

HOW MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS CAN UTILIZE CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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We examined the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication by multinational corporations in terms of the type of message being delivered. Results of Study 1 ($N = 122$ Korean adults) showed that CSR messages received more positive responses from consumers when temporal distance was low, compared to when it was high. Moreover, emotional message appeals generated more positive product evaluations from consumers than did rational message appeals when framed in the near versus distant future. Results of Study 2 ($N = 120$ Korean adults) revealed that Korean consumers reacted more positively to CSR messages from domestic companies than to those from multinational corporations when such messages were described concretely versus abstractly. Across the 2 studies, we found that construal levels and message appeals shaped the behavioral processes that generate consumers' responses to CSR messages from multinational corporations.

Keywords: multinational corporations, corporate social responsibility, construal-level theory, message appeal.

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As globalization and the opening of emerging markets have increased, multinational corporations (MNCs) have had a positive impact on the global economy and culture through forming different types of subsidiary companies (Xie, Batra, & Peng, 2015). However, increases in market monopolization and moral-hazard-related scandals, such as those of Enron Corporation and WorldCom telecommunications company, have enhanced attention to global economic crises and corporations' corporate social responsibilities (CSR; Golob, Lah, & Jančič, 2008). Consumers now have higher CSR-related expectations of organizations, and many business managers aim to meet these expectations by participating in CSR management activities.

Local CSR relates to a firm's activities based on the standards of the local community (Meyer, 2004). However, in much of the existing literature on MNCs, CSR activities have been focused more on initiatives or identity rather than performance (Hartman, Rubin, & Dhanda, 2007; Huemer, 2010). Further, few researchers have examined CSR communications (Maignan & Ralston, 2002). To fill this gap, we investigated MNCs' methods of communication regarding consumer behavior when a foreign company attempts to succeed in host countries.

Theoretical Background

Corporate Social Responsibility Communication of Multinational Corporations

CSR has long been recognized as an integral part of the business model of corporate operations (Huemer, 2010). *CSR activities* are generally conceptualized as the company's status and activities with respect to its perceived societal obligations (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Consumers' attitudes toward corporations and the related brands vary depending on how they define the corporation's reasons for their CSR activities (Barone, Miyazaki, & Taylor, 2000; Dean, 2003). Therefore, companies intentionally or strategically undertake CSR activities to deliver a positive brand image to consumers (Golob et al., 2008).

However, CSR scholars have mainly focused on how consumers deliberately relate companies' services and products to their CSR actions when determining the outcomes of CSR, which means that the types of communication methods that trigger consumers' evaluation and perception of CSR activities have not been deeply investigated. Consumers' evaluations of CSR information are usually influenced by the context of the message, which has different effects on different types of companies (domestic vs. foreign). Such message differences can subtly activate a consumer's motivation beyond conscious awareness (Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008); thus, we predicted that communicating the CSR activities of an MNC's brand would result in favorable brand evaluations by potential

consumers. In addition, we expected that specific message communications would lead to more favorable evaluations of an MNC's brand, even when the same CSR strategies are used.

Construal-Level Theory

We used construal-level theory, which relates to how people vary their interpretation levels of certain actions as a function of their psychological distance (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), to investigate MNCs' message communication with consumers. These levels of interpretation are dependent on the psychological distance between an individual and a target object, which directs the person's attitudes and decision making toward the object. A psychologically distant mindset is associated with a more abstract level of interpretation (*high construal level*), whereas a psychologically near mindset is associated with a more concrete level of interpretation (*low construal level*; Liberman & Trope, 1998).

Construal levels are largely divided into temporal distance, social distance, spatial distance, and hypotheticality (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In this research, we paid particular attention to temporal distance and social distance in exploring the factors that affect the effectiveness of firms' CSR messages. In initial studies of the theory of construal level, temporally near events were found to align more closely with low construal levels, whereas temporally distant events aligned more closely with high construal levels (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Liberman and Trope also revealed that socially distant events or objects are associated with greater psychological distance and prompt high levels of construal during information processing. Thus, although each psychological distance described in construal-level theory exists in its own dimension, we predicted that prompt responses and decisions would be made when there was a close match between psychological distance and level of interpretation.

In addition, contributions by companies that are considered to be socially desirable to their host countries can build favorable and positive corporate brand images. Previous researchers have shown that social distance raises questions about how people advise others, decide for others, and offer gifts (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Lynch & Zauberman, 2007). Therefore, we assumed that CSR investment would be a useful nonmarket coping mechanism for increasing market share in host countries.

Construal-Level Theory and Message Appeals

Recent studies based on construal-level theory have been focused on the interactive effects on each component or matching of various components, to determine which produce more effective results (e.g., Giacomantonio, De Dreu, Shalvi, Sligte, & Leder, 2010; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011). Thus, in this study we investigated the interaction between consumers' construal levels and

CSR message appeals (emotional vs. rational). *Message appeal* is a means of attracting consumers' attention toward a certain brand's products or services by appealing to either their emotion or their reason (Moriarty, Mitchell, & Wells, 2012).

One of the most important consequences of being in a psychologically distant mindset is reduced *affective concern* (Williams, Stein, & Galguera, 2014), which implies that consumers exhibit weaker emotional responses to the focal stimuli as their psychological distance increases. Accordingly, we proposed that when a firm's CSR activities are expected to fulfill their outcome in the near (vs. distant) future, consumers will be more likely to process the information when the message's appeal is emotional than when it is rational. Therefore, the message regarding CSR activities will derive more favorable responses from consumers when the activities that are likely to achieve the outcome in the near (vs. distant) future are described using emotional (vs. rational) appeal. Thus, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: When framed in the near (vs. distant) future, emotional corporate social responsibility message appeals will prompt more favorable product evaluations than will rational corporate social responsibility message appeals.

Construal-Level Theory and Concrete or Abstract Message Description

Additionally, we focused on social distances based on individual involvement. According to previous researchers (e.g., Wright, 2012), individuals can have different levels of expectations about CSR activities, which alter the individuals' specific actions. Thus, we predicted that the greater the social distance of an individual from an event, the more distant and more abstract it would appear to him or her. Specifically, we addressed domestic versus foreign objects based on level of social distance (Liviatan et al., 2008), to elucidate whether foreign affiliates, who are socially distant, are more likely to engage in abstract CSR expression than are domestic affiliates, who are socially near. We expected that CSR messages from domestic firms would elicit more favorable evaluations when framed by low construal levels, whereas CSR messages from foreign firms would elicit more favorable evaluations when framed with high construal levels. Thus, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: When described as concrete (vs. abstract), corporate social responsibility messages from domestic firms will prompt more favorable product evaluations than will those from foreign firms.

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested whether emotional, compared to rational, message appeals prompt more favorable responses when framed in the near (vs. distant) future (Hypothesis 1).

Method

Participants and design. Participants were recruited through SurveyMonkey to take part in a 2 (message appeal: emotional vs. rational) \times 2 (temporal distance: near vs. distant future) factorial between-subjects experiment. The sample comprised 122 Korean adults (73 women and 49 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 27.48$ years, $SD = 5.22$), of whom 44 were undergraduate students, 25 were graduate students, and 53 were nonstudent adults.

Procedure and stimuli. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and read the cover story of a fictitious health supplement company, Healthen, which purportedly engages in CSR activities by sponsoring amateur boxers. A description of this fictitious firm and its CSR activities appeared in the introduction of the online survey. The cover story contained manipulations of message appeals (emotional vs. rational) and temporal distance (near vs. distant future). To manipulate message appeal, the challenges confronting the amateur boxers were described either sentimentally (emotional) or in a neutral tone (rational). To manipulate temporal distance, the amateur boxers were depicted as preparing for the upcoming World Championships this year (near future) or for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (distant future). After reading the cover story, participants then rated a series of items regarding product attitude, manipulation checks, and involvement with health supplement products, as well as providing demographic information.

Measures. All measurement items, original sources of the items, and rating scales are presented in the Appendix.

Data analysis. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 20 by applying analyses of covariance (ANCOVA), analyses of variance (ANOVA), and logit analysis.

Results

Manipulation and confound checks. Results of a 2 (message appeal: emotional vs. rational) \times 2 (temporal distance: near vs. distant future) ANCOVA, with cause involvement as a covariate, revealed that the message used in the emotional condition was perceived as being more emotional than was the message used in the rational condition, $M_{\text{emotional}} = 3.92$, $M_{\text{rational}} = 2.31$; $F_{(1, 117)} = 147.86$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .56$; all other effects: $F_s < 2.45$, $ps > .10$. An analogous ANCOVA also indicated that near-future framing aligned more closely with low (vs. high) temporal distance than did distant-future framing, $M_{\text{near}} = 1.85$, $M_{\text{distant}} = 3.90$; $F_{(1, 117)} = 163.73$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .58$; all other effects: $F_s < 0.15$, $ps > .70$. Separate ANOVAs of gender, age, and occupation then showed no significant interaction effects, eliminating the possibility of treatment effects, $F_s < 1.20$, $ps > .25$; Wald η^2 's < 1.20 , $ps > .25$.

Product attitude. Results of a 2 (message appeal) \times 2 (temporal distance) ANCOVA run on product attitude ($\alpha = .86$), with cause involvement as a

covariate, revealed a significant main effect of temporal distance, $F_{(1, 117)} = 18.39$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .14$, indicating that near-future framing prompted more favorable product attitudes than did distant-future framing, $M_{\text{near}} = 3.66$, $M_{\text{distant}} = 3.20$. This effect was then qualified by a significant interaction between message appeal and temporal distance, $F_{(1, 117)} = 5.76$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Simple contrast analysis showed that the emotional message appeal prompted more favorable product attitudes when framed in the near (vs. distant) future, $M_{\text{near}} = 3.84$, $M_{\text{distant}} = 3.11$; $F_{(1, 117)} = 21.69$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .16$. This result, especially, indicated the presence of a large effect size (Cohen, 1988); however, rational message appeal did not vary as a function of temporal distance, $M_{\text{near}} = 3.48$, $M_{\text{distant}} = 3.29$; $F_{(1, 117)} = 1.75$, $p > .10$, $\eta^2 = .02$ (see Figure 1). No other effects were significant, $F_s < 0.80$, $p_s > .35$.

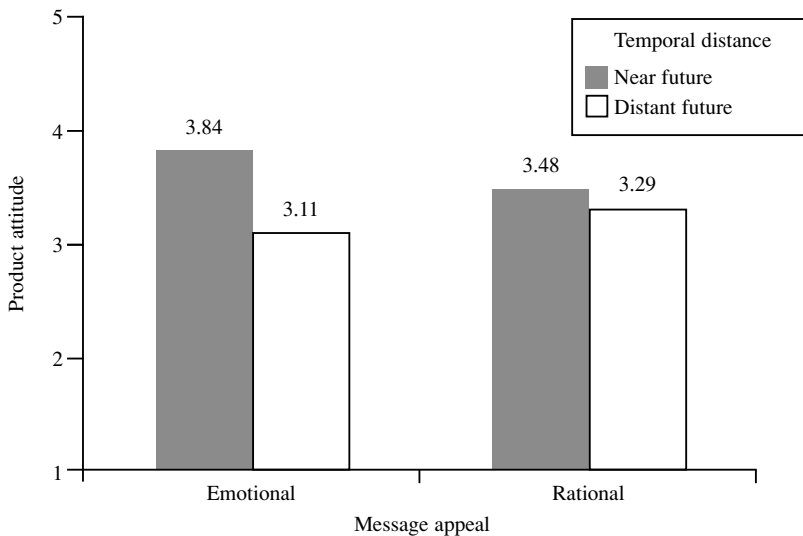


Figure 1. Product attitude as a function of message appeal and temporal distance (Study 1).

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 was supported; however, some alternative explanations still remain. First, consumers' prior attitude toward a cause may have confounded the observed interaction, such that, when exposed to emotional message appeals, participants who had positive attitudes toward sponsoring unpopular sports responded more favorably to the stimulus message, regardless of their construal level (Erb, Bohner, Rank, & Einwiller, 2002). Moreover, low product involvement may have increased the participants' sensitivity to the manipulation of construal levels when message appeals were matched with temporal distance (i.e., emotional–near future, rational–distant future) because uninvolved

consumers are inclined to attend more selectively to matched (vs. mismatched) information (Wang & Lee, 2006).

Hence, we examined this possibility in Study 2 by including measures of participants' prior attitude toward a cause and product involvement. CSR evaluations and product attitudes served as dependent variables.

Study 2

In Study 2, we investigated whether CSR messages from domestic, compared to foreign, firms prompt more favorable evaluations when framed with low (vs. high) construal levels (Hypothesis 2). Therefore, we compared Korean consumers' responses to CSR messages from Korean and Japanese firms. The manipulation of construal levels was performed by using concrete (low construal) or abstract (high construal) message descriptions (Tsai & McGill, 2011). The possible confounding effects of prior attitude toward a cause and product involvement were also examined.

Method

Participants and design. We used a 2 (social distance: Korea vs. Japan) × 2 (message description: concrete vs. abstract) between-subjects study design, wherein participants were randomly assigned to one of the four groups. Participants were 120 Korean adults (68 women and 52 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 23.78$ years, $SD = 3.22$), of whom 96 were undergraduate students, 10 were graduate students, and 11 were nonstudent adults.

Procedure and stimuli. As in Study 1, participants were asked to log on to the online experimental site SurveyMonkey and read the brief cover story regarding the fictitious firm Healthen. The cover story contained manipulations of social distance and message description. Regarding the manipulation of social distance, Healthen was introduced as based in Korea (near) or Japan (distant). Regarding the manipulation of message description, Healthen was described as either sponsoring the athletes' preparation for the World Championships/Olympics (concrete) or supporting fulfillment of their dreams (abstract). After reading the cover story, participants responded to a series of items concerning two dependent measures, the manipulation check, and three control variables (product involvement, prior attitude toward the cause, and cause involvement), as well as providing demographic information.

Measures. All measurement items, original sources of the items, and rating scales are presented in the Appendix.

Data analysis. Analogous to Study 1, we used SPSS version 20 to perform ANCOVA and logit analyses of the data.

Results

Manipulation and confound checks. Results of a 2 (social distance) \times 2 (message description) ANCOVA of the manipulation check for social distance, with cause involvement, prior attitude toward the cause, and product involvement ($\alpha = .88$) as covariates, revealed that the cover story regarding a Korean firm was perceived as having a closer social distance than that of the story discussing a Japanese firm, $M_{\text{Korea}} = 3.12$, $M_{\text{Japan}} = 1.87$; $F(1, 113) = 69.99$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .38$; all other effects, $F_s < 1.00$, $p_s > .30$. Analogous ANCOVAs of message description ($\alpha = .74$) also supported the effectiveness of the manipulation, $M_{\text{concrete}} = 4.51$, $M_{\text{abstract}} = 3.17$; $F(1, 113) = 12.15$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$; all other effects, $F_s < 1.20$, $p_s > .25$. Additionally, the 2 (social distance) \times 2 (message description) ANCOVA of age and occupation showed no interaction effects, eliminating the possibility of treatment effects, $F < 1.95$, $p > .15$; Wald η^2 's < 1.0 , $p_s > .40$.

However, participants' gender revealed a marginally significant treatment effect in a logit analysis where social distance and construal level served as independent variables (social distance: Wald $\chi^2 = 3.38$, $p = .066$; all other effects: Wald χ^2 's < 2.20 , $p_s > .10$). This result implies that the number of female participants assigned to the low social-distance condition (Korea, 39 women) was greater than that of female participants assigned to the high social-distance condition (Japan, 21 women). Thus, we conducted additional ANCOVAs, treating gender as another factor, but found no moderating effect of gender on the relationship between social distance and message description ($F_s < 2.0$, $p_s > .15$). Therefore, concerns regarding the confounding effects of gender were eliminated.

Product attitude. We conducted a 2 (social distance) \times 2 (message description) ANCOVA of product attitude ($\alpha = .79$), treating cause involvement, prior attitude toward the cause, and product involvement as covariates. As predicted, this yielded a significant interaction between social distance and message description, $F(1, 113) = 13.95$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Further contrast analyses showed that participants exposed to a story about a Korean firm reported significantly more favorable product attitudes when the story was described concretely than when it was described abstractly, $M_{\text{concrete}} = 3.48$, $M_{\text{abstract}} = 3.00$; $F(1, 113) = 13.97$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .11$, whereas those exposed to a story about a Japanese firm did not vary their attitudes as a function of construal level, $M_{\text{concrete}} = 3.06$, $M_{\text{abstract}} = 3.26$; $F(1, 113) = 2.47$, $p > .10$, $\eta^2 = .02$. All of the significant results exhibited medium effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). No other effects were significant, including the main effects of social distance and message description ($F_s < 2.50$, $p_s > .10$).

Corporate social responsibility evaluation. To test for the predicted interaction effects on CSR evaluation ($\alpha = .79$), we performed a 2 (social distance) \times 2 (message description) ANCOVA, with cause involvement, prior attitude toward the cause, and product involvement as covariates. The results showed a significant interaction effect between social distance and message description, $F(1, 113) = 28.66$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .20$. Furthermore, planned contrast

tests revealed that participants exposed to a story about a Korean firm reported significantly higher CSR evaluations when the story was described concretely than when it was described abstractly, $M_{\text{concrete}} = 3.72$, $M_{\text{abstract}} = 2.88$; $F(1, 113) = 21.06$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .16$, whereas those exposed to a story about a Japanese firm reported the opposite, $M_{\text{concrete}} = 3.07$, $M_{\text{abstract}} = 3.60$; $F(1, 113) = 9.18$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .08$ (see Figure 2). Again, no other effects were significant, including the main effects of social distance and message description (F 's < 1.35 , p 's $> .25$).

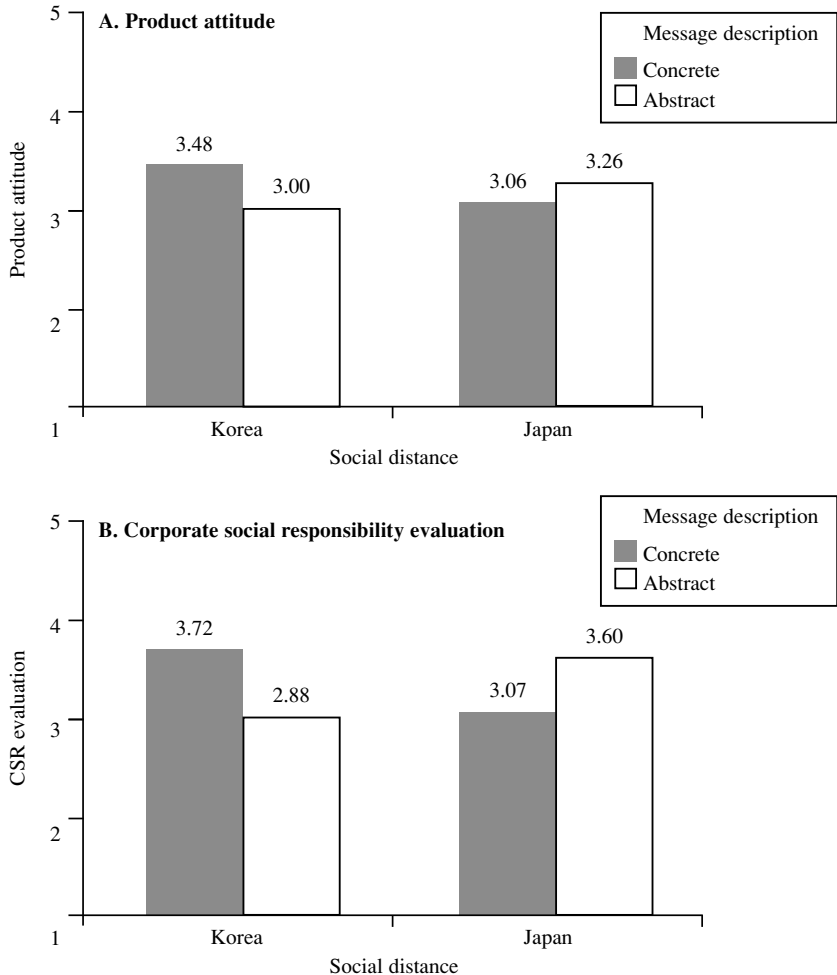


Figure 2. Product attitude and corporate social responsibility (CSR) evaluation as a function of social distance and message description (Study 2).

Discussion

Our findings in Study 2 confirm that, when exposed to concrete versus abstract CSR messages, Korean consumers respond more favorably to messages from a Korean firm than to those from a Japanese firm, supporting Hypothesis 2. This result implies that the congruence between social distance and message description serves to enhance consumers' evaluation of products and CSR activities. Moreover, we addressed the confounding effects of prior attitude toward a cause and product involvement by controlling for these variables during data analysis. In this way, we established a clear relationship between social distance and message description.

General Discussion

Across two studies, we found evidence for our proposition that psychological distance and construal level can affect the behavioral processes that cause responses of consumers to CSR messages from MNCs. On the basis of the Study 1 results, CSR messages situated in the near, compared to distant, future induced more favorable reactions from consumers. Moreover, emotional (vs. rational) message appeals generated more positive product evaluations from consumers when they were framed in the near (vs. distant) future. Our findings provide strong support for prior findings that near-future framing evokes a low construal level of thinking, whereas distant-future framing evokes a high construal level of thinking (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). In addition, results obtained in Study 2 showed that construal level can be used to explain how consumers exercise judgment and make decisions. These results confirm that congruence between social distance and message description (or construal levels; Liviatan et al., 2008) can improve the effectiveness of CSR messages in relation to both the evaluation of products and CSR activities themselves.

Some questions raised in the current research remain to be addressed in future work. First, contrary to the results obtained in previous research on construal-level theory, we did not find evidence that distance manipulation altered the level of information construed. We followed the method used by Williams et al. (2014), but future researchers could investigate the bidirectional link between distance and construal. Second, researchers could further examine whether or not psychological distances have a distinct effect on CSR communication, in relation to purchase intentions and the effect of word of mouth. Last, we focused on a single, imaginary health supplement company, which purportedly engages in CSR activities by sponsoring amateur boxers. Future researchers may conduct comparisons of diverse product groups or the targets of CSR activities.

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Appendix

Variables of Interest, Scale Items, and Sources

| Variables and source | Scale items | Studies |
|--|--|-----------------|
| Product attitude (Park & John, 2011; Truong, Klink, Fort-Rioche, & Athaide, 2013) | I feel favorably toward Healthen's products. I like Healthen's products. Healthen's products are likely to be of good quality. Healthen's products are likely to be believable. (1 = <i>not at all</i> , 5 = <i>very much so</i>) | Studies 1 and 2 |
| CSR evaluation (Bigné, Currás-Pérez, & Aldás-Manzano, 2012) | Healthen is genuinely concerned about consumer welfare. Healthen gives genuine support to amateur boxing athletes. Healthen fulfills its social responsibilities. (1 = <i>not at all</i> , 5 = <i>very much so</i>) | Study 2 |
| Message appeal: emotional/rational (Andreu, Casado-Díaz, & Mattila, 2015) | The above story regarding the reality of amateur boxing and firms' support appeals to me. (1 = <i>primarily rationally</i> , 5 = <i>primarily emotionally</i>). | Study 1 |
| Temporal distance (Martin, Gnoth, & Strong, 2009; Wilson, Buehler, Lawford, Schmidt, & Yong, 2012) | How far in the future will the boxer in the above story fulfill his dream? (1 = <i>near future</i> , 5 = <i>distant future</i>) | Study 1 |
| Message concreteness (Chandran & Menon, 2004) | I am able to generate a mental picture of the information contained in the persuasive message. My thoughts on the article were hazy and indistinct (reverse-coded). (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7 = <i>strongly agree</i>) | Study 2 |
| Social distance (Lieberman & Förster, 2009) | How close do you feel to the above Japanese (Korean) health supplement firm? (1 = <i>not very close</i> , 5 = <i>very close</i>) | Study 2 |
| Cause involvement (Diamond & Gooding-Williams, 2002; Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005) | Usually, how concerned are you about sponsoring amateur boxing? (1 = <i>not concerned at all</i> , 5 = <i>very concerned</i>) | Studies 1 and 2 |

Appendix continued

| Variables and source | Scale items | Studies |
|--|--|---------|
| Prior attitude toward the cause (Baek & Reid, 2013) | Do you think it is necessary to sponsor amateur boxing? (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 5 = <i>strongly agree</i>) | Study 2 |
| Product involvement (Mittal & Lee, 1989) | I have a strong interest in health supplements. Health supplements are very important to me. (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 5 = <i>strongly agree</i>) | Study 2 |