



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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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Cause-related marketing
Fit
Skepticism
Trust
Regulatory focus
Willingness to purchase

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

[☆] This research was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Doc.CH, Project number: POTIP1_155413).

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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

different drivers of CM evaluation, according to a commonality strategy, and offers an organized framework for otherwise disjointed literature pertaining to the concept of fit (e.g., Barone et al., 2007; Das et al., 2016).

Applying this theoretical framework to CM suggests that taxonomic partnerships arise from an overlap between the product category of the brand (i.e., for-profit company) and the selected non-profit recipient. For example, the alliance between the sport shoe brand Puma and Soles4Souls, a non-profit association trying to reduce poverty by distributing shoes, represents a taxonomic partnership. Thematic partnerships instead move beyond the brand's main category to highlight overlap between the brand and the cause in terms of image, mission, or core values. For example, Avon cosmetics created its own foundation to support domestic violence prevention efforts, because it presents itself as “the company for women,” and one of its primary goals is to improve women's lives.

2.2. Skepticism

Skepticism refers to a person's tendency to distrust or disbelieve. Some consumer studies present skepticism as a personality trait (e.g., Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998), but most research, particularly in contexts related to corporate social responsibility (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Pirsch, Gupta, & Grau, 2007), focuses on situational skepticism, induced by distrust of the information provided by companies, which is independent of a person's traits (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Consumer attributions of CM motives take two forms: extrinsic, such that consumers believe the company is attempting to increase its profits, or intrinsic, such that consumers perceive the company is acting out of a genuine concern for the social issue (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007; Ellen et al., 2006; Forehand & Grier, 2003). Stronger attributions of intrinsic motives lead consumers to react more positively; perceptions of predominantly extrinsic motives lead to less favorable behavioral responses (Ellen et al., 2000).

Several studies suggest that consumers perceive the brand's motive as driven by self-interest when fit is high (Barone, Miyazaki, & Kimberly, 2000; Drumwright, 1996; Ellen et al., 2000). Drumwright (1996) cautions companies about pursuing partnerships with charities or non-profits that are too closely related to their core offerings, because the high degree of fit may spark perceptions that the company is being exploitative in its cause sponsorship (Barone et al., 2000). Ellen et al. (2000) further suggest that high fit may raise consumers' skepticism about company motives, whereas they may respond more positively to weaker fit between the cause and company. Literature concerning taxonomic and thematic similarity suggested that taxonomic categories are “more fitting”, as they are well established in memory and less surprising, leading to immediate higher fit perceptions; oppositely, thematic associations are “less fitting”, since they are typically created ad hoc and thus more surprising, leading to lower fit perceptions (Poyner & Wood, 2010; Ross & Murphy, 1999). Therefore,

H₁. Consumers express more (less) skepticism towards taxonomic (thematic) partnerships.

2.3. Mediating role of trust

Trust is key to CM partnership success (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Waddock, 1988). It is fundamental for building and maintaining long-term relationships between customers and companies (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and it influences consumers' intentions to support a corporation that adopts a social cause (Nowak et al., 1999; Osterhus, 1997). For this study, trust pertains to “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer, 1998, p. 395). From consumers' perspective, relational trust depends on the situation (Grayson, Johnson, & Chen, 2008), reflecting their beliefs

that the corporation will perform in a manner consistent with their expectations (Park, Lee, & Kim, 2014). When consumers regard the company as trustworthy, their evaluations of it should tend to be positive (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Conversely, consumers may grow skeptical or less trusting of CM partnerships that lack advertising or source credibility (Thorson et al., 1995).

Perceived similarity often determines whether parties begin to trust each other (Meijnders et al., 2009; Racherla, Mandviwalla, & Connolly, 2012; Woolley & Fishbach, 2017). Consequently, trust represents an underlying mechanism that may differentiate the skepticism expressed by consumers who encounter taxonomic versus thematic partnerships. Therefore our second hypothesis predicts,

H₂. Customer trust in the partnership mediates the relationship between taxonomic or thematic partnerships and skepticism.

2.4. Regulatory focus

To help marketers reduce consumer skepticism in response to taxonomic partnerships, regulatory focus (RF) provides a variable of considerable interest (Higgins, 1997, 2000), because RF affects responses to persuasive messages (Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010) and influences the effectiveness of advertising campaigns (Cesario et al., 2004; Pham & Avnet, 2004). Extant RF theory predicts two separate, independent self-regulatory orientations: prevention and promotion. A prevention focus emphasizes safety, responsibility, and security needs. Goals are viewed as obligations, and there is a strategic desire to approach non-losses (absence of negatives) and avoid losses (presence of negatives). A promotion focus instead emphasizes hopes, accomplishments, and advancement needs. Goals are ideals, and the strategic interest centers on approaching gains (presence of positives) and avoiding non-gains (absence of positives). Promotion-focused people concentrate on positive cues in their environment and thus perceive the world as largely benign and nonthreatening (Friedman & Foerster, 2002). Pham and Avnet (2004) suggest that when they are promotion focused, people tend to be influenced by the affective content of an advertisement, but if they take a prevention focus, they are more likely influenced by the substance of advertising. Skepticism, which involves the careful scrutiny of information presented, as experienced in taxonomic CM partnerships, thus may diminish among consumers who engage in promotion-focused strategies. Formally,

H₃. Regulatory focus moderates the relationship between fit and skepticism in a taxonomic (cf. thematic) partnership. Specifically, a promotion focus reduces the skepticism expressed by consumers exposed to a taxonomic partnership.

2.5. Willingness to purchase the brand

Consumers' purchase behavior in CM is a central variable (e.g., Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Hult, 2004; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). Ultimately, CM activities exist and are driven by increases in people's willingness to purchase (WTP) the brand and products associated with the cause (e.g. Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). Research into composite branding alliances (Park, Jun, & Shocker, 1996) and CM (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004) suggests that fit is a prerequisite to increase WTP, whereas skepticism has a negative effect on WTP for products and brands associated with a cause (Webb & Mohr, 1998). Therefore, when skepticism increases, consumers may be less likely or willing to make a purchase (Goh & Balaji, 2016). According to the proposed framework, because consumers likely express more skepticism towards taxonomic partnerships, they also should be less inclined to purchase products from the brand, leading to diminished WTP for that particular brand. Finally, trust in the partnership influences skepticism, where less trusting consumers are more skeptical towards CM (e.g. Thorson et al., 1995). Therefore, both trust and skepticism should jointly influence the effect of

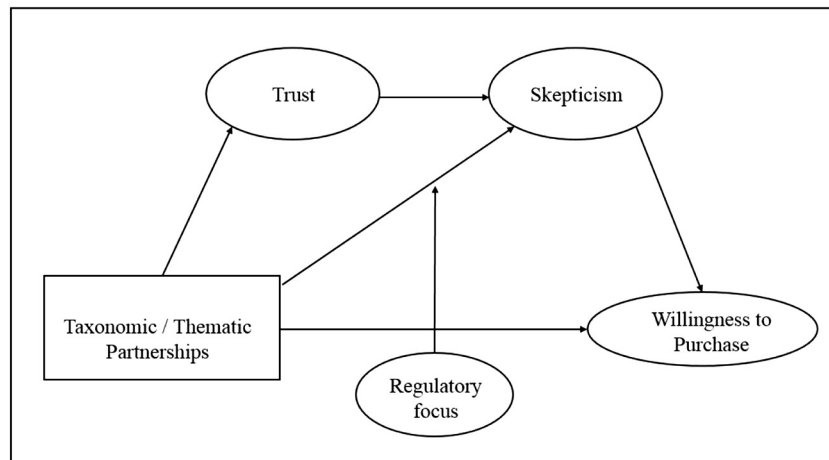


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

taxonomic or thematic partnerships on WTP a brand that engages in CM activities. That is,

H₄. Consumers are less (more) willing to purchase a brand involved in taxonomic (thematic) partnerships.

H₅. The effect of taxonomic (cf. thematic) partnerships on willingness to purchase a brand involved in CM activities is serially mediated by trust and skepticism.

3. Methods

The tests of these hypotheses span four experimental studies, using existing brands that collaborate with fictitious taxonomic or thematic partnerships. **Study 1** addresses the skepticism expressed by participants towards partnerships (**H₁**). **Study 2** tests the mediating role of trust in the partnership (**H₂**). **Study 3** focuses on ways to reduce skepticism in taxonomic partnerships by leveraging the moderating effect of regulatory focus (**H3**). Finally, **Study 4** tests which type of partnership increases the WTP of consumers towards the brand (**H₄**) and includes skepticism and trust as possible mediators of this effect (**H₅**). **Fig. 1** illustrates the conceptual framework.

3.1. Stimuli selection

This study features real brands, so that participants likely have prior knowledge about the brands and their core values. However, the CM partnerships are hypothetical, so the participants respond to the study manipulation without any prior knowledge. This procedure is consistent with prior research into fit, brand extensions, and cause-related marketing (e.g., Kumar, 2005; Samu & Wymer, 2009). For example, participants read that the brand Tiffany & Co. was partnering with a cause that was either taxonomic (e.g., safeguarding the safety of diamond miners, for an overlap of the brand and cause in terms of “diamonds”) or thematic (e.g., restoration of the Statue of Liberty, for an overlap of image with New York City), such that a percentage of each ring sold would support the cause.

One hundred one US participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.8$ years; 54.5% male) were recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk, which has been extensively validated for behavioral research; Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012) to complete our stimuli selection in return for a small compensation. In the one-factor (similarity: taxonomic vs. thematic) between-subjects design, participants evaluated either all taxonomic partnerships or all thematic ones. At the start, participants received a definition of taxonomic and thematic CM partnerships, then had to indicate how taxonomic (1 = “Not taxonomic at all”; 7 = “Very taxonomic”) and how thematic (1 = “Not thematic at all”; 7 = “Very

thematic”) they perceived the partnerships to be.

The results of a paired sample *t*-test led to the selection of the Tiffany & Co.–safeguarding diamond miners’ safety link as the taxonomic stimulus ($n = 51$, $M_{\text{taxo}} = 5.10$; $M_{\text{theme}} = 4.31$, $p < .05$). The Tiffany & Co.–restoration of the Statue of Liberty partnership provided the thematic stimulus ($n = 50$, $M_{\text{taxo}} = 3.16$; $M_{\text{theme}} = 4.90$, $p < .01$). Tiffany thus provided the brand stimulus for the first set of studies. As Silverstein and Fiske (2003) reveal, Tiffany targets Millennials (e.g. Samaha, 2017) with masstige product lines and sells many new products at lower prices (e.g., \$150–\$200). Millennials are also the main target audience for CM activities (i.e., the “empathic generation”; Arnett, 2010). Consequently, students from a large US university and US MTurk workers participated in the next studies, with Tiffany as the stimulus brand.

4. Study 1

4.1. Pretest on fit

The purpose of this pretest was to test that taxonomic and thematic fit were perceived differently than no fit in consumers’ minds. Ninety-four US-participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.09$; 59.6% male) were recruited on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to complete our pretest in return for a small compensation. In this case, we added a no fit partnership (“Reducing trash in US city parks”). With regard to fit, we chose a scale already used by Estes et al. (2012), wherein participants responded to a 7-point Likert scale asking about the perceived fit of the partnership (The partnership: “Fits with the parent brand”; “Is positive for the parent brand”; “Is logical for the parent brand”; 1 = “Strongly disagree”, 7 = “Strongly agree”). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (i.e., taxonomic, thematic, no fit) and we controlled for familiarity, like and involvement towards the brand and the cause (all results are non-significantly different among the three conditions). The results of this short pretest showed a main effect of the three conditions on fit (Fit ($\alpha_{\text{Fit}} = 0.864$): $F(2, 91) = 13.54$, $p < .01$). Further *t*-testing revealed that the no fit condition ($M_{\text{Fit}} = 4.02$) is significantly lower in fit than the thematic condition ($M_{\text{Fit}} = 5.00$) (Fit: $t(63) = 3.13$, $p < .05$) and taxonomic condition ($M_{\text{Fit}} = 5.62$) (Fit: $t(63) = 4.86$, $p < .01$). The results confirmed that taxonomic and thematic fit are different from no fit.

4.2. Pretest on emotions

The purpose of this pretest was to test that both partnerships (i.e., taxonomic and thematic) were perceived in the same manner in terms of emotions being experienced. Hundred twenty-seven students from a

large US university ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.07$; 64% male) participated in the pretest in return for course credit. They were asked about how they felt towards the partnerships in terms of empathetic emotions (Lee, Winterich and Ross Jr., 2014). Six different empathy emotion adjectives were tested (sympathetic, warm, compassionate, softhearted, tender and moved) (1 = “Not at all”, 7 = “Very much”) and an index was created ($\alpha_{\text{Emp_Emo}} = 0.961$). Finally, we ran an ANOVA and results confirmed that the two means were not different (Empathetic Emotion Index: $M_{\text{tax}} = 3.01$ vs. $M_{\text{them}} = 2.93$, $F(1,125) = 0.077$, $p = \text{ns}$), implying that the perception of both partnerships in terms of emotions is similar.

4.3. Method

The goal of **Study 1** was to test the first hypothesis, namely that consumers perceive a higher degree of skepticism towards taxonomic partnerships (H_1). One hundred fifty US-students ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.07$; 50.3% male) participated in our study in a controlled lab environment in return for course credit. **Study 1** used a one-factor (similarity: taxonomic vs. thematic) between-subject experiment.

We first gave students two lines of short description of the brand and we assigned them to either the taxonomic or the thematic condition. Respondents then indicated familiarity with the brand (using a 7-point Likert scale: 1 = “Not at all familiar”, 7 = “Extremely familiar”) and brand, cause, and partnership liking (1 = “Dislike at all”, 7 = “Like very much”). Afterwards, we assessed skepticism using a three-item measure developed by Romani, Grappi, and Bagozzi (2016). The items were “skeptical”, “suspicious” and “distrustful” and we asked participants how they perceived the partnership to be (7-point bipolar scale). Furthermore, we also checked the relationship that fit had with the skepticism variable (scale of Estes et al., 2012). Reliability checks for the scales were also performed ($\alpha_{\text{Skepticism}} = 0.95$; $\alpha_{\text{Fit}} = 0.84$) and we created two indices averaging the items for skepticism and fit, respectively.

4.4. Results

4.4.1. Manipulation checks

We first checked that familiarity of the brand and cause and liking of the brand, cause, and partnership did not influence our dependent variables. Even if Tiffany & Co. was perceived as a highly familiar brand, the mean differences in the two groups were non-significant.

4.4.2. Results for skepticism

Consistent with H_1 , participants who were in the taxonomic scenario showed a higher degree of skepticism towards the cause compared to those who were in the thematic one ($M_{\text{tax}} = 3.35$, $SD_{\text{tax}} = 1.40$ vs. $M_{\text{them}} = 2.91$, $SD_{\text{them}} = 1.31$, $F(1,151) = 4.02$, $p < .05$). Even if they perceived a higher fit than those who were in the thematic condition ($M_{\text{tax}} = 5.42$, $SD_{\text{tax}} = 1.17$ vs. $M_{\text{them}} = 4.53$, $SD_{\text{them}} = 1.08$, $F(1,151) = 23.61$, $p < .01$), their skepticism was higher.

4.5. Discussion

According to this study consumers see more skepticism towards taxonomic partnerships. This holds to be true even if the perceived fit that consumers have towards taxonomic partnerships is higher than the thematic fit. Consumers seem to believe that this high fit between cause and brand is connected to an extrinsic motivation towards CM (i.e. exploitation of the cause). This confirms the fact that thematic partnerships are instead better as they are perceived in a less skeptical manner. Even if they are “less fitting”, consumers believe the motivation for engaging in CM activities is driven by a genuine concern for the social issue, confirming what literature suggests (Drumwright, 1996; Ellen et al., 2000).

5. Study 2

5.1. Method

The goal of **Study 2** was to test the second hypothesis, namely that trust in the partnership mediates the relationship between taxonomic and thematic similarity and skepticism (H_2). One hundred twenty-two US-participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.7$; 50.8% male) were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk to complete our study in return for a small compensation. In order to better assess the relationship between similarity and skepticism, we conducted a mediation analysis with trust (H_3).

We created an index ($\alpha_{\text{Trust}} = 0.943$), averaging the two items proposed in the Hagdevdt trust scale (2011) (“The partnership is trustworthy”; “The partnership is reliable”, 1 = “Strongly Disagree”, 7 = “Strongly Agree”). We then did the same for the skepticism scale ($\alpha_{\text{Skepticism}} = 0.98$). We performed the mediation analysis using taxonomic/thematic similarity as independent variable, trust as mediator, and skepticism as dependent variable. For the mediation analysis, we used version 2.16 of the PROCESS macro by Preacher & Hayes (2008).

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Manipulation checks

As in **Study 1**, we first checked that familiarity and liking did not influence our dependent variable skepticism (Brand/cause familiarity and brand/cause/partnership liking all non-significant). Moreover, we also made sure that participants perceived a certain degree of fit between the cause and the brand, including our fit measure (Estes et al., 2012; $\alpha_{\text{Fit}} = 0.843$). Results showed even here that participants saw a higher fit for the taxonomic partnership rather than the thematic ($M_{\text{tax}} = 5.68$, $SD_{\text{tax}} = 1.23$ vs. $M_{\text{them}} = 5.24$, $SD_{\text{them}} = 1.16$, $F(1,120) = 4.17$, $p < .05$). This result confirms what checked in **Study 1**, but also shows that the two means are relatively high, suggesting that participants saw a certain degree of fit in both cases (i.e. different from no fit).

5.2.2. Results of the mediation analysis with trust

The bootstrap analysis indicated a significant indirect effect of similarity on skepticism (95% CI = -1.037 to -0.060). In the indirect path, a shift from taxonomic to thematic similarity increases trust towards the partnership by 0.6040 ($a = 0.6040$). At the same time, a shift from trust to skepticism reduces skepticism by 0.8680 ($b = -0.8680$). This means that holding constant similarity, an increase in trust towards the partnership lowers skepticism by 0.8680. Furthermore, the direct effect c , i.e. the effect of similarity on skepticism without mediators ($c = -0.046$, $p < .05$), becomes non-significant after the introduction of trust as mediator ($c' = -0.1768$, ns). Thus, trust towards the partnership fully mediates the relationship between taxonomic and thematic similarity and skepticism (see **Table 2** for further details).

5.3. Discussion

According to this study, trust in the partnership is the mechanism explaining the process between similarity and skepticism. Different authors suggested that similarity can be considered as a basis for trust (e.g. Meijnders et al., 2009) and we find that it has an impact even in our model, when taxonomic and thematic partnerships are evaluated in skepticism terms. More specifically, consumers trust taxonomic partnerships much less and this is reflected to the fact that they perceive a higher skepticism towards them (opposite for thematic).

6. Study 3

6.1. Method

The goal of **Study 3** was to evaluate the third hypothesis (H_3).

Table 2
Results of the mediation conducted in Study 2.

DV:	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Skepticism (Y)			Trust (M)			Skepticism (Y)		
	Coeff	SE		Coeff.	SE		Coeff.	SE	
Trust (M)									
Tax_Them (X)	c→	-0.046**	(0.084)	a→	0.6040**	(0.281)	b→	-0.8680***	(0.187)
Constant		0.634***	(0.023)		4.871***	(0.197)	c'→	-0.1768	(0.259)
N		122			122			7.695***	(0.440)
R ²		0.032			0.037			0.497	
F		3.960			4.608			0.82	

*** p ≤ .01.

** p ≤ .05.

* p ≤ .1.

Specifically, the study tested whether regulatory focus moderated the relationship between similarity and skepticism for taxonomic partnerships. One hundred seven respondents ($M_{age} = 32.23$; 61.7% male) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk participated in the study in return for a small compensation.

The study used a 2 (similarity: taxonomic vs. thematic) × 2 (regulatory focus: prevention vs. promotion), between-subjects experiment. In order to manipulate regulatory focus, we followed the procedure used by Freitas and Higgins (2002) regarding current ideals and obligations. Participants were randomly assigned to either the promotion or the prevention focus condition. Participants in promotion focus were asked to think about something they ideally would like to do and were requested to describe in details three hopes or aspirations they had. Oppositely, participants in prevention focus were asked to think about something they ought to do and were requested to describe three duties or obligations they had. After the priming, participants saw either the taxonomic or the thematic partnership and then answered to the skepticism dependent variable.

6.2. Results

6.2.1. Results for regulatory focus as moderator

A two-way ANOVA was performed for similarity (taxonomic vs. thematic) and regulatory focus (prevention vs. promotion) on the degree of skepticism. The analysis uncovered a significant interaction effect of similarity and regulatory focus on skepticism ($F(1,107) = 4.25, p < .05$) with the main effect of similarity as significant ($F(1,107) = 5.41, p < .05$) and regulatory focus as non-significant ($F(1,107) = 2.74, ns$). In the taxonomic scenario, promotion-focused participants showed significantly lower skepticism compared to prevention-focused ones ($M_{prev} = 4.20, SD_{prev} = 1.82$ vs. $M_{prom} = 2.96, SD_{prom} = 1.65, F(1,50) = 6.57, p < .05$). In the thematic condition, the difference between conditions was non-significant ($M_{prev} = 2.74, SD_{prev} = 1.65$ vs. $M_{prom} = 2.88, SD_{prom} = 1.69, F(1,53) = 0.09, ns$) (Fig. 2).

6.3. Discussion

We find that regulatory focus acts as moderator in our model. As skepticism is higher in the case of companies engaging in taxonomic partnerships, we provide evidence for the fact that it can be reduced by focusing on promotion-focus strategies, rather than prevention ones. More specifically, promotion focus emphasizes hopes, accomplishments and goals are viewed as ideals (Higgins, 1997). As promotion strategies can be situationally induced (Cesario et al., 2004), companies and CM experts should make consumers concentrate on the positive cues of the partnership, in order to activate feelings of benign and non-threatening situations (Friedman & Foerster, 2002). Regulatory focus and especially engaging people in promotion-focus contexts (e.g., letting them focus

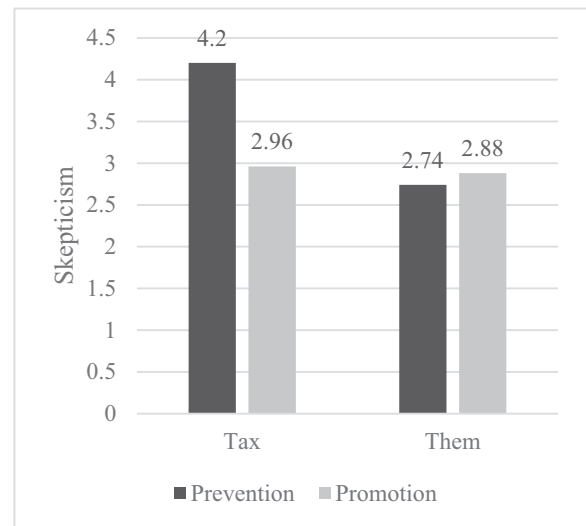


Fig. 2. Results of Study 3.

on the affective content of an advertisement) is a powerful tool to put in place in order to limit consumers' skepticism in taxonomic CM scenarios.

7. Study 4

The aim of the final study was to test the last two hypotheses (H_4 and H_5). On one hand, we wanted to show that consumers perceived a higher willingness to purchase (WTP) in the case of thematic partnerships. On the other, we also wanted to test that both trust and skepticism could together influence the relationship between similarity and WTP. For testing these hypotheses and also increase the generalizability of our results, we used another brand, i.e. Beats (by Dr. Dre). Beats is a leading audio brand highly appreciated by Millennials and is becoming one of their favorite audio brands (Klara, 2017). We therefore decided to use Beats as the brand stimulus for the final study.

7.1. Stimulus selection

We adopted the same procedure as the one used for the stimulus selection of Tiffany. Specifically, we told participants that the brand Beats (by Dr. Dre) was partnering with a cause that was either taxonomic (e.g., Donating headphones to teenagers in orphanages – overlap of brand and cause in terms of “headphones”) or thematic (e.g., Promoting diversity in US colleges – overlap of core values/mission with the fact that Beats believes “that without the diversity that music brings us our world would be nothing”) and that a percentage of each

product sold was going to support the cause. Ninety US participants recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk ($M_{age} = 35.3$; 62.2% male) participated in the stimulus selection in return for a small compensation. Based on the results of a paired sample *t*-test, the partnership “Beats - Donating headphones to teenagers in orphanages” was selected as the taxonomic stimulus ($n = 45$, $M_{tax} = 4.76$ vs $M_{them} = 3.49$, $p < .05$) while the partnership “Beats – Diversity in US colleges” was selected as the thematic one ($n = 45$, $M_{tax} = 2.51$ vs $M_{them} = 5.64$, $p < .01$).

7.2. Pretest on fit and emotions

As with Tiffany & Co., purpose of this pretest was to test that taxonomic and thematic fit were perceived differently than no fit in consumers' minds. Seventy-five US-participants ($M_{age} = 34.74$; 60% male) were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk to complete our pretest in return for a small compensation. In this case, we added a no fit partnership (“Fighting against food waste in US colleges”). As fit check, we used the fit scale of [Estes et al. \(2012\)](#) as in the pretest of Tiffany. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (i.e., taxonomic, thematic, no fit) and we controlled for familiarity, like and involvement towards the brand and the cause (all results non-significantly different among the three conditions). The results of this short study showed a main effect of the three conditions on fit (Fit ($\alpha_{Fit} = 0.914$); $F(2, 72) = 6.70$, $p < .05$). Further *t*-testing revealed that the no fit condition ($M_{Fit} = 2.92$) is significantly lower than the thematic condition ($M_{Fit} = 4.73$) (Fit: $t(50) = 2.441$, $p < .05$) and taxonomic condition ($M_{Fit} = 5.02$) (Fit: $t(50) = 0.204$, $p < .01$). The results confirmed that taxonomic and thematic fit are different from no fit also in the Beats case.

Furthermore, taking into consideration only the taxonomic and the thematic partnerships, we also asked participants about how they felt towards the partnerships in terms of empathetic emotions (Empathetic emotions; [Lee, Winterich, & Ross Jr, 2014](#)). Results confirmed that the two means among the two groups were not different ($\alpha_{Emp_Emo} = 0.985$) (Empathetic Emotion Index: $M_{tax} = 4.28$ vs. $M_{them} = 3.55$, $F(1,48) = 1.655$, $p = ns$). Finally, we also controlled for familiarity, liking and involvement with the brand and cause and we did not find any significant difference among the two conditions.

7.3. Replication of Studies 1, 2 and 3 with the new brand

Before conducting the final study, we replicated the results obtained in the previous studies with Tiffany with the new brand Beats. The results are all significant and go in the same direction as the ones with Tiffany. However, we here only report the results related to the specific hypotheses H_4 , and H_5 .

Table 3
Results of the serial mediation analysis conducted in [Study 4](#).

DV:	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Trust (M_1)		Skepticism (M_2)		WTP (Y)	
	Coeff	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Skepticism (M_2)					-0.1162**	(0.058)
Trust (M_1)			-0.734***	(0.034)	0.5148***	(0.062)
Tax_Them (X)	0.315**	(0.122)	-0.175*	(0.096)	0.6765***	(0.127)
Constant	4.704***	(0.086)	6.353***	(0.175)	1.911***	(0.436)
N	517		517		517	
R ²	0.012		0.480		0.307	
F	6.586		237.39		75.882	

*** $p \leq .01$.
** $p \leq .05$.
* $p \leq .1$.

7.4. Method

Five hundred seventeen students were recruited in a large US university ($M_{age} = 22.20$; 52% male) and participated in our study in a controlled lab environment in return for course credit.

The procedure was the same as in the previous studies. We asked participants to answer our trust and skepticism variables ($\alpha_{Trust} = 0.965$; $\alpha_{Skept} = 0.949$) as well as the new variable willingness to purchase (WTP) the brand (“Now that you know about the partnership, how willing are you to buy the brand Beats?”, 1 = “Extremely willing”; 7 = “Extremely unwilling”). Before posing this question, we also checked for the usual purchasing behavior towards the brand (“Have you ever purchased the brand Beats?” 1 = “Never”; 7 = “Very often”). Furthermore, we also controlled for familiarity and liking (no significant differences). We run a one-way ANOVA for checking the behavior of taxonomic/thematic on willingness to purchase and then a serial mediation analysis to test the relationships between the different variables. For the mediation analysis, we used version 2.16 of the PROCESS macro by [Preacher and Hayes \(2008\)](#) with bootstrapping estimates.

7.5. Results

7.5.1. Results for willingness to purchase for a brand (WTP)

We measured the WTP after knowing that the brand was doing CM activities. Firstly, we controlled that purchase behavior towards the brand did not influence our WTP variable (Purch Beh: $M_{tax} = 2.68$, $SD_{tax} = 1.68$, $M_{them} = 2.95$, $SD_{them} = 1.88$, $F(1,515) = 0.295$, ns). Results showed that the taxonomic condition leads to a significantly lower WTP than the thematic condition ($M_{tax} = 4.00$, $SD_{tax} = 1.79$, $M_{them} = 4.88$, $SD_{them} = 1.52$, $F(1,515) = 36.45$, $p < .01$), in line with H_4 .

7.5.2. Results of the serial mediation analysis with trust and skepticism on WTP

To test H_5 , we ran a serial mediation analysis with taxonomic/thematic similarity used as independent variable, WTP as dependent variable and trust and skepticism as mediators. Similarity had a positive effect on trust ($\beta_{taxthem} = 0.315$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .05$) and had a negative effect on skepticism ($\beta_{trust} = -0.74$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .01$). By running the serial mediation model, we found out that trust and skepticism serially mediated the effect of taxonomic/thematic similarity on WTP, confirming H_5 (ω (tax/them \rightarrow trust \rightarrow Skept \rightarrow WTP) = 0.026, 95% CI = 0.0013 to 0.0813). By engaging in thematic partnerships, consumers perceive a higher level of trust towards the partnership, which leads to a lower degree of skepticism. This in turn influences in a positive manner the willingness to purchase, i.e. a low skepticism leads to a higher willingness to purchase (see [Table 3](#) for details on the

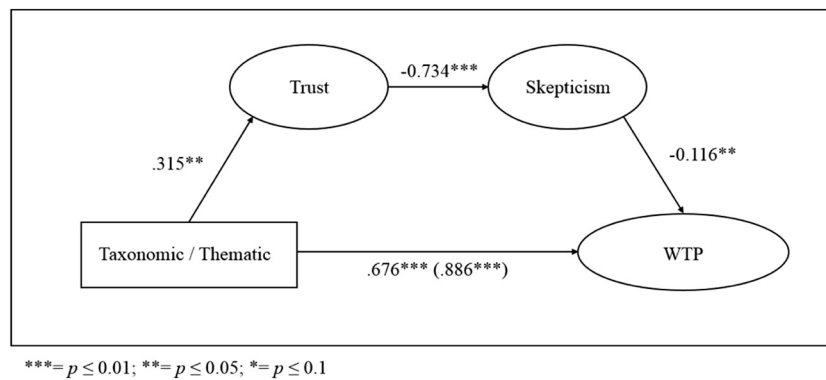


Fig. 3. Graphical representation of the serial mediation model in Study 4.

regressions, Fig. 3 for conceptual summary). We replicated the results obtained in this final study also with Tiffany.

7.6. Discussion

Study 4 shows that consumers are more willing to purchase brands that are engaged in thematic partnerships (as opposed to taxonomic). Even if similarity, or perceived fit between sponsoring brand and cause, has been shown to impact WTP in a positive manner (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004), thematic partnerships are preferred when consumers express their WTP a given brand engaged in CM activities. This seems to be true especially due to the negative role that skepticism has on WTP (e.g. Webb & Mohr, 1998). As a matter of fact, consumers appear to be more skeptical and less trusting towards taxonomic partnerships and be less willing to purchase brands involved in those kinds of CM-partnerships (e.g. Goh & Balaji, 2016). Furthermore, as trust is higher and skepticism is lower in thematic partnerships, WTP becomes higher.

8. General discussion

Selecting the right cause and the right partner is one of the most important issues for cause-related marketing. Fit, or similarity between a brand and cause (Aaker & Keller, 1990), constitutes an important variable for promoting the success of CM (e.g. Ellen et al., 2006) but also can foster consumer skepticism (e.g., Barone et al., 2007; Drumwright, 1996; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). The literature review reveals a lack of consensus about what fit means (Table 1). To achieve a more systematic understanding of fit, this study draws on psychological and branding literature, with the goal of informing (and re-forming) concepts of fit in CM. The literature review of cognitive psychology and brand extension studies (e.g., Estes et al., 2012) helps distinguish between taxonomic and thematic fit, such that this study seeks to evaluate which type of CM partnership leads to less skepticism and higher WTP.

Across four studies, the findings suggest that participants express more skepticism towards taxonomic partnerships, which feature greater fit between the brand and the cause. Consumers seem skeptical of such partnerships and distrust companies that engage in such relationships more. Moreover, trust in the partnership serves as a significant mediator (lowering the total effect of taxonomic/thematic similarity on the degree of skepticism); regulatory focus (prevention-focus vs. promotion-focus strategies) also acts as a moderator of the effect of taxonomic partnerships. In general, taxonomic partnerships are trusted less, which leads to more skepticism. By implementing promotion-focused strategies, companies engaged in taxonomic CM relationships can reduce the degree of skepticism expressed by consumers and encourage them to focus on positive cues of the partnership (Friedman & Foerster, 2002). Finally, consumers are more willing to purchase brands that engage in thematic (cf. taxonomic) partnerships, and trust and skepticism act as serial mediators of this willingness to purchase. Consumers appear less

trusting and more skeptical towards taxonomic partnerships, reflected in their diminished willing to purchase brands involved in such CM partnerships (e.g. Goh & Balaji, 2016). Trust is higher and skepticism is lower in thematic partnerships though, so WTP also appears higher, which indicates the promising opportunities that thematic partnerships offer for CM success.

8.1. Theoretical implications

These findings contribute to CM literature, specifically that related to commonality strategies, for which fit, skepticism, trust, regulatory focus, and WTP all have roles. By examining the effects of fit on skepticism in a specific CM context, this research conceptually extends and empirically contributes to literature from branding, psychology, and advertising (e.g., Drumwright, 1996; Ellen et al., 2000; Estes et al., 2012). First, by drawing on the neural and behavioral dissociation of taxonomic and thematic similarities, a dual-process model provides a parsimonious account of two drivers of CM evaluation; this novel framework informs otherwise disjointed literature on the concept of fit in CM (e.g. Barone et al., 2007; Das et al., 2016; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). Second, this research contributes to prior literature on skepticism by providing empirical evidence of the positive relationship between relationships with greater fit (i.e., taxonomic) and increased skepticism (Drumwright, 1996; Ellen et al., 2000). Third, a large stream of CM literature considers the effects of CM activities on WTP (e.g. Lafferty et al., 2004; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998); this work supports clearer links among studies on fit, skepticism, and WTP, emphasizing that thematic partnerships are preferable if companies seek greater WTP (Goh & Balaji, 2016; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). Fourth, in a contribution to research on trust and regulatory focus, this study emphasizes their roles in connection with fit and skepticism in the specific field of CM (e.g., Cesario et al., 2004; Higgins, 1997, 2000; Meijnders et al., 2009).

8.2. Managerial implications

Beyond its scholarly contributions, this research has implications for managerial practice. It represents the first attempt to highlight differences in evaluations of taxonomic and thematic CM partnerships. Such partnerships are growing in importance, and a better understanding of what leads to better customer evaluations, in terms of higher trust, lower skepticism, and higher WTP, is very relevant to modern companies. Consumers assume CM is not driven entirely by altruistic motives; is it possible to lower this form of skepticism? For example, should Avon collaborate with an organization to prevent domestic violence or one that seeks to protect people against skin allergies? The current results indicate that companies should focus more on thematic partnerships (e.g., Avon and domestic violence), which create less skepticism and seem more trustworthy than taxonomic partnerships. They also increase consumers' willingness to purchase. Thematic partnerships

offer great potential that is currently not being exploited; managers often, and erroneously, perceive that taxonomic partnerships offer greater value (e.g., D'Aveni, Ravenscraft, & Anderson, 2004).

The findings also provide suggestions for brands currently engaging in taxonomic partnerships (e.g., Tom's Shoes and Children International, to donate shoes to poor kids). Many taxonomic partnerships remain in the market, so limiting skepticism may be particularly helpful for decreasing expenditures or avoiding brand dilution. In such scenarios, managers in charge of marketing and communication activities should devote more attention to strategies for limiting skepticism, such as evoking consumers' promotion-focused mindsets. If brands can get consumers to focus on the peripheral cues of the promotional message, they should be able to influence the affective content of the promotional message, focusing on the general ideas they want to communicate without overwhelming consumers with details (e.g., no need to focus on campaign technicalities or numbers).

8.3. Limitations and further research

A promising direction for research would entail considerations of other stimuli, such as brands (fictitious or real) in different product categories. Moreover, different scales could be used to assess the relationships among the variables. For example, the skepticism scale used herein (Romani et al., 2016) included three negatively valenced items, which might have activated triggering processes or cognitions. Applications of other skepticism scales might help replicate the results obtained in this article; they should be adapted to the specific purpose of testing CM partnerships (e.g. Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, skepticism towards advertising scale). This study also includes only partnerships with some minimum degree of fit (taxonomic or thematic), excluding random partnerships from the analysis. Additional research might check whether they are perceived even worse than taxonomic partnerships, in terms of skepticism and WTP. Nor does this study take into consideration the links among the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the target consumers and the brands involved in CM activities, though prior literature suggests including them to predict the effectiveness of CM campaigns (e.g. Zdravkovic et al., 2010). Finally, further research should specify the implications of the relationships among taxonomic and thematic similarity, skepticism, and WTP for other variables, such as donation contributions from consumers and companies to support CM campaigns.

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