Selecting the Right Cause from the Right Category: Does the Role of Product Category Matter in Cause-Brand Alliance? A Case Study of Students in Shanghai Universities

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Abstract

Increased competition is making it difficult to distinguish products solely by attributes, creating room for cause-related marketing. In this study with a sample of 322 university students, we evaluated the changes in consumer attitudes toward cause and brand as consequences of Cause Brand Alliance (CBA), by using the product category as moderator. Four popular brands from two product categories, including durable and nondurable, and four causes from different cause categories involving health, human service, animal, and environment, have been used. ANOVA has been used to compare the means of consumers' responses toward cause and brand, in relation to CBA at different times. Results show that linked cause and brand improve the attitude of the consumers toward the cause as well as the brand. In the case of the cause, improvement in consumer attitude is high for the durable product category, but low for the non-durable product category. So for the brand, improvement in consumer attitude is there regardless of product categories (durable, non-durable) when it is attached to different types of causes. This improvement is high for association with human-related causes compared to that of non-human-related causes. Findings suggest that in forming a CBA, cause-managers should pay more attention in selecting product category for alliances, and brand-managers have to impute more interest in establishing alliance with human-related cause.

Keywords

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Introduction

Corporate and brand associations are created by using numerous ways of communications including advertisements (Lober, 2012). One type of corporate or brand association is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Perez et al., 2013). CSR, which is created through a cause and brand, is referred to as the Cause Related Marketing (CRM) (Krishna, 2011). CRM is defined as "the process of formulating and implementing the marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount of money to a chosen cause where consumers engage in revenue providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives" (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Primarily, CRM is a temporary sales promotion activity, which is being transformed into a long-term strategy, cause-brand alliance (CBA). It is long-term partnership between brand and cause, whereas two organizations create an alliance with the aim of forming a close connection with the customer that will lead to the long-term market positioning of the brand. For social cause, this kind of partnership provides benefits such as a source of income and increase in exposure, consequently, leads to an increase in the level of awareness and knowledge of the causes (Davidson, 1997; Grolleau et al., 2016).

These days, steady growth in CBA shows affirmative practices of firms' CRM (Mantovani et al., 2017). The businesses which are paying more attention to the cause-related programs are ultimately receiving high popularity as compared to others (Lii & Lee, 2012). Relatively, a trend of paying more attention to cause-related programs has prevailed because consumers have more expectations from firms to satisfy their social responsibility. At the same time, such activities result in affecting consumer's buying choice (Freestone & McGoldrick, 2007). The firms are getting benefited from the process above in cooperation with social causes and charities, whereas the charitable causes are also making huge turnovers by gaining financial as well as strategic support (Vock et al., 2013). Positively reviewed CRM enhances consumer's attitude toward the brand, that ultimately

influences his/her intentions for procuring the product which is allied with the campaign (Chernev & Blair, 2015; Lafferty & Edmondson, 2009).

According to National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS, 2011) and The American Institute of Philanthropy (AIP, 2011), the charitable causes can be categorized as health, human services, animal, and environment. All activities dealt with people's health issues such as research on AIDS and cancer are depicted by the health cause. The American Diabetes Association and The March of Dimes belong to the category of health cause. The human services cause is related to humanitarian matters like victims of crimes, helping the homeless, and support during natural disasters, and so on. Habitat for Humanity and The American Red Cross belong to the category of the human services cause. Animal category deals with all issues related to animals such as poacher issues, and their safety. The World Wildlife Fund and The Humane Society represent it. The environmental causes include issues of saving habitat for animals or rainforests and protecting the rivers/lakes. The Ocean Conservancy, The Green Peace, and The Environmental Defense Fund fall under this category.

People may donate to a specific cause not only because of CBA but also due to their personal relevance or self-congruence. Typically, human-related issues can affect a person directly or indirectly, for example, donating to The American Diabetes Association because there is/was a certain type of genetically spread disease (Chowdhury & Khare, 2011). Personal relevance is usually not the only reason the individuals donate to some worthy causes. The media with the tortured animals may move people to donate directly or make them buy the brands which are organizing certain cause. Consumers' main preferences are still goods or services although they are donating for certain cause-related programs. The cause can induce consumers to prefer one brand over another if they contemplate that the cause organized by brands is a worthy one, but in most cases, the cause is not personally relevant to them. To the consumer, if a cause does not associate with any popular brand then the personal relevance of that cause plays more significant role in defining which cause will collect

the donation. If personal relevance has low value in CRM, does the cause category induce consumers to buy the partnering brand?

Increased trend of the CBA's leading question on selection of the right partner, which makes a difference in the usefulness of affiliation, is yet to be answered. An appraisal of the criteria that is crucial to choose the suitable partner has not been adequately defined (Lafferty et al., 2004). Although, few studies proved that CBA benefits both partners but literature review has revealed scarcity of empirical investigations on cause-brand relationships (Kim et al., 2012; Yechiam et al., 2002). Previous evidences showed that usually, categories selected for causes were of the same type like human services, and results might differ if we chose the cause from a different category, that are health, animal, or environmental category (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore whether the types of cause and product category have a greater or lesser effect on consumer perceptions of each partner. This gap is addressed in the existing study.

Background and Hypotheses

While probing the four types of cause categories (i.e., human, health, environment, and animal), apparently two of the categories are directly related to human being. Researchers conclude that the categories of health and human causes usually have more effect than those of animal and environmental causes (Lafferty & Edmondson, 2013). The self-categorization theory proposes that consumers are mostly inclined to those causes chosen from specific domains, closely associated with human. Therefore, people give more favor and share the common bond with each other because of their similar aspects. Thus, when given a choice, consumers would favor a human cause and feel more positive toward a partnership that facilitates people rather than animals or the environmental causes. For example, in 2004, when the catastrophic tsunami struck Sumatra, many brands used CRM to donate to humanitarian causes that provided services to the victims of the disaster. Many consumers assumed that it was a way

to help the victims, even though they were not personally affected by the event.

The intent of the CBA from both the charitable cause and brand perspectives for consumers is to articulate different estimations and their relations for both cause and brand; those augment the impression of both the partners. Information integration theory delivers academic support, which suggests that preceding attitudes of the consumer will be assimilated with the new evidence given by the cooperation of the two, thus affecting the valuations to the alliance and the post-revelation attitudes regarding the cause and brand (Anderson, 1981). The formulated information integration theory permits it to be applied malleably to a CBA. Therefore, it provides an understanding that how new evidence regarding the alliance with preceding attitudes to the cause and brand, generate new attitudes to both. If pre-alliance attitudes regarding the cause and the brand are promising, the incorporation of the two regarding their partnership should generate added promising attitudes toward each of the two. This discussion leads us to develop the following hypothesis.

> **H1:** Consumer attitudes toward brand will be improved more when it partners with human related (health and human services) as compared to when it partners with non-human related (animal and environment) cause categories.
>
> **H2:** Consumer attitudes toward cause (health, human services, animal and environment) will be greater after exposure to the alliance.

Product involvement accordingly describes the personal relevance of a product to an individual, its self-image, and values (Josiassen et al., 2013). Additionally, the involvement of the product directly affects consumer reaction. The relevance and the strength of the effect depend on the specific categories of goods and services to which the brand belongs. For example, product type such as perfume can be easily associated with France rather than car. Being aware of these different relations, there are significant differences depending on both the type of product and its category. Marketers can customize the presentation of their brand to consumers in a more deliberate way.

From this discussion, one can conclude that product category may change the results of overall evaluation of CBA. The reason for that is, respondents may like certain products which are combined with causes, thus, it may influence their evaluation.

Although most studies focus on the fit between cause and brand (Kim et al., 2012; Lafferty, 2009), in CBA the fit between them have less impact on their post attitude. Therefore, we choose a product category (durable/non-durable) to make an alliance with different cause category. Products that have longer life span and are not worn out, are referred as durable products, for example, cars, electrical appliances, computers and furniture. Whereas products that have shorter life span and are consumed quickly, are described as non-durable products, for example, food, cosmetics and cleaning products, medication and office supplies (Ismagilova et al., 2014; Xiao, 2017).

While fit between partners is an important selection criterion in other alliances except for CBA (Roy & Cornwell, 2004), because in such types of alliances a cause induces an effective response (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). In this case, if a brand is popular in CBA, then consumer perception of the cause-brand fit makes an insignificant difference in enhancing attitudes of partners and purchase intentions (Lafferty, 2009). Therefore, we used popular brands for partnership. If consumers are philanthropic, they cognitively evaluate the partnership to determine to which extent it helps to fulfill their noble values. One of the other reasons why fit of the brand may not play the significant role in a CBA in comparison with the other brand partnerships is an emotion accompanying with a cause which has been omitted in other alliances, explained in previous studies. Thus, certain authors argue that devotion and emotional stimulation are the autonomous responses which boost up the effectiveness of CSR program (Vanhamme et al., 2012). Usually, causes create some level of influence irrespective of their fit in the partnership. If a brand is associated with a cause which receives a specific amount of charity, it is enough to assume that consumers have a positive review about that brand, which influences its purchase intention and attitude (Lafferty, 2007). This explanation is supported by social identity theory (Mae & Ashforth, 1992). The

theory states that individuals choose activities corresponding with striking aspects of their identity and support the institutions that match those activities. It can lead to more promising attitudes toward a partnership irrespective of cause-brand fit (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Hence, durable and non-durable product categories seem ideal for the alliance in our study.

H3a: There will be interaction effect for a cause between durable and non-durable product categories over time, so that the attitude will be greater toward that cause which is partnered with durable product category as compared to a non-durable one.

H3b: There will be no interaction effect for a brand irrespective of product categories (durable and non-durable) while partnered with different types of causes.
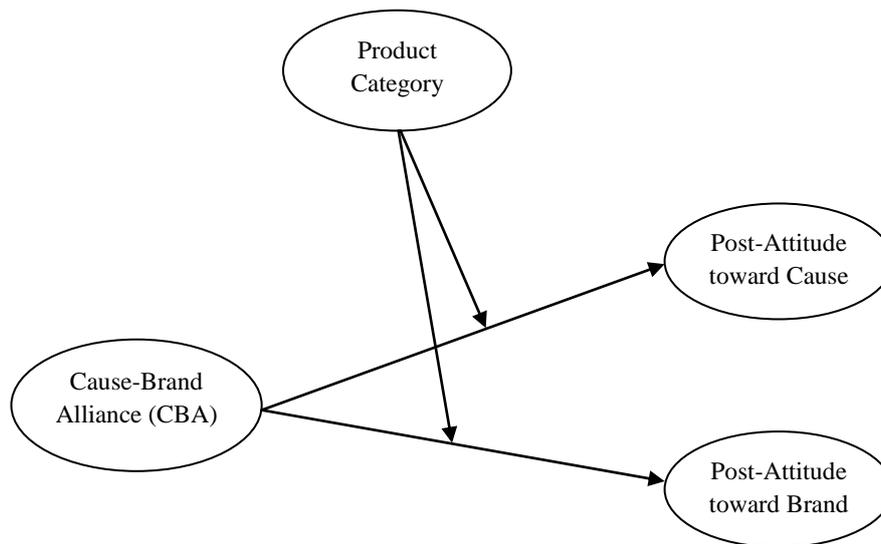
Fig. 1. Conceptual model

Methodology

Subjects

Respondents were students of business administration field from various universities of Shanghai. We used student sample in our research because they were also the customers and consumers of the products utilized in the study. In the experimental research design, previous researchers have used student sample as the proxy for the

actual respondents (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2005). This study was conducted at three timings, Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3, with each questionnaire separated by 1 to 4 days through sending an online link. Random sampling technique was used for the data collection. Therefore, the online questionnaire link was sent randomly. Students' participation in the study was voluntary. Out of total 354 respondents' responses, 322 were usable for analyses consisting of 219 (68%) men. Ages ranged from 20-25 with 35%, 25-30 with 44%, and from 30-35 with 21% of the total. As for the educational qualification of respondents, 103 (32%) were undergraduate students, 182 (56%) were master degree students, and 37 (11%) were post graduate (doctorate) students. Based on the focus of this paper, only the highly familiar causes (one from each cause category) and highly familiar brands were used for analysis.

To select the target brands and causes to be used in the final study, a pilot study was conducted before the actual experiment. Eight different causes and four different brands were evaluated for familiarity, by using a sample of thirty respondents. Two highly familiar brands and four highly familiar causes were selected. Hisense television (durable) and Sensodyne toothpaste (non-durable) were chosen as highly familiar brands. Likewise, Big Brothers and Big Sisters (human services), American Cancer Society (health), Ocean Conservancy (environment), and American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) (animal) were chosen as highly familiar causes.

Independent/Dependent Variables

The study has a longitudinal research design (pre-exposure/exposure/post-exposure). Therefore, as a standard practice, we used repeated measure ANOVA for the analysis. We considered the time to be an independent variable. The core purpose of the study is to analyze the change in attitudes between pre-exposure (Time-1), and post-exposure (Time-3) as a result of CBA. Durable/non-durable product category is another independent variable, and it serves as a moderator variable too. Post attitudes of cause and brand are

dependent variables. Thus, study contains 2 (durable/non-durable product category) * 2 [pre-exposure (T1)/post-exposure (T3)] mixed design.

Design and Procedure

Total eight ads were created for the online questionnaire. These include four ads of target alliance, that are, Hisense/Big Brothers and Big Sisters (human services), Sensodyne/American Cancer Society (health), Hisense/Ocean Conservancy (environment), and Sensodyne/ASPCA (animal). The ads were changed for brand names, the name and description of the cause, as well as the picture of both. In Time 1, we evaluated respondents' prior attitude and familiarity level toward different charitable causes and brands including target and dummy brands/causes. To preserve consistency with previously reported studies, the procedure was adopted from an earlier study. Three items, good/bad, favorable/unfavorable, and positive/negative adopted from the previous study of Burnkrant and Unnava (1995), were used to measure consumer' prior and post attitudes toward brand and cause. Respondents were asked to circle a number on each of three seven-point adjective pairs that best reflected their attitudes toward the brand and cause. Similarly, three items, recognized/not recognized, familiar/unfamiliar, and had heard before/had not heard before adopted from the study of Simonin and Ruth (1998), were used to measure familiarity of brand and cause. Respondents rated their attitudes toward both the cause and the brand using the seven-point bipolar scales discussed above. A bipolar scale prompts a respondent to balance two opposite attributes, determining the relative proportion of these opposite attributes.

In Time 2 (following three days of Time 1), we gave them information regarding eight alliances including four target alliances and four dummy alliances followed by the measures for attitudes toward brand and cause. In Time 3, we measured post exposure attitudes toward cause and brand on the same previous items which were used to check preceding attitudes. To ensure that the respondent did not guess the purpose of the study, all respondents rated their attitudes toward target and dummy brands/causes.

Data Analysis and Results

Manipulation Check

Three familiarity rating items from the pre-exposure session were summed to measure brand familiarity ($\alpha= 0.71$). ANOVA indicates a significant difference between mean familiarities of non-durable product category (Sensodyne) ($M1=6.45$, $SD=0.65$; $M2=5.78$, $SD=0.53$) and durable product category (Hisense Television) ($M1=6.24$, $SD=0.67$; $M2=6.13$, $SD=0.54$) [$F (3, 1284)=69.46$, $P<0.01$, $n^2=0.16$], confirming manipulation success. However, by summing the three familiarity ratings for charitable causes ($\alpha=0.74$), one way ANOVA indicates a significant difference between the mean familiarities of four highly familiar causes. Big Brothers and Big Sisters ($M=5.87$, $SD=0.63$), American Cancer Society ($M=5.36$, $SD=0.56$), Ocean Conservancy ($M=5.60$, $SD=0.54$) and ASPCA ($M=6.20$, $SD=0.52$) [$F (3, 1284) = 135.03$, $P<0.01$, $n^2=0.31$]. Tukey's HSD post-hoc test ($P=<0.01$) showed that ASPCA was highly familiar compared to other causes, while American Cancer Society was less familiar than other three causes. All brands were highly familiar as required for this study. Table 1 explains alpha, mean and standard deviation values, while Figure 2 describes the graphical representation of mean (pre-exposure, exposure, post-exposure) for all causes and brands.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Item	alpha	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pre Ex. Att. Hisence1	0.87	5.47	0.59
Ex. Att. Hisence1	0.81	5.88	0.63
Post Ex. Att. Hisence1	0.80	5.78	0.53
Pre Ex. Att. Sensodyne1	0.70	5.93	0.74
Ex. Att. Sensodyne1	0.80	6.38	0.58
Post Ex. Att. Sensodyne1	0.85	6.29	0.61
Pre Ex. Att. Hisence2	0.82	6.21	0.52
Ex. Att. Hisence2	0.72	6.48	0.50
Post Att. Hisence2	0.81	6.38	0.56
Pre Att. Sensodyne2	0.71	5.35	0.56
Ex. Att. Sensodyne2	0.80	5.80	0.79
Post Att.Sensodyne2	0.72	5.62	0.53
Pre Att. American Cancer Society	0.84	5.23	0.81
Ex. Att. American Cancer Society	0.82	5.61	0.78
Post Att. American Cancer Society	0.84	5.53	0.75

Continue Table 1. Descriptive statistics

| Item	alpha	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pre Att. Big brother big sister	0.79	5.17	0.80
Ex. Att. Big brother big sister	0.79	5.69	0.80
Post Att. Big brother big sister	0.86	5.59	0.93
Pre Att. ASPCA	0.77	5.30	0.72
Ex. Att. ASPCA	0.62	5.67	0.57
Post Att. ASPCA	0.86	5.47	0.83
Pre Att. Ocean Conservancy	0.72	5.93	0.79
Ex. Att. Ocean Conservancy	0.80	6.45	0.65
Post Att. Ocean Conservancy	0.73	6.21	0.65

Att: Attitude; Ex: Exposure; *N*=322.
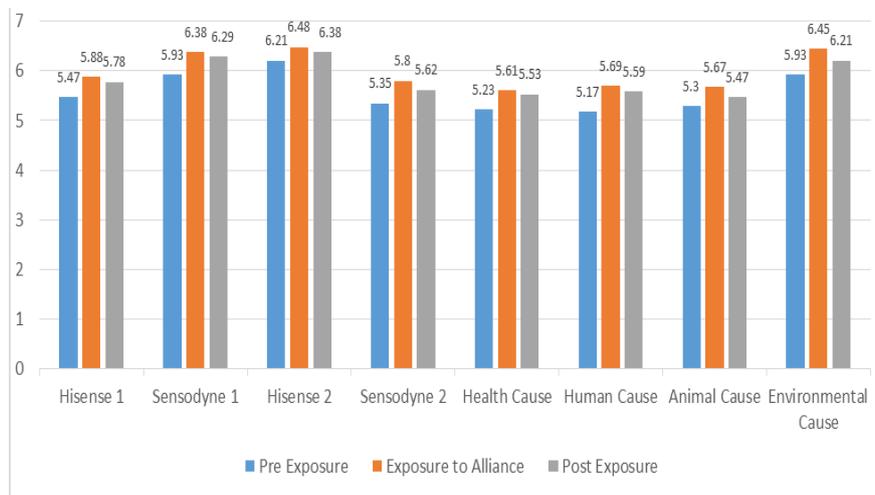
Fig 2. Graphical representation of descriptive statistics

Hypotheses Tests

To test hypothesis H1 which states that consumer attitudes toward brand will be improved more when it partners with human related (health and human services) compared to when it partners with non-human related (animal and environment) cause categories, we used repeated measure ANOVA to compare the combined means of brands paired with causes from health and human service categories including Hisense/Big Brothers and Big Sisters (human services), and Sensodyne/American Cancer Society (health). In the current study eta squared measure was used to compute the proportion of the total variance of a dependent variable by each group of the independent variable (Pierce et al., 2004).

The value of Wilks' λ=0.771, F(2, 642)=95.29, P<0.05 and multivariate partial eta squared =0.23 show that there is a significant effect of time on both brand combined. Post-hoc comparison was performed by using Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons. Post-exposure attitudes toward the combined brands (M=6.04, SD=0.63) was more positive than the pre-exposure attitude toward combined brands (M=5.70, SD=0.71). Similarly, repeated measure ANOVA was used to compare combined means of brands paired with animal and environmental categories including Hisense/Ocean Conservancy (environment) and Sensodyne/ASPCA (animal). For both brands combined, there was also a significant effect of time (Wilks' λ =0.828, F(2, 642) = 66.82, P<0.05, multivariate partial eta squared =0.17). Post-exposure attitudes toward the combined brands (M=6.01, SD=0.67) was more positive than the pre-exposure attitudes toward combined brands (M=5.78, SD=0.69). Multivariate partial eta squared values were 0.23 when brand partnered with human-related cause and 0.17 when brand partnered with non-human related cause. It shows brand post attitude increased when it partnered with human-related and non-human related categories. The attitudes toward brands improved more when it partnered with health and human services as it was aligned with animal and environmental cause categories; thus, H1 is supported.

To test hypothesis H2 which states that consumer attitudes toward cause (health, human services, animal and environment) will be greater after exposure to the alliance, we used repeated measure ANOVA to compare the combined means of causes from health, human services, animal and environmental categories paired with the brands. It showed a significant effect of time (Wilks' λ=0.845, F(2, 1286)=117.91, P<0.05, and multivariate partial eta squared = 0.15). The post exposure attitude toward the combined causes (M=5.70, SD=0.85) was more positive than the pre-exposure attitude toward the combined causes (M=5.40, SD=0.84); thus, H2 is supported.

To test the hypothesis H3a which states that there will be the interaction effect for a cause between durable and non-durable product categories over time, so that the attitude will be greater toward that

cause which is partnered with durable product category as compared to a non-durable one, two-way between-group analysis of variance was conducted. ANOVA showed the significant interaction (between-subjects) effect for product category [F (2, 3858) = 3.03, $P<0.05$, $n^2=0.002$]. Hence, hypothesis H3a is also supported (Fig. 3).

To test hypothesis H3b which states that there will be no interaction effect for a brand regardless of product categories (durable and non-durable) while partnered with different types of causes, two-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of the product category. ANOVA showed that the interaction effect was insignificant [F(2, 3858) = 1.97, $P=0.14$, $n^2=0.01$]. Hence, hypothesis H3b is supported (Fig. 4).
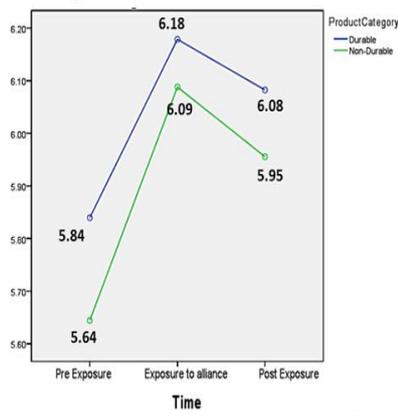

Fig. 3. Attitude towards brand
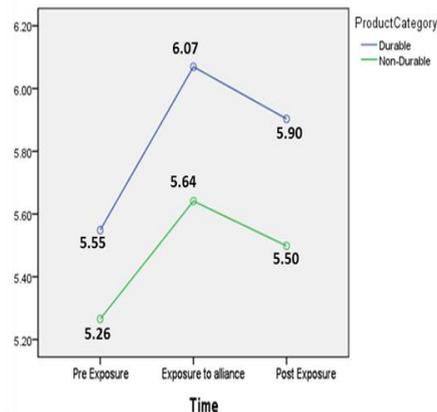
Fig. 4. Attitude toward cause

Discussion

Increasing competition in the markets is creating difficulty for competitors to distinguish their products by attributes only. This situation is offering gap for CRM. Consumers look deeper toward a product by analyzing their worthiness on CRM. The primary intent of this study is to compare the differences in consumers' attitudes toward brand for human related and non-human related cause categories as well as toward causes. Results show that both the partners get benefited from the good CBA, although differently.

For attitude toward the brand, results of the study reveal that marketing strategies based on health, human services, animal and environmental causes have a greater impact on the consumers' perceptions regarding the brand. Attitude toward brand increases when it partnered with any cause category. This attitude is more positive for human-related cause categories compared to non-human related ones. Consumer evaluates brand more favorably when it is attached to those causes which are beneficial for the human being. The self-categorization theory proposes that consumers may tend to select causes from a domain with which they are closely associated. Prior research shows, if the consumer perceives the importance of cause attached to the brand, then it may lead to the more positive effect on the attitude toward brand (Lafferty, 2009). In this study, we find that the attitude toward brand improved more when it was attached to human-related causes. The reason might be a consumer thinks that human-related causes are more important than those from other categories, and it leads to the more positive attitude of the consumer toward those brands, which are linked to human-related causes. This evidence is consistent with the previous studies where consumers once consider the selected charitable cause was significant, then they consider the brand, which is advertised in conjunction with this cause as well (Lucke & Heinze, 2015). Some authors argue that the cause can improve attitudes toward brand (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). These findings suggest that a cause category plays an important role to determine which cause should be partnered with a brand. So, for the attitude toward the cause, the results show that all causes from the category are getting benefits from CBA, although differently. Post-exposure attitudes toward causes were more positive than pre-exposure attitudes. Attitudes improve more toward human-related causes rather than non-human causes, which means, although people prefer human-related causes to make an alliance with brand, still they are concerned with non-human-related causes as well.

Two-way ANOVA (between-subjects) was conducted to explore the interaction effect of product category on cause and brand attitudes. Regarding attitude toward the cause, results show the interaction

effect of product category was significant. This study suggests that product category plays an important role to enhance cause attitude in CBA. Although the effective size is minor, still consumers show more positive response when the cause is attached to the durable product category. For the brand, the interaction effect was not significant. Attitude toward brand increased in both cases irrespective of durable and non-durable product categories. Consumers evaluate brand favorably when it was attached to a cause instead of the product category. This study finds that product category does not play a major role to enhance brand attitude in CBA because consumers just think about the cause and this is sufficient to buy a product.

Managerial Implications

Our research findings provide profound and relevant implications for managers. In general, CBA elevates consumer attitudes toward both partners. Therefore, managers should consider and pay more attention in making cause-brand alliance to receive the positive evaluation. Furthermore, regardless of focusing on the product category, the brand manager should make an alliance with the charitable cause. Importantly, the brand manager should make an alliance with charitable causes that support humanitarian and health issues. This study found that four major categories of the causes have the differential impact on post-attitudes toward cause and brand. Usually, causes are considered to be less important, due to lack of cognizance or the kind they represent, and have a harder time finding a partner with a highly popular brand. Results also supported the hypothesis that linked cause and brand improve the attitude of the consumers toward the cause more when the category of the product is durable, but its impact is less when the product category is non-durable. Hence, for managers, it is important to consider their type of product too as consumers focus on the product category as well either that is a durable or non-durable product. On the other hand, brand attitude increases regardless of product categories, durable or non-durable, when it is attached to different types of causes. Our findings suggest that the cause managers should pay more attention in selecting product

category for alliances while forming a CBA, and the brand managers have to impute more interest in establishing the alliance with human-related causes. The cause manager, in general, should make an alliance with the brand to elevate the cause. Our finding revealed that the cause category matters in CBA because human-related causes receive more positive attitude than non-human related ones. Therefore, the non-human cause manager should focus on best fit or other relevant strategies to receive favorable attitude.

Limitations and Future Research

We have poured out our potential efforts for investigating the interesting phenomenon, but few limitations are due that we must express. First, sample data consisted of university students. Thus, we assume that data collection from consumers would improve the generalizability of our findings as compared to the sample of university students which is a usual thing in the experiments. Although students might seem as product consumers, still different characteristics of the population such as higher income, being housewives, marital status, may generate the different outcome.

Second, these findings are limited due to the specific product categories chosen for this study as well as the selected brands and causes. Only two brands and four causes, one from each category, were used for this study, while future investigation should include more causes and brands.

Our study was conducted on popular brands and causes. However, we suggest researchers pay more attention to partners with moderate or low popularity in CBAs. The emerging trend shows that one brand may have the alliance with multiple causes; therefore, future studies may investigate the strategic effectiveness of such multiple partnerships.

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