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Selfless First Movers and Self-Interested Followers: Order of Entry Signals Purity of Motive in Pursuit of the Greater Good

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When do brands get credit for contributing to the greater good? Prior research has shown that consumers reward brands for prosocial initiatives (e.g., corporate philanthropy, social responsibility, cause marketing) in line with the perceived purity of their motives. We report four experiments demonstrating that consumers interpret the order in which brands launch prosocial initiatives as a signal of their underlying motivations for doing good. Whereas prosocial first movers appear to care genuinely about the causes they support, prosocial followers (i.e., those that imitate the prosocial actions of other brands) typically seem to have more selfish intentions, even if their initiatives have an equal or greater social impact. This discrepancy in perceived motives, in turn, serves as an additional source of first mover preference, above and beyond previously studied first mover effects and unique to greater good marketing contexts. It also leads consumers to reward followers for launching more original prosocial initiatives, even if these seem less impactful for society. These findings bridge literatures on prosocial behavior and entry order, and they offer practical insight for brands looking to combine profits and purpose.

Keywords First mover advantage; Plagiarism; Pioneering; Motive inference; Prosocial behavior; Corporate social responsibility

TOMS Shoes was established in 2006 after founder Blake Mycoskie’s vacation to Argentina led to eye-opening encounters with barefoot children. TOMS billed itself as a for-profit brand on a genuine social mission: For every pair of shoes sold, TOMS would donate a pair to a needy child. This “buy-one, give-one” model earned widespread acclaim, and TOMS went on to succeed both commercially and philanthropically, selling over 95 million pairs of shoes, and donating another 95 million, since its founding (TOMS shoes, 2019). In 2010, Skechers tried to emulate TOMS’ winning formula, launching BOBS,

Skechers’ own “charitable shoe collection” (Skechers, 2018). BOBS shoes looked similar and offered an equivalent buy-one, give-one pledge. Yet although their products and social impact were nearly identical, consumer responses to TOMS and BOBS diverged dramatically: While TOMS became an industry model for purpose-driven marketing, BOBS’ entry provoked outrage and ridicule (Timberlake, 2012).

Imitating previously established business models, product features and appearances, and even brand names is common (Sayman, Hoch, & Raju, 2002); and in many cases, consumers actually prefer follower products which can often fulfill similar needs at lower prices (Wilcox, Kim, & Sen, 2009). Why then was the reaction to BOBS and their donation program so negative? As one industry expert put it, the TOMS/BOBS case illustrated “a powerful distinction between those that do good because of the

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meaning behind it and those that do it simply for marketing” (Mainwaring, 2010). It seems the two brands were seen as doing good for different reasons. Whereas TOMS appeared genuinely committed to the cause, something about being a follower led BOBS’ motives for donating shoes to appear suspect. In a pilot study, we found support for this conjecture: Consumers judged BOBS charitable shoe collection to be more self-interested and evaluated the BOBS brand less favorably when they knew BOBS was a follower to adopt a buy-one-give-one pledge (see Appendix StudyA).

Prior research has established that motive inferences guide consumer reactions to corporate prosocial behavior. But what factors lead consumers to see corporate philanthropic initiatives, cause-marketing campaigns, or social responsibility programs as motivated by a genuine desire to contribute to the greater good? We propose that, holding other factors constant, consumers often use the order in which brands launch prosocial initiatives as a cue to their underlying motivations. We hypothesize that whereas the first brand to launch a prosocial initiative (a “prosocial first mover”) will typically seem motivated by genuine concern for the greater good, later brands (“prosocial followers”) will typically seem to have more selfish motives, even if their prosocial efforts have an equal or greater impact.

We theorize that cynical motive inferences about followers provide an additional edge for *prosocial* first movers specifically—above and beyond previously studied drivers of first mover preference. Indeed, we predict that consumers will prefer first movers over followers more in the context of prosocial initiatives relative to other kinds of firm actions—that is, typical profit-seeking ones—because having pure intentions matters more when doing good. Moreover, cynicism about prosocial followers may lead consumers to prefer prosocial initiatives that accomplish *less* good for the world, provided they seem more original and thus more genuine. We report four experiments which support these predictions and discuss their practical implications for brands that aim to combine profits and purpose. Before describing these studies, we review past work on corporate prosocial behavior and first mover advantages.

Background

The Demand for Brands that Do Good. . . and Mean It

Consumers increasingly expect brands that they support to contribute to the greater good. In a global survey of consumer attitudes and sales data

across 60 countries, Nielsen finds that 66% of consumers prefer socially responsible brands and pay more for their products (Nielsen, 2015). Indeed, corporate prosocial initiatives can boost brand equity (Brammer & Pavelin, 2006; Green & Peloza, 2011; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), strengthen investor confidence (Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006), and improve perceived product quality (Chernev & Blair, 2015). Consequently, for-profit firms face growing incentives to incorporate prosocial activities—cause marketing, corporate philanthropy, sustainability, etc.—into their business models.

Yet as the BOBS case illustrates, brands do not always benefit from doing good: Positive market responses depend critically on consumers believing that brands actually care about the causes they support (i.e., that their motives are “pure”; Newman & Cain, 2014; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006). When prosocial brands seem motivated by a genuine desire to do good, their actions are judged favorably, with positive consequences for brand image, sales, and market share. However, when prosocial actors seem motivated by extrinsic rewards like reputation or profit, their actions appear “tainted” (Lee, Bolton, & Winterich, 2017; Newman & Cain, 2014; Small & Cryder, 2017). In fact, consumers will actually *condemn* brands that accomplish a great deal of good for the world if their motives appear self-interested (Bhattacharjee, Dana, & Baron, 2017; Pallotta, 2008). In extreme cases, prosocial efforts that seem self-interested can backfire altogether, painting brands that do good more negatively than those who do not do any good at all (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013; Newman & Cain, 2014). In sum, observers are skeptical in the domain of prosocial behavior (Critcher & Dunning, 2011) and assign “charitable credit” to prosocial brands in line with the perceived purity of their motives (Gershon & Cryder, 2017; Small & Cryder, 2017).

Thus, while brands are increasingly expected and incentivized to contribute to the greater good, they are not guaranteed to benefit from doing so. As prosocial initiatives become more commonplace, understanding the factors that predict whether consumers will reward or admonish them is paramount. The present studies investigate one salient factor—entry order—as a cue to motive inference.

First Movers and Followers

First mover brands often enjoy more desirable market positioning and larger, more sustained market shares than later entrants (Hotelling, 1929; Robinson, 1988; Robinson & Fornell, 1985; Urban, Carter, Gaskin, & Mucha, 1986). For example, first

movers can form partnerships, attain patents, and build infrastructure which raise barriers to entry for followers (Sammut-Bonnici & Channon, 2015). Earlier and more frequent exposure to first mover brands also causes consumers to remember first movers better and form more favorable attitudes towards them (Kardes & Kalyanaram, 1992; Kardes, Kalyanaram, Chandrashekar, & Dornoff, 1993; Robinson, Kalyanaram, & Urban, 1994). First movers often define product categories and dictate consumer tastes and preferences (Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989; Kamins & Alpert, 2004; Moreau, Markman, & Lehmann, 2001).

On the other hand, it sometimes pays to be a follower (Shankar & Carpenter, 2012; Shankar, Carpenter, & Krishnamurthi, 1999), allowing first movers to test and prime the market for later entry. In practice, imitation is ubiquitous (Sayman et al., 2002) and consumer responses to later entrants are not categorically unfavorable (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012, 2017). In fact, follower brands and products can become quite popular, particularly when they fulfill consumer needs more effectively or at a lower price (Wilcox et al., 2009). A number of beloved market leaders (a majority by some estimates; Golder & Tellis, 1993) are actually followers, such as Nabisco's Oreo or Sony's PlayStation. In summary, previous research on whether it is preferable to be first or to follow paints a mixed picture.

Importantly, prior work on entry order has little to say about *prosocial* innovation specifically, and it would predict neither the powerful consumer backlash that BOBS faced in our motivating example nor more generally that prosocial followers would be seen as having selfish intentions. If anything, one might expect prosocial followers to be cheered for "joining the cause" by imitating the prosocial products, policies, and practices of other brands. After all, such initiatives generate positive externalities (i.e., charitable impact) which should paint followers in a positive light (Chernev & Blair, 2015). Indeed, many cultures and religions explicitly encourage emulating the behavior of moral role models (Bucher, 1998; Kristjánsson, 2006), such that imitating the prosocial behavior of other brands may seem like an innocuous way to enter the prosocial space and meet the growing consumer demand for social impact.

On the contrary, we suggest that people will typically respond more negatively to prosocial followers, in part because relative to first movers, followers are thought to be doing good for the wrong reasons. A related line of psychological research concerning people's moral judgments of

plagiarism provides some support for this idea. Specifically, recent studies suggest that people's objection to copying ideas is driven in part by a concern that copycats are seeking to benefit undeservingly from the ideas and efforts of others (Altay, Majima, & Mercier, 2020; Silver & Shaw, 2018). Because seeming self-interested and opportunistic is *especially* damning when doing good, we predict that copying prosocial acts might provoke *stronger* backlash than imitating other sorts of firm actions (i.e., typical, profit-seeking ones).

To our knowledge, no previous literature has examined the possibility that first mover advantages can arise because of consumer perceptions of discrepant motives between first movers and followers or that preferences for first movers might be amplified in the context of good deeds specifically. Our experiments address this gap, aiming to establish motive inference as an independent driver of order-based preference.

Present Research

We investigate a novel first mover advantage unique to greater good settings, where motives matter. To do this, we first seek to establish that, in line with our account, first mover preferences are larger in prosocial contexts. We reason that if motive inferences matter above and beyond other first mover effects, then we should expect to observe larger first-mover preferences in the context of prosocial brand actions (where motives matter more) than in the context of nonprosocial brand actions (i.e., typical profit-seeking actions, where motives matter less). By contrast, alternative sources of first mover preference—perceived creativity or innovativeness, unfairness to first movers, more general dislike of copying—make no predictions about the relative size of first mover advantages across prosocial vs. nonprosocial contexts. Thus, we aim first to demonstrate an effect specific to greater good marketing, where consumers place a particular premium on having the right kinds of (non-selfish) motives.

Hypothesis 1: Preferences for first mover brands (over followers) are stronger in prosocial (vs. typical profit-seeking) contexts.

We turn next to measuring the drivers of first mover preference in prosocial contexts specifically, testing whether motive inferences can explain in part why people prefer prosocial first movers to

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prosocial followers. Specifically, we predict that whereas the first brand to launch a certain prosocial initiative is typically seen as more purely motivated, follower brands that launch similar initiatives are typically seen as having more tainted motives. Because motives matter in greater good contexts, we also expect to observe downstream effects of these motive inferences on brand evaluations.

Hypothesis 2a: Prosocial followers typically seem less purely motivated (more self-interested) than prosocial first movers.

Hypothesis 2b: Seeming less purely motivated harms brand evaluations of prosocial followers (vs. prosocial first movers).

Why might following lead to more cynical motive inferences? At baseline, people tend to view for-profit firms as uncaring (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; Bhattacharjee et al., 2017) and show skepticism at their ostensibly benevolent initiatives (Newman & Cain, 2014). But whereas prosocial first movers seem willing to put profits on the line for the cause, prosocial followers may seem to be behaving opportunistically, expecting to profit in some way from joining the movement. In the eyes of consumers, following another firm's actions typically implies that the first mover benefited from taking them (and that the follower therefore expects to benefit as well). While pioneers seldom know how their actions will be received in the marketplace, followers can observe how consumers respond to first movers, copying only when it is in their interest to do so. However, if it appears that the follower, too, is willing to put profits on the line for the sake of the cause, they may be perceived as having pure motives after all. For example, if consumers happen to know that a prosocial first mover brand did not profit from doing good (e.g., lost money on an investment for social impact), following should no longer appear incentivized or opportunistic, and follower motives should seem more pure as a result.

What can follower brands do to defend against the perception that their motives for doing good are self-interested? We suggest that prosocial followers can earn more credit with consumers by differentiating their good deeds from those of prior entrants (e.g., by "finding their own cause"). Put simply, taking steps to identify a more original way to do good may signal more genuine motives. This is because differentiation makes following seem less opportunistic: Going out on a limb for more

original prosocial products and initiatives allows later entrants to appear more like daring pioneers in their own right and less like followers at all.

Hypothesis 3: Differentiating (vs. copying) can lead prosocial followers to appear more purely motivated.

An interesting implication of Hypothesis 3 is that consumers may sometimes prefer that prosocial followers choose *less impactful* ways to do good, provided these seem more original. Indeed, although scholars and laypeople alike endorse the importance of judging prosocial behavior in terms of outcomes (i.e., *social impact*; Singer, 2019; MacAskill, 2015), consumers often disregard outcome information in practice (e.g., dollars donated, lives saved), both in their own charitable behavior and in their judgments of others' good deeds (Berman, Barasch, Levine, & Small, 2018). Similarly, we suggest that consumers may prefer more original prosocial initiatives from followers, even if being original also means doing less good.

Study Overview

We report four experiments which examine consumers' responses to real and hypothetical cases of corporate prosocial behavior and their choices between cause-marketing products. These experiments manipulate entry order between- and within-subjects and operationalize prosocial behavior broadly to include products, programs, and policies supporting charitable missions from poverty alleviation to environmentalism to urban revitalization. Importantly, we do not intend to argue that motive purity is the only driver of order-based preference. Instead, our studies aim is to show that motive purity provides an *additional* source of first mover advantage that amplifies first mover preferences in greater good contexts. To this end, we aim not to remove all other possible drivers of first mover preference from our stimuli, but rather, to hold them constant across conditions and demonstrate effects of motive purity above and beyond them. All reported experiments were preregistered at AsPredicted.org. All preregistrations, study stimuli, data files, and appendix studies are accessible at https://osf.io/97rvc/?view_only=77759b50f8624c539d041071c70aa8ac. The appendix also contains five additional studies, which further replicate our effects and address related points.

In Study 1, using real product choices, we demonstrate that first mover preferences are larger

in the context of prosocial behavior, where motive purity matters more, relative to nonprosocial (i.e., typical profit-seeking) behavior, where motive purity matters less. In Study 2, we show that prosocial followers (vs. first movers) are specifically judged as less purely motivated and that this effect mediates broader brand evaluations. In Study 3, we moderate our effect, showing that brand evaluation penalties for following are weakened when the follower is less likely to profit from doing good (which should make their motives appear more pure). In Study 4, we show that finding a more original cause can offset the negative effects of being a prosocial follower, even if doing so means picking a cause that is less impactful or less obviously connected to the brand. Taken together, our studies provide evidence for a novel first mover advantage, driven by moral judgment of underlying motive, in the growing consumer market for prosocial brands and products.

Study 1. First Mover Preferences are Stronger in Prosocial Contexts

We contend that prosocial followers are evaluated more negatively because their motives appear more tainted. On this theory, the costs of following should be steeper (and first mover preferences should thus be larger) in the context of prosocial behavior, specifically, where motive purity is more important, than in the context of other kinds of typical (i.e., profit-seeking) firm actions, where motive purity is less important. In Study 1, using real product choices, we test this prediction (Hypothesis 1) by framing the same initiative—making a supply chain change—as either prosocial or profit-seeking and comparing participants' relative preferences for first movers between these domains.

Our aim here is to make a practically important point: Relative to other sorts of actions where motives matter less, being first matters more for marketing actions taken in pursuit of the greater good.

Method

Across all studies, sample sizes were determined in advance and any exclusions were preregistered. For all studies, we report all conditions and response variables. For this study, 310 participants (64.5% female, mean age = 27.8) were recruited from a northeastern university's behavioral laboratory for an hour-long session and received \$10. Our

experiment took the first 7 minutes. Participants, seated in separate cubicles, read a short (and factually true) description of a recent trend among major chocolate manufacturers. Specifically, participants learned about two real candy bar brands—Cadbury's *Flake* and Mars' *Ripple*—that have both recently begun sourcing cocoa beans from Ghana (*Flake* first, followed by *Ripple*; Glover, 2009). In other words, participants learned about a real first mover brand and a real follower brand. We selected British candy bar brands we hoped would be unfamiliar to our participants in order to minimize the impact of pre-existing preferences on our experiment.

We manipulated between-subjects the apparent purpose of switching to Ghanaian cocoa beans. In the profit-seeking condition, participants learned that these new beans would allow the two brands to offer a premium-quality product and increase profit margins for shareholders. In the prosocial condition, participants learned that these new beans would allow the brands to offer a fair-trade product and increase profit shares for local farmers. Participants were then asked which of the two candy bars they would prefer to take home at the end of the study, *Flake*—the first mover—or *Ripple*—the follower. To avoid possible floor effects on choosing the follower across conditions, we also told all participants that the follower chocolate bar typically receives better customer reviews. We preregistered the prediction that participants would more frequently pick the first mover (over the better-reviewed follower) when the brands' bean-sourcing initiatives were framed as prosocial, fair-trade projects than when they were framed as profit-maximizing projects.

Participants then answered two short multiple-choice manipulation checks, reporting which brand (*Flake* or *Ripple*) had changed their cocoa sourcing first (91.2% answered correctly) and identifying the stated purpose for the brands' sourcing initiatives (92.5% answered correctly). Participants also indicated whether they had ever encountered either candy bar previously (87.7% had not). Participants picked up their candy bar choice from a hypothesis- and condition-blind research assistant as they exited the experimental session. In this and all other studies, we collected basic demographics (e.g., age, gender) but did not observe any consistent demographic effects.

Results

Consistent with our hypotheses, a logistic regression predicting participants' likelihood of choosing

the first mover candy bar by condition detected a significant effect. Participants who thought that switching to Ghanaian chocolate was a fair-trade initiative chose the first mover brand more frequently (50.0%) than those who thought that it was a profit-seeking initiative (30.8%; Wald $Z = 3.43$, $p < .001$). Note that the more general preference for the follower product we observed is likely because the follower was said to be better-reviewed, but this cannot explain differences in first-mover choice share across conditions.

Discussion

In Study 1, examining real, consequential choice, we found results in line with Hypothesis 1: Participants displayed stronger first-mover preferences in the context of prosocial products (fair-trade chocolates) relative to nonprosocial products (premium-quality chocolates). Said differently, in the context of doing good, where motive purity matters more, the costs of following were amplified. Importantly, this result is not restricted to the case of fair-trade cocoa beans: We replicated it in Appendix Study B, a scenario study about cause-marketing (vs. cost-saving) clothing items.

That first mover preferences would be larger in greater good contexts is not easily explained by other previously studied order effects (perceived creativity, unfairness to the first mover, general dislike of copying, etc.) which should not differ across prosocial vs. nonprosocial contexts. By contrast, this pattern is consistent with the notion that perceptions of motive purity contribute to first mover advantages. Where motives matter more, penalties for following are larger.

To test our proposed process directly, Study 2 measured perceptions of motive purity for first movers and followers in a prosocial context and investigated whether these motive inferences mediate effects of order on downstream brand evaluations.

Study 2. Prosocial Followers Seem More Self-interested than Prosocial First Movers

Study 2 sought to demonstrate, via mediation, the impact of entry order on motive inferences and downstream brand evaluations in a greater good context (testing Hypotheses 2a and 2b). Participants learned about a snack food company that was either the first or a follower to donate healthy lunches to underserved schools. We also included a

condition in which entry order was omitted to test how consumers respond in the absence of order information. In line with prior literature on pioneering effects, our central predictions concern a *relative* effect of entry order on brand attitudes and motive inferences (i.e., first movers vs. followers). Nevertheless, we included this baseline condition to gain insight into whether this effect would more closely resemble a benefit for being first or a penalty for following.

Method

Nine hundred and four participants (47.7% female, mean age = 37.5) were recruited from MTurk. Participants read about a for-profit snack food company called Shipley's Harvest. Participants learned that Shipley's Harvest had recently launched a corporate philanthropy program donating free healthy lunches to local public schools.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three entry-order conditions (first mover, follower, or baseline) and read an additional excerpt according to condition. In the first mover condition, participants learned that Shipley's Harvest was "the first snack food company" to donate school lunches to local public schools. In the follower condition, participants learned that Shipley's Harvest was "following other snack food companies" in doing so. In the baseline condition, we omitted any mention of entry order. This baseline condition helped us ascertain whether any differences observed between first mover and follower more closely resemble positive inferences about first movers or negative inferences about followers.

After reading, participants evaluated the Shipley's Harvest brand and made inferences about its motives for doing good. The brand evaluation task (adapted from Kamins & Alpert, 2004) asked participants to report their overall attitudes toward Shipley's Harvest on three 7-point items: liking (1. "Dislike very much" to 7. "Like very much"), favorability (1. "Highly unfavorable" to 7. "Highly favorable"), and positivity (1. "Extremely negative" to 7. "Extremely positive"). These were averaged to create a composite brand evaluation measure ($\alpha = 0.95$). The motive inference task asked participants to rate their agreement with three items on 7-point Likert scales from 1. "Strongly disagree" to 7. "Strongly agree." These items were: "Shipley's Harvest's motives for donating lunches are self-serving"; "Shipley's Harvest has an ulterior motive for donating lunches"; "Shipley's Harvest is donating lunches mainly to look good to customers."

These items were reverse-coded and averaged ($\alpha = 0.89$) to form a single measure of perceived motive purity. We predicted that Shipley's Harvest would be seen as more purely motivated and evaluated more positively in the first mover condition relative to the follower condition, but we did not make any predictions about comparisons with the baseline condition.

Next, participants answered a multiple-choice attention check question, selecting between: "Shipley's Harvest was the first snack food company to donate lunches"; "Shipley's Harvest was following other snack food companies in donating lunches"; "No information about order was provided." 79% answered correctly. Following our preregistered plan, we included all participants in subsequent analyses (but the same results arise if we focus instead on data from correct responses only).

Results

Motive purity

Participants' motive purity inferences were subjected to a one-way ANOVA with entry order as a between-subjects factor, revealing a significant omnibus effect of condition ($F(2, 899) = 5.64, p = .004$). See Figure 1. Pairwise planned comparison *t* tests indicated that, in line with predictions, Shipley's Harvest was seen as more purely motivated in the first mover condition ($M = 3.77, SD = 1.57$) than in the follower condition ($M = 3.37, SD = 1.35; t(603) = 3.35, p < .001, d = 0.27$). Shipley's Harvest was also seen as more purely

motivated in the baseline condition ($M = 3.63, SD = 1.47$) than in the follower condition ($t(596) = 2.19, p = .029, d = 0.18$). The difference between the baseline condition and the first mover condition was not significant ($t(603) = 1.18, p = .24, d = 0.10$).

Brand evaluations

We next subjected participants' brand evaluations to a one-way ANOVA with entry order (first mover, follower, or baseline) as a manipulated factor. This procedure revealed a significant omnibus effect of condition ($F(2, 899) = 19.09, p < .001$). See Figure 1. Pairwise planned comparison *t* tests revealed that, in line with predictions, Shipley's Harvest was evaluated more positively overall when it was described as a first mover ($M = 5.71, SD = 1.08$) than when it was described as a follower ($M = 5.17, SD = 1.10; t(603) = 6.13, p < .001, d = 0.50$). Shipley's Harvest was also evaluated more positively overall in the baseline condition when no entry order information was provided ($M = 5.44, SD = 1.08$) than in the follower condition ($t(596) = 3.05, p = .002, d = 0.25$). The first mover and baseline conditions also differed significantly on broader brand evaluations ($t(603) = 3.11, p = .002, d = 0.25$).

Mediation

Lastly, we examined whether participants' motive purity inferences mediated the effects of entry order on brand evaluations. We examined

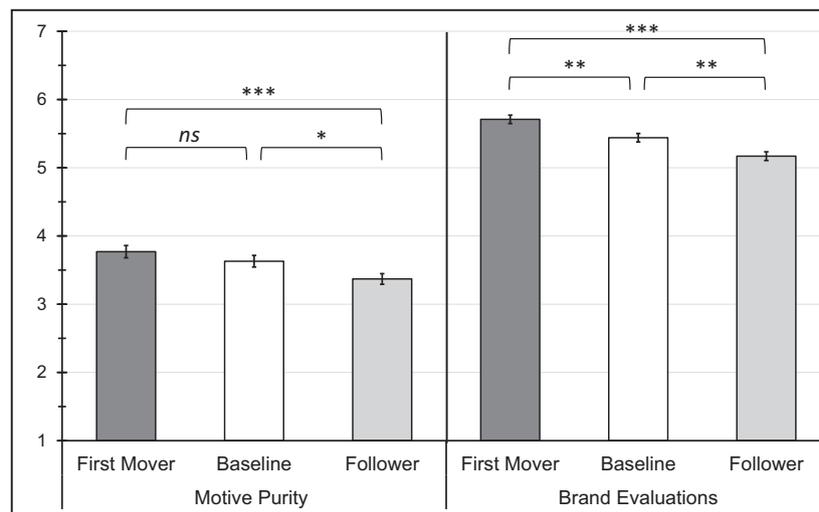


Figure 1. Perceived motive purity (1–7 scale) and brand evaluations (1–7 scale) by entry order condition from Study 2. Error bars represent standard errors. * < 0.05 , ** < 0.01 , *** < 0.001 .

each pairwise comparison among all three entry order conditions, in each case using a bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). These mediation models always included entry order condition as the independent variable, motive purity as a mediator, and brand evaluations as the dependent variable. First, comparing the first mover (0) and follower (1) conditions, we found a significant indirect effect of motive purity on brand evaluations (effect estimate = -0.10 , $SE = 0.03$, 95% $CI = [-0.16, -0.04]$). We also found a significant indirect effect comparing the baseline (0) and follower (1) conditions (effect estimate = -0.07 , $SE = 0.03$, 95% $CI = [-0.13, -0.01]$). However, we did not find a significant indirect effect comparing the baseline (0) and first mover (1) conditions (effect estimate = 0.04 , $SE = 0.03$, 95% $CI = [-0.02, 0.10]$). These results are consistent with motive purity judgments playing a mediating role in the relationship between entry order and overall brand evaluations, with this effect being strongest when a prosocial brand is known to be a follower.

Discussion

The results from Study 2 suggest that prosocial followers are specifically seen as less purely motivated (i.e., more self-interested) than prosocial first movers and that these motive inferences mediate effects of order on brand evaluation. These findings corroborate Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

Participants' responses to our baseline condition are consistent with the possibility that effects on brand evaluation derive more strongly from learning that a brand is a follower than from learning that they are a first mover. A related possibility is that participants simply assumed that Shipley's Harvest was the first (or the only) prosocial actor in the baseline condition and evaluated them accordingly. In either case, more explicit knowledge of follower status appears to be important for producing our effects: Motive inferences did not differ significantly between the first mover and baseline conditions, but both saw more favorable attributions than the follower condition. Moreover, these motive inferences mediated brand evaluation effects between baseline and follower, but not between baseline and first mover, suggesting that differences in brand attitudes between baseline and first mover may be attributable to other positive inferences about pioneering. By contrast, learning that a brand is a follower raises suspicion about the brand's motives for doing good, which seems to impact brand attitudes above and beyond other

mechanisms. We replicated these results with an identical design but in different prosocial context (an eco-friendly jewelry brand) in Appendix Study C.

Although we made efforts in Studies 1 and 2 to describe the follower's actions as neutrally as possible, we also wanted to know whether a more positive framing of following (i.e., "joining the cause" with the first mover's invitation) might attenuate the discrepancy in perceived motives between prosocial first movers and followers. In Appendix Study D, in the context of disability-friendly gaming products, we found that describing following as a response to a direct invitation to "join the cause" did not diminish the effects of order on motive inference. This result casts doubt on alternative explanations of our effect based on perceived harm to the first mover: If the first mover is explicitly inviting followers, following is unlikely to seem harmful. It also suggests that our effects are relatively insensitive to how order information is communicated.

Study 3. Profit Potential Moderates the Impact of Following on Motive Inference

Study 3 sought to demonstrate the impact of motive purity on brand evaluations via moderation (testing Hypotheses 2a and 2b). In marketplace contexts, the presence of followers typically implies that the first mover's actions benefited the brand—and thus incentivize later entrants. For this reason, whereas prosocial first movers might appear willing to put profits on the line for the greater good, prosocial followers may often seem to be behaving in self-interest (i.e., to have more tainted motivations). In Study 3, we asked whether cynicism about prosocial followers and their motives would therefore be lessened in a case where following is not incentivized, because the first mover did not benefit from the good deed in question. Specifically, we sought to compare two follower conditions, one in which the prosocial initiative being copied—a socially responsible loan program—had profited the first mover (implying a potential for the follower to likewise profit from it) and one in which it had not profited the first mover (implying the follower would probably not profit from it). We expected that the follower would seem to have purer motives, and be evaluated more positively as a result, in the latter case.

We note that in addition to providing direct evidence in favor of our account, this manipulation

allows us to rule out multiple alternative explanations for our previous effects. A potential for profit should have no effect on, for example, perceptions of follower creativity or more general dislike of copying, but it should certainly impact perceptions of self-interest.

Method

Three hundred and two MTurk participants (mean age = 36.2, 40.7% female) were randomly assigned to one of three between-subjects conditions. All participants read about a prosocial first mover, a big bank called Madison Trust, that launched a corporate philanthropy initiative to invest in and revitalize underserved urban communities. In the first condition, participants simply evaluated the first mover after reading this information. In the other two conditions, participants also read about a prosocial follower, Bank of the Atlantic, that launched a similar program, and these participants subsequently evaluated the follower only. The only difference between these two follower conditions was whether the first mover was described as having profited (vs. not profited) from investing in underserved neighborhoods. In this way, we sought to manipulate whether the follower's prosocial initiative seemed incentivized by the potential for profit. We did not specify the follower's outcome, that is, whether the follower subsequently turned out to profit from doing good. Thus, all participants either evaluated a prosocial first mover or one of two prosocial followers—one following a first mover that had profited and the other following a first mover that had not profited (i.e., a "high profit potential follower" and a "low profit potential follower"), with equal proportions randomly assigned to each of three cells. Our key test concerned the comparison between the two follower conditions. After reading, participants evaluated either the first mover or the follower, according to condition, on the same brand evaluation items ($\alpha = 0.96$) and the same motive purity items ($\alpha = 0.87$) used previously.

We preregistered two predictions. First, we predicted that the first mover would be evaluated more positively and seen as more purely motivated than the follower when the follower had a high potential for profit (and thus seemed to be behaving opportunistically). Second, we predicted that the follower would be evaluated more positively and seen as more purely motivated when there was low (vs. high) potential for the follower to profit.

All participants were asked to correctly identify which of the two banks they had evaluated (90.0% answered correctly). Finally, participants in the two follower conditions were asked to identify whether the first mover had profited from their prosocial initiative (89.4% answered correctly).

Results

Motive purity

Participants' motive purity judgments were subjected to a one-way ANOVA with condition as a between-subjects factor. Results revealed a significant omnibus effect of condition ($F(2,299) = 9.72, p < .001$). As we predicted, planned comparisons revealed that the first mover ($M = 3.57, SD = 1.38$) was evaluated as more purely motivated than the follower with high-profit potential ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.10; t(198) = 3.80, p < .001, d = 0.54$). The follower with low-profit potential ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.46$) was also evaluated as more purely motivated than the follower with high-profit potential ($t(197) = 4.14, p < .001, d = 0.59$). In terms of motive purity, there was no difference between the first mover and the follower with low-profit potential ($t(203) < 1, p > .5$).

Brand evaluations

A similar one-way ANOVA on participants' brand evaluations revealed a significant omnibus effect of condition ($F(2,299) = 12.91, p < .001$). In line with our predictions, planned comparison *t* tests revealed that the first mover was evaluated more positively ($M = 5.73, SD = 1.11$) than the follower with high-profit potential ($M = 4.89, SD = 1.12; t(198) = 5.34, p < .001, d = 0.75$). The follower with low-profit potential was evaluated marginally more positively ($M = 5.18, SD = 1.34$) than the follower with high-profit potential ($t(197) = 1.63, p = .10, d = 0.23$). The first mover was also evaluated more positively than the follower with low-profit potential ($t(203) = 3.24, p < .01, d = 0.45$).

Mediation

We estimated two mediation models to examine our causal predictions. The first model examined the comparison between the first mover and the follower with high-profit potential, treating brand evaluations as the dependent variable, condition as the independent variable (first mover = 0, follower = 1), and motive purity as the mediator. A

bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 samples revealed a significant indirect effect (effect estimate = -0.16 , $SE = 0.07$, $95\% CI = [-0.31, -0.04]$). This model essentially replicates the causal process we have observed previously: Differences in brand evaluations between the first mover and the follower with high-profit potential appear to be driven by discrepancies in perceived motive purity.

The second model examined the comparison between the two different follower conditions, again treating brand evaluations as the dependent variable, condition as the independent variable (high-profit potential = 0, low-profit potential = 1) and motive purity as the mediator. This procedure revealed a significant indirect effect (effect estimate = 0.29 , $SE = 0.09$, $95\% CI = [0.13, 0.49]$). This result indicates that to the extent that a follower is evaluated more positively for copying when profit potential is low, this effect is driven by differences in perceived purity of motive.

For completeness, we also analyzed the comparison between the first mover (0) and the follower with low-profit potential (1). Although the first mover was viewed more positively in terms of brand evaluations, this effect was not mediated by perceptions of underlying motive (effect estimate = 0.02 , $SE = 0.05$, $95\% CI = [-0.09, 0.13]$). This result suggests that additional preferences for first movers may be driven by other positive inferences about pioneering.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 provide further evidence for Hypotheses 2a and 2b via moderation and explore a theoretically informative boundary condition. Prosocial followers face less cynical attributions when their initiatives seem to lack a potential for profit (because the first mover's initiative was not profitable). Followers who emulated a prosocial initiative that had not been profitable previously were seen as having purer motives, and these motive inferences predicted downstream differences in broader brand attitudes. Indeed, when the first mover had not profited, the follower and first mover seemed roughly equally purely motivated. (Nonetheless, first movers were still preferred on the broader brand evaluations DV, a result consistent with the notion that first mover advantages are complex and multiply determined.)

This study's purpose was primarily to test the underlying psychological mechanism for order-based motive inferences (a lay intuition that following implies the presence of tainting marketplace

incentives). In the real world, consumers seldom have direct information about potential for profit. Still, the fact that motive inferences and downstream brand evaluations change when such information is provided suggests that these follower costs are not driven by other relevant alternatives (such as perceived creativity, innovativeness, general dislike of copying, etc.), on which potential for profit information should have little effect. In Study 4, we turn to a more practical question: What can prosocial followers do to avoid attributions of self-interest?

Study 4. Finding your Own Cause can Diminish Skepticism about Prosocial Following

We have thus far demonstrated that prosocial followers, relative to first movers, are seen as less purely motivated and evaluated less positively overall as a result. In Study 4, we ask whether later entrants can recoup some of the costs of following by differentiating their prosocial behavior from that of the first mover (i.e., by finding their own cause; Hypothesis 3). To investigate, we told participants about two technology brands that each recently launched a corporate philanthropy initiative, with one brand launching their charitable effort 6 months later than the other; and we varied whether the follower's initiative was similar to or different from the first mover's. In all conditions, the first mover brand launched an outreach program to teach young women to code. The follower then either offered a similar coding program or instead organized volunteering efforts at local animal shelters. We predicted that differentiating, relative to copying, would engender more favorable motive inferences and brand attitudes.

To provide an especially conservative test of this prediction, we intentionally selected a differentiated initiative that we expected would seem both *less* socially impactful and a *less* natural fit with a technology company's brand. In other words, we expected that participants would give more credit to a follower firm that differentiated its prosocial initiative, even if doing so would seem to accomplish less good for society and fit less naturally with the brand. Evidence in favor of this pattern would suggest that under some circumstances people respond more favorably to followers who are more original, but less socially impactful, in their charitable behavior. Note that we make no normative claims about the relative societal impact of offering free coding classes vs. volunteering at

animal shelters. Of interest here are participants' perceptions of impact.

Method

Perceived impact and fit pretest

We suspected that people would generally view offering free coding classes for young women as more socially impactful and a better fit for a technology brand than organizing volunteering efforts at animal shelters. To test this prediction, we recruited 202 MTurkers (mean age = 35.5, 38.1% female) for a short pretest. Participants were asked to consider a technology brand deciding between two possible charitable initiatives to launch. One was described as "a program aimed at increasing access to software engineering jobs for young women." The other was described as "a program aimed at caring for neglected and abused animals." Participants then answered two questions: "Which program do you think will have a greater positive impact on society?" and "Which program do you think would fit more naturally with the [technology] company's brand and message?" on a scale from 0 to 100, with the two programs as the endpoints of this scale. Which program sat at which scale endpoint was randomized and coded such that higher numbers always indicated a participants' belief that the initiative helping women land jobs in technology was more socially impactful or a better brand-cause fit. The scale's midpoint always read "about the same."

With respect to perceived impact, 68% of participants gave a response greater than 50, indicating a belief that offering coding classes to increase gender representation in tech was more socially impactful. A one-sample *t* test comparing participants' perceptions of social impact to the midpoint of the scale indicated that coding classes were, on average, seen as having a greater positive impact on society ($M = 63.1$, $SD = 27.5$; $t(201) = 6.77$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.48$). With respect to brand-cause fit, 75% gave a response greater than 50, indicated a belief that offering coding classes better fit the brand. A one-sample *t* test comparing participants' perceptions of brand-cause fit to the midpoint of the scale indicated that coding classes were, on average, seen as a better fit for the brand ($M = 72.9$, $SD = 28.1$; $t(201) = 11.58$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.82$).

In sum, the pretest results confirmed our intuitions: An initiative aimed at increasing gender diversity in tech (relative to one aimed at providing care for animals) was seen as more socially

impactful and a better fit for a technology brand. Nevertheless, we predicted that followers would be judged more negatively for launching such an initiative if doing so appeared derivative of similar efforts by a prosocial first mover.

Main study

A separate sample of 643 MTurkers (mean age = 38.3, 44.9% female) participated in the main study. All participants read about two technology brands ("Techlogix" and "Businessware") which offer cloud-based storage support for businesses. In all cases, participants learned that in early 2019, Techlogix (the first mover) launched a charitable initiative aimed at increasing gender diversity in the technology industry: free coding classes for young women at local community colleges. Then, "six months later," Businessware (the follower) launched their own charitable initiative. We varied between conditions whether Businessware also launched free coding classes (copied condition) or instead organized volunteering efforts at local animal shelters (differentiated condition). To avoid the inference that the follower's coding classes would provide a redundant service or somehow compete with the first mover's, we described Techlogix as based in San Francisco and Businessware as based in Boston.

Participants then rated both the first mover and the follower on the same motive purity ($\alpha_{FM} = 0.89$, $\alpha_{FOL} = 0.92$) and brand evaluation ($\alpha_{FM} = 0.96$, $\alpha_{FOL} = 0.98$) items used previously. Thus, we employed a mixed 2 (order: within-subjects) \times 2 (follower response: between-subjects) design. We preregistered the following predictions. First, we predicted a main effect of order such that first movers would be viewed as more purely motivated and evaluated more positively than followers. Second, we predicted an interaction whereby the discrepancy in perceived motives and brand attitudes would be larger when the follower copied (vs. differentiated from) the first mover's prosocial initiative. Third, we predicted that followers who differentiate would be seen as more purely motivated and evaluated more positive positively than followers who copy.

Finally, participants were asked to identify which brand launched their prosocial initiative first as a brief manipulation/attention check. Following our preregistered plan, we excluded an additional 19 participants who missed this simple detail (3% of the total sample). All reported results hold if these participants are instead included.

Results

Motive Purity

We analyzed participants' perceptions of motive purity for first movers and followers using a repeated measures ANOVA with entry order as a within-subjects factor and follower response (copied vs. differentiated) as a between-subjects factor. In line with predictions, this approach revealed a significant main effect of entry order such that first movers were seen as more purely motivated than followers across conditions ($M_{\text{first mover}} = 4.10$, $SD = 1.53$ vs. $M_{\text{follower}} = 3.60$, $SD = 1.62$; $F(1, 641) = 67.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_G^2 = 0.026$). We also detected a main effect of condition on perceived motive purity ($M_{\text{differentiated}} = 4.05$, $SD = 1.59$ vs. $M_{\text{copied}} = 3.65$, $SD = 1.57$; $F(1, 641) = 14.37$, $p < .001$, $\eta_G^2 = 0.017$). Importantly, these main effects were qualified by a significant entry order \times follower response interaction ($F(1, 641) = 45.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_G^2 = 0.017$).

Replicating our previous results, when the follower copied the first mover's prosocial initiative, the follower was seen as less purely motivated than the first mover ($M_{\text{Fol-Copy}} = 3.20$, $SD = 1.51$ vs. $M_{\text{FM-Copy}} = 4.10$, $SD = 1.50$; paired $t(322) = 11.58$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.64$). However, in line with predictions, when the follower differentiated their prosocial initiative from that of the first mover, there was no difference in perceived motive purity ($M_{\text{Fol-Differ}} = 4.01$, $SD = 1.62$ vs. $M_{\text{FM-Differ}} = 4.10$, $SD = 1.56$; paired $t(319) = 0.98$, $p = .33$, $d = 0.05$).

Moreover, independent samples t test revealed that while the first mover was regarded similarly regardless of the follower's response ($t(641) = 0.06$, $p = .95$), the follower who copied was seen as less purely motivated than the follower who differentiated ($M_{\text{Fol-Copy}} = 3.20$, $SD = 1.51$ vs. $M_{\text{Fol-Differ}} = 4.01$, $SD = 1.62$; $t(641) = 6.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.52$).

Brand evaluations

A similar repeated measures ANOVA revealed a similar pattern of results for participants' brand evaluations. See Figure 2. We detected a main effect of entry order such that first movers were evaluated more positively than followers across conditions ($M_{\text{first mover}} = 5.42$, $SD = 1.20$ vs. $M_{\text{follower}} = 4.93$, $SD = 1.41$; $F(1, 641) = 89.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_G^2 = 0.035$). We also detected a main effect whereby brands were viewed more positively in the differentiated condition relative to the copied

condition ($M_{\text{differentiated}} = 5.33$, $SD = 1.25$ vs. $M_{\text{copied}} = 5.01$, $SD = 1.40$; $F(1, 641) = 13.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_G^2 = 0.015$). Again, these main effects were qualified by the predicted entry order \times follower response interaction ($F(1, 641) = 51.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta_G^2 = 0.02$).

When the follower copied, the follower was evaluated less positively than the first mover ($M_{\text{Fol-Copy}} = 4.58$, $SD = 1.46$ vs. $M_{\text{FM-Copy}} = 5.44$, $SD = 1.20$; paired $t(322) = 12.94$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.72$). However, when the follower differentiated, there was no discrepancy in brand evaluations ($M_{\text{Fol-Differ}} = 5.28$, $SD = 1.28$ vs. $M_{\text{FM-Differ}} = 5.39$, $SD = 1.21$; paired $t(319) = 1.48$, $p = .14$, $d = 0.08$).

Moreover, while the first mover was evaluated similarly across conditions ($t(641) = 0.54$, $p = .59$), the follower who copied was evaluated significantly less positively than the follower who differentiated ($M_{\text{Fol-Copy}} = 4.58$, $SD = 1.46$ vs. $M_{\text{Fol-Differ}} = 5.28$, $SD = 1.28$; $t(641) = 6.40$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.50$). See Figure 2.

Mediation

We tested our proposed causal process in two ways. First, we calculated a difference score between judgments of the first mover and of the follower on each of the two DVs: brand evaluations and motive purity. These scores represent the magnitude of the first mover's advantage on each dimension for each participant. We then estimated a mediation model with condition (copied = 0, differentiated = 1) as the independent variable, the motive purity difference score as the mediator, and the brand evaluation difference score as the dependent variable. We found evidence of a significant indirect effect (effect estimate = -0.48 , $SE = 0.08$, 95% $CI = [-0.32, -0.67]$), suggesting that the follower's choice to differentiate diminished participants' preference for first movers by reducing the discrepancy in their perceived motives for doing good.

Next, we narrowed in on the follower conditions and tested whether perceived motive purity mediated the effect of differentiation on brand attitudes (copied = 0, differentiated = 1). Again, we found a significant indirect effect (effect estimate = 0.39 , $SE = 0.06$, 95% $CI = [0.27, 0.52]$), suggesting that prosocial followers were judged more favorably when finding their own cause because differentiation attenuated the inference that their motives for doing good were impure. For completeness, we tested the same mediation pathway comparing first

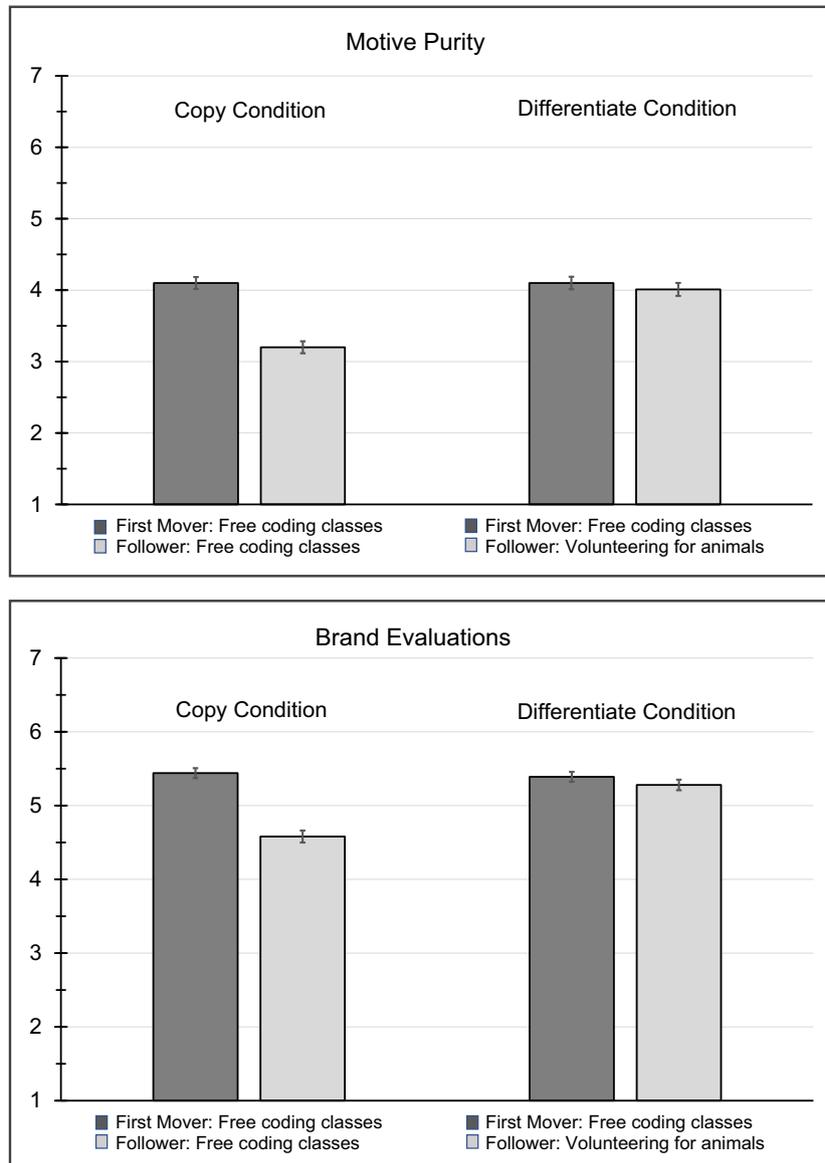


Figure 2. Perceived motive purity (1–7 scale) and brand evaluations (1–7 scale) by entry order (within-subjects) and condition (between-subjects) from Study 4. Error bars represent standard errors. Note that across conditions, the first mover's behavior is identical, but the follower's response varies: The follower either launches a prosocial program that is similar to or differentiated from that of the first mover.

movers across conditions and detected no indirect effect (effect estimate = 0.00, SE = 0.05, 95% CI = [−0.09, 0.09]).

Discussion

The results of Study 4 are consistent with Hypothesis 3: Follower brands are regarded more favorably when they perform more original prosocial acts, even if these seem to have less charitable impact and seem to fit less well with the brand.

Although our pretest participants generally believed that offering free coding classes for women accomplishes more good for society than organizing care for stray animals, participants in our main study evaluated the former as less purely motivated and more negatively overall when it was enacted by a follower. This result poses a potential challenge. From an impact perspective, it would be preferable for follower brands to deploy their resources toward the most important societal problems and the most impactful charitable causes regardless of entry

order, but this may prove an ineffective brand strategy if consumers prefer less effective, but more original, forms of prosocial behavior from followers.

These data also provide some insight into the strength of the effects in question. Prior literature touts the importance of brand-cause fit as a strong driver of consumer responses to corporate prosocial initiatives (Nan & Heo, 2007; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010). That is, consumers typically prefer brands to take on social causes connected to their product, industry, or mission. Here, we found that conditional on being a follower, a tech company was evaluated more positively for supporting animal shelters (lower on brand-cause fit) than for offering free coding classes (higher on brand-cause fit).

We replicated these results with an identical design, but in a different prosocial context (the TOMS/BOBS case) in Appendix Study E.

General Discussion

Emulating the prosocial behavior of others may seem an intuitive strategy for doing good and an appealing way for prosociality to spread. Nevertheless, we find that across a variety of industries, initiatives, and charitable causes, follower brands that adopt prosocial practices from first movers are believed to have more tainted motives. In our experiments, participants consistently viewed prosocial followers as more self-interested than prosocial first movers, evaluated them more negatively, and even avoided their ostensibly superior products. We also found that the tendency to penalize followers was stronger in the context of prosocial campaigns (where motives matter more) than in the context of profit-seeking ones (where motives matter less), and that first mover preferences were amplified in the domain of prosocial behavior as a result.

These motive inferences appear to arise because follower brands are expected to opportunistically copy prosocial initiatives which are profitable, and prosocial behavior with profit motives is seen as unacceptable (Bhattacharjee et al., 2017; Silver, Newman, & Small, 2021). Indeed, when participants learned that the prosocial first mover had not profited from their good behavior and that the follower's good deeds were unlikely to be profitable as a result, the difference in perceived motive purity between first mover and follower vanished. Finally, we find that followers can get more credit by launching more original prosocial efforts (i.e., "finding their own cause"), even if doing so also means doing less good.

These results extend and bridge two important areas of marketing research. First, they contribute to a growing body of literature examining the strategic value for brands of taking action for the greater good. While consumers increasingly demand that brands have a positive impact on society, they also penalize brands for doing good for the wrong reasons (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013; Newman & Cain, 2014). Our results identify a novel cue, entry order, that consumers may use in drawing inferences about the extent to which brands actually care about the causes they support. Second, our experiments provide evidence for a novel pioneering effect not previously identified in the first mover literature and one specific to greater good marketing. Previous research has found that first mover brands frequently (but not always) enjoy various benefits (Robinson et al., 1994), but our work is the first to separately identify perceptions of more genuine motives as one of them.

We note a few limitations. In our experiments, participants were often provided with entry order information in order to test our causal hypotheses. In the real world, consumers might acquire such information by reading popular press articles or industry reports about the latest trends in greater good marketing or by simply observing the behavior of brands in categories they frequent. However, not all consumers will possess discrete knowledge of entry order, and some prosocial followers may be able to avoid negative inferences if their following goes unnoticed. On the other hand, discrete entry order knowledge may not always be required for our effects to arise. It is possible that a vague awareness of follower status or a perception of unoriginality (even a mistaken one) is sufficient to taint motive inferences, particularly in the domain of prosocial behavior where skepticism is high (Critcher & Dunning, 2011). In a pilot study in which we measured—rather than manipulated—participants' knowledge of entry order, we found that prosocial brands that were *believed to be* followers were seen as more self-interested and less likable, providing some support for this conjecture.

In addition, we have primarily examined cases in which being a follower is mostly unambiguous, but as previous researchers have noted (Silver & Shaw, 2018), the exact features that give rise to the perception that an action or product is unoriginal are not well-understood. For our purposes, the extent to which a given prosocial initiative appears to have been explicitly copied will vary by observer, domain, and context, and we suspect that the magnitude of the first mover motive purity advantage will co-vary accordingly. Specifying more

granular gradations in psychological perceptions of copying and identifying optimal levels and dimensions of differentiation to achieve perceptions of originality is an important area for future research.

Managerial Implications

Our results also offer a number of concrete recommendations for marketing managers. From a brand value perspective, an obvious takeaway from these studies is that brands joining a prosocial movement should try to be first. To the extent that following another brand is unavoidable (which may be increasingly the case as prosocial initiatives become more commonplace), brands should make efforts to differentiate their good deeds from those of their competitors. Differentiation can be achieved by choosing a charitable cause or cause-marketing structure which is less obviously derivative, as demonstrated in Study 4. It may also be possible to curtail negative inferences by emulating a prosocial initiative from a noncompetitor. In line with previous literature (Van Horen & Pieters, 2017), we expect that adopting prosocial initiatives from brands in other industries may be evaluated less negatively, perhaps because borrowing ideas from other market sectors seems less certain to be profitable (Silver et al., 2021) or because it is less readily recognized as following at all. Another recommendation would be to avoid emulating prosocial initiatives that have been conspicuously profitable for others in the past: Such situations increase suspicion that followers have ulterior motives. More generally, brands may do well to focus on launching prosocial initiatives that will be seen as creative and original, perhaps even if these seem like a less natural brand-cause fit, as was the case in our Study 4.

From a social good perspective, prosocial first movers may want to take steps to alleviate the reputational burdens placed on followers. For example, by issuing to their competitors a call to action, first movers may hope to reframe following in a way that does not implicate followers' profit-maximizing motives, painting them as "joining the cause" rather than shrewdly following the market. However, when we tested for this sort of effect in Appendix Study D, we found little support for it. In that study, the discrepancy in perceived motives between first movers and followers—our central result—was unaffected by the presence of an invitation. The broader impact of invitations and challenges in prosocial behavior is beyond the scope of this article, but an interesting area for future research.

Extensions and Future Directions

We have examined observers' evaluations of first movers in the domain of corporate prosocial behavior specifically. However, a natural further question concerns whether similar patterns of attribution would be observed with individual prosocial actors. For example, does the first consumer in a community to install solar panels on their house seem more environmentally conscious than later neighbors to do so? Although monetary rewards are seldom at stake in cases of individual prosocial behavior, we suspect that later entrants in prosocial movements may be seen as motivated by social pressure more than by a genuine desire to do good, giving rise to similar first mover effects. Another interesting extension would be to examine how *actually being* the first or a follower to do good impacts anticipated and experienced warm glow (Andreoni, 1990), or to explore whether latter prosocial efforts evoke less flattering self-attributions (Savary, Goldsmith, & Dhar, 2015). To the extent that being a prosocial follower feels less fulfilling and praiseworthy, later entrants may feel less compelled to do good (see also, Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009).

Our experiments have also focused on comparisons between a first mover and a single follower, but some settings will obviously contain a greater number of actors in a more complex entry process and other comparisons will be relevant. Future research can examine how evaluations of first movers and later entrants vary as a function of group size and composition, as well as speed and order of adoption as prosocial norms pervade larger networks of actors. An intriguing possibility is that early followers (e.g., those second or third) may be seen as more opportunistic and evaluated more negatively than later adopters (e.g., those seventh or eighth) who may be seen as simply resigned to adopt industry standards and best practices.

Finally, while we have examined the order of prosocial actions *between* brands, it would be interesting to examine how repeated prosocial efforts from *the same brand* are evaluated. For example, if a brand launches an annual fundraising drive for charity, does the first year's event seem more laudable than the second or the fifth? On the one hand, it is possible that performing the same prosocial action repeatedly can serve as a signal of cause-commitment. On the other, later identical acts may seem either more calculated or simply more routine and less effortful, reducing perceptions of their genuineness. Recent work by Gershon and Smith (2020) offers some evidence in favor of the latter possibility in authenticity

judgments of repeated acts from artists and performers: Recycling an act makes it seem less authentic. The question of whether brands hoping to build a reputation for social responsibility would do better to double down on a small set of concerted, repeated prosocial efforts or differentiate their prosocial initiatives across a variety of causes and forms of outreach is an interesting one for future research.

Conclusion

In an ideal world, early adopters of prosocial practices would identify the most effective and impactful ways to do good and set a public example for later entrants to follow. Prosocial followers would adopt charitable best practices, and observers would reward charitable *impact* regardless of perceived motive. Our studies identify a psychological snag: Order of entry matters a great deal for determining who gets credit. As a result, firms are sometimes incentivized to sacrifice social impact in order to appear more original and thus genuinely motivated. In addition to identifying a marketplace dynamic which makes effective and contagious corporate altruism less likely, our results point to a quagmire that brands may face as consumer demand for prosocial impact grows.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Appendix S1. Supplementary Studies