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ORIGINAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Corporate sponsorship as an image platform: understanding the roles of relationship fit *and* sponsor–sponsee similarity

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Abstract Studies have shown that the fit between a sponsoring brand and the sport, art, or charity sponsored influences outcomes such as brand awareness and image. This research adds the role of sponsor–sponsee similarity to the discussion of fit. The authors argue that similarity interacts with fit when conditions evoke suspicion or disrupt typical inferences regarding sponsorship relationships. Interaction is particularly important when the sponsor seeks to develop its image by association with a cause, and is also of consequence for the cause in terms of its branding. Three studies test sponsorship effects with respect to blood donation and cancer prevention organizations. Results support the predicted moderated mediation model, showing that similarity between a corporate sponsor and a sponsored cause can interact with fit, influencing sponsorship evaluations directly and shaping attitudes and behavioral intentions toward constituents indirectly. This work reveals a counterintuitive effect of similarity for some sponsorship relationships.

Keywords Sponsorship fit · Similarity · Positioning · Image

Introduction

Sponsorship of World Cup soccer by adidas makes perfect sense to consumers because they can easily understand why adidas would sponsor a sporting event. In this instance, fit between the sponsor and sponsee is self-evident. The adidas brand, well known for its quality athletic products, enhances its image by promoting its products at the world's premier soccer event. Research shows that this sort of match is effective in supporting image (Gwinner and Eaton 1999) as well as in developing consumers' memory of the relationship (e.g., Cornwell et al. 2006). Also obvious is that individuals will identify points of similarity between the sporting goods manufacturer and World Cup soccer, such as sport, athletes, competition, and play.

A more ambiguous sponsorship relationship is that between Shell Oil Company and the Ducks Unlimited wetlands conservation group. This relationship may also "make sense" at some level, in that consumers may understand a firm's goal of developing goodwill via cause sponsorship, but consumers are unlikely to consider the relationship to be a good fit. Even if Shell Oil has a valid reputation claim (Lankoski 2007) of helping preserve wetlands, without knowledge of the particular case (Bennett et al. 2013) consumers may have difficulty discerning when a brand is merely seeking to communicate an environmentally friendly image. Consumers may even become suspicious, questioning the appropriateness of the partnership if they associate the oil company with pollution. Furthermore, while in this situation the oil company and the conservation group may seem to have points of similarity—such as preservation of ducks, wetlands, and the environment—the two entities have an opposing orientation to these points.

Both of these examples have aspects of similarity stemming from shared associations. When adidas sponsors World Cup soccer, both sponsor and sponsee focus on sports. When Shell sponsors Ducks Unlimited, both entities focus on the environment. In the first instance, the commonality could be considered a straightforward contributor to similarity, but in the second example, the similar interest in the environment is

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actually an aligned difference (Markman and Gentner 1996). That is, although the two organizations are aligned in their interest in wetlands, public opinion generally holds that oil companies adversely affect the environment, whereas conservation groups protect it. The problem is that fit is a measure that typically informs sponsorship decision-making but similarity is not.

Although similarity and fit are lexically and conceptually distinct (Park et al. 1991), the boundary between them is blurred, with the two terms being used interchangeably (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Keller and Aaker 1992; Smith and Andrews 1995). Furthermore, fit measures have been employed to measure similarity (e.g., Taylor and Bearden 2002) and similarity measures have been employed to measure fit (e.g., Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). Hence, a clear understanding of how fit and similarity differ becomes important.

Similarity between objects of comparison stems from commonality, which includes shared features or characteristics as well as aligned differences (Spiggle et al. 2012). The commonality of aligned differences is readily apparent in the sponsorship of sport by tobacco companies. While tobacco and sport are both associated with health, they lie on opposite ends of the continuum, as tobacco is known to damage health and sport is known to support it. Now consider McDonald's sponsorship of the Olympics with respect to the characteristic "health." While both food and exercise via sport support health, in the minds of many the McDonald's brand of fast food holds an aligned difference (in terms of health) from sport.

Fit refers to the degree to which the sponsor's brand-specific associations are applicable or beneficial to the sponsee's product category (Spiggle et al. 2012). That is, fit refers to "the 'sense' or 'logic' of a particular brand sponsoring a particular object (i.e., organization, cause, event…being sponsored)" (Olson and Thjømøe 2011, p. 57). We adopt a similar view. For example, people may feel that the McDonald's brand is poor match as a sponsor for the Olympic Games because fast food is linked to obesity, or conversely people may feel the brand is a good match because they see the sense of a global brand sponsoring a global sporting event. Importantly, fit between a sponsor and sponsee is considered to be a key influence on consumer evaluations of sponsorship relationships (Cornwell et al. 2005; Nan and Heo 2007; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006).

The intriguing challenge in understanding sponsorship relationships is to grasp the connection between similarity and fit. We argue that merely considering fit in a sponsorship relationship without considering the degree of similarity between entities may lead to erroneous conclusions. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to disentangle the impact of entity similarity from that of relationship fit to yield a better understanding of the communication outcomes of sponsorship under suspicion-arousing conditions. Specifically, the objectives of this research are (a) to examine the role of fit and similarity in the evaluation of socially oriented cause sponsorship relationships where suspicion is most likely to arise, and (b) to consider direct and indirect outcomes for both the sponsor and the sponsee. We argue and empirically demonstrate that two entities in a sponsorship may be considered to be of good or poor fit irrespective of their level of similarity to each other. We also show that under conditions of poor fit, high similarity between the partners leads to less favorable outcomes.

Theoretical development

Sponsorship relationship fit

Perceptions of fit can emanate from numerous characteristics and features. For example, fit in a sponsorship relationship could stem from both image congruence and functional congruence (Gwinner and Eaton 1999; Prendergast et al. 2010). Evidence generally supports a positive relationship between fit and social sponsorship evaluations (e.g., Hamlin and Wilson 2004; Zdravkovic et al. 2010), as people may use fit as a heuristic for judging the appropriateness of sponsorships (Haley 1996). High-fit social sponsorships are consistent with expectations, and thus are cognitively fluent in consumer evaluations, and should generate favorable evaluations. On the other hand, low-fit social sponsorships may lead to cognitive elaboration (Menon and Kahn 2003) and consumer suspicion of sponsor motives because of incongruity (Campbell and Kirmani 2000), and thus result in less favorable evaluations.

In fact, research shows that high-fit social sponsorships enhance clarity of positioning for and generate favorable attitudes toward commercial sponsors (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). Extending this logic, we posit that consumer perceptions of fit not only yield greater clarity of positioning for the nonprofit entity being sponsored, but also lead to favorable consumer attitudes toward social partnerships. Clarity of positioning constitutes an important facet of brand meaning (Erdem and Swait 1998) and refers to "the extent to which people know what to expect from an entity" (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006, p. 155). Clarity of positioning has also been referred to as brand meaning clarity (e.g., Chien et al. 2011). Although several contextual factors are known to moderate the impact of fit on sponsorship evaluations, some conditions may accentuate the adverse impact of low fit, such as when suspicion about the relationship is aroused.

Similarity

Understanding the role of similarity in sponsorship requires thinking about how people make similarity judgments and how these judgments underlie perceptions in context. To support this understanding, we first consider structure mapping theory as one process of coming to a judgment of similarity. We then consider how people develop inferences of similarity through correspondence bias. Lastly, we discuss how disruption of this inference of similarity occurs, leading to unexpected outcomes.

How do people judge similarity? The question of how similar one object is to another has no unique answer (Dhar and Glazer 1996). To support efficient information processing, people categorize objects as similar on the basis of both common and distinctive features. The meaning of similarity also depends on the task, other objects in the stimulus set, the direction of comparison (Sloman and Rips 1998), and the context (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994). According to structure mapping theory (Gentner 1983; Gentner and Markman 1997; Medin et al. 1993), similarity is an outcome of the cognitive comparison of objects. The comparison considers commonalities between the objects, differences related to commonalities, and differences unrelated to commonalities (Markman and Gentner 1996). Importantly, people tend to notice differences related to commonalities more than differences unrelated to commonalities (Tversky 1977). In fact, objects that have more commonalities *and* differences related to the commonalities are more likely to be viewed as more similar.

Several researchers have provided excellent discussions of how consumers make judgments about similarity (e.g., Bijmolt et al. 1998; Creusen and Schoormans 1997; Johnson 1986). When faced with a similarity judgment task, consumers comparing brands rely on information either retrieved from memory (e.g., from prior purchase and use of the brands, personal communication, and advertising), or made available during the task (e.g., through sponsorship communication), or both.

Consumers rely on perceived attributes when making similarity judgments (Creusen, and Schoormans 1997; Lefkoff-Hagius and Mason 1993). For example, people may use several attributes (e.g., goals and ideas) when judging the image similarity of partners in a sponsorship. Attributes on which two brands are judged to be about equal will cause the pair to be perceived as relatively similar, whereas attributes on which two brands are judged to differ substantially will cause the pair to be perceived as relatively dissimilar (Bijmolt et al. 1998).

Since countless characteristics and features might contribute to the overall perception of similarity between two entities, conceptualizations of similarity that emphasize the total or majority feature overlap are limited in some situations (Murphy and Medin 1985). Moreover, people may not always have the knowledge, capacity, time, and motivation to evaluate all features of similarity between the objects of comparison. Similarity judgments are often based on a limited number of relevant attributes (Johnson 1986) and can even be based on a single brand association (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994). For example, people may use an attribute related to the category (e.g., fast food) when making global similarity judgments.

The diagnosticity of an attribute in similarity judgments depends on the objects being compared (Johnson 1986). Hence, even seemingly disparate objects can be perceived to be similar (e.g., milk, spinach, and sardines because of their high calcium content), and judging similarity may be less a process of feature mapping than one of inferring context-specific connections, particularly for dissimilar objects (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994). Similarity evaluations can be lower if a diagnostic attribute is not readily available for comparison (Gierl and Huettl 2011).

Human correspondence bias

Corporate social responsibility activities tend to exploit human correspondence bias (Yoon et al. 2006) in that people think that others (in this case, the organization) are as they act (Gilbert and Malone 1995). For example, if firms give to charity, they must be charitable. However, aroused suspicion can disrupt the robust nature of correspondence bias (Fein and Hilton 1994), a consequence that is well documented (Fein and Hilton 1994; Fein et al. 1990; Hilton et al. 1993). The possibility of disruption is particularly important in sponsorships because of the inherent power imbalance in most sponsorship partnerships, where brands often provide vital financial support to causes.

Consumers attribute intrinsic (i.e., socially responsible) and/or extrinsic (i.e., self-interested) motives to social sponsorship behavior, and—importantly—when they find extrinsic motivation to be explanatory, they discount intrinsic motivation (Rifon et al. 2004). Moreover, consumers use heuristics to develop their perceptions of corporate motives (Menon and Kahn 2003). Since consumers are not likely to have specific knowledge of a corporation's inner workings, they are inclined to rely on salient cues in the environment for inferring sponsorship motives (Rifon et al. 2004). For example, when fit is low (Webb and Mohr 1998) or when the message overemphasizes the sponsor (Samu and Wymer 2009), or when the source of the message is the company rather than the cause (Yoon et al. 2006), consumers are liable to perceive self-interest motives.

We argue that similarity facilitates the disruption of correspondence bias under low-fit conditions. Because disruption of correspondence bias relies solely on aroused suspicion (no confirmation of self-interested motives is necessary), an individual need only make inferences about an actor's underlying

motives. Sponsorship of an AIDS research nonprofit organization by a drug manufacturer such as Pfizer offers an example. In this case, similarity may raise skepticism that might not develop from the pairing of the Sierra Club with Pfizer, as inferring that Pfizer might benefit from supporting the Sierra Club is less likely than concluding that Pfizer supports AIDS research from self-interest. In sum, suspicion draws the sponsor's motivation into question, which may in turn reflect negatively on the nonprofit and lead to less favorable attitudes toward the sponsorship.

Fit and similarity interaction

We now turn to the interactive effects of fit and similarity. Causes seek to establish a clear image in part because clarity helps potential donors respond in appropriate ways, such as through giving or donating (Becker-Olsen and Hill 2006). High-fit partnerships should insulate the partnership from negative evaluations or blurred positioning and provide greater credibility. Low-fit sponsorships lead to perceived risk (Smith and Andrews 1995) and increased elaboration (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006) and may evoke negative thoughts. We argue that people may question the motives of sponsors engaged in low-fit/high-similarity social sponsorships, and that any disruption of correspondence bias would be more pronounced for low-fit social sponsorships. Therefore,

H1: Fit and similarity have an interactive effect on (a) clarity of nonprofit positioning and (b) attitudes toward the sponsorship relationship, such that any adverse effects of similarity are stronger for low-fit sponsorships than for high-fit sponsorships.

People evaluate constituent brands involved in an alliance (e.g., as sponsor or sponsee) through a sequential process in which they first evaluate the alliance itself (i.e., the sponsorship). This evaluation subsequently influences their attitudes toward the alliance partners (i.e., the sponsor and sponsee) (Ruth and Simonin 2003; Simonin and Ruth 1998). Prior research has shown that social sponsorship fit has an indirect positive effect on affective and behavioral responses toward the commercial sponsor via clarity of positioning (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006) and favorable attitudes toward the sponsorship (Zdravkovic et al. 2010).

Extending the logic to the sponsee, we predict that both clarity of positioning and attitudes toward the sponsorship mediate the positive impact of fit on attitudes toward the sponsored nonprofit and intentions to support it financially, via volunteering, and through recommendation. Although the social sponsorship literature reports the positive impact of fit on intention to support (Becker-Olsen and Hill 2006; Samu and Wymer 2009), research does not explain the routes through which fit and similarity jointly influence people's attitudes toward the partners. Hence, we offer the following hypotheses involving moderated mediation (Muller et al. 2005; Preacher et al. 2007).

H2: Clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship mediate the interactive effect of fit and similarity on (a) attitude toward the nonprofit and (b) intention to support the nonprofit, such that the adverse impact of similarity is stronger for low-fit sponsorships than for high-fit sponsorships.

H3: Attitude toward the sponsorship mediates the interactive effect of fit and similarity on attitude toward the sponsor, such that the adverse impact of similarity is stronger for low-fit sponsorships than for high-fit sponsorships.

We test the conceptual model (see Fig. 1) for two nonprofit brands in three experiments. The objective of Experiment 1 is to examine the impact of fit and similarity on social sponsorship evaluations and on attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the focal nonprofit as predicted in H1a, H1b, H2a, and H2b.

Experiment 1

Pretests

Pretest 1 helped in identifying a large pool of potential sponsors. We asked 60 university students to list the names of firms that were suitable and not suitable to sponsor the selected nonprofit brands. This exercise generated a list of 182 potential sponsors from a range of industries. Pretest 2 (N=110) helped identify the sponsors for inclusion in the experiments and was used to assess various characteristics, such as familiarity, liking, and trustworthiness, of a smaller pool of 12 potential sponsors previously identified. The goal was to increase the variance on both fit and similarity, because pairing sponsor and sponsee in a sponsorship relationship exposure enhances perceptions of similarity.

Results of Pretest 2 indicated that the brands Subway and KFC showed significant variation on fit (M_{Subway}=4.55, M_{KFC}=3.62; p=.031) and similarity (M_{Subway}=4.02, M_{KFC}=2.98; p=.044). Selection of both sponsors from the same product category (quick-service restaurants) helped minimize extraneous variance. These sponsor brands are associated with health, with Subway being perceived as being healthier than KFC. Both sponsee nonprofit brands (Australian Red Cross Blood Service and Leukaemia Foundation) are generally perceived as brands supporting health. Thus, Subway is considered to have greater similarity to the selected nonprofits than KFC on the dimension of health.

To lend support to our interpretation of these pretest differences and their theoretical potential to in one instance support

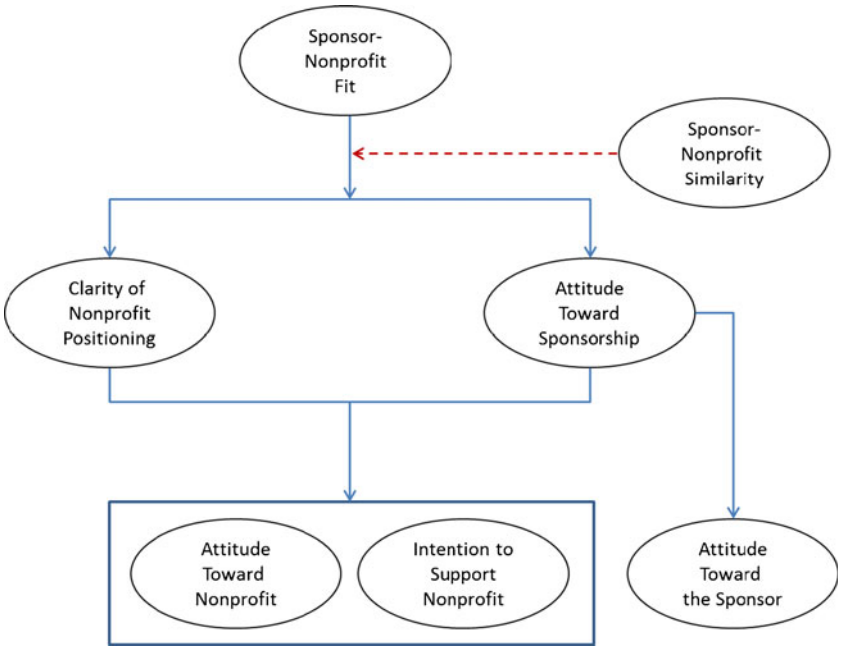

Fig. 1 Conceptual model of sponsorship effects including measures of sponsor fit and similarity. *Note*: Experiment 1 used a student sample and global similarity scale. Attitude toward the sponsor was examined, consumer samples were employed, and image similarity scales were used only in Experiment 2 and 3. Trustworthiness was included as a covariate in all experiments. Nonprofit brand was used as a covariate in Experiment 1

correspondence bias and in the other disrupt it, we undertook a thought elicitation study that explores the possible pairing of these brands and charities. Participants in the pretests, the thought listing study, and the experiments were debriefed as to the hypothetical nature of the pairings.

Thought listing study

Participants (N=101, aged 18–29 years, university student sample, 50.5% female) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (sponsor: Subway vs. KFC) × 2 (nonprofit brand: Australian Red Cross Blood Service vs. Leukaemia Foundation) between-subjects design. Participants were provided the same newsletter subsequently used in Experiment 1 and were asked what they thought about the pairing. As an example, participants listed their thoughts to complete the statement "Subway is offering sponsorship to the Australian Red Cross Blood Service because…."

Theoretical frame for coding To group motives into altruistic and exploitive categories, we used prior work on the range of attributions consumers made concerning corporate social responsibility (Ellen et al. 2006). Altruistic motives are also known as values-driven motives and include care about society, giving back to society, saving lives, and promoting health (Vlachos et al. 2009). Exploitive motives refer to self-gain reasons in the areas of strategy, stakeholder pressure, and pure egoism. Strategy-driven motives support legitimate business goals such as improving awareness, brand image, profit, and market share while at the same time helping the cause. In contrast, stakeholder-driven motives support social causes solely because of pressure from stakeholders. Egoism-driven motives, such as cleaning up an image as a polluter or securing tax benefits, take advantage of the cause rather than supporting it (Vlachos et al. 2009).

Results Because familiarity can influence judgments, we checked participants' familiarity with all sponsors and sponsees and found no statistically significant differences. Two independent coders blind to the purpose of the study coded participants' open-ended responses. Overall, coders agreed on 86% of the categorizations and consensus on the remaining categorizations was reached via discussion. With respect to sponsorship, findings show that in comparison to KFC, Subway elicited more frequent altruistic (n_{Subway}=16 or 27%; n_{KFC}=7 or 12%) and strategy-driven (n_{Subway}=40 or 68%; n_{KFC}=26 or 44%) attributions and less frequent egoism-driven (n_{Subway}=1 or 2%<; n_{KFC}=16 or 27%) and stakeholder-driven (n_{Subway}=2 or 3%; n_{KFC}=10 or 17%) attributions. These findings support the predicted disruption of correspondence bias, which was pronounced in the pairing of KFC with either cause.

Theoretically interesting is the identification, across conditions, of health as grounds for similarity judgments. For example, respondents wrote that "Subway is a healthy organization" and "KFC is not healthy." In contrast, both nonprofits were considered to be supportive of health. For example, respondents regarded the Red Cross Blood Service as "an organization that represents healthy lifestyles," and the Leukaemia Foundation as "a charity for health."

Respondents also thought that Subway and KFC offer different degrees of fit with the selected nonprofits:

> The Red Cross Service has aligned themselves with fitness and health events. Sponsorship of the service will assist Subway in promoting their own alignment with a fit and healthy fast food.
> Subway is a healthy organisation and wants to support a foundation regarding health.
> [Red Cross Blood Service is] an organization that represents healthy lifestyles. I would see the relationship between Subway and the Red Cross as a suitable one, as they both pursue similar goals; to help people remain healthy.

In contrast, respondents considered KFC's sponsorship to be less beneficial to the nonprofits and hence a poor fit. Further, some comments clearly demonstrated the failure of correspondence bias:

> It's quite ironic that the Red Cross is about saving lives and KFC is the fast food industry which is the cause of a lot of health issues.
> I think it's a bit counter intuitive KFC sells fatty fast food and now they're trying to project this image that they are for helping people stay healthy and improve wellbeing?

The results also highlight the distinction between similarity and fit. For example, respondents perceived Subway's sponsorship of either cause to be more appropriate and a better fit than sponsorship by KFC. Respondents envisaged both causes and/or their target markets as potentially benefitting more from partnership with Subway than with KFC. Respondents also considered Subway to be more similar than KFC to the selected nonprofits on health. While similarity judgments appear to have been driven by the perceived relationships between the sponsor and sponsee categories (e.g., fast food–health), fit judgments seem to have been driven by associations that were specific to the individual brands (e.g., Subway–fresh food–health benefit and KFC–fatty fast food–loss of health).

Participants and design

We randomly assigned 195 undergraduate business students at a large state university in Australia to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 (social sponsorship: Subway [high-fit] vs. KFC [low-fit]) × 2 (nonprofit brand: Australian Red Cross Blood Service vs. Leukaemia Foundation) between-subjects design. Students are likely targets for blood donation and volunteering. They are also active consumers of the for-profit brands of quick-service restaurants selected as sponsors for the study.

The two nonprofits were included as replicates and we advanced no hypotheses regarding differences between the two nonprofit brands. We selected causes that were well-liked and were familiar to the participants. Preliminary analysis of the control group data (n=46; 30% male, where no sponsorship arrangement was presented to the participants) indicated that differences in consumer attitudes toward the two nonprofit brands ($F_{(1, 44)}$=1.10; p=.300; $M_{Red\ Cross\ Blood\ Service}$=5.79, n=25, $M_{Leukaemia\ Foundation}$=6.20, n=21), perceptions of credibility of the nonprofit brands ($F_{(1, 44)}$=.057; p=.812; $M_{Red\ Cross\ Blood\ Service}$=6.21, n=25, $M_{Leukaemia\ Foundation}$=6.16, n=21; 7-point scale), and intentions to support the nonprofit brands ($F_{(1, 44)}$=1.91; p=.174; $M_{Red\ Cross\ Blood\ Service}$=4.22, n=25, $M_{Leukaemia\ Foundation}$=4.75, n=21) were not statistically significant.

Since announcement source is known to influence consumer perceptions of social partnerships (White and Peloza 2009), in all materials the source of the announcement was the nonprofit concerned. The participants (57% females) were between 18 and 29 years of age. All participants were previously aware of the nonprofit they evaluated. The majority of the participants (73%) were non-donors for the nonprofit they evaluated but had made prior purchases at the sponsor firm they evaluated (Subway, 96%; KFC, 99%). The past donation behavior of the sample reflects national patterns, with 31% of participants evaluating the Red Cross having previously made a blood donation and 23% of the participants evaluating the Leukaemia Foundation having made a financial donation to this nonprofit brand.

Procedure and stimuli

We manipulated the treatment conditions in a fictitious newsletter (see Appendix 1) via four news items and instructed participants to consider the materials at their own pace. Filler items, sections one and four of the newsletter, were constant across conditions and included stories external to the study. The second news item included information about the target nonprofit brand and the sponsorship announcement and varied across conditions. The third news item included information about the sponsor organization. Each news item featured text, along with a picture and logo representing the selected organization.

Measures

Independent variables We used seven-point scales to measure the key variables. The Simmons and Becker-Olsen scale of fit has seven items, five of which we argue capture fit and which we used to measure *sponsorship relationship fit* (α=.88): "does not make sense/makes sense," "low fit/high fit," "not complementary/complementary," "inconsistent/consistent," and "unrepresentative/representative" (Simmons and Becker-Olsen

2006). The stem of this question asked respondents "How well do the following words describe the sponsorship arrangement between (sponsor) and (sponsee)?" Importantly, the referent is the sponsorship relationship.

Various types of similarity, such as image-based similarity (Gwinner and Eaton 1999), product category similarity (Boush and Loken 1991), and similarity in the appearance of brands (Loken et al. 1986), have been examined in the marketing literature. In the context of sponsorship, we view similarity at the global level as the degree to which the sponsor and sponsee involved in a partnership are perceived to be like each other on salient attributes. As similarity between brands has typically been assessed using single-item measures (e.g., Keller and Aaker 1992; Loken et al. 1986; Shine et al. 2007), to assess *sponsor–sponsee similarity* we adapted a single item that had been validated in previous studies for measuring similarity between brands (Bijmolt et al. 1998; Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Joiner and Loken 1998; Yeo and Park 2006). The stem of the question asked whether the sponsor and sponsee are "dissimilar/similar." Again, importantly the referent in the stem of the question is the sponsor and sponsee, not the sponsorship relationship.

Mediating variables We measured *nonprofit clarity of positioning* (α=.88) with the items "clearly communicates what it stands for," "has an image that is easy to understand," and "conveys a clear image in all its actions" (Erdem and Swait 1998). We used the anchors "1=strongly disagree" to "7=strongly agree" for the Likert-type scales. *Attitude toward the sponsorship* arrangement (α=.93) was measured with three items: "negative/positive," "unfavorable/favorable," and "bad/good" (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006).

Dependent variables We measured participants' *attitude toward the nonprofit* (α=.90) with the same items employed for measuring attitude toward the sponsorship. *Intention to support the nonprofit* (α=.80) was measured using the three items "likely to contribute financially," "likely to work as a volunteer for," and "likely to recommend to others" (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006).

Covariate To better understand the nature of the relationship, we wanted to control the basic trustworthiness of the sponsor. Thus, *sponsor trustworthiness* (α=.92) captured general perceptions of trustworthiness of the sponsor in the context of offering sponsorship, and we adapted the five-item scale from Ohanian (1990) to the present context ("undependable/dependable," "unreliable/reliable," "untrustworthy/trustworthy," "insincere/sincere," and "dishonest/honest").

We examined the reliability and validity of the measures using CFA (χ^2_{207}=292.3; RMSEA=.047 [.034 - .059], CFI=.98; TLI=.97; SRMR=.046). The measures exhibit good psychometric properties. All item loadings were sizable (β>.66) and statistically significant (p<.001), demonstrating convergent validity. For all constructs, reliability coefficient H values (Hancock and Mueller 2001) exceeded the cut-off value of .70 (see Table 1 – Part A), and average variance explained (AVE) values exceeded the suggested the recommended threshold of .50. Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, composite reliabilities, construct reliabilities (coefficient H) and AVE values, as well as latent variable correlations. For each pair of constructs, the average AVE value was greater than the squared correlation between the constructs, indicating the discriminability of the two constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Results

The study design achieved variance in fit (M=3.86, SD=1.26, range=6) and similarity (M=2.67, SD=1.46, range=5). We tested the hypotheses using structural equation modeling (SEM). We used maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) in Mplus 7.0 for model estimation (Muthén and Muthén 2012). After the exclusion of outliers, the available sample size (N=189) met the minimum sample size requirements for SEM.

We included two nonprofit brands to increase the generalizability of the results. In preliminary analysis we examined whether any of the outcome variables in the model varied significantly by nonprofit brand name. We pooled data from the two nonprofit brands and tested a model (Model A2) in which the dummy variable capturing nonprofit brand (BRAND, Leukaemia Foundation=0, Red Cross Blood Service =1) was modeled to affect the key outcome variables. Model A2 revealed good fit to the data (χ^2_{172}=271.2, RMSEA=.055 [.042–.067], CFI=.96; TLI=.95; SRMR=.075). Nonprofit brand name had a statistically significant direct effect on clarity of nonprofit positioning (β=.21, p=.001), but not on other outcome variables, attitude toward the sponsorship (β=−.09, p=.132), attitude toward the nonprofit (β= −.09, p=.126), and intention to support the nonprofit (β=.08, p=.126). The dummy variable capturing nonprofit brand name had no interactive effects with other factors. Hence, in the interest of parsimony we report the results of a model that excluded non-significant paths originating from the dummy variable BRAND. Sponsor trustworthiness had a positive effect on nonprofit clarity of positioning (β=.23, p=.014) and

Table 1 Data distribution, correlations, and discriminant validity

(a) Experiment 1 (Fast food) (N= 189, Student sample)

Construct	M	SD	AVE	H	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1. TRU	4.63	1.03	.68	.93	**(.91)**							
2. FIT	3.87	1.26	.71	.93	.34	**(.93)**						
3. SIM	2.67	1.46	.75	.75	.12[b]	.31	**(.75)**					
4. COP	6.08	0.90	.73	.93	.22	.07[b]	−.15[a]	**(.89)**				
5. ATS	4.92	1.19	.88	.96	.41	.52	.07[b]	.29	**(.96)**			
6. ATNP	5.87	1.15	.85	.96	.21	<.01[b]	−.22	.50	.42	**(.94)**		
7. ITS	4.79	1.28	.58	.90	−.01[b]	.11[b]	−.18[a]	.47	.20	.42	**(.80)**	

(b) Experiment 2 (Fast food) (N=204, Consumer sample)

Construct	M	SD	AVE	H	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. TRU	5.07	1.38	.87	.98	**(.97)**							
2. FIT	4.42	1.66	.88	.98	.56	**(.97)**						
3. SIM	3.24	1.72	.84	.96	.42	.63	**(.95)**					
4. COP	6.02	1.10	.86	.95	.30	.21	.07[b]	**(.95)**				
5. ATS	5.11	1.68	.97	.99	.54	.84	.48	.30	**(.99)**			
6. ATNP	6.13	1.17	.94	.99	.30	.33	.18	.49	.38	**(.98)**		
7. ITS	4.36	1.41	.59	.83	.28	.33	.42	.34	.34	.33	**(.81)**	
8. ATSP	4.74	1.79	.97	.99	.73	.64	.47	.28	.62	.27	.32	**(.99)**

(c) Experiment 3 (Department stores) (N=194, Consumer sample)

Construct	M	SD	AVE	H	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. TRU	5.35	1.13	.83	.91	**(.91)**							
2. FIT	4.95	1.28	.97	.97	.52	**(.98)**						
3. SIM	3.66	1.54	.82	.96	.37	.53	**(.95)**					
4. COP	6.02	1.02	.84	.95	.35	.30	−.04[b]	**(.94)**				
5. ATS	5.81	1.19	.96	.99	.56	.62	.14[a]	.42	**(.99)**			
6. ATNP	6.25	0.95	.93	.98	.35	.36	−.08[b]	.54	.54	**(.99)**		
7. ITS	4.41	1.28	.50	.78	.16[a]	.30	.32	.30	.19	.25	**(.74)**	
8. ATSP	5.31	1.37	.96	.99	.79	.52	.33	.30	.55	.40	.15[a]	**(.99)**

Correlations are significant at p<.01 level (two−tailed) unless specified otherwise

The composite reliability values are reported in bold on the diagonal

All variables were measured using seven-point scales

AVE average variance extracted

H construct reliability coefficient H (Hancock and Mueller 2001)

TRU sponsor trustworthiness

FIT sponsor-nonprofit fit

SIM sponsor-nonprofit similarity

COP clarity of nonprofit positioning

ATS attitude toward sponsorship

ATNP attitude toward nonprofit brand

ITS intention to support the nonprofit

ATSP attitude toward sponsor

[a] p<.05

[b] p>.05

attitude toward sponsorship (β=.32, p<.001), and was therefore retained as a covariate.

Structural model results We estimated two nested models: one without the interaction term (Model A) and the second with the interaction term (Model B). We compared the two models using the Satorra–Bentler scaled chi-square difference test, based on the log-likelihood values of the models (Satorra and Bentler 2001) as explained later in this section.

First, we tested Model A, in which the main effects of fit and similarity are estimated without the interaction term. The model tested (see Fig. 1) encompassed similarity and six latent variables including trustworthiness. We used a composite for measuring trustworthiness by dividing the original five items into parcels of two and three items. Model A revealed good fit to the data (χ^2_{175}=277.8, p<.001; RMSEA=.056 [.043 - .068], CFI=.96; TLI=.95; SRMR=.074) and explained significant variance in clarity of nonprofit positioning (17.5%) and attitude toward sponsorship (40.1%) (see Appendix 2). Although fit did not have a statistically significant effect on clarity of positioning (b=.05, p=.477), similarity showed a significant negative effect on clarity of positioning for the nonprofit organization in this model (b=−.21, p=.003). While fit had a strong positive effect on attitude toward the sponsorship (b=.47, p<.001), the impact of similarity was negative (b=−.17, p=.041).

In Model B, in addition to estimating the main effects we estimated a fit by similarity interaction on clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship. Conventional SEM models contain an unrestricted covariance matrix as H1. The nature of the unrestricted model is unclear when latent variable interactions are estimated using the RANDOM type of analysis and INTEGRATION algorithm in Mplus Version 7. Hence, Mplus does not generate traditional goodness-of-fit indices (e.g., R^2 values and standardized regression coefficients) when latent variable interactions are estimated (Muthén and Muthén 2012). Therefore, we computed a chi-square difference test in Mplus to compare the fit of the two adjacent nested models (Model A and Model B), based on log likelihood values and scaling correction factors obtained with the MLR estimator (see Appendix 2). Model B, which included the interaction term, revealed significantly better fit to the data ($\Delta\chi^2_2$= 9.9, p=.007). We present the results of Model B in Table 2.

Clarity of positioning The results indicate support for H1a. As predicted, the fit by similarity interaction revealed a statistically significant positive effect on clarity of positioning (b=.15, p=.010). Also, while fit did not have a simple effect on clarity of positioning (b=.11, p=.164), the simple effect of similarity on clarity of positioning (b=−.29, p=.001) was significant. Fit affected clarity of positioning differently at various levels of similarity, as indicated by the significant interaction. Specifically, for each unit of improvement in fit above the mean, the adverse impact of similarity on clarity of positioning was weaker by .15 units. That is, similarity affected clarity of positioning more strongly at low fit than at high fit. We conducted simple slopes analyses following Aiken and West (1991) to examine the nature of the interaction effect shown in Fig. 2 (Panel A). Clarity of positioning plotted on the y-axis has a mean of zero. The high and low values of similarity and fit are 1SD above and 1SD below the mean respectively.

The simple effect of similarity on clarity of positioning at low fit was significant (b=−.48, p=017). Specifically, for low-fit sponsorships (−1SD), as perceptions of similarity increased, participants believed the nonprofit was communicating its brand positioning with less clarity. However, for high-fit sponsorships (+1SD), heightened perceptions of similarity did not significantly affect participant perceptions of clarity of the endorsed nonprofit's positioning (b=−.10, p=.501). Low-fit sponsorships generated greater clarity of positioning at low similarity than at high similarity.

Attitude toward sponsorship The results did not support the fit by similarity interaction effect on attitude toward the sponsorship predicted in H1b (b=.03, p=.526). We explore the reasons for this result in the general discussion. Importantly, fit (b=.48, p<.001) had a positive effect on attitude toward the sponsorship relationship, whereas similarity (b=−.18, p=.037) had a negative effect.

In H2a and H2b, we predicted that fit and similarity have a joint indirect effect on attitude toward the nonprofit and intention to support the nonprofit respectively. We used the product of the unstandardized regression coefficients to calculate the indirect effects, and we used the standard errors obtained from Mplus to test for the significance of the indirect effects using the Sobel's test. We obtained the total indirect effects (Preacher and Hayes 2008) by adding the specific indirect effects via each of the variables clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship.

Attitude toward the nonprofit The fit by similarity interaction revealed a significant indirect effect on participant attitude toward the nonprofit via clarity of positioning (b=.07, p=.022). Also, we found significant total indirect effects for both fit (b=.20, p=.002) and similarity (b=−.19, p<.001) on attitude toward the nonprofit. High similarity between the alliance partners resulted in stronger adverse indirect effects on attitude toward low-fit partnerships, whereas attitude toward nonprofits involved in high-fit social partnerships was not significantly affected by the adverse indirect effects of high similarity. Specifically, the indirect positive effect of fit was stronger for high-similarity partnerships (+1SD), whereas low-similarity sponsorships (−1SD) did not benefit similarly in enhancing attitudes with

Table 2 Results of hypotheses testing

Model B (Comparison model with the interaction term)	Experiment 1 (N=189) Fast food		Experiment 2 (N=204) Fast food		Experiment 3 (N=194) Department stores	
	b	*p*	*b*	*p*	*b*	*p*
H1a: supported						
Fit × Similarity → COP	.15	.010	.09	<.001	.12	<.001
Fit → COP	.11	.164	.17	.037	.32	<.001
Similarity → COP	−.29	.001	−.18	.020	−.27	<.001
H1b: not supported						
Fit × Similarity → ATS	.03	.526	−.08	<.001	<.01	<.960
Fit → ATS	.48	<.001	.86	<.001	.57	<.001
Similarity → ATS	−.18	.037	−.08	.117	−.30	<.001
H2a: supported						
Fit × Similarity → COP → ATNP	.07	.022	.05	.044	.05	.003
Fit → COP & ATS → ATNP[a]	.20	.002	.23	.001	.28	<.001
Similarity → COP & ATS → ATNP[a]	−.19	<.001	−.10	.020	−.19	<.001
COP → ATNP	.49	<.001	.49	<.001	.38	<.001
ATS → ATNP	.29	.001	.17	.005	.29	<.001
H2b: supported						
Fit × similarity → COP → ITS	.10	.019	.04	.008	.05	.002
Fit → COP & ATS → ITS[a]	.07	.181	.28	<.001	.19	.003
Similarity → COP & ATS → ITS[a]	−.19	.002	−.09	.024	-.14	.001
COP → ITS	.62	.001	.40	<.001	.39	.001
ATS → ITS	.07	.240	.24	<.001	.11	.320
H3: not supported						
Fit × Similarity → ATS → ATSP	–	–	−.02	.004	<.01	.964
Fit → ATS → ATSP	–	–	.26	<.001	.07	.123
Similarity → ATS → ATSP	–	–	−.03	.152	−.04	.129
ATS → ATSP	–	–	.30	.005	.12	.118
Covariates						
Trustworthiness → COP	.22	.011	.19	.021	.25	.025
Trustworthiness → ATS	.36	<.001	.18	.006	.43	<.001
Trustworthiness → ATSP	–	–	.80	<.001	.99	<.001
[b]Nonprofit brand → COP	.38	.001	–	–	–	–

[a] *Total indirect effect* is the sum of the two *specific indirect effects* via clarity of positioning (COP) and attitude toward sponsorship (ATS)

[b] Nonprofit brand name affects clarity of positioning and was included as a covariate in Experiment 1

ATNP Attitude toward nonprofit, *ITS* Intention to support nonprofit, and *ATSP* Attitude toward sponsor

improvement in fit, as shown in Fig. 2 (Panel B). The results indicate support for H2a.

Intention to support the nonprofit As predicted, fit and similarity jointly affected participants' intention to support the nonprofit (b=.10, p=.019) via clarity of positioning. Also, similarity (b=−.19, p=.002) demonstrated an indirect simple effect on intention to support the nonprofit, whereas the indirect simple effect of fit on intention to support the nonprofit was not statistically significant (b=.07, p=.181).

High similarity between the alliance partners resulted in stronger adverse indirect effects on intention to support the nonprofits engaged in low-fit partnerships (see Fig. 2, Panel C). Fit indirectly affected intentions to support more strongly at high similarity, whereas for low-similarity partnerships improvement in fit did not further affect participant intention to support. The

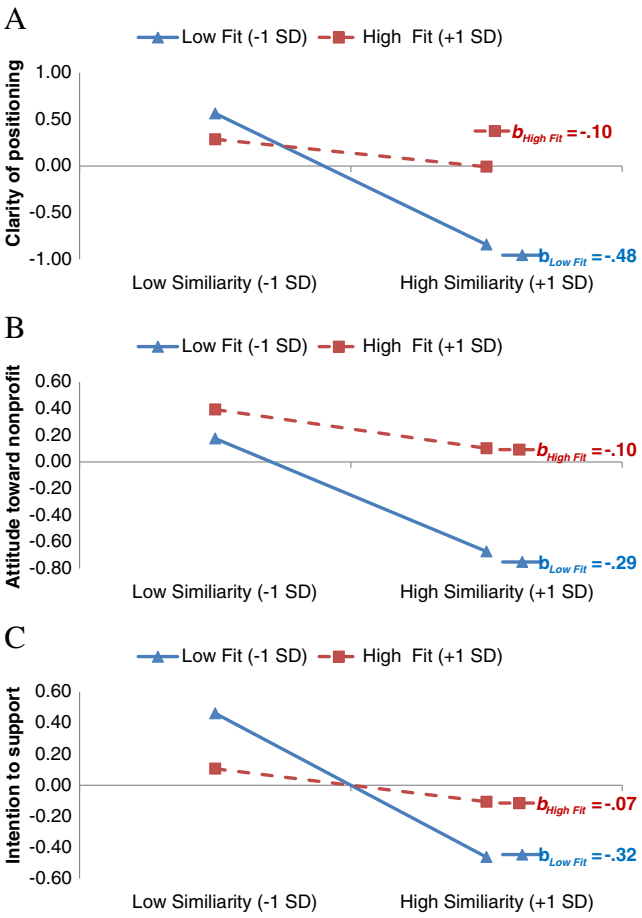

Fig. 2 Experiment 1: Fit by similarity interaction effects. *Note*: Low and high values are 2SDs apart. Variable on the y-axis has a mean of zero

indirect effects were mainly transmitted through clarity of positioning.

We included a debriefing item inviting participants to offer comments on any aspects of the survey. Two comments regarding the role of KFC as a sponsor showed that at least regarding the Leukaemia Foundation, participants were uncomfortable with the fit of the company and the cause, even if in some instances they were able to understand the reasons for the relationship.

> I don't think a cancer organization should be associated with a fast-food company that has been linked to possibly causing cancer by the products it sells!
>
> I realize that it would seem at first glance inappropriate for a fast-food chain to be linked to the LF— however, with money in short supply many organizations have to accept sponsorship from somewhat odd sources in order to continue to provide valuable services to those in need.

Check on the role of prior exposure The results might have differed if the participants had not had any prior exposure to the sponsor products, but exposure is naturally a requisite for respondents' fit and similarity assessments. We checked for the potential confounding effects of prior purchase and usage frequency of sponsor products. Preliminary analysis showed that none of the outcome variables in the model varied significantly by participant prior purchase of sponsor product (clarity of nonprofit positioning [$F_{(1,\ 187)}$=.146; p=.703], attitude toward the sponsorship [$F_{(1,\ 187)}$=.253; p=.651], attitude toward the nonprofit [$F_{(1,\ 187)}$=1.07; p=.302] and intention to support the nonprofit [$F_{(1,\ 187)}$=<.001; p=.997]) or usage frequency of sponsor product (clarity of nonprofit positioning [$F_{(8,\ 162)}$=.728; p=.667], attitude toward the sponsorship [$F_{(8,\ 162)}$=.341; p=.949], attitude toward the nonprofit [$F_{(8,\ 162)}$=.938; p=.437], and intention to support the nonprofit [$F_{(8,\ 162)}$=1.27; p=.267]).

Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 largely support the predicted interaction and indirect effects and indicate support for a moderated mediation model. Experiment 1 found a two-way interaction between fit and similarity with respect to clarity of positioning of the nonprofit (H1a). Specifically, our results suggest that the adverse impact of perceived similarity on the endorsed nonprofit's clarity of positioning is stronger for low-fit sponsorships than for high-fit sponsorships. These results provide support for the argument that high similarity can lead to adverse evaluations owing to the disruption of correspondence bias. We find that perceptions of clarity toward low-fit social sponsorships (e.g., when the nonprofits were paired with KFC) are less favorable when participants viewed the similarity between the nonprofit causes and KFC to be high than when they thought it was low. Moreover, high similarity reduces the clarity of nonprofit positioning for such low-fit sponsorships. The literature reviewed suggests that one interpretation of this finding is that participants are reacting to a perceived persuasion attempt (Friestad and Wright 1994). Consumers recognize persuasion attempts through cognitive elaboration (Campbell and Kirmani 2000), such as when they evaluate low-fit sponsorships. Possibly, consumers think that KFC is pairing with a cause like the Leukaemia Foundation or the Red Cross Blood Service in a bid to be perceived as healthier—an inference also indicated by the results of the thought listing study. This possibility disrupts correspondence bias.

The interactive effect of fit and similarity (H1b) was not observed for attitude toward the sponsorship relationship, as fit demonstrated a positive effect whereas

similarity had a negative effect. These findings are important, since current literature does not explain how perceived similarity between alliance partners influences people's attitudes toward the sponsorship relationship. Participants evaluated the nonprofit's marketing actions (i.e., clarity of positioning) and social responsibility actions (sponsorship) differently.

The mediation analyses demonstrated that change in attitude toward the nonprofit is due to the change in attitude toward the sponsorship and the clarity of nonprofit positioning. The results support the joint indirect effects of fit and similarity on attitude toward the nonprofit (H2a) and intention to support the nonprofit (H2b). Specifically, the adverse impact of similarity on attitude toward the nonprofit and intention to support the nonprofit was stronger for low-fit sponsorships than for high-fit sponsorships.

Experiment 1 was limited in that the reliability of the single-item scale used to measure the construct of similarity was fixed at .75 for model estimation purposes (Hayduk 1987). To improve on our initial measurement of similarity, we examined the proposed relationships using a more reliable measure and selected established scales of similarity for use in Experiment 2. Specifically, we adapted the image similarity scales of Gwinner and Eaton (1999) and Speed and Thompson (2000) to the present context.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2 we sought to replicate Experiment 1 by using the same design and stimuli but with a consumer sample. Importantly, we used a multi-item scale to measure image similarity. We also added a measure of attitude toward the sponsor. All other measures used were the same as in Experiment 1.

Participants, design, and procedure

Participants were 212 adult consumers from an online consumer panel. Access to the consumer panel was purchased from an online panel data provider. The majority of participants (52%) were females and participants were adults, 18–65 years of age. A significant proportion of the participants had previously made a donation to the nonprofit they evaluated (Australian Red Cross Blood Service, 44%; Leukaemia Foundation, 50%) and had made a prior purchase at the selected fast-food chains (Subway, 94%; KFC, 92%). After the exclusion of outliers, the sample size (N=204) met the minimum required for SEM.

Measures and measure validation

We measured sponsor–nonprofit similarity using items adapted from the literature (Gwinner and Eaton 1999; Speed and Thompson 2000): "(sponsor) and (sponsee) stand for similar things," "(sponsor) and (sponsee) have very similar goals," "the image of (sponsor) and the image of (sponsee) are very similar," and "the ideas I associate with (sponsor) are very similar to the ideas I associate with (sponsee)." Given the emphasis on image in this measure and to distinguish this measure from that used in Experiment 1, we refer to this measure as "image similarity." We measured *attitude toward the sponsor* (α=.98) using the three items "negative/positive," "unfavorable/favorable," and "bad/good."

We examined the reliability and validity of the measures using CFA (χ^2_{346}=589.6, p<.001; RMSEA=.059 [.051 - .067], CFI=.97; TLI=.97; SRMR=.038). All item loadings were sizable (β > .65) and statistically significant (p<.001), demonstrating convergent validity. For all constructs, reliability coefficient H values exceeded the cut-off values of .70 (see Table 1, Part B) and AVE values exceeded the suggested cut-off value of .50, as Table 1 shows. The alternative similarity measure demonstrated excellent reliability (H=.96). For each pair of constructs, the average AVE value was greater than the squared correlation between the constructs, indicating the discriminability of the two constructs.

Results of hypotheses testing

The design demonstrated variance in both fit (M=4.42, SD=1.67, range=6) and similarity (M=3.24, SD=1.72, range=6). The results of Experiment 2 are similar to those of Experiment 1 and indicate support for the majority of the hypotheses (see Table 2). We again tested nested models for estimating the interaction effects. Model A, the main effects model, showed good fit to the data (χ^2_{212}=377.7, p<.001; RMSEA=.062 [.052 - .072], CFI=.97; TLI=.96; SRMR=.066). The fit of Model B, which included the fit by similarity interaction, was significantly better than that of Model A ($\Delta\chi^2_2$=29.2, p<.001) (see Appendix 2). The pattern of results was similar with the inclusion/exclusion of nonprofit brand name as a covariate. Hence, the results of the parsimonious model that did not include nonprofit brand name are reported for this experiment.

Clarity of positioning As in Experiment 1, the fit by similarity interaction had a statistically significant positive effect on clarity of positioning (b=.09, p<.001). Also, similarity had a negative simple effect (b=−.18, p=.020), whereas fit had a positive simple effect on clarity of positioning (b=.17, p=.037).

Simple slopes analyses revealed that perceptions of similarity had a stronger negative effect on clarity of positioning for low-fit (−1SD) sponsorships (b=−.33, p=.003), whereas for high-fit (+1SD) sponsorships clarity of positioning was not affected significantly adversely by similarity (b=−.02, p=.737) (see Fig. 3, Panel A). Importantly, low-fit sponsorships generated greater clarity of positioning at low similarity (−1SD) than at high similarity (+1SD). These results indicate support for H1a. Fit improved clarity of positioning at high similarity (b=.33, p=.003), whereas for low similarity partnerships improvement in fit did not further enhance clarity of positioning (b=.01, p=.906).

Attitude toward the sponsorship In contrast to the results of Experiment 1, the main effect of fit on attitude toward the sponsorship was qualified by an interaction with similarity (b=−.08, p<.001) (see Table 2). The simple effect of fit on participant attitudes toward the sponsorship was statistically significant (b=.86, p<.001), whereas similarity did not have a significant simple effect on attitude toward sponsorship (b=−.08, p=.117). However, the interaction effect was negative—in the opposite direction from that hypothesized. The impact of fit on attitude toward the sponsorship was weakened as consumer perceptions of image similarity improved. Simple slopes analyses revealed that fit affected attitude toward the sponsorship more strongly at low similarity (b=1.0, p<.001) than at high similarity (b=.72, p<.001). Consumers relied to a lesser extent on fit in the presence of high image similarity between the alliance partners, a finding we address in the general discussion. These results do not indicate support for H1b.

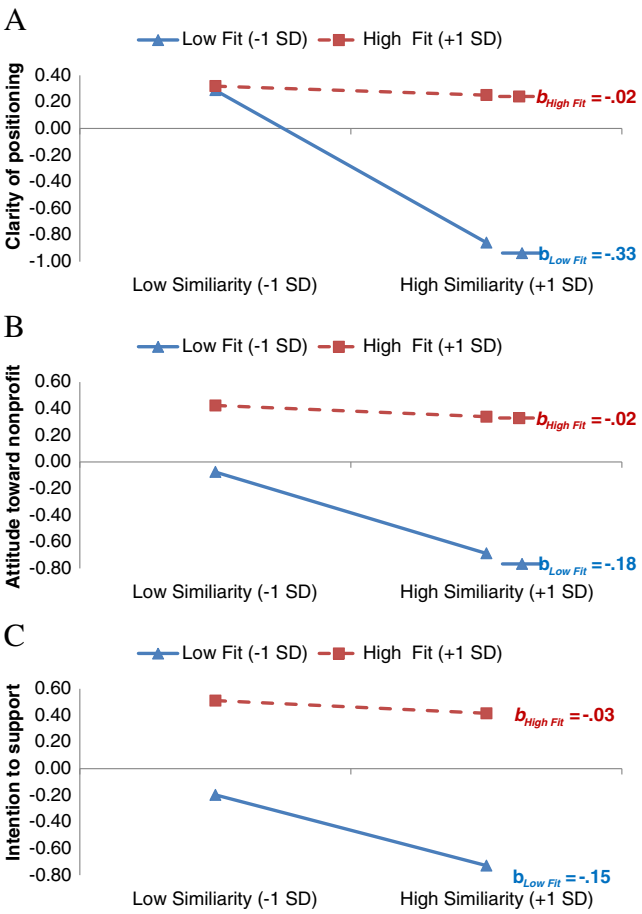

Fig. 3 Experiment 2: Fit by similarity interaction effects. *Note*: Low and high values are 2SDs apart. Variable on the y-axis has a mean of zero

Attitude toward and intention to support the nonprofit As predicted, the indirect effects of the fit by similarity interaction on attitude toward the nonprofit (b=.05, p=.004) and intention to support (b=.04, p=.008) were statistically significant. The impact of fit was stronger with increased similarity. Higher similarity adversely affected attitudes toward and intention to support nonprofits involved in low-fit sponsorships indirectly, but nonprofits involved in high-fit sponsorships were immune to the adverse effects of high image similarity (see Fig. 3, Panels B and C). These results indicate support for H2a and H2b.

Attitude toward the sponsor The indirect effect of fit on attitude toward the sponsor was qualified by an interaction with similarity (b=−.02, p=.004), but in the direction opposite to our prediction. Fit (b=.26, p<.001) had a simple indirect effect on attitude toward the sponsor. However, the simple indirect effect of similarity (b=−.03, p=.152) on attitude toward the sponsor was not statistically significant. The indirect effects of fit on attitude toward the sponsor were stronger at low image similarity than at high image similarity. These results do not support H3.

Discussion

Despite the use of different samples and different similarity scales across the two experiments, the results of Experiment 2 show some consistencies with those of Experiment 1 and support H1a, H2a, and H2b. The results support the interaction effect on clarity of positioning and the indirect effects predicted, supporting the moderated mediation model. Two differences emerged in the results between the two experiments. In contrast to Experiment 1, here fit had a simple effect on clarity of positioning. Moreover, similarity and fit had an interaction effect on attitude toward the sponsorship directly and on attitude toward the sponsor indirectly. Specifically, similarity diluted the direct effect of fit on attitude toward the sponsorship and the indirect

effect of fit on attitude toward the sponsor for high-fit sponsorships. This result is understandable, as consumers reduced their reliance on fit for the evaluation of sponsorships in the presence of other available information in the form of image similarity.

The results again suggest that high perceived similarity between alliance partners can be detrimental for low-fit sponsorships. Our interpretation is that when consumers consider a social sponsorship by a brand such as KFC to have some similarity with a nonprofit, they may view the alliance as an attempt by KFC to persuade the marketplace of the healthfulness of their product. Again, we believe that people perceive persuasion attempts in the case of a failure of fit. The idea should be generalizable to a broad spectrum of situations where people see grounds for similarity—for example, when both brands are concerned with image—but also have their suspicion aroused by the failure of fit between the partners.

Experiment 3

Experiments 1 and 2 were limited to the quick-service restaurant category, with the restaurants differing in terms of their orientation toward health. Experiment 3 replicated Experiment 2 but used a set of retail stores as sponsors with a consumer sample. Specifically, the sponsors were the discount retailer Kmart (high-fit) and a regional mid-market department store chain (department store) (low-fit).

The Kmart brand is associated with supporting social causes. For example, company web sites show that Kmart's sponsorship portfolio includes local schools, hospitals, and communities. The other sponsor, the regional department store, has developed an image of providing sponsorship support for fashion and the arts. Therefore, Kmart's sponsorship may be considered to be more beneficial to the two nonprofits in this study, both of which help people and save lives, and hence Kmart's sponsorship offers a more logical or appropriate fit. Both sponsors are well known to the participants.

Participants, design, and procedure

Participants were 203 adult consumers from an online consumer panel. Access to the consumer panel was purchased from an online panel data provider. The majority of participants (52%) were females and participants were adults, 18 to 65 years of age. A significant proportion of the participants had previously made a donation to the nonprofit they evaluated (Australian Red Cross Blood Service, 46.4%; Leukaemia Foundation, 40.9%) and had made a prior purchase at the selected retail stores (Kmart, 100%; department store, 93.8%). After the deletion of outliers, the sample size (N=194) met the minimum required for SEM.

Measures and measure validation

All measures used were identical to those in Experiment 2. We again examined the reliability and validity of the measures using CFA (χ^2_{347}=505.5, p<.001; RMSEA=.048 [.039 - .057], CFI=.98; TLI=.98; SRMR=.047). All item loadings were sizable (β > .70) and statistically significant (p<.001), demonstrating convergent validity. For all constructs, reliability coefficient H values exceeded the cut-off values of .70 (see Table 1, Part C) and AVE values exceeded the suggested cut-off value of .50. The alternative similarity measure demonstrated good reliability (H=.96). For each pair of constructs, the average AVE value was greater than the squared correlation between the constructs, indicating the discriminability of the two constructs.

Results of hypotheses testing

The design employed demonstrated variance in both fit (M=4.95, SD=1.28, range=6) and similarity (M=3.66, SD=1.54, range=6). The results of Experiment 3 are similar to those of the previous experiments and indicate support for the majority of the hypotheses (see Table 2). We again tested nested models to estimate the interaction effects. Model A, the main effects model, demonstrated good fit to the data (χ^2_{211}=320.6, p<.001; RMSEA=.052 [.040 - .063], CFI=.97; TLI=.97; SRMR=.076). The fit of Model B, which included the fit by similarity interaction, was significantly better than that of Model A ($\Delta\chi^2_2$=25.1, p<.001) (see Appendix 2). Since the pattern of results was similar with the inclusion/exclusion of nonprofit brand name as a covariate, the results of the parsimonious model that does not include nonprofit brand name are reported for this experiment.

Clarity of positioning As in the results of Experiments 1 and 2, the fit by similarity interaction had a statistically significant positive effect on clarity of positioning (b=.12, p<.001). Also, fit had a positive simple effect (b=.32, p<.001), whereas similarity had a negative simple effect (b=−.27, p<.001) on clarity of positioning.

Simple slopes analyses revealed that perceptions of similarity had a stronger negative effect on clarity of positioning for low-fit (−1SD) sponsorships (b=−43, p<.001), whereas for high-fit (+1SD) sponsorships clarity of positioning was not significantly affected by similarity

(b=−.11, p=.456). Importantly, low-fit sponsorships generated greater clarity of positioning at low similarity (−1SD) than at high similarity (+1SD). These results indicate further support for H1a. Moreover, fit improved clarity of positioning more strongly at high similarity (b=.51, p<.001), whereas clarity of positioning was not further enhanced by improvement in fit for low similarity partnerships (b=.13, p=.071) (see Fig. 4, Panel A).

Attitude toward the sponsorship The fit by similarity interaction on attitude toward sponsorship was not supported (b<.01, p=.960). However, the main effect of fit on participant attitudes toward the sponsorship was positive (b=.57, p<.001), whereas similarity had a negative effect on attitude toward sponsorship (b=−.30, p<.001). These results do not support H1b.

Attitude toward and intention to support the nonprofit As predicted, the joint indirect effects of fit and similarity on attitude toward the nonprofit (b=.05, p=.003) and intention to support (b=.05, p=.002) were statistically significant. The impact of fit was stronger with increased similarity. Greater similarity adversely affected attitudes toward and intention to support nonprofits involved in low-fit sponsorships indirectly, but nonprofits involved in high-fit sponsorships were immune

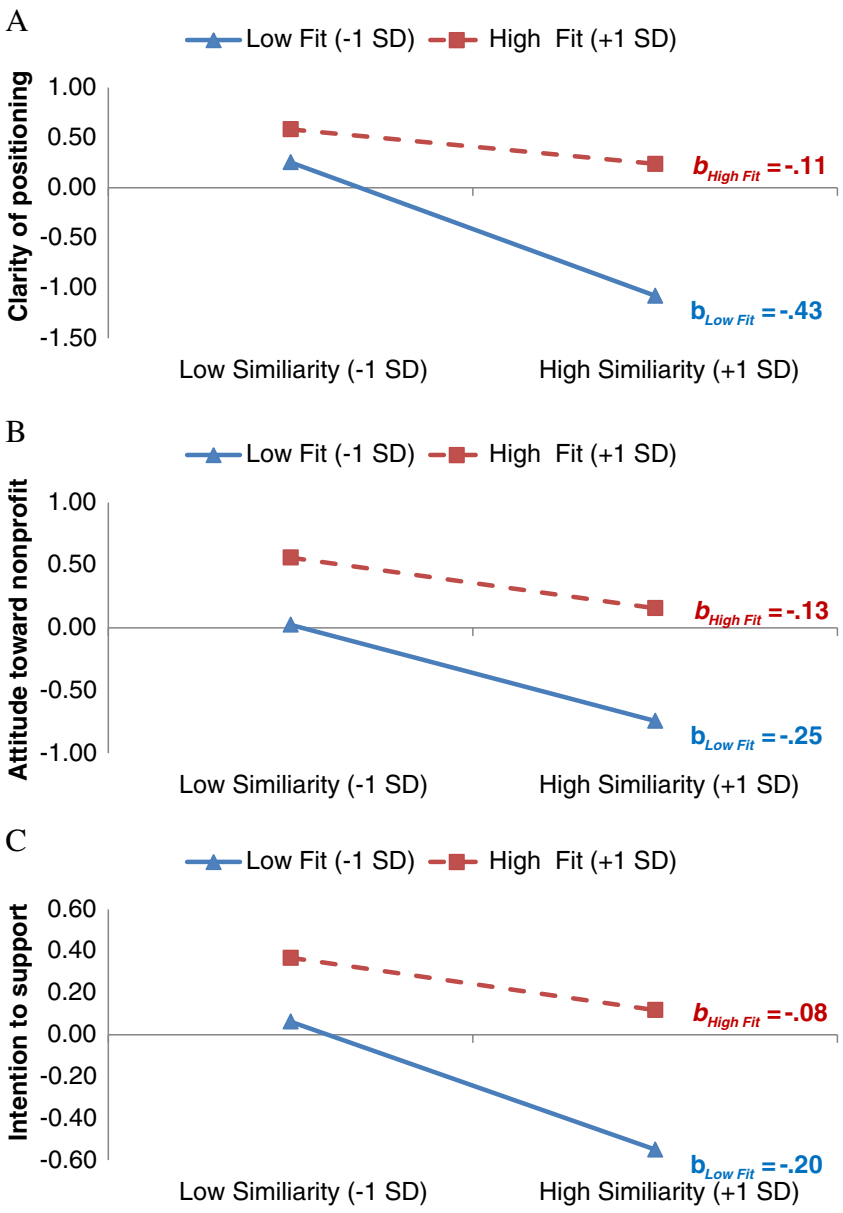

Fig. 4 Experiment 3: Fit by similarity interaction effects. *Note*: Low and high values are 2SDs apart. Variable on the y-axis has a mean of zero

to the adverse effects of high similarity (see Fig. 4, Panels B and C). These results indicate support for H2a and H2b.

Attitude toward the sponsor Attitude toward the sponsorship did not affect participant attitudes toward the sponsor significantly (b=.12, p=.118). The predicted indirect effect of the fit by similarity interaction on attitude toward the sponsor was not supported (b<.01, p=.964). Moreover, neither fit (b=.07, p=.123) nor similarity (b=−.04, p=.129) had a statistically significant indirect effect on attitude toward the sponsor. These results do not indicate support for H3.

Discussion

Despite the use of different sponsors, the results of Experiment 3 are largely consistent with those of Experiments 1 and 2 and support H1a, H2a, and H2b. The results support the interaction effect on clarity of positioning and the indirect effects on the nonprofits, supporting the moderated mediation model. However, the results do not support the predicted joint indirect effect of fit and similarity on the sponsor (H3).

The results also suggest that high perceived similarity between alliance partners can be detrimental for low-fit sponsorships. Our interpretation is that when consumers consider a social sponsorship by a brand such as the department store in this study to be low fit/high similarity, they may view the alliance as an attempt to persuade the marketplace of the firm's corporate citizenship behavior via its ability to contribute to causes.

General discussion

As our results show, fit and similarity do function as differentiated contributors to the understanding of how sponsorships work. Importantly, commonly used measures of fit can lead to erroneous conclusions. While these research results are confined to the sponsorship of charities, any sponsorship that has the potential to raise suspicion would likely benefit from a more detailed examination of fit and similarity. For example, when Florida Atlantic University decided to accept the locally headquartered GEO Group as their stadium naming rights sponsor, the university's focus on the shared location as a point of similarity was at odds with the fit. The GEO group is the second largest for-profit prison operator in the United States and has had a negative profile owing to numerous charges that its facilities are unsafe and unclean. After considerable public debate, the sponsorship was withdrawn. Although no discussion of any research conducted in this case is publicly available, brands with headquarters in the same region as a sport commonly have successful sponsorships without other points of similarity. A company relying solely on one of the many popular fit measures may comprehend why the company would sponsor the entity, but still fail to grasp the full meaning of the relationship. Measuring and estimating the impact of similarity on sponsor–sponsee fit separately may yield different results.

This paper examines conditions under which sponsorship relationship fit affects evaluations, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward the sponsored social cause. Our stimuli were not strong examples of aligned differences but were more subtle areas of possible failure of correspondence bias. We believe our approach offers a robust test of the importance of measuring fit and similarity in social sponsorships.

By identifying boundary conditions for the impact of fit on social sponsorship evaluations, this research contributes to the social sponsorship literature (e.g., Madill and O'Reilly 2010; Menon and Kahn 2003; Samu and Wymer 2009; Szykman et al. 2004). Specifically, the study's results show that similarity between the partners is an important predictor of sponsorship evaluations and support intentions. We offer counter-intuitive findings, as our results demonstrate that high similarity between alliance partners is beneficial for high-fit sponsorships but can adversely affect low-fit sponsorships. Notably, our results show that high-fit sponsorships are immune to the adverse effects of high similarity. Loosely coupled relationships, such as those found in sponsoring, may allow correspondence bias to operate and bring perceptions of goodwill to sponsors. Alternatively, loosely coupled relationships might also be interpreted as insincere, or as an attempt to persuade, and may therefore backfire on attaining image goals for the sponsorship.

Across three experiments with different samples, different sponsor categories, and different similarity scales, we found that high similarity blurred the clarity of positioning for low-fit partnerships, whereas high-fit sponsorships were immune to the adverse effects of similarity. These results support the idea that naturally occurring correspondence bias can be disrupted by aroused suspicion. Alternatively, fit affects clarity of positioning positively at high levels of similarity between social partners, whereas improvement in fit does not enhance clarity of positioning for low-similarity partnerships. These results are significant, as prior research in sponsorship is largely silent on the role of similarity in sponsorship evaluations.

Fit and similarity have a joint indirect effect on attitudes toward nonprofits and intention to support the nonprofits involved in social sponsorships mainly via

clarity of positioning. Similarity strengthened the indirect effect of fit on attitudes toward high-fit sponsorships, and high similarity adversely affected low-fit sponsorships. By clarifying the path of influence, these results extend prior research that examined the impact of fit on sponsorship evaluations (Hamlin and Wilson 2004; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006; Zdravkovic et al. 2010). Specifically, the results support the predicted moderated mediation model. Clarity of positioning and attitude toward the sponsorship jointly mediated the impact of fit and similarity on attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the sponsored nonprofit. Furthermore, trustworthiness positively affected attitudes toward the social sponsorship and the clarity of nonprofit positioning.

The interactive effect of fit and similarity on participants' attitudes toward the sponsorship was observed only for the quick-service restaurants in Experiment 2. Moreover, the interaction effect was in the opposite direction to the prediction (i.e., negative). Specifically, similarity diluted the impact of fit on attitude toward high-fit sponsorships, while high fit had a positive effect on attitudes toward social sponsorships in general. The difference between studies may be due to the context or to the different measurement of similarity. While Experiment 1 with quick-service restaurants employed a global similarity scale, Experiments 2 and 3 used the image similarity scale. Additionally, Experiment 3 used department stores. These results suggest that image similarity (Experiment 2 and 3) affects the impact of fit on attitudes toward social sponsorships in a more complex manner than global similarity (Experiment 1). High global similarity negatively affected attitudes toward the social sponsorships (Experiment 1), whereas higher image similarity between the alliance partners (Experiment 2) diluted the impact of fit and attitude toward the social sponsorships. Consumers evaluating quick-service restaurants in Experiment 2 relied on the high image similarity, thus reducing their reliance on fit for sponsorship evaluations. However, in the case of department stores (Experiment 3), image similarity negatively affected attitudes toward the social sponsorships.

Moreover, the joint indirect effect of fit and similarity on attitude toward the sponsor varied by the type of sponsor brand. For quick-service restaurants (Experiment 2) the effect was in the direction opposite to the prediction (i.e., negative), whereas the effect was not supported for department stores (Experiment 3).

As noted, unlike some of the examples discussed, the stimuli employed here—quick-service restaurant chains and department stores paired with causes—are not extreme in their suspicion-arousing tendencies. Nonetheless, fit and similarity indirectly influenced participants' attitudes toward the sponsor via attitude toward the sponsorship. For the social sponsorships examined here, fit has a positive influence whereas similarity dilutes the positive effects of fit on participants' attitude toward the focal sponsor in the quick-service restaurant category. Although the effect sizes observed are small, by suggesting separate measurement of fit and similarity, these findings add to the body of research on the impact of fit on attitude toward the social sponsor (Hamlin and Wilson 2004; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006; Speed and Thompson 2000).

Implications for practice

Implications for corporate sponsors

Corporate brand managers seeking to develop goodwill or to mitigate a negative image arising from sponsorship may want weigh how sponsees under consideration could be perceived as similar. Similarity would include characteristics that are in harmony, such as being headquartered in a region, as well as characteristics that may stem from aligned differences, such as perception of the corporation as environmentally exploitive and the potential sponsee as conserving. A debatable issue is whether this consideration is necessary for the most obviously suspicious combinations of sponsors and sponsees. Clearly, the internationally known Koman Race for the Cure relationship with KFC to support breast cancer research met with a backlash that could not have been good for either partner, as indicated in the following letter posted to the "Think before you pink" website:

> I am appalled by your "Buckets for the Cure" partnership. I share Breast Cancer Action's shock at this outrageous campaign, which uses the breast cancer epidemic to improve the American public's perception of KFC, and increase the company's profits from the sale of pink buckets of chicken. There is no doubt in my mind that countless people affected by breast cancer find this campaign offensive and upsetting, as is evident from many blog posts and Facebook pages I have seen (Breast Cancer Action 2013).

Again, while the current research was conducted with cause partners, the findings apply to any partnership that consumers may view as having alternative motives, where similarity is partially due to an aligned difference. An example is apparent in the criticism leveled at

Olympic corporate sponsors by the medical journal *The Lancet*:

> The Games should encourage physical activity, promote healthy living, and inspire the next generation to exercise. However, marring this healthy vision has been the choice of junk food and drink giants—McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Cadbury's—as major sponsors of the event (*The Lancet* 2012, p. 188).

Corporate sponsors seeking to improve their image as well as those genuinely wanting to deliver in terms of corporate social responsibility could sponsor entities that are not similar and in particular do not have aligned differences. An oil company sponsoring a charitable group in support of AIDS research would face less aroused suspicion than a pharmaceutical company. Either company could likely sponsor opera or a symphony in their headquarters location with less scrutiny than sponsoring entities that have touch points with their industries and their product-related marketing objectives.

Implications for those sponsored

Implications of the study's findings for nonprofits are noteworthy. In the face of dwindling funding support and a competitive marketplace, nonprofits are increasingly using marketing communications to influence target consumers' perceptions. In sectors such as blood donations, non-returning donors pose increasing challenges. The nonprofit can foster customer retention through clear positioning and by limiting any questions of bias or compromise. The study's results imply that, like corporate managers, nonprofit managers should be cautious in engaging in social sponsorships with low-fit alliance partners, especially when any similarity might be in the form of an aligned difference.

The current research suggests that in considering a sponsor with key similarities for financial and in-kind support, a nonprofit must ensure that the sponsorship is based on a high-fit relationship. In particular, the entities should clearly articulate the fit between them (Cornwell et al. 2006; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). In sum, it is essential for nonprofits to know how perceptions of similarity influence target market perceptions of the nonprofit and to plan sponsorship leveraging and activation to achieve desirable perceptions.

Limitations and future research directions

This paper highlights the potential for adverse effects of social sponsorships involving partners consumers perceive to be highly similar to each other. While this research has examined cause sponsorships, the theoretical propositions should apply to any situation where the relationship might invoke suspicion. For example, in sponsorship of the arts and cultural events, large corporate investments in regions of their major influence may evoke negative implications of similarity. Research examining other areas where similarity influences sponsorship outcomes is warranted.

In aiming at high external validity, this work employed familiar brands in both the corporate sponsor and the cause sponsee role. This approach has the advantage of using existing attitudes and any arising suspicions, but it does not identify the nature of these attitudes. Obviously, prior attitudes are noise in this analysis. More research is needed to fully understand the conditions under which similarity is detrimental to the alliance partners. Future laboratory research might examine the influence of different types of similarity (e.g., geographic similarity or attitude similarity) on sponsorship evaluations. Lab conditions would also allow control of the nature and extent of aligned differences, and in doing so would give some indication of areas where similarity functions as a trigger for defensive processing.

Another limitation of this research that might be addressed in future lab studies is the extent to which attitudes are newly created or reinforced by the pairing. While this limitation would apply to all sponsorship research where entities are combined as a communication platform, it is even more relevant to sponsorships where the goal is goodwill or image change. This approach would imply the use of actual brands in a study, but with an extensive consideration of prior attitudes before examining any attitude change resulting from the sponsorship.

Conclusion

Do people consider similarity between a sponsor and the sponsored cause when evaluating a sponsorship? Do perceptions of greater similarity between constituent partners in a social sponsorship arrangement blur or enhance the positioning of the sponsored cause? How does similarity between the partners affect high-fit and low-fit social sponsorships? These questions are critical for marketing managers and managers of the nonprofits. However, the current sponsorship research on congruence between alliance partners contains mixed results that leave these important questions unanswered. We provide an alternative theoretical explanation to the mixed findings on the role of fit in sponsorship evaluations by showing that perceptions of similarity play an

interactive role in affecting how people view sponsorships of different levels of fit.

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Appendix 1

Table 3 Sample text of sponsorship advertisements in Experiments 1 and 2

High-fit sponsorship	Low-fit sponsorship
SUBWAY and ARCBS	KFC and ARCBS
In other news, the Australian Red Cross Blood Service (Blood Service) has announced a new sponsorship of the organisation by SUBWAY. SUBWAY has pledged an initial $25,000 to help the Blood Service continue its vital work. Together the Blood Service and SUBWAY will work towards raising funds and awareness for the Blood Service.	In other news, the Australian Red Cross Blood Service (Blood Service) has announced a new sponsorship of the organisation by KFC. KFC has pledged an initial $25,000 to help the Blood Service continue its vital work. Together the Blood Service and KFC will work towards raising funds and awareness for the Blood Service.
SUBWAY and Leukaemia Foundation	KFC and Leukaemia Foundation
In other news, the Leukaemia Foundation has announced a new sponsorship of the organisation by SUBWAY. SUBWAY has pledged an initial $25,000 to help the Leukaemia Foundation continue its vital work. Together the Leukaemia Foundation and SUBWAY will work towards raising funds and awareness for cancer research.	In other news, the Leukaemia Foundation has announced a new sponsorship of the organisation by KFC. KFC has pledged an initial $25,000 to help the Leukaemia Foundation continue its vital work. Together the Leukaemia Foundation and KFC will work towards raising funds and awareness for cancer research.
Layout of the newsletter	
Title: Business and organizations in the news	
News item 1—Filler 1—Identical across conditions.	
About a for-profit organization (Utilities provider)	
News item 2 (includes the sponsorship announcement)	
About the sponsee organization	
News item 3	
About the sponsor organization	
News item 4—Filler 2—Identical across conditions.	
About a nonprofit organization (Aged care provider)	

Appendix 2

Table 4 Results of nested model comparison

Fit Statistics[a]	Experiment 1[b] (*N*=189) Fast food	Experiment 2[c] (*N*=204) Fast food	Experiment 3[c] (*N*=194) Department stores
Model A (Nested model)			
χ^2 (df)	277.8 (175)	377.7 (212)	320.6 (211)[d]
p	<.001	<.001	<.001
RMSEA	.056	.062	.052
(90%CI) Lo	.043	.052	.040
Hi	.068	.072	.063
CFI	.96	.97	.97
TLI	.95	.96	.97
SRMR	.074	.066	.076
R^2			
Clarity of nonprofit positioning	17.5%	12.8%	23.2%
Attitude toward sponsorship	40.1%	74.9%	59.1%
Attitude toward nonprofit	33.4%	31.5%	42.4%
Intention to support the nonprofit	33.0%	23.3%	14.3%
Attitude toward sponsor	NA	62.9%	70.4%
Number of free parameters (p0)	75	87	88
Log likelihood (L0)	−4899.5	−5239.4	−4603.2
Scaling correction factor (c0)	1.534	2.100	1.729
Model B (Comparison model)			
Number of free parameters (p1)	77	89	90
Log likelihood (L1)	−4894.5	−5223.7	−4583.8
Scaling correction factor (c1)	1.520	2.077	1.726
Model Comparison			
Difference test scaling correction (CD)			
CD = $\frac{p0*c0-p1*c1}{p0-p1}$	.99	1.07	1.59
$\Delta\chi^2 = \frac{-2[L0 - L1]}{CD}$	9.9	29.2	25.1
Δdf = p1- p0	2	2	2
p	.007	<.001	<.001

[a] Maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors was employed to estimate the models

[b] Experiment 1: The error variances of two items measuring *fit* in Model A were allowed to co-vary. The error variance of the unique variable associated with the single indicator variable *similarity* (reliability=.75) was fixed at .5365 following the approach recommended by Hayduk (1987). We repeated the analyses using the single-item measure for *similarity* without fixing its reliability, and the results were similar to those reported in the paper

[c] The latent variables *fit* (in Experiment 2 and 3) and *trustworthiness* (in all the experiments) were each measured by dividing the five items measuring the construct into two item parcels, to manage the number of parameters estimated

[d] The error variances of two items measuring *similarity* in Experiment 3 were allowed to co-vary

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