All Cause-Related Advertisements Are Not Created Equal: Influences of Product Characteristics and Framing Effects on Consumer Purchase Decision

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The present study sets out to investigate influences associated with donation amount framing, product price, product type, and donation magnitude on cause-related marketing (CRM) effectiveness (i.e., the effectiveness of using promised donations to charity as purchase incentives) in advertising contexts. The results indicate that influences of product type (i.e., frivolous products bundled with a cause are more effective than practical ones) hold when a donation amount is framed in absolute dollars, but not when the amount is presented in relative percentage of a sale price. Impacts of product type on CRM also decrease when high product price and high donation magnitude are presented in the ad. In addition, framing effects of donation amount become insignificant when the donation magnitude is high. The study thus raises concerns over possible ineffectiveness of product type and donation magnitude in CRM. In practice, marketers hence stand to gain not only by changing the donation magnitude in their advertising strategies but also by an appropriate “framing” of the offered bundles.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been prompted both by companies that increasingly recognize it as a key to success and by nonprofits that have increasing needs for resources and funding. CSR initiatives include various forms of company involvement with charitable causes and nonprofits that represent them (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig, 2004). One dimension of CSR is the partnering of a product with a cause, referred to as strategically cause-related marketing (CRM). It has become a major corporate philanthropic activity to donate money to a charity each time a consumer makes a purchase over a promotion period (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988). Extended from previous research (Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998; Strahilevitz, 1999; Subrahmanyan, 2004), the objective of present study is to investigate potential influences associated with donation framing, donation magnitude, product price, and product type on CRM effectiveness (i.e., the effectiveness of using promised donations to charity as purchase incentives) in advertising contexts.

An experiment was designed to test the relative effectiveness of ad messages to promote products on CRM in a 2 (donation framing: absolute dollar value vs. relative percentage of a sale price) X 2 (product price: low vs. high) X 2 (product type: frivolous vs. practical) X 2 (donation magnitude: low vs. high) mixed design. Product type and donation framing were selected to be between-subjects variables, and product price and donation/cash discount magnitude were operationalized as within-subjects variables. Participants consisted of 217 part-time undergraduate students (95 males and 122 females) from seven evening courses across a variety of disciplines at four large universities in Taiwan. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions above. In order to eliminate the effects of product-selection bias, two products were chosen for each product type (frivolous vs. practical) based on a pre-test. Shampoo, toilet paper, color ink jet printer, and desktop computer were chosen as practical products with the first two items as less expensive and the other two as more expensive. Compact discs containing classical music, and movie tickets were used as frivolous lower-priced products. A bedside stereo system and a DVD recorder/player were chosen as frivolous higher-priced items. Eight scenarios were thus developed with order counterbalanced, varying from two products with two price levels (low vs. high) and two donation/cash discount magnitudes (i.e., 5% vs. 25%). Low-priced items were set at NT$129 and NT$190. High-priced items were set at NT$2,590 and NT$3,490. Participants had to choose one preferred option out of two alternatives (i.e., donation vs. cash discount) in each scenario.

After successful manipulation checks, a series of analysis of variance were conducted to examine proposed hypotheses. A four-way interaction effect of product type, donation magnitude, donation framing and product price was not found on participants’ choices with F<1. Likewise, three-way interaction effects were not found over any combination of these four variables. However, four two-way interaction effects and all four main effects were observed. In line with previous studies, main effects of product type and donation magnitude were found. The main effect of donation framing was also found to be significant. Participants preferred donations framed in absolute dollar terms to relative percentage of a sale price. Yet interestingly, a two-way interaction between donation framing and product type was observed. The effects of charity incentive in absolute dollar terms were stronger in promoting frivolous products than in promoting practical ones. Strahilevitz’s results (1999) are held for the conditions of donation framed in absolute dollars, but not for those conditions of donation presented in relative percentage of a sale price. A significant two-way interaction also occurred between donation framing and donation magnitude. To be specific, when the donation magnitude was low, the amount framed in absolute dollars was more effective than that in a relative percentage. However, framing effects of donation amount were significant when the magnitude appeared to be large. A significant main effect of product price was found. Compared with high-priced items, participants preferred a charity-linked product to a cash discount when the product price was lower. More importantly, a two-way interaction between product price and product type was significant. Higher product price weakened the effects of product type on CRM especially when the product was frivolous. Finally, a two-way interaction between product price and donation magnitude was revealed. Compared with products with a low magnitude of donation/discount, those with a high magnitude of donation/discount significantly reduced participants’ willingness to purchase the product with a cause when the price increased.

The present study raises concerns over possible ineffectiveness of CRM when bundled with products of certain types (i.e., frivolous products) and when offered at certain donation magnitudes (i.e., higher levels of magnitudes). Theoretical and practical contributions to CRM, consumer purchase decision-making, and marketing practice can be drawn. It is important to go beyond simple demonstrations of the effects of product type and to clarify when a particular cause-related promotion is likely to be observed, reversed, or eliminated with considerations of factors from product characteristics and donation framing. Marketers should present a donation amount clearly in CRM campaigns. How the price effects of a promoted product interacts with product type and donation magnitude offer further useful implications for marketers who seek to optimize the effectiveness of cause-related campaigns.

References


Towards an Understanding of Consumption Objectors
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ABSTRACT
This article studies the topic of meaning in consumption practices that are related to the critics of consuming society. In a postmodern world characterized by symbolism in consumption and a global “crisis of meanings”, a deep critical posture of consuming society is studied through its contribution to identity construction processes among “very responsible” consumers whom we refer to as “consumption objectors.” An interpretative analysis of fourteen narratives from forty interviews enables us to enter into the details of the meanings given by these consumers to their consumption by studying how they construct their identity. Through this analysis, the article shows that all consumption objectors have a certain set of common features: quest for authenticity, social integration, control, suffer and the sensation of compromise.

INTRODUCTION
During the past few years, many spectacular actions and events have been taken by individuals and groups aiming to raise public awareness about consumption. For instance, the tires of sports utility vehicles, targeted for their polluting effects, have been deflated. Advertising posters have been vandalized to denounce their disrespect of consumers. Mountains of packaging have been abandoned in supermarkets. Feasts such as “burning man or buy nothing day” have been organized to demonstrate against the frenzy of consumption.

The discourse has also changed: individuals are encouraged not to reject the whole economic system blindly, but rather to limit their consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), to think more about their purchases, to adopt solutions that encourage sustainable development. Consumers are advised to become more responsible so that they have “the set of voluntary acts, situated in the sphere of consumption, achieved from the awareness of consequences judged as negatives of consumption from the outside world to oneself; these consequences arising therefore not from the functionality of the purchases nor from immediate personal interest” (Ozcaglar-Toulouse 2005, 52). Some consumers however, do not limit their actions to the conservation of the planet, but are very critical of consumption and the place that it now occupies in the Western lifestyle. Therefore, we will call them consumption objectors.

Consumption objection is not a complete negation of consumption; its promoters are convinced that consumption can also become beneficial when it allows the development of communities in the case of fair trade (Ozcaglar-Toulouse, Shi, and Shaw 2006). In the field of responsible consumption, consumption objection can be distinguished according to its aim as a consuming act. It is not an act of moral conformity. As a deep critical posture, the message of consumption objection can derive either from political essence or from a desire for liberation of the consuming society. Consumption objection has a global vision of the world that one should protect, and which should be recognized by the individuals who have their role in the project of a new society.

Various interpretations can be made of consumption objectors. Historians will underline, for example, that this is not the first time that consumers have made their voices heard. Even during the Middle Ages, consumers were already protesting against the abuses of the traders; and in the 19th century they organized themselves in cooperatives (Chatriot, Chessel, and Hilton 2004). Sociologists will evoke the symbolic character of consumption objection as behavior or the rejection of alienation that its symbolic character denotes among consumers (Groupe Marcuse 2004). In marketing, a number of studies have investigated the strategies of consumer resistance such as Peñaloza and Price (1992), Thompson and Haytko (1997), Kozinets and Handelman (1998), Holt (2002). But probably the most interesting reading of consumption objectors, as it is the most contemporary one, consists in considering the attempt these individuals make to give a meaning to their consumption and include the latter as an element of their identity construction. This will be discussed later in this article.

CRISIS IN MEANING WITHIN THE WESTERN SOCIETIES
According to many philosophers and sociologists, Western consumers are going through a deep crisis driven by a search for some meaning, at least because of two reasons: the crisis of modernity on one hand and the loss of social significance on the other.

Western society, while leaving modernity (e.g. “The crisis of the modernity” from Alain Touraine 1992), has abandoned the project of a society turned towards the future and left individuals alone to get rid of their fears resulting from micro and macro social risks (Giddens 1990). Multiple social risks ranging from the ever-increasing difficulty to attain satisfaction in spite of a growing number of available goods and services, environmental deterioration, and risks to future generations resulting from limited natural resources, troubling economic instabilities and the persistence of famines and wars, are now internalized by individuals. Since society doesn’t know how to provide a suitable answer to these issues, the individual needs to find them by himself. The quest for identity can be part of this.

Every society creates its own world by creating elements of meaning. These elements structure the representations that one has of the world, identifying social norms and indicating the type of affects that reign in society. According to Castoriadis (1996), the unique representation communicated by Western Society is the image of a man who earns more to consume more. Not all consumers recognize themselves in this model. But as for the individual who refuses this representation, the search for uniqueness becomes difficult due to the fear and awkwardness of stepping outside the borders of society (Fromm 1976). Hence, the individual must give himself another social identity than the one proposed by society and adopt a critical approach towards consumption.

So far, search for the personal identity and search for a social identity both seem to be at work in the consumption objector’s mind. This suggests that identity could be a relevant concept to explore consumption objectors. The link between identity and consumption has long been investigated in academic marketing research since the first work of Levy (1959) about consumption symbolism (e.g., Belk 1988; Schouten 1991; etc.). The most recent studies adopt a hermeneutic perspective that provides the personalized cultural meanings that constitute a person’s sense of self-identity (Thompson 1997).
GENERATING NARRATIVES FROM CONSUMPTION OBJECTORS

In order to delve in a phenomenological way into the thoughts and feelings which the informants hold about the significance of consumption in their daily lives, a research method that relies on the propensity of people to talk about the social experience of their daily lives was selected. Consumption objectors are not usual consumers and an appropriate research design had to be constructed, in order to by-pass the current distrust that propels consumers away from marketing studies. Offering the respondent at least a certain amount of autonomy not only in her answers but also in the organization of the interview was a better way to encourage cooperation with consumers (Fouquier 2004). Moreover, they are not in the habit of reflecting the meaning that they give to their consumption or the link that exists between their acts of purchase and their life. It therefore seemed necessary to “provoke” the consumers into speaking not only about their consumption but also about their own self-defined consumption story. This sort of compiling of information is not unknown in humanities or social science, where it is referred to as the method of “narratives” (Stern, Thompson, and Arnould 1998). The narratives method consists of asking the informant to tell his/her own story, with his/her own words at his/her own pace.

Studying consumption from the story that the consumer tells about his/her life is a research strategy that allows us to combine objective phenomena and subjective experience to understand and to analyze “the act in situation” (Bertaux 2000). The narrative does not reflect the totality of what happened in reality: the setting in narration is the interesting aspect of the present research.

A database consisting of 800 consumers, which is stored from a former quantitative survey on responsible consumption performed by one of the researchers, was used to recruit the sample. Some of these consumers were selected along their very responsible character. According to the qualitative research, people belonging to diverse groups and showing differentiated types of responsible consumption behavior were included progressively. Gender parity and diversity of socio-professional categories were taken into account as far as possible. In such interpretative studies, diversity is important to get different kind of meanings: six men and eight women, living in two cities in France, from different socio-professional categories constituted the sample.

Each narrator, except two of them, was interviewed three times in order to increase the richness of information, as advised in the narrative literature (Atkinson 2002). These interviews employ few pre-planned questions. The first interview was focused on general life span and lifestyle. The second one was focused on consumption meanings and the third one on objection modes of consumption. Forty interviews were realized during forty-five hours in which the narratives of fourteen consumers were transcribed on more than five hundred pages. These were supplemented by various notes taken during and after the interviews, observation of the phenomenon studied (participation to some Adbusters performance, shopping in alternative retailers, discussion on Community Supported Agriculture), factual data on the narrators, “sneaky” information, such as lifestyle indicators, captured during the interviews (Newholm 1999), etc.

IDENTITY THROUGH LIFE SPAN IN THE CONSUMPTION OBJECTORS’ NARRATIVES

Each story was first read in its entirety. Further readings were necessary to develop an integrated understanding of the consumption meanings (Thompson 1997). Many identity issues and concerns emerged during these interviews. For a better understanding we have chosen to present them according to a dynamic approach of identity. For a good part of two decades, the term of identity has given rise to a large amount of definitions in various social sciences and humanities and to an even larger amount of research. Social psychology, psychoanalytic tradition or sociology all can be involved in investigating consumer identity. We would like to focus on a dynamic perspective as narratives allow us to approach the transitions of self. Identity can be considered as the crossroads of five processes (Marc 2005): the process of individuation, the process of identification, the process of valorization, the process of conservation and finally the process of realization.

The process of individuation refers to the awareness of one’s uniquenss by differentiation. Terms like people, society, and mass market are very often used by consumption objectors to refer to others who are not. One respondent illustrates the desire and the process of individuation particularly well. Two years ago, Christelle, 41 years old, quit her job as a director of marketing for a large company because she felt she was too different from her colleagues (“I was the only one who was thinking about the consequences of marketing”). At one time, she was successful member of senior management, but she slightly realized she had little freedom and slowly felt she was going to be laid off. It was very painful and time consuming for her to realize this and to quit (“This events prevent me from sleeping”). Another one comments:

“I never feel myself to form part of a group completely. Because I have the feeling to have too many elements which do not correspond to a group”. (Magali, 25)

Sabine underlines her need to be different, to go always a little further:

“I raise my difference with pride. But, I think that I will be happy that everyone makes effort (on his/her consumption). Of course, I will nevertheless find something to go further.” (Sabine, 33)

The process of identification leads consumption objectors to constitute networks through the necessity to meet each other in order to better take on the responsibilities and alienation associated with their “marginal” behavior (Moisander 2000; Moisander and Pesonen 2002).

“I have also a feeling of community of thought or community with other people who can act like me.” (Laurent, 29)

Some of them are concerned about the environment and belong to ecological movements; some others are or were members of a political party. Many are engaged in charity or social NGOs such as OXFAM. At a more local level, they are concerned with their neighborhood life or their relation with local producers. In a more positive perspective:

“I find important also this direct relation with producers from the same area with me or even from outside of the area.”

The process of valorization, Consumption objection seems to be driven on one hand by the desire to do something “counter-cultural”, but on the other hand by a need for creativity. Moreover, certain attitudes such as responsible, critical or ethical consumption can be socially valued. For this reason, being critical of consumption can be considered positively by others and allow the individual to develop a positive perception of oneself. Most respondents express their pride in being consumption objectors, although they...