



The dual-process model of similarity in cause-related marketing: How taxonomic versus thematic partnerships reduce skepticism and increase purchase willingness[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The “fit” between brand and cause has received considerable attention in the study of effective cause-related marketing. However, the literature is largely ambivalent in terms of what fit means, as little systematic research has looked into the relationship between cause and brand and its impact on consumers' skepticism, and in turn, on willingness to purchase. By drawing on the dual-process of similarity, four studies provide evidence on the role of thematic vs. taxonomic similarity in reducing skepticism and help companies understand which causes to support. Specifically, our results show that willingness to purchase the brand is higher in thematic partnerships and, counter intuitively, skepticism is higher in taxonomic partnerships. We discuss the results in light of the role of trust as mediator and regulatory focus as moderator of the effect. We offer theoretical and managerial implications of these results, discussed considering the demand for companies to be more socially responsible.

1. Introduction

In cause-related marketing (CM), a firm contributes to a cause, “linked to customers' engaging in revenue-producing transactions with the firm” (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, p. 60). In 2017, cause sponsorship spending amounted in \$62.7 billion globally, with projections that it would soon reach \$65.8 billion (IEG, 2018). Creating an alliance in which the company donates to a charitable cause provides evidence of the firm's good corporate citizenship, which may enhance the corporate image and brand equity (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2005; Rim, Yang, & Lee, 2016). Yet even as consumers require companies to be more socially responsible, they recognize that CM is not always altruistic, such that they have grown increasingly skeptical of such efforts (Drumwright, 1996; Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Webb & Mohr, 1998), which may undermine the success of a CM campaign. To reduce consumer skepticism towards CM, the firm needs to select both the right cause and the right partner. A good fit and its influence on skepticism represent key inputs for assessing the overall success of a CM campaign (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998), especially because skepticism relates negatively to willingness to make a purchase (Goh & Balaji, 2016).

According to Hoeffler and Keller (2002), brands selecting a cause to

support might pursue two alternative goals: commonality (focused on fit or a similarity advantage) and complementarity (focused on differential advantages achieved through enhanced meanings associated with a brand). Only the commonality scenario implies a fit between the company and its selected causes; this form of fit generally is defined according to the similarity between the brand and the cause (Aaker & Keller, 1990). Compared with complementarity-based causes, commonality-based causes lead consumers to perceive the company as more competent, and they also transfer positive feelings about the cause to the company (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). Commonality strategies also may be viewed as more relevant by employees, because they reinforce the brand image (Hoeffler, Bloom, & Keller, 2010). Prior studies suggest that fit can be a benefit, such that it increases overall evaluations of the sponsoring firm (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006) and the CM campaign (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004), but also might be detrimental, if it increases skepticism about the company's motives (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki, 2007; Drumwright, 1996; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Samu & Wymer, 2009). These conflicting outcomes suggest a research gap with regard to existing definitions of fit and how to operationalize it, such that marketing managers tend to assess this critical construct by applying reason or common sense (Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010), which are insufficient to specify the optimal choices regarding CM

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Table 1
Fit-constructs in cause-related marketing research.

Source	Construct	Description
1.	Fit	Relatedness perceived between the brand and the cause
2.	Retailer-cause fit	Relatedness perceived between the retailer and the cause
3.	Fit	Congruence between the brand and the cause
4.	Fit	Degree to which the brand and the cause are perceived as compatible or congruent with each other
5.	Prominence fit	Manner in which the cause relationship is presented and explained to potential customers (relationship explicitness, visibility of the relation, similar visuals/colors, affiliation with the local attributes, active involvement)
	Marketing strategy fit	Deals with the partners' similarity in segmentation, targeting and positioning (similar slogan, mission, target market, promotion and geographic areas)
6.	Fit	Extent to which the cause has strong connections to the firm's core business
7.	Company-cause fit	Degree of compatibility that consumers perceive exists between the cause and the brand
8.	Conceptual congruence	Conceptual congruence between a firm and a cause at the organizational level. Relatedness of conceptual attributes (values, brand image, product positioning). Transferability of expertise and assets between a firm and a cause
9.	Fit	Degree of association between a cause and brand or a product

1. Pracejus and Olsen (2004); 2. Barone et al. (2007); 3. Lafferty (2007); 4. Samu and Wymer (2009), 5. Zdravkovic et al. (2010), 6. Robinson, Irmak, and Jayachandran (2012); 7. Vock, van Dolen, and Kolk (2013); 8. Kuo & Hamilton Rice, 2015; 9. Das, Guha, Biswas, and Balaji (2016).

partnerships that can reduce consumer skepticism.

This study therefore investigates how similarity and skepticism might connect to consumers' willingness to purchase a brand involved in CM activities by drawing on literature pertaining to brand extensions and cognitive psychology. In turn, the current study defines fit as the similarity between the brand and the cause according to two different aspects: taxonomic feature-based and thematic relation-based (Estes, Gibbert, Guest, & Mazursky, 2012). Taxonomic similarity implies that the items share common features (e.g., airplanes and helicopters, same category); thematic similarity refers to items that interact in the same context (e.g., airplanes and suitcases) (Estes et al., 2012; Golonka & Estes, 2009). By applying this distinction to CM partnerships, our results show that thematic partnerships are the ones preferred in terms of lower skepticism and higher willingness to purchase. This holds true also with respect to the mediating role that trust towards the partnership plays in these scenarios. Literature suggests that perceived similarity is considered as a basis for trust (e.g. Meijnders, Midden, Olofsson, & Oehman, 2009), which in turn influences consumers' intention to support a given company adopting social causes (Nowak, Fucciolo, & Ponsford, 1999; Osterhus, 1997), and has a negative relationship with skepticism (e.g. Thorson, Page, & Moore, 1995). Oppositely, our results reveal that taxonomic partnerships are the ones perceived with a higher skepticism and a lower willingness to purchase. In those specific cases, this research also highlights the role of regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997, 2000) as moderator of the relationship between taxonomic fit and skepticism. Regulatory focus (with its distinction into promotion and prevention strategies) has in fact been shown to affect responses to persuasive messages and influences the effectiveness of marketing campaigns (e.g. Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Pham & Avnet, 2004). We provide evidence that in the case of taxonomic partnerships it is possible to lower the skepticism perceived by consumers by engaging in promotion-focused activities, i.e. making consumers concentrate on the positive cues of the partnership, in order to activate feelings of benign and non-threatening situations (Friedman & Foerster, 2002).

By examining the effects of both taxonomic and thematic similarity (Estes et al., 2012) on skepticism and willingness to purchase, this work advances cause-related marketing literature, while also conceptually extending and empirically contributing to research into similarity, skepticism, and willingness to purchase (e.g., Drumwright, 1996; Ellen et al., 2000; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). Beyond these scholarly contributions, this research offers implications for managerial practice; understanding what leads to better customer evaluations of new CM partnerships has great relevance for companies, especially in terms of consumers' willingness to purchase (e.g., Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Webb & Mohr, 1998).

The next section reviews relevant literature, followed by the

development of the conceptual framework and hypotheses pertaining to fit, skepticism, trust, regulatory focus, and willingness to purchase. Then this article presents the methods, involving the development of fictitious partnerships, as well as the data and results of four studies and their pretests. Finally, the conclusion offers a discussion of possible theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

2.1. Dual-process model of similarity in CM

Commonality strategies stress the positive impact of fit, or the degree of affinity between a brand and the cause (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). For example, firm–cause fit can increase overall evaluations of the sponsoring firm (Ellen et al., 2006) and the CM campaign (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004), as well as compensate for sponsorship of less desirable causes (Barone et al., 2007). But fit also may relate to skepticism (e.g. Barone et al., 2007; Samu & Wymer, 2009). Considering the links between firm–cause fit and various CM variables, a clear understanding of the nuances of what constitutes “good” fit is critical for launching successful CM campaigns that benefit both firms and social welfare. However, a common understanding of what fit means and what aspects constitute fit has not been established (see Table 1), thus forcing marketing experts to rely on different, broad definitions of this construct (Zdravkovic et al., 2010).

A dual-process model of similarity (Golonka & Estes, 2009; Wisniewski & Bassok, 1999) provides a parsimonious organizing framework for understanding what constitutes fit and how its understanding might inform the implications of fit for CM. Until quite recently, advertising, branding, and cognitive psychology research has examined similarity only in taxonomic terms, reflecting a comparison process that identifies common and distinctive features between objects (Gentner & Gunn, 2001; Tversky, 1977). A dual-process model instead distinguishes this taxonomic, feature-based similarity from thematic, relation-based forms (Estes et al., 2012; Wisniewski & Bassok, 1999). Taxonomic similarity refers to whether items share common features; a motorcycle and a bicycle share similar features, in that they both have wheels and a frame and provide transportation. Thematic similarity instead is based on spatial, temporal, or functional interactions among items in a given scenario (Estes et al., 2012). For example, motorcycles and helmets are thematically related to the context of riding a motorcycle. Recent psychological and neuroscientific evidence consistently shows that thematic and taxonomic similarity are distinct, both psychologically and neurologically, and they activate distinct neural circuits (e.g. Sachs, Weis, Krings, Huber, & Kircher, 2008). By drawing on neural and behavioral dissociations of taxonomic and thematic similarities, the dual-process model provides a more parsimonious account of

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