an improved work-life balance due to their engagement with the cause, and may hence appear more friendly in customer-contact situations due to increased job satisfaction, signalling more responsiveness to customers (cf. Figure 4).

Figure 4: Overview of the study's main constructs and connections



## The Role of Self-Interest in Relation to CSR

Most theories of human motivation and behavior assume that individuals are primarily motivated by self-interest (cf. Holmes, Miller, & Lerner, 2002; Miller & Ratner, 1998; Miller, 1999). Especially in individualistic cultures self-interested motives are considered as normal or rational (Miller, 1999). Meglino and Korsgaard (2004, p. 946) define rational self-interest as “thinking and acting in a manner that is expected to lead to an optimal or maximum result for a person”. Although the widely held view of self-interest as “the cardinal human motive” (Holmes et al., 2002, p. 144) has been criticized and challenged by more recent research (see e.g. Abelson, 1995), there is evidence that individuals are even guided by self-interested motives in their responses to social initiatives (Holmes et al., 2002; Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004; Simpson, Irwin, & Lawrence, 2006).

According to social exchange theory, which builds on the concept of reciprocity, individuals’ voluntary deeds are stimulated by expected returns from others (Blau, 1964). Such benefits could accrue in the form of gratitude, trust, or economic returns (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Similarly, in the marketing literature consumer choice processes are described in terms of economic utility maximization (e.g. Arora & Henderson, 2007). As suggested by the common practice of offering people products in return for their donations to charities, Holmes et al. (2002) demonstrated empirically that individuals are more willing to donate to charitable organizations when the act of giving is presented as an economic transaction rather than as charity. Building on Holmes et al.’s study, Simpson et al. (2006) obtained similar results, although their theoretical approach differed. While Holmes et al. (2002) argued that donors try to avoid inner conflicts by creating the ‘fiction’ of an economic

exchange, providing them with a self-interested justification for their good deeds, Simpson et al. (2006) criticized this approach. They asserted that responding to one's personal *and* others' interests does not necessarily imply a discrepancy. Rather, individuals behave in a way that is consistent with their self-perception of being moral (i.e. donating to a cause) *and* rational (i.e. receiving something in return). Consistency theory implies that not accepting an economic exchange in return for a philanthropic donation would create dissonance which individuals tend to avoid.

Arora and Henderson (2007) explicitly created tensions between concern for 'self' and 'other' in three experimental studies. In the context of transaction-based CSR activities (i.e. cause-related marketing) respondents were asked to trade off price discounts (i.e. "self" component) against donations of equal monetary value for varying social causes (i.e. "other" component). Their findings suggest that promotions with a 'self' component seem to be more effective than promotions with a social cause component. However, their findings also indicate that this is only true if the monetary value of promotions is sufficiently high. Similarly, Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) found that consumers punish firms in terms of unfavorable evaluations if they perceive a trade-off between the firm's CSR initiatives and its corporate abilities, such as producing high-quality products.

Apart from such economic exchanges, Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) identified consumer well-being and behavior modification as CSR effects beneficial for consumers. The authors stated that even though these outcomes do not directly impact business, firms should acknowledge such benefits as they may contribute to the bottom line in the long term. In addition, Bhattacharya et al. (2009) theorized that various benefits could arise to consumers depending on their perceptions of firms' CSR initiatives. They developed a conceptual model describing in what ways individual stakeholders can derive potential benefits from a firm's CSR activities. The authors drew on the concept of means-end chain according to which consumers' purchase decisions are based on functional, psychological and value-based benefits. Although the model was not investigated empirically, the authors theorized that the degree to which stakeholders derive such personal benefits from firms' CSR initiatives (e.g. employee harmony, work-life integration, consumer well-being) will impact their responses towards the firm.

While such consumer benefits may be derived from CSR directly, partnerships can also create consumer-perceived self-interest indirectly through consumers' interactions

with employees, as described above. The implications of such indirect effects will be discussed next, with Table 2 containing some examples of direct and indirect partnership effects as illustration.

**Table 2.** Examples of hypothesized direct/indirect partnership effects in relation to high/low consumer-perceived self-interest

	<b>Direct partnership effects</b>	<b>Indirect partnership effects</b>
<b>High consumer self-interest</b>	Perceived economic advantage: perception that greater customer orientation (i.e. consumer self-interest) is not accompanied by price increases.	Employees' active participation in the partnership can increase work satisfaction and customer orientation which positively impacts consumer self-interest. Customers do not feel that employees are distracted by their partnership engagement.
<b>Low consumer self-interest</b>	Economic implications such as perceived price increases for consumers which are ascribed to the company's engagement with the cause.	Although employees' active participation in the partnership may increase their work satisfaction and commitment to their job, their engagement with the cause is not perceived positively because consumers feel their interests are neglected at the expense of the company's partnership engagement.

## Hypotheses Development

As discussed earlier, employee participation in partnership activities may increase work motivation, customer orientation and productivity, which may trigger a high level of consumer self-interest (cf. Basil, et al., 2009). In line with the literature on self-interest it can be expected that consumers will respond favorably towards a firm if they perceive that the firm's partnership initiative is beneficial for them personally.

Despite these potential positive effects of partnerships on employees and hence customers, there is some evidence that partnership initiatives may not always result in high consumer self-interest. More specifically, we argue that the extent to which consumers perceive such initiatives to distract employees from their core job tasks will influence consumers' responses to the partnership. This reasoning is in line with Sen and Bhattacharya's (2001) advice for CSR-active firms to inform customers that the initiative is not be carried out at the expense of the firm's core abilities.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that CSR may distract firms from their core business activities (cf. Grayson & Hodges, 2004; Motorola, 2008). In particular, employee

volunteering programs supported by firms may create a conflict of interest between business-related obligations and participation in the partnership program (Pancer, Baetz, & Rog, 2002), for instance if a planned volunteer activity coincides with an important business meeting. As many volunteer activities take place during work hours, Basil et al. (2009) mentioned the blurring of boundaries between work and recreational time. Based on interviews with partnership participants, Berger et al. (2006, p. 133) found that employees even characterized partnership participation as "hard work" if it took place on a day-to-day basis. For instance, Randstad, a temporary employment company, offered to provide its NGO partner with advice regarding its human resource system free of charge, as human resource solutions belong to the firm's core activities (Insead, 2004).

Therefore, it can be argued that employees' distraction from their daily business tasks due to their participation in partnership activities may cause inconveniences for customers, such as longer waiting time in call centers, resulting in a low level of consumer self-interest. Following the logic of self-interest as "the cardinal human motive", consumers will punish the firm if they perceive that their interests are neglected by (service) employees due to their commitment to the nonprofit partner in terms of time and effort. In addition to these indirect effects on consumer self-interest via employees, consumers are expected to reward the firm if they perceive that the partnership activity benefits them directly (e.g. by contributing to their personal well-being, as suggested by Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Similarly, consumers will punish the firm if they believe that partnerships negatively impact their economic self-interests directly, such as price increases which consumers attribute to the firm's financial commitment to its NGO partner. This reasoning is supported by Arora & Henderson (2007), who described economic utility maximization as an important aspect in consumer choice processes.

To operationalize consumer reward and consumer punishment of the firm, the marketing literature often distinguishes between evaluative responses of consumers, particularly trust and attitude, and their behavioral responses, which includes buying and switching behavior, and word of mouth. Studies have shown that CSR influences these types of responses, but also that the impact may depend on other factors (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Bhattacharya et al., 2009; Brønn & Vrioni, 2001).

We believe that the level of consumer-perceived self-interest will impact their evaluative and behavioral responses towards the firm in a way that consumers will respond

more favorably if they feel that the partnership benefits them personally (i.e. high self-interest), compared to if they believe that their personal interests are neglected (i.e. low self-interest). First, attitudes, which describe consumers' assessment of firms more generally (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006), aid the realization of personal goals and the avoidance of personal costs. As individuals are usually opposed to situations involving potential losses, their attitudes are favorable if they perceive a benefit for themselves (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995). Although the effects of self-interest on attitudes are often considered as weak, such effects have shown to be stronger when self-interest is temporarily primed (Boninger et al., 1995). Second, trust, which has been defined as "confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity", relates to the belief that a (business) partner's actions will result in favorable outcomes for oneself (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). In line with this reasoning, Bhattacharya et al. (2009) theorized that stakeholder benefits derived from CSR will improve trust as the firm demonstrates its caring behavior towards stakeholders. In the context of the current study it is therefore expected that increased perceptions of consumer self-interest will favorably impact consumer trust in the company.

On the one hand, consumers' behavioral intentions, such as word of mouth, which refers to consumers' willingness to recommend the firm to others (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), buying intentions (i.e. consumers' likelihood of purchasing the firm's products or services, Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), and switching intentions (i.e. likelihood of changing from one supplier to another, Lam, Shankar, Erramilli, & Murthy, 2004), can be seen as outcomes of attitude and trust (Bhattacharya et al., 2009; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). For instance, Bhattacharya et al. (2009) theorized that consumer-related benefits derived from CSR impact firm-directed behaviors, such as purchase intentions, through relationship building factors (e.g. trust, satisfaction). Moreover, extant CSR research has confirmed the relationship between consumers' evaluative (i.e. attitudes, trust) and behavioral responses measures (i.e. word of mouth and switching intentions) (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2009).

On the other hand, we expect also a direct effect of self-interest on the behavioral response measures as self-interest predicts behavior rather than evaluations. Different from stating one's opinion, the expectancy of behavioral engagement prompts consumers to consider actual costs, which makes acting upon one's perceived self-interest more likely

(Miller and Ratner, 1998). Furthermore, Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggest that customers whose relationships with firms result in superior benefits, will be more committed, which directly affects switching or buying intentions (Bansal, Irving, & Taylor, 2004). This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>1</sub>: A high level of consumer self-interest derived from a partnership activity causes more favorable consumer responses in terms of (a) attitudes, (b) trust, (c) word of mouth, (d) switching intentions and (e) buying intentions compared to a low level of self-interest.*

### **The Relative Importance of Self-Interest: Fit as a Moderator**

Although the literature on self-interest suggests the importance of this concept in explaining consumer responses, even in the context of CSR, other literature proposes that individuals are not only guided by self-interest but also by motivations concerning others; this can occur simultaneously, even if these motives are conflicting (Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 1996; Bowles, 2008). Proponents of this view assert that rational self-interest cannot fully explain individuals' attitudes and behaviors, and that the impact of self-interest is often overestimated, as supported in several empirical studies (e.g. Miller & Ratner, 1998; Van Lange, 2000). Some CSR research suggests that consumers reflect on the reasons for firms' engagement in social initiatives, considering the firm's sincerity or honesty of its engagement with the NGO as important (e.g. Bigné Alcañiz et al. 2010; Bigné-Alcañiz, Currás-Pérez, & Sánchez-García, 2009; Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006). Conveying these insights to a partnership context, consumer self-interest derived from a partnership may not always elicit favorable consumer responses towards firms. Whether consumers reward firms for accruing self-interest may depend on the perceived sincerity of the firm's engagement with the NGO. The level of fit or congruence between the firm and the cause (often called company-cause fit) has shown to inform consumers about the firm's motivations and sincerity in this regard (Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2009).

Insights on company-cause fit are derived from the more generic literature on cause-brand fit in cause-related marketing activities or sponsorship, that included some empirical studies. Building on that debate, we can describe company-cause fit as the perceived

“degree of similarity or compatibility” (Lafferty, 2007, p. 448) between two partnering organizations. In the context of partnerships, Berger et al. (2004) identified various dimensions of fit, such as congruence among the collaborating organizations’ missions, their leaders, employees or resources. Several benefits can arise to partners with a high fit, such as that the implementation of the partnership will be easier in case both organizations share a similar culture or values. Similarly, if employees share an affinity for the cause (i.e. work force fit), they will more easily identify with their work organization, which can in turn result in favorable job-related behaviors (Berger et al., 2004). Although some of the more generic empirical research has found no or only weak support for the importance of high fit, particularly conceptual and some other empirical fit studies have stressed that high fit is essential to evoke favorable consumer responses (e.g. Lafferty, 2007). These studies have often used congruence theory, stating that relatedness or similarity will influence storage in memory and retrieval of information (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Lafferty, 2007). As people prefer to establish and maintain harmony among their thoughts, feelings and behaviors, they strive for uniformity among cognitive elements (Jagre, Watson, & Watson, 2001; Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Hult, 2004). In line with this theory, Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) argue that experienced cognitive consistency, such as in the case of high fit, leads to favorable consumer responses, while low fit evokes perceptions of inconsistency and consequently causes negative responses.

Following this argumentation, Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2010) conceptualize that fit, among other CSR communication elements, can influence consumers’ evaluative (i.e. attitudes, trust) and behavioral (i.e. word of mouth, purchase intentions) responses towards firms. Empirical research has demonstrated that high product/brand-cause fit favorably impacts consumers’ attitudes and corporate credibility and hence trust, relative to low fit (Basil & Herr, 2006; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Furthermore, past research suggests a positive link between high fit and favorable word of mouth intentions, which can be explained by consumers’ attributions regarding the firm’s motives to engage in a partnership, or by consumers’ willingness to trust the firm (Ellen et al., 2006; Rifon et al., 2004; Vlachos et al., 2009). Moreover, high fit has shown to increase buying intentions (Ellen et al., 2006), and is also expected to impact switching intentions, which are said to be predicted by evaluative responses as trust and price perceptions (Bansal, Taylor, & James, 2005).

Regarding consumers' perceptions of the firms' motivations to engage in CSR, past research has shown that high fit triggers mainly altruistic attributions, which may be accompanied by strategic (i.e. firm-serving) attributions as well (Ellen et al., 2006; Rifon et al., 2004). As altruistic and firm-serving motives are regarded as two extremes on a continuum, and it is the predominant attribution that influences how consumers evaluate firms, consumers' altruistic beliefs are prevalent in the case of high-fit alliances (Bigné Alcañiz et al., 2010). Consumers use these attributions to judge the firm's sincere intentions towards the partnering NGO, and thus its credibility (Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2009; Bigné Alcañiz et al., 2010), which in turn impacts consumers' trust, attitudes and purchase intent. Low fit, on the other hand, causes more egoistic attributions (i.e. purely firm-centered), such as taking advantage of the NGO, which consequently elicits less favorable consumer behavior. Consumers appear to perceive such firm-centered motives as less honest towards the NGO, which may explain their negative responses towards firms.

As it is unclear how consumers will respond to self-interest in the light of high versus low company-cause fit, arguments can be made for four descriptive scenarios, depending on whether high/low self-interest is coupled with a high-fit or low-fit partnership initiative. They are shown in a 2-by-2 matrix in Table 3 which illustrate the four scenarios. As this study focuses on the outcomes of consumers' impressions based on their integration of information about fit and self-interest, rather than on the relationship between these two constructs, causality between fit and self-interest is not assumed. Nevertheless, for illustrative purposes, Table 3 represents examples for each of the four scenarios, suggesting that consumers might derive perceptions about self-interest from the level of company-cause fit. Examples for high and low-fit partnerships, with a hypothesis for each, will be given next.

An example of a high-fit partnership activity is a commercial employment agency using its network and offices to recruit volunteers for an NGO that places professional volunteers in developing countries in an attempt to fight poverty. In this case, the partnership activity would be integrated into employees' daily job tasks, which could result in either high or low self-interest for consumers. An example of a low-fit partnership activity is an accountancy firm helping an NGO that requires less specialized skills, such as accountants helping to build or paint houses, activities that are completely unrelated to their daily job tasks. Although the strategic focus of partnerships seems to imply at least

some congruity between the firm and the cause, such a fit may not always be visible or obvious for consumers. Moreover, many firms manage a diverse portfolio of partnerships, including causes with various levels of logical fit (Austin, 2003). For instance, Timberland, a footwear and apparel manufacturer and retailer, partners with such diverse causes as the American Red Cross, GreenNet or Skills USA (Timberland, 2010). While partnership activities which are not well integrated into firms' strategy are sometimes considered a distraction from the business purpose, indicating low consumer self-interest, an alternative scenario is possible (Grayson & Hodges, 2004). The present study aims to disentangle the consequences with regard to these descriptive accounts shown in Table 3 by manipulating the level of consumer self-interest and of fit.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Scenarios Self-Interest & Fit Manipulations

	High company-cause fit	Low company-cause fit
High consumer self-interest	<p><b>Scenario I</b> Volunteering for the NGO can easily be integrated into employees' daily job routines. As employees can largely rely on their existing skills, activities for the NGO cause no distraction from daily job tasks, allowing them to help the cause while serving customers well.</p>	<p><b>Scenario IV</b> There is no direct link between employees' core activities and the efforts required for helping the cause, which facilitates a clear separation between the two types of activities. This might help employees to stay more focused on their commercial job tasks, avoiding potential distraction by cause-related activities.</p>
Low consumer self-interest	<p><b>Scenario II</b> The blurring of core-job and cause-related activities may distract employees. And as consumers can infer from a high-fit initiative that it is implemented strategically, they may feel that resulting trade-offs faced by employees may have negative implications for them, by being less well-served. E.g., a customer cannot get hold of a contact person who is working on an urgent project for the NGO.</p>	<p><b>Scenario III</b> Employees may need to acquire additional skills to serve the NGO well, and/or leave their daily working environment as their partnership commitments cannot be integrated into their daily job routines due to a lack of fit (e.g. accountants helping to build or paint houses). Their absence in the office may cause inconveniences for customers of the firm, who, analogous to scenario II, may feel that their interests are neglected, causing customer dissatisfaction and hence low perceived self-interest.</p>

### *High Fit*

According to consistency theories, perceived dissonance among consumers' thoughts and expectations is regarded as unpleasant and hence avoided (Simpson et al., 2006). While inconsistent information about the firm prompts attitude changes in an attempt to resolve perceived imbalances, consistent information can enhance consumers' attitudes towards firms as corporate behavior is evaluated as appropriate (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Cornwell et al., 2005). Applying this concept to our study, the notion of high fit will be consistent with high self-interest in consumers' minds, as both indicate favorable information about the firm and will thus be perceived as consistent, prompting favorable consumer responses (Scenario I). The notion of low consumer self-interest, however, will be perceived as unpleasant, and hence as inconsistent with information regarding high fit. As consumers strive to establish harmony among their beliefs about the firm, the positive impact of high fit will be undermined by perceptions of low self-interest, causing overall negative responses (Scenario II). Drawing on the effects of self-interest and fit on consumers' evaluative and behavioral responses towards firms discussed earlier we hypothesize:

*H<sub>2</sub>: When company-cause fit is high, consumer responses towards the firm in terms of (a) attitudes, (b) trust, (c) word of mouth, (d) switching intentions and (e) buying intentions will be more favorable in cases of high self-interest compared to low self-interest.*

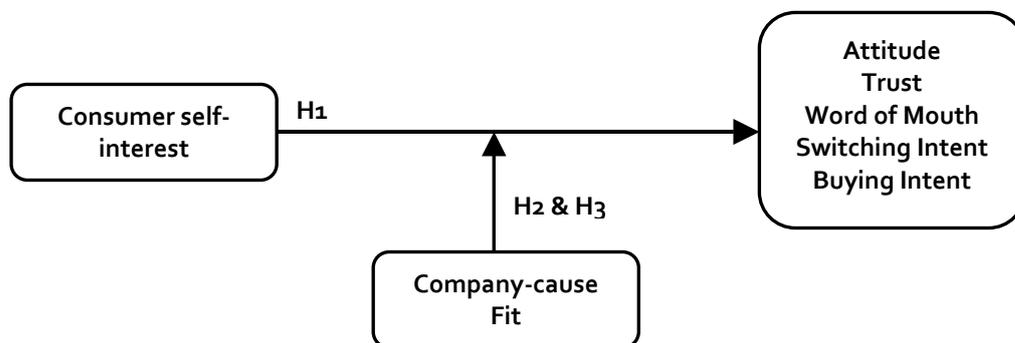
### *Low Fit*

According to Becker-Olsen et al. (2006), perceptions of low company-cause fit are inconsistent with individuals' prior expectations, which complicates the integration of new information into existing memory structures. This process results in less favorable thoughts and attitudes towards the firm, which are more focused on the firm's motives to engage in social initiatives. These motives are considered mainly firm-centered in the case of low fit, and have been associated with negative consumer responses in past research, including a perception of less sincerity of firms' intentions (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2009; Ellen et al., 2006). Such unfavorable beliefs are incongruent with the notion of high consumer self-interest, which prompts overall positive firm beliefs. In line with

consistency theory, such inconsistent beliefs will trigger an attitude change as consumers may not believe that the partnership results in high self-interest for them, causing overall unfavorable responses towards the firm (Scenario IV). Similarly, it is expected that low fit in combination with low self-interest will prompt unfavorable consumer responses (Scenario III). Although consistency theory suggests that two negative beliefs are in balance and should hence prompt favorable attitudes towards the firm (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006), Basil and Herr (2006) argue that consistency is not sufficient to cause favorable responses, but that positive, or well-liked organizational attitudes need to be present as well. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>3</sub>: When company-cause fit is low, consumer responses towards the firm in terms of (a) attitudes, (b) trust, (c) word of mouth, (d) switching intentions and (e) buying intentions will not differ between cases of high and low self-interest.*

Figure 5: Hypothesized relationships



## Data and Method

### Sample and Procedure

We recruited participants at public places (airport, train station) in the Netherlands to assure a large variety of people with different demographic backgrounds. A total of 308 participants completed the questionnaire. Framing the data collection method as a field experiment, we assigned respondents randomly to one of four conditions (high fit, high self-

interest/ high fit, low self-interest/ low fit, high self-interest/ low fit, low self-interest). The advantages of field experiments, which involve data collection in a realistic rather than a laboratory setting while manipulating the variables of interest, are the precision of measurement, due to the possibility to control the independent variables, and the realism of context (cf. Scandura & Williams, 2000). Respondents were selected based on two criteria: (1) being at least 18 years old, as this is considered a reasonable age to buy the focal firm's products and services, and (2) being a Dutch speaking resident of the Netherlands. Participants first read a (fictitious) press release informing them about the firm's engagement in a partnership. Fit was manipulated in these press releases. We framed it as a retrospect on the two-year partnership between the focal firm and an NGO. Respondents were informed that several employees of the firm volunteered for the NGO, which was supported by the firm through the provision of working hours. Subsequently, we asked respondents to read (fictitious) consumer responses to these press releases. Self-interest was manipulated in these responses. In a final step, all respondents completed the questionnaire.

We excluded 12 questionnaires from the dataset, leaving 296 respondents for the data analysis. From these 296 respondents 52.5% were female, and 47.5% male. One person did not answer this question. With regard to participants' age, about 44% of the respondents were between 18 to 25 years old, followed by 26 to 35 year-olds (29%), 46-55 year-olds (11%) and 36 to 45 year-olds (10%). Those aged 56 to 65-plus accounted for about 6%. Respondents were distributed almost equally across the four conditions: 72 respondents in the high fit, high self-interest condition, 74 respondents in the high fit, low self-interest condition, 81 respondents in the low fit, high self-interest condition, and 69 respondents in the low fit, low self-interest condition.

## Measures

**Independent variables.** We used a 2 (high/low self-interest) x 2 (high/low fit) factorial design for this study.

*Consumer self-interest* was manipulated by varying fictitious consumer responses to the online press release described earlier (cf. Wiener, LaForge, & Goolsby, 1990 for self-interest manipulation). In the high self-interest condition we primed that consumers

benefited from the partnership indirectly due to improved customer service quality. Fictitious consumers shared their experiences they had with employees during the past two years. They concluded that employees were much more motivated, open minded and customer oriented since the launch of the partnership and that customer service employees had told them that sickness leave among employees had decreased as a positive side effect of the partnership. With reference to the partnership, one consumer mentioned that the firm had won a customer satisfaction award, and that the partnership with the NGO had not caused price increases. In the low self-interest condition, on the other hand, we primed that since the initiation of the partnership customer service quality had deteriorated as call center employees devoted too much time and efforts to the partnership. Fictitious consumers complained, for instance, about longer waiting time on the phone or employees asking them to contribute to a fundraising activity for the cause, distracting employees from their core business activity. In addition, one consumer feared that prices had increased since the launch of the partnership.

While employee performance might as well be influenced by various other factors, such as training, or interactions with commercial and other, non-commercial clients, this study focuses on the effect of a partnership on consumer perceptions. By providing consumers with information about the firm's partnership and its employee volunteering program, and by linking this information to the quality of employees' customer orientation/service, this study explores consumers' responses towards firms. While consumers might not be aware of employee training opportunities, partnership activities are often communicated to consumers, and may hence be integrated into consumers' overall perceptions of the organization, which also includes their experiences regarding customer service quality or employees' customer orientation. While consumers may attribute poor customer service to a variety of reasons, the aim of this study is to investigate the potential benefit or damage arising to a firm if consumer perceptions about customer service are linked to the potential consequences of employees' active participation in a partnership.

Moreover, while consumers may have little insight into the actual internal processes and effects of partnerships, they form impressions based on their perceptions, interpretations, and the integration of pre-existing and new information (cf. Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2005). Therefore, new information about employees' active engagement in

corporate volunteering programs may be integrated with (negative or positive) past experiences with customer service employees, thereby attributing the quality of employee-customer interactions to the partnership. As consumers increasingly share their opinions about companies online, the question how such a scenario would affect companies is a relevant and interesting one to explore.

*Company-cause fit* was manipulated by varying two existing nonprofit organizations in the press articles described above, informing respondents about the long-term partnership with the focal firm, a telecommunications service provider. In a pretest two coders evaluated the actual level of fit for both NGO based on nine dimensions of fit identified by Berger et al. (2004). We identified the partnership between the firm and a telephone and internet help-line for children as high fit as it scored high on several of these dimensions. For example, both organizations share the central idea of inclusion of society, which indicates a fit among the organizations' missions. However, we found almost no corresponding matches for an organization caring for the conservation of nature, which consequently served as the low-fit partner (e.g. the NGO's mission with a focus on nature did not match with the firm's social mission). We stressed the differences between both partnerships in the fictitious press articles to ensure that the manipulation would be successful. The manipulation texts can be found in Appendix A.

**Dependent variables.** Although evaluative outcomes in consumers' responses to CSR (e.g. attitude, trust) are usually greater and also more easily assessable than behavioral outcomes (e.g. word of mouth, buying intentions), in this study we investigate both in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of consumer self-interest and fit in partnerships (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Despite a trend observed with field experiments to use dependent variables at the organizational level, measuring dependent variables at individual levels is a common approach in management studies (cf. Scandura & Williams, 2000).

*Evaluative responses.* We used attitude (4 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.74$ ) and trust (4 items,  $\alpha=0.91$ ) to measure evaluative consumer responses, and averaged all items measuring the same construct into a single measure. CSR initiatives can build trust and evoke positive attitudes towards firms among consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Vaaland, Heide, & Grønhaug, 2008). Moreover, these attitudes were found to be even

greater if consumers perceive a high fit between the firm and the cause (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). We phrased attitude items as “My attitude towards [the firm] is...”, and trust items as “I can count on [the firm]”.

*Behavioral intentions.* We used word of mouth (4 items,  $\alpha=0.84$ ), switching intentions (3 items,  $\alpha=0.62$ ), and buying intentions (3 items,  $\alpha=0.71$ ) to measure consumers’ behavioral responses, and averaged all items measuring the same construct into a single measure. According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) word of mouth can be seen as one of the key behavioral outcomes of CSR. This behavior can be explained by consumers’ identification with a firm engaging in CSR activities. Similarly, CSR was found to impact buying and switching intentions, which is particularly relevant in the context of the service firm used in this study (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). We phrased word of mouth items as “I will encourage others to purchase the products and services of [the firm]”, items for buying intentions as “I am planning to buy the products and services of [the firm]”, and items for switching intentions as “If I had to choose a (new) internet provider, [the firm] would be my first choice”. We measured all items in the questionnaire on a 7-point scale, anchored by ‘totally agree’ and ‘totally disagree’, except for one item of attitude, which was anchored by ‘extremely positive’ and ‘extremely negative’. The measures can be found in Appendix A.

## Manipulation Checks

In order to assess the self-interest manipulation we asked participants to evaluate the perceived level of consumer self-interest (3 items averaged into a single measure,  $\alpha=0.80$ ). We phrased self-interest items as “The partnership between [the firm] and [NGO] explicitly entails benefits for the customer”. One-way ANOVA results showed that our manipulation worked, as consumers rated perceived self-interest higher in the high self-interest condition ( $M=4.56$ ) compared to the low self-interest condition ( $M=2.91$ ) ( $F=137.82$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

Similarly, we asked participants to evaluate the fit between the two allied organizations presented to them (3 items averaged into a single measure,  $\alpha=0.65$ ). We worded fit items as “The link between the core business of [the firm] and [NGO] is clear to me”. Again, results of a one-way ANOVAs showed that our manipulation was successful, as

the firm's cooperation with the well-fitting nonprofit was evaluated more favorably than the partnership with the low-fit NGO ( $M_{\text{high fit}}=4.78$ ,  $M_{\text{low fit}}=3.78$ ,  $F=62.16$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

## Results

To test  $H_1$ , stating that high consumer self-interest derived from a partnership activity will lead to more favorable consumer responses than low self-interest, we conducted a series of one-way ANOVA's for the five dependent variables used in this study. We found significant differences between high and low consumer self-interest for attitude, word of mouth, switching intentions and buying intentions (see Table 4). Although the results for trust point into the same direction, we could not detect any significant difference.

**Table 4.** One-Way ANOVA Effect Test Comparison of Means

	Level of Consumer Self-Interest		F-value	p
	Means (Std.)			
	High	Low		
Attitude	4.08 (1.07)	3.78 (1.04)	5.90	0.02
Trust	3.95 (1.06)	3.78 (1.12)	1.83	0.18
Word/Mouth	3.66 (1.06)	3.31 (1.31)	6.41	0.01
Switching	4.16 (1.10)	3.87 (1.14)	5.04	0.03
Buying	3.77 (1.07)	3.48 (1.35)	4.16	0.04

Therefore, our findings do support  $H_1$  with regard to the behavioral response measures used in this study, and for attitude. These findings are in line with Millner and Ratner (1998), who stated that self-interest rather predicts behavior than attitudes, which are closely related to trust conceptually (cf. Selnes, 1998). If primed, however, self-interested reasoning can temporarily cause stronger impacts on attitudes (Boninger et al., 1995).

In order to test  $H_2$  and  $H_3$ , we conducted a series of two-way ANOVA's in a first step. These hypotheses propose that there will be interaction effects between consumer self-interest and company-cause fit. Subsequent one-way ANOVA's focusing first on the high-fit condition, and then on the low-fit condition were conducted to adopt or reject  $H_2$  and  $H_3$ .

Based on the two-way ANOVA's we found significant interaction effects between self-interest and fit for word of mouth, switching and buying intentions, while we could not detect any significant interaction effects for attitude and trust (see Table 5).

The insignificant findings for attitude and trust are not surprising in view of the results we obtained when testing  $H_1$ . Again, the generally weak power of self-interest on evaluative responses, compared to behavioral responses, might explain why no significant interaction effects were detected. This reasoning is supported by Figures 6 to 10, which show that the graphs for attitude and trust point into the same direction as the graphs for behavioral intentions, for which we did find a significant interaction effect.

**Table 5.** Two-Way ANOVA Effect Test Comparison of Means. Interaction Test Consumer Self-Interest & Company-Cause fit

Dep.Var.	Consumer self-interest	Means (Std.)		F-value	p
		High fit	Low fit		
Attitude	High	4.60 (0.55)	4.20 (1.21)	2.71	0.10
	Low	4.10 (0.95)	4.07 (0.94)		
Trust	High	4.15 (0.68)	3.78 (1.29)	1.43	0.23
	Low	3.81 (1.16)	3.75 (1.09)		
Word/Mouth	High	4.04 (0.58)	3.33 (1.26)	5.01	0.03
	Low	3.36 (1.39)	3.26 (1.23)		
Switching	High	4.44 (0.82)	3.92 (1.26)	9.35	0.00
	Low	3.74 (1.17)	4.01 (1.09)		
Buying	High	4.05 (0.81)	3.53 (1.21)	5.51	0.02
	Low	3.42 (1.44)	3.56 (1.25)		

**Figure 6.** Two-Way ANOVA for Attitude

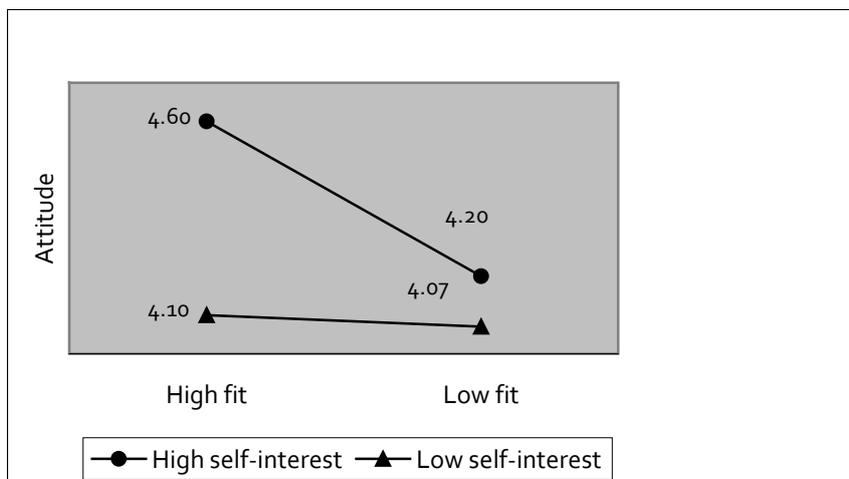


Figure 7. Two-Way ANOVA for Trust

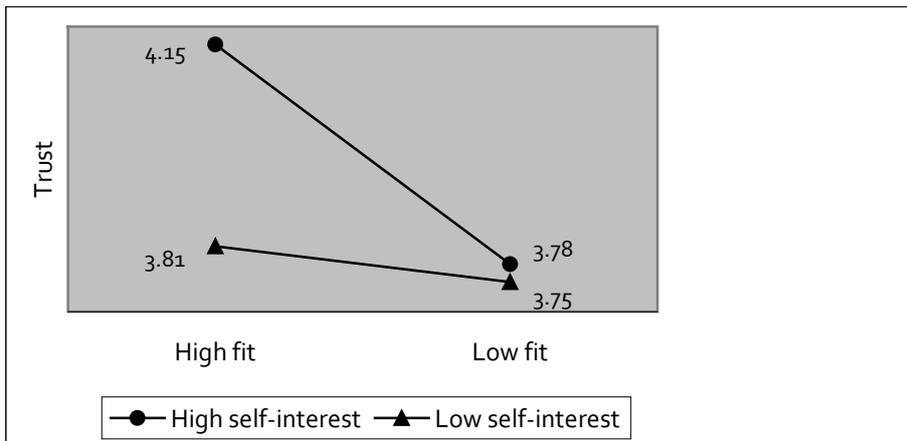


Figure 8. Two-Way ANOVA for Word of Mouth

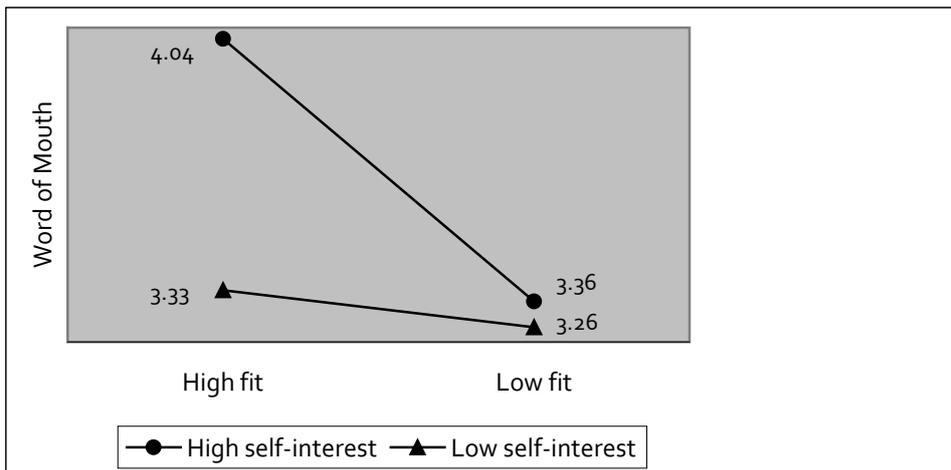


Figure 9. Two-Way ANOVA for Switching Intentions

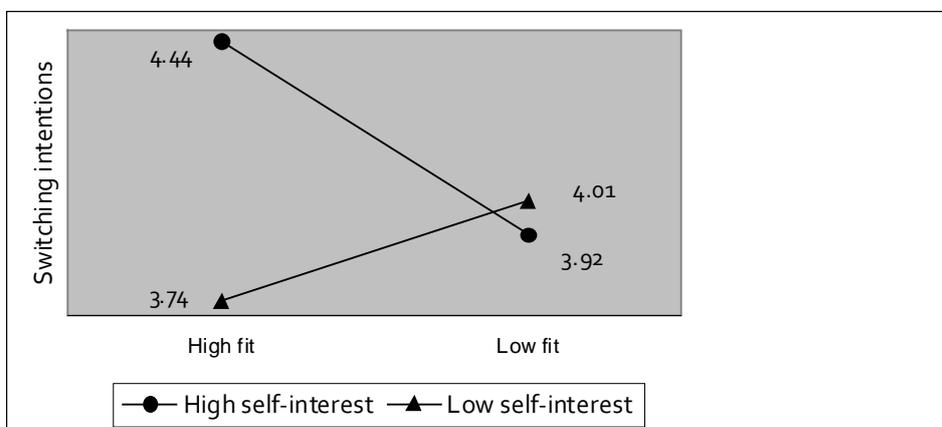
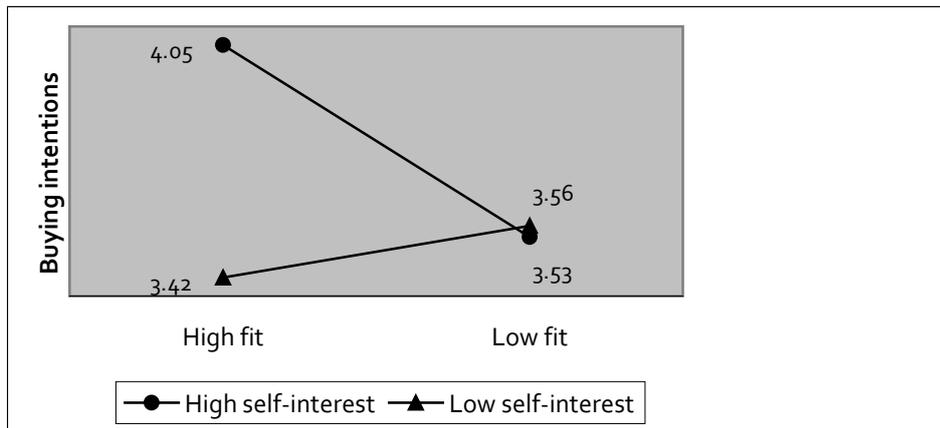


Figure 10. Two-Way ANOVA for Buying Intentions



To test  $H_2$  and  $H_3$ , we conducted a series of one-way ANOVA's, using consumer self-interest as independent variable. For the high-fit condition, we found significant differences between high and low consumer self-interest for attitude, trust, word of mouth, switching intentions, and buying intentions, lending full support for  $H_2$  (see Table 6).

Table 6. One-Way ANOVA Effect Test Comparison of Means

Dep.Var.	Level of Consumer Self-Interest (means, std.)		F-value	p
	High	Low		
Attitude	4.60 (0.55)	4.10 (0.95)	14.52	0.00
Trust	4.15 (0.68)	3.81 (1.16)	4.50	0.04
Word/Mouth	4.04 (0.58)	3.36 (1.39)	14.54	0.00
Switching	4.44 (0.82)	3.74 (1.17)	17.15	0.00
Buying	4.05 (0.81)	3.42 (1.44)	10.57	0.00

For the low-fit condition, we found no significant differences between high and low consumer self-interest for attitude, trust, word of mouth, switching intentions, and buying intentions, lending full support for  $H_3$  (see Table 7). In accordance with our hypotheses these results indicate that consumer responses towards the firm are only affected by perceived consumer self-interest in a high fit condition, whereas self-interest does not seem to matter if company-cause fit is low.

**Table 7.** One-Way ANOVA Effect Test Comparison of Means

Dep.Var.	Level of Consumer Self-Interest (means, std.)		F-value	p
	High	Low		
Attitude	4.20 (1.21)	4.07 (0.94)	0.51	0.48
Trust	3.78 (1.29)	3.75 (1.09)	0.03	0.87
Word/Mouth	3.33 (1.26)	3.26 (1.23)	0.12	0.73
Switching	3.92 (1.26)	4.01 (1.09)	0.21	0.65
Buying	3.53 (1.21)	3.56 (1.21)	0.02	0.89

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study focused on the micro perspective of cross-sector partnerships between firms and NGO, which has received little attention so far as partnerships have mainly been investigated at the macro and meso levels. To conceptualize how partnerships affect employees and how these effects may spill over to consumers, we drew on insights from various theoretical perspectives, from marketing, management and organization studies. In this way we also respond to calls for more research on the relation between partnership initiatives and firm success using such cross-disciplinary approaches (Harrison & Freeman, 1999; McAlister & Ferrell, 2002). Particularly the strategic and long-term nature of partnerships can be seen to require cross-disciplinary studies in order to comprehend and seize the full potential of this promising form of business-nonprofit collaboration. Tactical CSR programs, such as sponsorship or cause-related marketing, predominantly aim at short-term marketing benefits, and are hence often limited to marketing departments' budgets and sphere of influence (McAlister and Ferrell, 2002). Partnerships, however, tie a firm's core competencies and overall resources to a social cause, demanding resource commitments and contributions from various organizational departments and employees across the whole organization. Such an approach calls for coordinated and cross-departmental action and the combined assessment of impacts on various stakeholder groups. In particular, the successful implementation of partnerships requires an understanding of how benefits for different stakeholders can be integrated into an organizational strategy (McAlister & Ferrell, 2002). Our study contributes to this lack of understanding by providing theoretical and empirical insights.

First, by drawing on past insights on the effects of CSR on employees and customers, as well as on the service-profit chain concept and related psychological mechanisms, we conceptualized potential spillover effects of employee outcomes of active partnership participation on consumers. In particular, we illustrated how employees' engagement in such partnerships (e.g. providing professional knowledge or volunteer services to the NGO) may affect consumer perceived self-interest, for instance, due to perceptions of increased/decreased customer orientation. By bridging insights from the organizational and marketing literature, we advance extant partnership studies, and research on CSR more generally, by contributing a conceptual framework that may inspire and spur future empirical investigations in this field.

Second, as an initial empirical exploration of the combined effects of partnerships on several stakeholder groups, we investigated how consumers respond to high versus low self-interest arising from employees' active partnership engagement, and whether these responses are influenced by the level of company-cause fit. While past research has paid much attention to the business case of CSR, revealing potential benefits of CSR for the firm, Bhattacharya et al. (2009) state that we first of all need to understand how CSR may benefit individual stakeholders to fully comprehend impacts on the firm. Our empirical investigation hence contributes novel insights to past CSR research by exploring whether the level of company-cause fit impacts consumers' responses to perceived self-interest derived from partnerships.

The findings of our research suggest that overall, consumer self-interest primarily matters with regard to consumers' behavioral intentions towards firms, while consumers' evaluations of firms in terms of trust remain largely unaffected. More specifically, consumers' word of mouth, and switching and buying intentions towards the firm were more favorable if they perceived self-serving benefits derived from the partnership initiative, such as an increased level of customer satisfaction since the launch of the partnership. These findings are in line with Boninger et al. (1995, p. 61), who stated that "the prospect of behavioral involvement (unlike the request for an opinion) forces people to consider cost, and hence prompts self-interest reflection", which might also explain the weak result for trust.

In line with our expectations, the data analysis revealed boundary conditions to the favorable impact of consumer self-interest. Taking company-cause fit into account, our

results indicate that high consumer self-interest does not always trigger favorable consumer responses towards the firm. More specifically, while consumers rewarded the focal firm for accruing self-interest if fit was high, a low level of fit turned the priming of consumer self-interest ineffective. Apparently, despite consumers' general appreciation of personal benefits, specific partnership characteristics (i.e. the similarity between the firm and the cause) have to be met in order to ensure the effectiveness of priming consumer self-interest. Our observation that the two-way interaction effect between fit and self-interest was not significant for the evaluative response measures was not altogether surprising after having detected weak effects for trust on testing  $H_1$ . However, the graphs displaying the proposed interaction effects (Figures 6-10) show similar patterns for the evaluative and behavioral response measures, supporting our reasoning, and are in line with insights from attribution and consistency theory explained in the theoretical part of the paper. Obviously, further investigation is needed, also amongst broader sets of respondents and covering firms from different sectors, for example, while using multi-informant research designs or different methods of data collection can be other extensions to the present study.

Future research may also be expanded to other countries to investigate whether the findings of this study hold in other contexts as well. While Maignan and Ferrell (2003) demonstrated that overall US consumers' perceptions differ from those of Western European consumers (i.e., Germany and France) with regard to the assigned importance of different stakeholder responsibilities, their study also indicates that US and European consumers equally consider customers' fair and satisfactory treatment as a firm's primary responsibility. Although the central importance of consumers' personal interest identified by Maignan and Ferrell suggests that our results with regard to self-interest in a Dutch context might hold for consumers in the US as well, it would be interesting to explore whether outcomes differ for consumers of countries that are typically considered less individualistic compared to the Netherlands (such as many Asian countries).

Caution should be exercised concerning the generalizability of our finding across sectors. As personal contact between employees and consumers is inherent to the theoretical framework we established, we framed our experimental scenarios in the context of customer service employees of a telecommunications service provider. Results may differ for more traditional consumer product firms with regard to switching or buying intentions, as choosing a new telephone or internet provider involves much more complex choices

compared to switching, for instance, to a new soap brand. And while our conceptual model will most likely be tied to service-intensive firms, the findings of our empirical study might as well be relevant for more production-oriented firms as long as there are comparable clear customer contacts.

Our theoretical framework intended to exemplify how consumer self-interest may be created in the context of business-NGO partnerships. However, self-interest may be generated or hurt in different ways, such as a firm that uses inferior materials for production while dedicating resources to an NGO-partnership. Moreover, there are several ways to implement partnerships, as well as various possibilities to involve employees. Our study focuses primarily on volunteering by firms' employees, as commitment of employee time and knowledge has been identified as an important aspect of business-NGO collaboration (Austin, 2000). A recent study showed that more than half of the surveyed firms "either attempts to accommodate employee volunteering during regular working hours", or already actively supports it (Basil et al., 2009, p. 391). Since partnerships can be more multifaceted than the ones presented in this study, future research could explore other partnership activities to increase generalizability. In this way, different sources of consumer self-interest may be identified to see whether they may impact consumer responses differently, also in relation to the level of company-cause fit. Furthermore, consideration of time scales could inform researchers which sources of self-interest may require a long-term rather than a short-term perspective, potentially emphasizing the need for long-term partnerships in contrast to more tactical CSR programs which are usually short-term.

While our data collection among real consumers – in contrast to student samples that are rather common in experimental studies – increases the generalizability of our findings, the use of fictitious scenarios represents a limitation of this study, as it jeopardizes the degree of external validity. In particular, our scenario descriptions insinuate that customers understand how effects of partnerships internal to the firm may translate into consumer self-interest. While this scenario might not be representative of consumers' actual understanding of partnership processes, it builds on the assumption that consumers integrate various pieces of information about the firm to draw this conclusion. Despite some evidence that consumers indeed do perceive trade-offs between a firm's CSR efforts and its corporate abilities, further empirical research is needed to investigate the employee-customer relationships conceptualized in our model (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). In

particular, future research designs would benefit from including employee respondents as well in the empirical investigations, which was not done in the current research.

Despite these caveats, some practical implications can already be indicated. First, our study suggests that partnerships can benefit the firm and stakeholders in multiple ways. More specifically, managers should bear in mind that such initiatives may not only be beneficial for the social cause and the firm itself, but also for individual employees and customers of the firm. Our findings support Bhattacharya et al.'s (2009) notion that a broadened stakeholder perspective is needed to more fully assess the 'return on investment' of partnerships. Concerted efforts by various departments, including personnel and marketing departments, seem needed to exploit the full potential of this promising form of CSR. By recognizing the role of employees as advocates of firms' partnership initiatives (cf. Drumwright, 1996), this research highlights the importance of considering not only the desired corporate outcomes, but also how such initiatives can benefit employees and consumers in the first place.

Second, we showed that while priming consumers' self-interest seems to have a direct impact on a firm's bottom line (through buying or switching intentions), long-term strategic effects for the corporate image (via positive attitudes or trust) are less likely. In addition, firms that wish to improve their bottom line by communicating consumer-centered benefits to their target groups need to consider (the communication of) good company-cause fit as a necessary premise. More generally, it seems advisable to engage in partnerships with a high fit and avoid those with a low fit. While this implication clearly stresses the business case of CSR, it should be noted that the choice to collaborate with a high-fit cause to further strategic business interests may mean that pressing problems that simply do not fit well with the firm's objectives are neglected. Criticism that many firms assign more weight to the business case than to the importance and urgency of community issues has been raised in academic research more broadly (e.g., Seitanidi, 2010).

The conceptual and empirical insights provided by our study suggest that stakeholder demands do not necessarily need to compete. To the contrary, partnerships may provide platforms that are actually capable of consolidating stakeholder needs that might have been conflicting otherwise. A better understanding of the potential interrelatedness of the effects of such partnerships on different stakeholder groups

provides managers with tools to balance competing stakeholder needs effectively. However, further research is necessary to validate the findings of our exploratory study.