

**Corporate Social Marketing:**

**An analysis of consumer response to Nike's campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick**

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Consumers are increasingly favoring companies, along with their brands and products, that invest in social change initiatives (Lough & Pharr, 2010). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is often credited as the most appropriate avenue for organizations to have a positive impact on society. CSR likewise has been shown to positively influence consumer behavior (Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2010; Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001). Corporate social marketing (CSM), a form of CSR, is implemented by the firm to inspire a positive behavioral change in individuals or society at large. For example, Nike has conducted multiple CSM campaigns, including an equality-themed campaign highlighting athletes LeBron James and Serena Williams. Nike's "Dream Crazier" campaign was delivered to celebrate women while acknowledging male and female athlete double standards held by society. However, Nike's most controversial CSM campaign was launched last fall when Colin Kaepernick tweeted a Nike advertisement featuring himself and the quote "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything" (Carrington & Boykoff, 2018, para. 1). Kaepernick's tweet quickly spurred national conversation via media and social media channels. Consumer opinions were polarized between supportive and negative narrative. Given the mixed response to Nike's campaign, the purpose of this study was to explore how consumers processed and evaluated this campaign.

A few sport scholars have investigated CSM's influence on society and its potential for positive business outcomes (Bell & Blakey, 2010; Inoue & Kent, 2014; Lough & Pharr, 2010). Lough and Pharr (2010) and Blake and Bell (2010) focused on the outcomes of specific CSM campaigns; whereas, this study investigated focused on consumer's cognitive evaluation of CSM campaigns. Inoue and Kent (2014) proposed a framework aimed at understanding the effects of CSM, specifically what attributes resulted in greater CSM campaign credibility. The framework was informed by credibility literature. For this research, attribution theory was used in combination with Inoue and Kent's (2014) framework to further explain how consumers are interpreting CSM campaigns. Attribution theory posits that "consumers cognitively infer a motive for the sponsorship behavior" which influences their evaluation of organizational behavior (Rifon, Sejung, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004, pp. 29). Prior research has demonstrated that consumers will disregard an organization's social advocacy actions when self-serving motives become salient (Forehand & Grier, 2003). Additionally, research has shown that a strong company-cause fit will likely result in consumer's perceiving the CSM campaign as altruistic and enhance the campaign and organizations credibility. Based on the prior literature and attribution theory, the following research questions were developed:

- RQ1: How do corporate attributes affect consumers' evaluation of a CSM campaign?
- RQ2: How do corporate reputation affect consumers' evaluation of a CSM campaign?
- RQ3: How do CSM attributes affect consumers' evaluation of a CSM campaign?
- RQ4: How do cause attributes affect consumers' evaluation of a CSM campaign?
- RQ5: What specific attributes have the greatest impact on consumers' purchase intention?

**Methodology**

377 readers' comments of a New York Times article covering the Colin Kaepernick and Nike advertisement were analyzed. A thematic analysis of the readers' comments was conducted utilizing the framework method. A deductive approach was employed where themes and codes, based on the literature, attribution theory, and Inoue and Kent's (2014) framework, were determined prior to analysis. These themes were corporate attributes, corporate reputation, CSM attributes, cause attributes, and consumer behavior. Any additional themes emerging outside the framework were noted and analyzed. Further, the comments were coded for their tone.

## Results

The majority of the comments investigated were coded into the predetermined thematic codes. The most prevalent themes of the readers' comments were CSM attributes, consumer behavior and cause attributes, totaling approximately 69% of the comments. Comments categorized into CSM attributes generally discussed the marketing campaign, typically the company-cause fit. These comments accounted for 28% of the total comments. Overall, the majority of the comments within this category were positive and consumers supported Nike's choice to use its platform to highlight social injustice. The consumer behavior category captured comments related to consumers' purchase intentions, specifically whether the campaign encouraged the consumer to either boycott Nike products or purchase Nike products. Twenty-four percent of the comments were coded for this category with the majority (18%) having positive purchase intentions. The cause attribute category included reader comments that mentioned Colin Kaepernick's protest and fight for social injustice. These comments were 17% of the total comments studied, where the majority were either positive or neutral.

## Discussion

The results were surprising, as the literature suggested that consumers rely heavily on source and corporate credibility to evaluate CSM campaigns (Haley, 1996). Yet, this study found that only 5% of the comments mentioned corporate attributes or corporate reputation. While only 4% of the comments analyzed discussed corporate reputation, the majority of the comments suggested that when consumers utilize corporate reputation as a way to evaluate CSM, it can have a negative effect. Additionally, some readers felt a lack of congruence between Nike's social advocacy efforts and their own violation of social ethics. However, if readers personally supported the cause, there was a clear positive effect on their perception of the campaign because 100% of the commenters who supported the cause, also had positive purchase intentions.

## Implications

From a practical perspective, marketers launching CSM campaigns should choose a cause personally identifiable by their target audience. Additionally, marketers must ensure that altruistic motives are salient. Theoretically, this study extended attribution theory to include consumer attributions of marketing campaigns, rather than an organizational action or event. The results demonstrated that consumers' affective perceptions and attitudinal assessment were influenced by their attributions of the specific CSM campaign and its associated cause.

## References

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