

Brand Associations, Consumers' Attitudes and Cause-Related Marketing: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This exploratory study seeks to examine the evolution of the brand structure of a For-Profit Organization (FPO), before and after a partnership with a Non-Profit Organization (NPO). To better understand this impact, a review of the most relevant theories on branding, co-branding and cause-related marketing is first proposed. The problem statement is then exposed and an experiment derived from semi directive interviews of potential consumers, on a French partnership, is described. The research findings on the brand structure of the FPO are compared to the theories previously developed and finally, managerial implications, study limitations and further research areas are presented.

Key words

Branding, Co branding, Cause-Related Marketing, Central core, Non-profit organization.

Résumé

Cette approche exploratoire s'intéresse à l'évolution des associations et des attitudes envers la marque avant et après un partenariat avec une association à but non lucratif. Pour appréhender cette évolution, une revue de littérature sur la marque, le co-marquage et le CRM (Cause Related Marketing) est d'abord présentée. En découle l'exposé des problématiques et la description de l'expérimentation menée sur le cas Volvic Unicef à partir d'entretiens semi directifs de consommateurs potentiels. Les évolutions des associations liées à la marque Volvic suite à ce partenariat, sont alors confrontées aux théories énoncées au préalable. Pour conclure, les implications managériales, les limites de la recherche et des voies de recherche à venir sont présentées.

Mots clés

Marque, Co-marquage, CRM (Cause-Related Marketing), Noyau central, Organisation à but non lucratif.

Introduction

The ever-increasing competitive environment leads companies to innovate and launch products on mature or oversaturated markets where consumers have to choose between offers with a similar level of quality, price and services. However, today, in the 21st century, a business which is the best at offering quality products and services at competitive prices may not be doing enough in the eyes of the consumer (Mason, 1993). Accordingly, companies encounter difficulties in differentiating their corporate products and brands, which are considered as valuable strategic assets. This context leads businesses to consider new directions to position their firms and brands for the future and increase their brand value. The most popular strategies already being used to leverage the potential of brands refer to brand extensions and co-branding (Rooney, 1995). The literature distinguishes two types of co-branding: (1) ingredient branding which incorporates key attributes of one brand into another brand as know how or ingredients (Desai and Keller, 2002) and (2) symbolic co-branding which associates two brands in order to gain symbolic additional attributes (Cegarra and Michel, 2001).

Simultaneously, the Cone/Roper Executive Study (2002) indicates managers' fast-growing interest in integrating social issues into business practices. For instance, in 2000, American companies spent \$9 billion on social initiatives (Cone et al., 2003). This community involvement awareness is also perceptible among consumers who care more about the welfare of the society. Indeed, all over the world, citizens as well as consumers are directly or indirectly confronted with daily poverty, pollution, and mass consumption regardless of ethics, human and/or environmental values. These concerns impact the way people think about themselves as well as their needs of paying attention to each other. Consumers wish to ally caring with core life-style decisions in addition to increasing empathy for the troubles of others. Several reports maintain that 84% of Americans and 86% of Europeans would be likely to switch to a brand associated with a good cause (Cone, 2002; Hillard, 1999).

In such a context, strategies and concepts as Corporate Societal Marketing (CSM), Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) or Cause Branding (CB) appear to be aligning with the emerging trend consisting of coupleling a FPO brand with a NPO cause (Gourville and Rangan, 2004). This phenomenon illustrates the merger between corporate strategy and social responsibility (Smith and Alcorn, 1991). To sum up, the economic world is experiencing a huge shift of paradigm: from a profit-maximization to a profit-optimization ideology, which urges the new generation of corporate leaders to consider the 3P's in their decision-making process: Planet, People and Profit (Srivastava and Venkateswaran, 2000).

Consequently, in order to match consumers' concerns, Hoeffler and Keller (2002) suggest that executives, who have to preserve their competitive edge, should integrate the social dimension by linking their brand to an existing cause. For them, this kind of alliance should be managed as a standard co-branding strategy. So, even if co-branding has already been explored in various ways (Rooney, 1995; Cegarra and Michel, 2001; Abbo, 2006), few empirical investigations have examined it in a CRM context nor measured the influence it could possibly have on the FPO brand. Some questions remain, such as "How a partnership with a cause impacts the FPO brand structure and consumers' attitudes?", "Is the spillover effect described by Simonin and Ruth (1998) still effective in a CRM situation?" This exploratory study intends to clarify those questions from the consumers' standpoint.

1. Theoretical Foundations

In today's business environment, a brand is considered as a primary source of competitive advantage and a valuable strategic asset (Aaker, 1996). The American Marketing Association defines it as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". Organizations develop brands as a way to attract and keep customers by promoting value, image or lifestyle included in their brand identity. They continually look for new means of exploiting their brands, a capital to be managed with appropriate marketing tools and strategies. According to Rooney (1995), a branding strategy is essentially aimed at building the brand image, increasing the brand's value to the customer which leads to brand loyalty. Effectively, once consumers become accustomed to a certain brand, they do not readily accept substitutes. So even if branding is not the answer to all the problems facing businesses today, it has become a marketing priority (Kotler et al., 2006).

To enhance their brands and gain competitive advantage, today's marketers often link them to other entities, for example, people, places, things or other brands, as a means to improve their brand value by borrowing equity from others (Keller, 2003). According to Keller (2003), analyzing this leveraging process requires understanding (1) what in fact consumers know about a brand and (2) how this knowledge might be affected by linking the brand to other entities. Brand equity means a set of assets linked to the brand. These assets include brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, and associations (Aaker, 1991). Associations are informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory, which contribute to and ultimately define the brand's image to the consumer. These associations play an important role in consumers' product evaluations and choices, helping them make purchase decisions (Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2001). The concept of brand associations stems from cognitive psychology theories. From this approach, the brand structure is organized around two main dimensions: the brand central core and the brand peripheral system (Abric, 1994; Michel, 2000). The central core is defined as a stable, un-negotiable, and non-transformable part of the representations, which ensures brand durability. For Michel (2000), the brand central core combines all the elements perceived by a majority of consumers as being fixed to the brand. It constitutes the focal component of the brand, determining as well its meaning and structure. The peripheral system, which revolves around the central core, is much more individual and flexible (Abric, 1994). Indeed, it represents the interface between the brand central core and the concrete situation in which the brand evolves. Therefore, it enables the brand to adapt to any environmental or market fluctuations. Figure 1 illustrates this model.

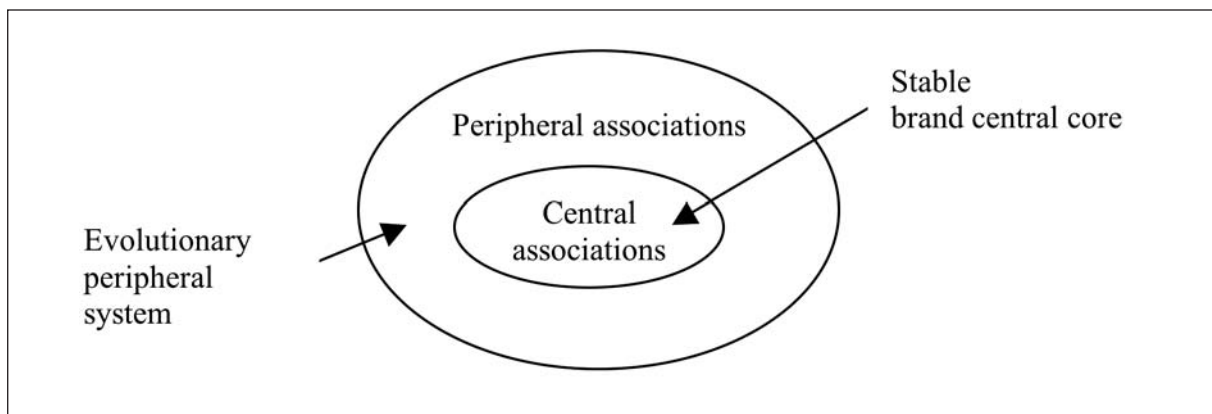


Figure 1: The brand central core and the brand peripheral system

As mentioned previously, today's consumers positively behave to a brand supporting a good cause. Indeed, a business which demonstrates responsiveness to social concerns and gives proportionately more to charity than other firms, receives higher reputation ratings by its publics (Fombrun and Shanley,

1990). Furthermore, one third of Americans consider a company's responsible business practices the most important factor in deciding whether or not to buy a brand. Hence, from the customer's perspective, sustaining a cause program has become a "must" in the marketplace for companies which are willing to remain competitive and keep their customers.

The notion of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which refers to corporate social actions whose purpose is to satisfy social needs, gains momentum (Angelidis and Ibrahim, 1993). The Cone/Roper Corporate Citizenship Study (2002) mentions that in the early 90s, innovative companies began to recognize the power of cause programs to create additional value. Progressively, cause programs evolved from a short-term tactic used to boost sales, into a powerful positioning discipline, used to raise brand equity and enhance corporate image with significant bottom-line and community impacts (Till and Nowak, 2000). In other words, CSR is viewed as an investment that improves the long-term performance of the corporation (Stroup and Neubert, 1987) and an important element for the embodiment of the brand.

New CSR marketing communication campaigns have been designed to inform, communicate, and positively affect stakeholders' associations (Till and Nowak, 2000). These initiatives are commonly known as Cause Marketing or Cause-Related Marketing (CRM). For Varadarajan and Menon (1988), CRM is characterized as a marketing program that attempts to achieve two main objectives: (1) improve corporate performance and (2) help worthy causes by linking fund raising for the benefit of a cause to the purchase of the firm's products and/or services. From a marketer's perspective, CRM consists in strengthening consumer demand (Smith and Alcorn, 1991). Till and Nowak (2000) emphasize this standpoint, stipulating that CRM is an effective communication tool used to increase customer loyalty and build brand image. By this way, companies can differentiate themselves in the marketplace.

By 1998, Cause Marketing has become a more common practice. Consumers are rewarding companies that are differentiating their products and services integrating social issues. According to the Cone/Roper Corporate Citizenship Study (2002), 92% of Americans have a more positive image of companies that support causes they care about. More than eight out of ten Americans would be likely to switch brands to one associated with a good cause, if price and quality were similar (84% in 2002 vs 81% in 2001). Cone (2003) also indicates that women more than men, consider social issues as extremely important for companies. Over years, CRM has evolved from "Cause Promotion" to a new approach that Cone (2000) calls "Cause Branding", a business strategy that integrates a social cause or issue into a corporate brand's personality and organizational identity. Cause Branding Programs are built upon the unique values and culture of each company and can truly differentiate a brand, providing it with long-term, sustainable competitive advantage.

Keller (2003) stipulates that a Cause Marketing Program can build brand awareness via recall and recognition, enhances brand image in terms of attributes such as user imagery (e.g. kind and generous) and brand personality (e.g. sincere), evokes brand feelings (e.g. social approval and self-respect), establishes brand attitudes (e.g. credibility judgments such as trustworthy and likable), and creates experiences (e.g. through a sense of community and participation in cause-related activities).

Hoeffler and Keller (2002) identify three main branding strategies whose focus is to create mutually beneficial situations. Firstly, co-branding consists in linking the brand to an existing cause. The alliance between America Airlines and the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation is frequently held up as an example of such a strategy. This paper is principally focused on this scheme. Secondly, self-branding refers to the creation of an entirely new organization to deliver benefits associated with the cause. Ronald McDonald House Charities illustrates perfectly this strategy. Lastly, joint branding turns to a firm that partners with a NPO in order to create a specific program promoting exclusively the cause, as with American Express's Charge Against Hunger program in conjunction with the Share Our Strength Foundation.

As Cause Marketing has progressed, it has become clear to managers and researchers that consumers are highly influenced by a Cause Marketing campaign and partnership (Sagawa and Segal, 2000; Adkins, 2000).

As a particular type of brand alliance, co-branding may modify consumers' evaluations and perceptions of the brands involved. According to Simonin and Ruth (1998), brand alliances have the potential to modify subsequent attitudes toward the partner brands: "judgments about the brand alliance are likely to be affected by prior attitudes toward each brand". They further argue that brand alliances influence how the partner brands are evaluated by developing new associations. In other words, brand alliance evaluations have spillover effects on attitudes toward each partner. Moreover, brand alliances could represent strategic marketing opportunities to add to or alter a brand's specific associations (Broniarczyk and Alba, 1994).

To analyze the attitude toward the brand, Michel (2000) distinguishes three dimensions. The first dimension is the cognitive component, which concerns the knowledge accumulated about the brand. The second dimension is the affective component, which concerns the brand evaluation summarizing all the beliefs about a brand in a global orientation, positive or negative. The third dimension is the conative component, which corresponds to the tendency of consumers to buy or reject the brand's products. The purchase likelihood of branded products is a traditional indicator of this dimension.

2. Problem Statement

This exploratory study seeks to examine the impact of partnering with a NPO on the FPO brand. As examined in the co-branding literature cited above, this kind of program may influence consumer attitudes toward the FPO brand, creating new associations for the brand involved (Simonin and Ruth, 1998), leading consumers to brand loyalty (Rooney, 1995) and developing positive judgments to a brand supportive of a good cause (Cone, 2002; Hillard, 1999). Based on Michel's (2000) theory, Cause Marketing Program may not modify the central core of the FPO brand structure, but its peripheral system. Additionally, women and men having different feelings in front of such a partnership (Cone, 2003), female consumers may be more supportive of cause co-branding initiatives in their daily purchase decisions than men.

3. Research Methodology

To investigate those theories, a before-after experimental design has been conducted on a convenient sample. Derived from a marketing strategy, this methodology is widely applied in the analysis of the consequences of a co-branding strategy (Aaker and Keller, 1990).

The qualitative research emanates from Michel's (2000) method of brand associations to determine the central core and the peripheral system of the FPO brand and their evolution after a cause co-branding initiative.

A real CRM alliance, between a FPO (Volvic) and a NPO (UNICEF) has been chosen. Acquired by the French group Danone, Volvic produces and markets natural mineral bottled water internationally.

Its water comes directly from a protected area located in the middle of the “Massif Central” mountain in “Auvergne”, France. UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund) is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children’s rights, to help meet their basic needs and expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. Both organizations combined their competencies through the “1 liter for 10 liters” fund raising program: for every liter of water sold, Volvic promised to supply 10 liters of fresh water for the African deserted region named Sahel.

This initiative started in France on February 15th 2006 and ended on June 15th 2006, after being advertised on TV, in magazines, via the Internet and on Volvic bottle labels.



After creating an interview guide in order to know what is associated with the Volvic brand, a treatment experiment group composed of 18 potential consumers (9 women and 9 men) has been picked to answer questions, both before and after exposure to the Volvic and UNICEF TV campaign. A period of 10 days passed between the two face-to-face interviews (Figure 2).

To enhance the internal validity of this experiment, a control group has been constituted with two additional interviewees – one man and one woman- who followed the same protocol (before and after questionnaire) but without introducing any stimulus, as shown in Figure 2.

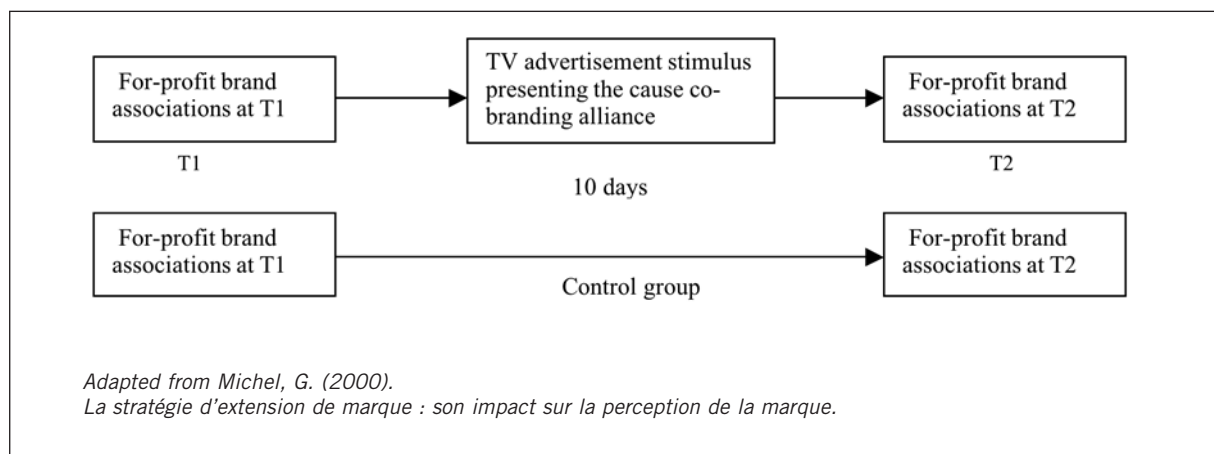


Figure 2: Experimental design

According to Abric (1994) brand associations should be investigated in a setting that allows respondents to reply freely by producing spontaneous associations. For this reason, interviews took place in a respondent familiar area, such as the workplace or home.

The treatment group was asked to produce spontaneous associations about Volvic, and for each association, answer either YES or NO to the following question: “if a product is not associated with.... (the association), can it be Volvic brand related?” For example if a customer answered “bottle” as an association linked to Volvic, the question was: “if a product is not “a bottle” can it be Volvic brand related ?” This refutation technique enables to determine if the spontaneous association given by the interviewee is linked to the brand central core or to its peripheral system (Michel, 2000).

Ten days later, the stimulus is introduced: the interviewee watches the 20-second TV advertisement displayed on a laptop and immediately responds to the second interview similarly designed like the first one. In this way, the evolution of the Volvic brand image, before and after the cause co-branding partnership, can be analyzed.

Finally, the interviewee is asked some additional questions with regard to their purchase intentions concerning Volvic.

4. Results and Findings

During the T1 treatment group experiment, 140 associations linked to Volvic were spontaneously generated by the 18 potential consumers, which correspond to an average of 7.78 quotations per interviewee. Associations cited more than three times were retained for the study, which corresponds to 92.8% of the total number of quotations. After a content analysis, the latter were gathered into 13 association units. Applying the refutation technique, 6 associations out of 13 were defined as Volvic central core, 5 as its peripheral system, and 2 between both.

For the T2 treatment group experiment, questions were identically repeated: 126 associations related to Volvic were instinctively engendered by the same sample, after exposure to the cause co-branding with UNICEF. This outcome represents an average of 5.85 quotations per interviewee. Here, associations that were enumerated more than three times, concern 87.3% of the total number of quotations. After the content analysis, 15 association units were gathered: 6 out of 15 related to Volvic central core, 8 to its peripheral system, and 1 between both as shown in Figure 3.

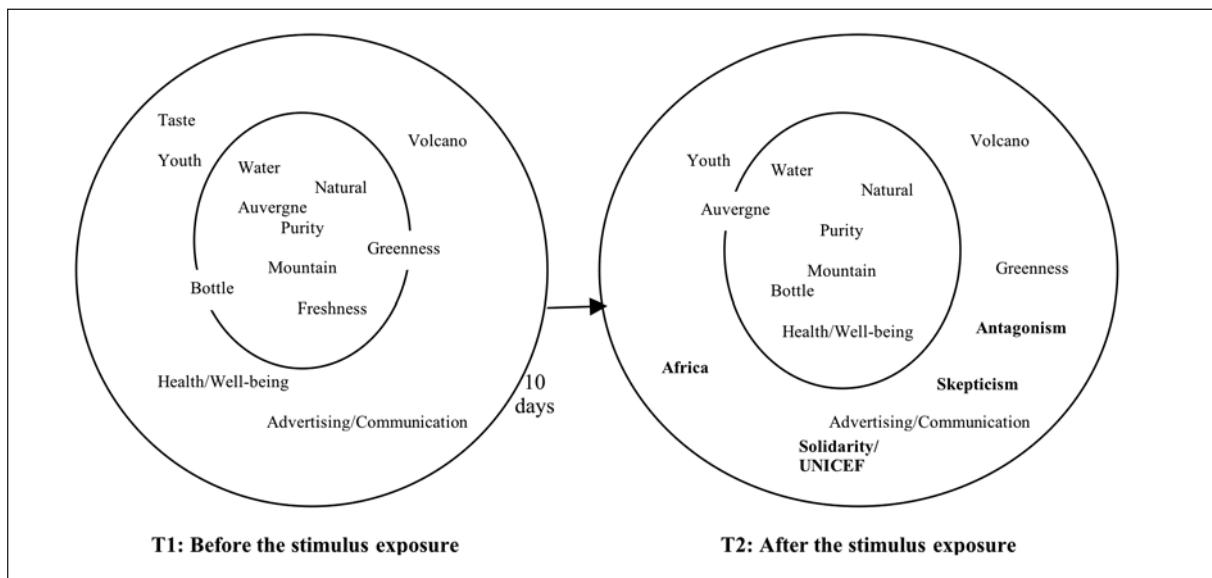


Figure 3: Volvic brand structure before and after the stimulus exposure

According to this experiment, after exposure to the Volvic-UNICEF alliance and in comparison with the associations initially made with Volvic, the number of associations related to the FPO brand decreased from 140 to 126 and 4 new associations appeared: “Africa” “Solidarity/UNICEF” “Skepticism” “Antagonism”.

As expected for the findings, it seems that Volvic brand initial associations entail an evolution after the exposure to the stimulus (evolution of the cognitive dimension of the attitude toward the brand), which tends to confirm Simonin’s and Ruth’s (1998) assumptions stating that brand alliances influence the way the partner brands are evaluated by developing new associations even in a CRM context.

Concerning the impact of this alliance on the FPO brand image, the number of associations related to Volvic central core does not change after exposure to the stimulus. However, 4 associations out of 6 remain tied to its central core: “Water”, “Natural”, “Purity”, and “Mountain”, and 2 associations enter: “Bottle” which was between the central core and the peripheral system at T1, and “Health/Well-being” which was in the peripheral system. Besides, “Freshness” which totally disappears from the brand structure and “Auvergne” moves from the central core to the borderline between the central core and the peripheral system.

This slight evolution seems to confirm Michel’s (2000) theory on the stability of the brand central core even after a CRM partnership.

Regarding the evolution of Volvic’s peripheral system after exposure to the stimulus, 8 vs. 5 initial associations are present. Three associations remain tied to it: “Volcano”, “Advertising/Communication” and “Youth”. One, “Greenness”, leaves the borderline between the central core and the peripheral system to enter the Volvic peripheral system. Another one, “Taste” completely disappears from the brand structure and 4 new associations appear at T2: “Africa”, “Solidarity/UNICEF”, “Skepticism” and “Antagonism”.

These results corroborate Michel’s (2000) approach which stipulates that a brand central core stays generally stable contrary to its peripheral system which is more flexible and matches the environment fluctuations. This theory seems to be also valid in a CRM context.

Besides, the evolution of the FPO brand peripheral system between T1 and T2 seems to indicate a variation in the affective dimension of the attitude toward the brand. Even if the for-profit brand evaluation was not studied in its global orientation, new associations appeared after exposure to the Volvic-UNICEF stimulus. Those latter have both positive (“Solidarity/UNICEF”) and negative (“Skepticism” and “Antagonism”) connotations. These observations show that the affective dimension has been affected. Therefore, as expected for this experiment, Cone’s (2002) and Hillard’s (1999) conclusions on positive judgments about a brand supportive of a good cause can be invalidated.

Considering the control group replies, the associations related to Volvic were fairly similar in number and in content between the T1 and T2 experiments, which confirms the relevance of the results of this qualitative research.

Concerning the conative dimension of the consumers’ attitude, only 1 person out of 5 Volvic customers belonging to the sample, declared to be willing to purchase more Volvic water after being exposed to the stimulus. Regarding Volvic non-consumers, 6 out of 13 interviewees declared the same. This surprising outcome would infer that a cause co-branding strategy would have more positive effect on the non-consumers of the FPO brand and seems to reject Rooney’s (1995) theory connecting co-branding strategy to brand loyalty (Ghewy et al., 2006).

Finally, previous research mentions that women feel more concerned than men with social issues in their daily purchase decisions. In this exploratory study, after exposure to the Volvic-UNICEF campaign, 5 out of 7 potential consumers claiming their Volvic purchase intentions were women. As presumed, Cone’s (2000) gender assertions seem to be sustained.

Conclusion and Managerial Implications

The results provide evidence that a cause co-branding partnership can influence the FPO brand structure and consumers' attitudes. This exploratory research offers implications for both marketing practice and theory. In terms of practical implications, the findings indicate that a standard co-branding strategy between two FPO brands can be transposed to a cause co-branding approach.

This study reveals as well, that partnering with a NPO enhances the FPO brand peripheral system much more than the brand central core, which was previously proved for the co-branding strategy between two brands (Michel, 2000). However, although the FPO brand image evolved with new associations, the latter can be either positive or negative; this can reinforce or alter the FPO brand. So, managers have to pay careful attention to specific variables when selecting a cause partner (prior cause associations, prior cause attributes...) and also be aware of the risks incurred by negative connotations on the FPO brand image after a CRM campaign. Therefore, it is highly recommended that marketers spend time on preliminary studies before initiating a cause co-branding program just as before initiating a FPO co-branding operation.

In terms of strategy, co-branding is typically used by marketers to enhance brand equity and to lead to brand loyalty (Rooney, 1995). In this experiment, it seems that CRM alliance is more effective to attract new customers than to reinforce brand loyalty (Ghewy et al., 2006).

Finally, the experimental findings suggest that the cause co-branding program suits more female than male expectations, which seems to be a specific characteristic of a CRM context. Globally, in a society where people are constantly "cause-hunting", CRM co-branding is a valuable tool that needs to be cautiously implemented.

Turning to academic implications, while cause co-branding and FPO co-branding mechanisms look alike, FPO co-branding measurement tools, that have already been tested, can be applied to a research on cause co-branding. Consequently, semi-directive interviews can be designed replicating valid survey instruments and measurement scales already used in a standard co-branding context, and including gender variables.

Limitations and Further Research

This qualitative research is exploratory in nature and is limited in its scope. Nevertheless, the results provide a platform for future research in the CRM area. In-depth studies of cause co-branding strategy and its growing relationships with FPOs in different regions of the world are needed.

This would help toward a better understanding of how cultural differences affect CRM strategy choices. For instance, in this experiment, the emergence of "Skepticism" could be explained by the French mindset which tends to feel suspicious toward a cause co-branding campaign. Further research would be worth studying in the United States or in India where such a practice is much more frequent. In addition, advanced research must investigate brand associations in different product categories and with different types of NPOs, in order to consider whether the external validity is sustained or not. It would also be crucial to consolidate the current qualitative findings with quantitative measures, which implies wider samples, valid survey instruments and measurement scales. A last limitation relates to the exclusive analysis of the impact a partnership with a cause on the for-profit brand structure and consumers' attitudes, without taking into account the impact such an alliance can have on the NPO. As a consequence, it would be useful to investigate the effects on the cause partner.

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