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Research Article

Segmenting the audience of a cause-related marketing viral campaign

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the attitudinal effect of a cause-related marketing campaign which becomes viral through social networks. This attitudinal response is observed in three Internet user segments with different affinity levels: i) strong (familiar with the sponsoring brand and the promoted cause); ii) intermediate (familiar with the brand or the cause); and iii) weak (without previous experiences of either the brand or the social cause). To develop our experiment, 360 Internet surfers agree to participate. Their attitudes were measured before and after the showing of a viral spot in which a pet food brand encourages pet adoption. Our results show that a viral campaign works perfectly for the strong-affinity segment and adequately for the week affinity segment. On the contrary, this viral campaign leaves the intermediate-affinity segment indifferent.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, brand associations based on the brand social responsibility beliefs and values are especially relevant because of brands' evolution from a rational approach towards a spiritual or ethical approach (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010). The building of a strong brand implies the communication of a determinate brand image so that all target groups associate it with a set of values (Keller, 2009; Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2012; Peloza & Shang, 2011). Cause-related marketing is one of the most popular strategies for companies to explicitly communicate their social responsibility and their social commitment in today's global market (Gruber, Kaliauer, & BSchlegelmilch, 2017; Wei, Ang, & Liou, 2020). When this type of communication is addressed exclusively to a group with very specific demographic characteristics or lifestyle it can be termed as 'affinity marketing' (Mekonnen, Harris, & Laing, 2008).

From a company-centric view, both cause-related and affinity marketing are strategies that have been increasingly implemented in consumer markets (Laing, Harris, & Mekonnen, 2004). As Thomas, Kureshi, and Vatavwala (2019) have reviewed, prior experiences with the brand or the cause would probably lead to a better evaluation of cause-related marketing campaigns, which is supported by the Attribution Theory. From this approach, it could be affirmed that a cause-related marketing campaign will work better for consumers with positive previous attributions (towards the brand or the cause).

From a consumer point of view, the empirical evidence demonstrates that most consumers are in favour of cause-related and affinity marketing programs, and that their support for these types of initiatives is growing (Samu & Wymer, 2014). However, as Wei et al. (2020) explain, consumers' evaluations of the cause and the brand promoting this cause will be contingent on their previous personal beliefs and experiences.

In this scene, new technologies emerge as a powerful, cost-effective and quick tool (Dwivedi et al., 2020) to implement a cause-related marketing campaign, focused to specific experienced audiences (affinity segment). In social network communications, '*familiarity leads to an understanding of an entity's current situation*' (Cheng, Fu, & de Vreede, 2017, p. 30), which suggest that previous affinity will affect viewers' responses towards viral cause-related marketing campaigns because '*individuals in the same group tend to trust more*' (Cheng et al., 2017, p. 31).

Given the described context, two main objectives guide this work. The first objective, which contributes to the general field of cause-related marketing, is to determine the direction (positive or negative) and the magnitude of the effect of a real virtual campaign on an audience. The second objective, which contributes to the more specific field of affinity marketing, is to demonstrate that the effectiveness of this type of campaign is not homogeneous. In particular, this work aims to ascertain to what extent the effectiveness of viral advertising depends on the previous affinity level of the audience segment (experience with the brand or with the cause): high, moderate or low.

To reach both objectives, a research study was carried out with the help of 360 Internet users. They filled out a questionnaire developed by a pet-food brand to promote a social cause (pet adoption) before and after viewing a real virtual video on a social media network.

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The results will cover five literature gaps that have not been investigated to date. Firstly, the large volume of cause-related marketing research has produced knowledge fragmentation with limited connections between studies (Wymer & Sargeant, 2006). Therefore, this piece of research focuses on the in-depth analysis of the basic consequence variable, 'attitude'. Moreover, given that pre-attitudes and post-attitudes were compared in this study, the authors have covered the gap identified by Thomas, Kureshi & Vatavwala (2019, p. 21), related to the absence of studies focused on monitoring 'pre and post evaluation' of a cause-related marketing campaign.

Secondly, this paper explores how consumers' motivations for sharing information via social media impact others' perceptions of the message. By using new technologies to investigate the effectiveness of a viral cause-related marketing campaign through Facebook we address the literature gap highlighted by Dwivedi et al. (2020), p. 4): "*research is needed to further understand how digital marketing relates to humanity*".

Thirdly, regarding the economic sector, an industry seldom investigated was chosen: the pet food industry. As Wu and Cheng (2020) support, pets have a central position in the human family. 'High pet ownership rates in Western countries are associated with a substantial number of stray animals admitted to shelters and pounds each year' (Wu & Cheng, 2020, p. 109), which urges to promote pet adoption campaigns.

Fourthly, in advertising research, it is necessary to demonstrate the effectiveness of new segmentation variables (such as affinity with the brand or the cause) when designing and planning a communication campaign. Thus, this research adopts a case study segmentation approach to investigate differential responses of various audience segments viewing the same advertisement. The Social Impact Theory suggests that individuals are more affected by immediate rather than distant sources (Wei et al., 2020). Therefore, the affinity or proximity of the audience with the sponsoring brand or the promoted cause is a relevant segmentation variable to better explain the effectiveness of a cause-related marketing campaign. The importance of using this segmentation variable has to do with the boom in affinity marketing in recent years (Abedi & Jahed, 2020). As Dwivedi et al. (2020), p. 4) have remarked, further research opportunities include the analysis of which combination of variables are most effective for segmenting customers in digital and social network marketing channels.

Lastly, benefit analyses of cause-related marketing from a sole brand perspective are predominant, and little attention has been paid to the cause perspective or the binomial brand-cause perspective (Basil & Herr, 2006; Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Hult, 2004, 2009, 2014), which is proposed by this research. Other more recent studies in this field were done (Mora and Vila, 2020); however, those studies were conducted from a quantitative approach that uses structural modelling and focuses just on post-attitudes towards the brand (omitting pre-attitudes and attitudes towards the cause).

In sum, the present paper adopts an experimental design, measuring the evolution of attitudes towards the brand and the cause, as well as the moderating role of affinity marketing to segment the audience.

2. Theory

2.1. Cause-related marketing campaigns to improve attitudes

The present study adopts a broad definition of the concept of cause-related marketing, according to the conceptualisation formulated by Endacott (2004), who defines it as 'a marketing strategy adopted by businesses to link their name, brand or service with a particular "good cause" service or charitable organisation' (p. 183).

These kinds of alliances are used to stimulate synergistic benefits among allies: a brand and a cause or non-profit organisation. The brand benefits from the social competencies of the alliance partner, and, at the same time, the alliance partner benefits from the financial and marketing competencies of the brand (Lafferty, Lueth, & McCafferty, 2016). However, this will happen only if the cause-related marketing campaign can improve the final attitudes of consumers, both towards the sponsoring brand and towards the promoted cause.

The improvement in attitudes towards the brand and the cause, as a result of a cause-related marketing campaign, can be explained with two theories: the Theory of Associative Learning (Mackintosh, 1983) and the Integration Theory (Anderson, 1981).

The Theory of Associative Learning supports that this type of advertising involves the construction of an associative link between a brand and a cause (Till & Nowak, 2000). As a result, attitudes towards each of the partners will improve when both brand and cause are valued positively (Lafferty et al., 2004), reinforcing each other. Hence, as Thomas et al. (2019) explain, a cause-related marketing campaign will significantly improve audience attitudes towards the brand that promotes the cause and also towards the promoted cause itself because, as the Theory of Associative Learning indicates, the fit between the brand and the alliance partner will create a mutually beneficial relationship through this connection.

The Integration Theory (Anderson, 1981) can also explain the improvement of audience attitudes towards the brand promoting a social cause and the promoted cause itself. This approach considers that the new information transmitted through advertising produces new attitudes towards the alliance partners and also causes individual effects towards the brand and the cause (Lafferty et al., 2004), which are integrated into previous existing attitudes. As Lafferty et al. (2016) detail, if the feedback of a cause-related marketing campaign is positive, prior attitudes will be augmented.

To sum up, brands are interested in developing cause-related marketing strategies because of their capacity to improve consumer attitudes, as this will impact directly and positively on consumers' intentions to purchase products of the brand (Theory of Reasoned Action). The association of a brand with a social cause in a cause-related marketing campaign enables the improvement of attitudes towards the allies (brand and cause), as their respective previous evaluations of both are now associated (Theory of Associative Learning). The new information transmitted through cause-related marketing advertising about the alliance produces new attitudes towards the partners and causes individual effects towards the brand and the cause, which are integrated with the previous existing attitudes (Theory of Integration).

Therefore, it could be predicted that a favourable impression of an alliance (between a brand a cause) will increase the chances to improve attitudes towards the partners (the brand and the cause) that have been successfully integrated into consumers' minds. Thus, based on these theories, the following two hypotheses have been formulated:H1. Exposure to a cause-related marketing viral video ad will significantly **improve** audience **attitudes** towards the **brand** that promotes that cause.

H2. Exposure to a cause-related marketing viral video ad will significantly **improve** audience **attitudes** towards the promoted **cause** in that campaign.

2.2. The role of audience affinity (high, moderate and low) on attitudes

Nevertheless, this positivist cause-related marketing research stream has been questioned by some recent investigations, which warn of possible emotional exhaustion (Buford & Daniels, 2012), scepticism among consumers (Singh, Kristensen, & Villasenor, 2009; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013) and cynicism that consumers sometimes attribute to the brands involved (García, Gibaja, & Mujika, 2003). These three negative feelings (i.e. emotional exhaustion, scepticism and brand cynicism) can result in negative attitudes towards the cause and the brand promoting that cause. This will occur mainly among low-affinity audiences because, in terms of Bae (2018), some factors might interfere with the intended outcome of a cause-related marketing ad on social network sites, being the audience profile one of the most important

moderating factors. Hence, the importance of segmenting the target audience of a cause-related marketing campaign.

In this vein, pioneering research, such as the study by Smith and Alcorn (1991), identified segments of consumers that could be differentiated according to their altruistic stimuli response: primary contributors, economically motivated and non-participants—ranked from highest to lowest intention towards cause contribution. Certainly, such differential responses from consumers have turned different strategies of market segmentation into one of the most effective forms of commercialisation and advertising (Qin, Yong, & Wang, 2017). Taking advantage of the most positive reaction from the most inclined segments (i.e. high-affinity segments) is, perhaps, what has increasingly made affinity marketing. So, affinity marketing is a specific type of marketing that can be used to promote causes prioritising involved-affine consumers (Laing et al., 2004; Mekonnen et al., 2008).

The seminal work on affinity marketing, by Macchiette and Roy (1992), describes the concept of 'affinity' based on the 'level of individual cohesion, social bond, identification and compliance with standards and standards of a particular reference group' (pp. 48). Besides, more recent conceptualisations, such as that by Oberecker, Riefler, and Diamantopoulos (2008), examine in-depth the concept by linking it with direct or indirect prior experience—in the case of this study, the perception of a foreign country—and define affinity as:

> *'a feeling of liking, sympathy, and even attachment toward [a specific foreign country] that has become an in-group as a result of the consumer's direct personal experience and/or normative exposure and that positively affects the consumer's decision-making associated with products and services originating from the affinity [country]'*. (p. 26)

Following this line of research, the present study will adopt this concept of affinity linked to previous experience with the brand or the cause. Community experience is an important driver of community commitment and social network brand community commitment can cultivate customers' positive brand attitude (Wang, Cao, & Park, 2019).

As Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006) point out, consumer affinity is considered to be a favourable attitude that develops when customers perceive similarities between their self-perception and brand perception, and this affinity is shared among the members of a community with mutual interests. Therefore, affinity and attitudes are related constructs. For this reason, the link between the attitudes—towards the brand and the cause—and the affinity–proximity of the users can be explained with the Self-Congruity Theory (Lee & Jeong, 2014) and the Social Identity Theory (Sheikh & Beise-Zee, 2011). Both approaches defend the notion that users who believe that a brand promoting a social cause shares with them a subset of distinctive characteristics (of a social nature in our case) will consider that supporting this brand and the promoted cause is an attractive way to create their identity and achieve their social realisation (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005). They will feel congruent with themselves and socially accepted. On the contrary, if users are not affine to a brand (or the promoted cause of that brand), they will not develop those same types of feelings or attitudes.

Thus, both lines of research, Self Congruity Theory and Social Identity Theory, postulate that internet users' with "high affinity" (that is, with previous experience with the brand and the cause) will have better starting attitudes (towards the brand and the cause) and will react more favourably (better post-attitudes) to a cause-related communication campaign. This occurs because of their previous fit (congruence) with the brand and the cause contributes to its greater social realization after visualizing the campaign. H3. Internet users' **attitudes** (towards the brand and the cause) will be higher for the **high-affinity** segment than for the **intermediate** and **low** ones

This general hypothesis could be deconstructed into the following sub-hypotheses based on two main conclusions.

Firstly, Internet users have different starting attitudes towards a brand or cause promoted online, based on their previous experiences (affinity). In this regard, Macchiette and Roy (1992) speak about three levels of affinity segments, ranging from higher to lower strengths of affinity: true, moderate and nominal. Extrapolating the division of the three affinity levels (Macchiette & Roy, 1992) to a brand–cause alliance, and considering this to be affinity linked to previous experiences (Oberecker et al., 2008), it is possible to find three different segments in the global audience of cause-related marketing campaigns: (1) recipients with high affinity (i.e. those with previous experiences with the cause and the brand promoting that cause); (2) recipients with intermediate affinity (i.e. those with brand or cause experience); and (3) recipients with low affinity (i.e. those without previous experiences of either the brand or the social cause). As Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006) conceptualised, affinity and attitudes are two sides of the same coin.

In sum, Internet users with "high affinity" (that is, with previous experience with the brand and the cause) show a high fit (congruence) with the brand and the cause (Self Congruence Theory), therefore their starting attitudes towards the brand and the cause will be higher. Then:H3a. Pre-attitudes towards the **brand** (before the cause-related marketing viral video ad) will be higher for the **high-affinity** segment than for the **intermediate-** and **low-affinity** segments.

H3b. Pre-attitudes towards the **cause** (before the cause-related marketing viral video ad) will be higher for the **high-affinity** segment than for the **intermediate-** and **low-affinity** segments.

Secondly, one should expect high-affinity segments to show better responses (post-attitudes) towards a cause-related marketing campaign than low-affinity segments because recipients prefer to interact with brands that they have attributed a symbolic and compatible value with their own self-concept in the past, as the Self-Congruity Theory states. For example, Teng (2017) demonstrated how high levels of identification (with an avatar in his experiment) lead to high levels of responses (participation in gaming communities). However, high-affinity recipients will also identify with those brands that also support the social causes that appeal most to their empathy, because human beings tend to identify themselves with others sharing common interests and beliefs—according to the Social Identity Theory (Teng, 2017). Hence, their acceptance will be higher.

As anticipated in the previous discussion, Internet users with "high affinity" (that is, with previous experience with the brand and the cause) will react more favourably (better post-attitudes) to a cause-related communication campaign, because its social realization after visualizing the campaign is bigger. Attitudes evolve because as Buhalis and Volchek (2020) have remarked, customers pass through distinct stages of awareness, interest, desire, and action to satisfy their needs, and this evolution depends on the number of marketing communications customers are exposed to. Then:

H3c. Post-attitudes towards the brand (after the cause-related marketing viral video ad) will be higher for the **high-affinity** segment than for the **intermediate**- and **low-affinity** segments.

H3d. POST-ATTITUDES towards the **cause** (after the cause-related marketing viral video ad) will be higher for the **high-affinity** segment than for the **intermediate-** and **low-affinity** segments.

Fig. 1summarises our proposal.

3. Materials and method

3.1. Design and general description: WHEN and HOW?

A quasi-experimental study was proposed, following similar previous examples (Basil & Herr, 2006; Grau & Folse, 2007; Samu & Wymer, 2009). Our experiment has been developed in two phases:

- PHASE 1. To test H1 and H2 an experiment was done based on a pre-test and post-test design for the same group of individuals. Their attitudes towards a brand and a cause were measured before and after visualizing a cause-related marketing campaign. This campaign was done by the brand to promote the cause. Then, previous and subsequent average attitudes towards the brand and the cause were calculated and compared using two t-tests for related samples.
- PHASE 2. To test H3 our sample was separated into three sub-samples. That is, in this second phase, a 1 × 3 experimental design was prepared, considering the degree of affinity (high, intermediate and low) as a moderating factor. A multiple one-way analysis of the variance (ANOVA) was used to compare these three segments attitudes before and after watching a viral, cause-related video ad. A total of four dependent variables were considered in this phase: (1) pre-attitude towards the brand, (2) pre-attitude towards the cause, (3) post-attitude towards the brand and (4) post-attitude towards the cause. The means of these variables were compared using multiple one-way analysis of the variance (ANOVA). Therefore, this experiment consisted of: 2 (pre attitudes and post attitudes) x 2 (allies: brand and cause) x 3 (affinity levels: high, intermediate and low).

3.2. Stimuli selection: WHAT?

To improve the external validity of the experiments (Alexander, 2009), a unique, cause-related marketing ad was presented in video format, in which Pedigree (i.e. a brand of pet food) encourages the adoption of dogs. Previously, that cause-related marketing ad reached significant levels of virality: more than 16,900 views on YouTube and more than 4900 Facebook shares.

3.3. Dependent variables (scales used)

Four types of attitudes were measured on the same scale: (1) pre-attitude towards the brand, (2) pre-attitude towards the cause, (3) post-attitude towards the brand and (4) post-attitude towards the cause. The most common measuring instrument is a semantic differential seven-point scale, with the following four pairs of adjectives: (1) bad–good, (2) negative–positive, (3) unfavourable–favourable, and (4) I do not like it–I like it (Coulter & Punj, 2004; Nan and Heo, 2007).

The corresponding Cronbach's α-coefficients confirm the reliability of the scale in all cases: pre-attitude toward the brand (α = 0.97), pre-attitude towards the cause (α = 0.91), post-attitude towards the brand (α = 0.98) and post-attitude towards the cause (α = 0.94).

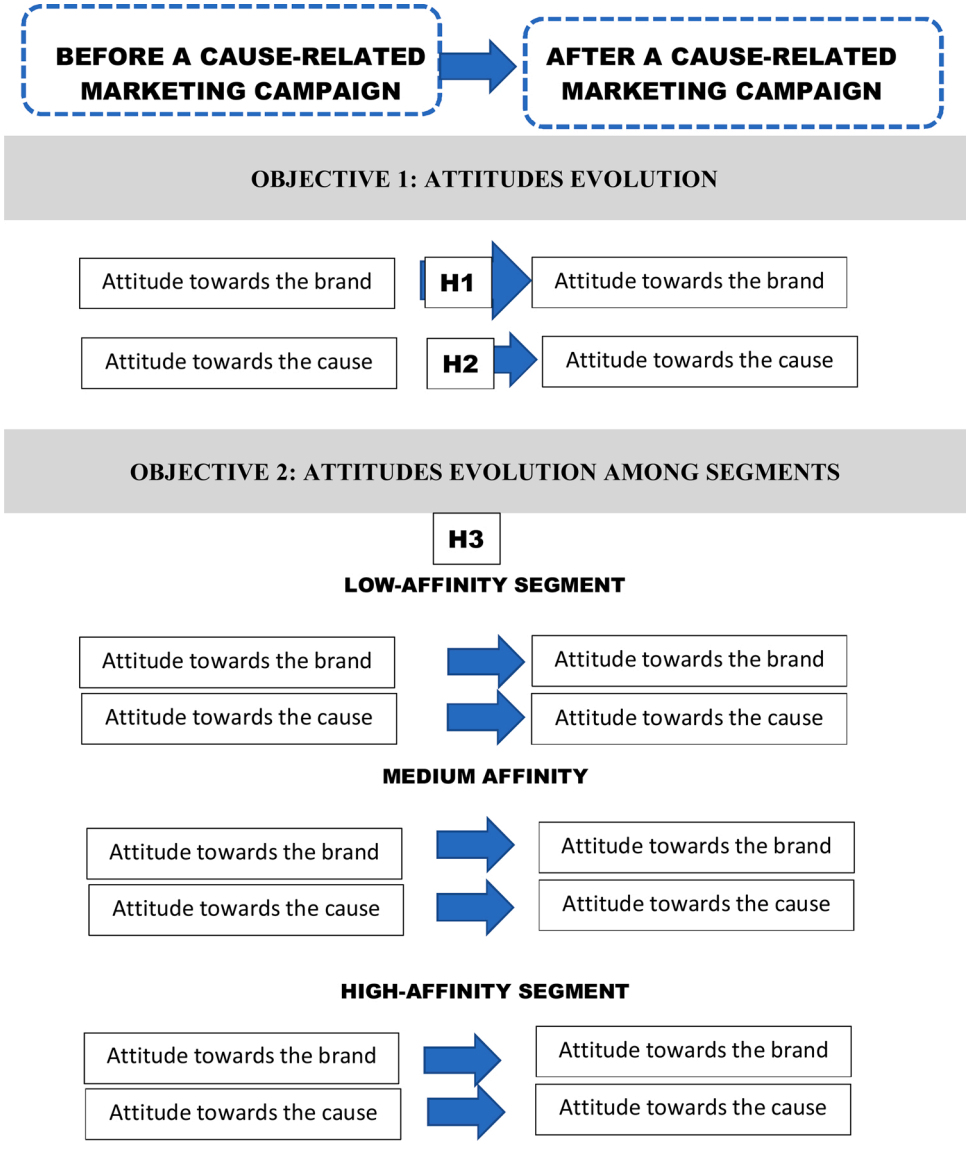

Fig. 1. Attitudes evolution: a segmented analysis.

3.4. Independent variables: affinity level

Before the exposure to the advertisement stimulus, both cause and brand were presented to the respondents to gauge the level of affinity. Based on the seminal work of Macchiette and Roy (1992), three levels of affinity were identified:

1 High affinity: the respondent has purchased the brand's product (dog food) AND experienced the promoted cause (dog adoption) in the past.
2 Intermediate affinity: the respondent has either purchased the brand's product (dog food) OR experienced the promoted cause (dog adoption) in the past.
3 Low affinity: the respondent has neither purchased the brand's product (dog food) NOR experienced the promoted cause (dog adoption).

3.5. Sample selection and data collection procedure: WHERE?

The sample selection of this study was carried out on the Internet. Participants were invited to answer an online survey before and after viewing a viral, cause-related marketing ad stimulus in video format. A non-probabilistic, snowball sampling procedure was used. Several Spanish animal charities spread the survey's link on their Facebook profiles (see Table 1). We chose Facebook because it is one of the world's most popular social networking sites (Garg, Gupta, Dzever, Sivarajah, & Kumar, 2020). Only participants from one country (Spain) were approached to avoid cultural bias. Also, the multinational brand that we used in the present study operates in other countries but promotes other causes and uses other media. Other studies limited to a single country are, for example, those of Jung, Shim, Jin, and Khang (2016), who interviewed undergraduate students from Seul; or Cheng et al. (2017), who collected the opinions of 115 undergraduate students from a Chinese university.

Following this procedure, a total sample of 360 Internet users was obtained. As shown in Table 1, PHASE 1 considers the total sample of 360 Internet users. In PHASE 2, however, the total sample of Internet users was refined, and just the opinions of 180 participants were retained. The sample was resized so that three homogeneous sub-samples with different affinity levels (high, intermediate and low) were formed, maintaining the same proportion by gender in the sub-samples (80 % women and 20 % men), as Table 2 shows. This sample size is adequate for similar comparative studies interested in measuring the evolution of attitudes after viewing an ad on social-media networks, when the compared groups are homogenous, except on one variable: affinity level (high, intermediate and low). That is, we refine our initial sample to carry out a ceteris paribus study, with the differential variable as the degree of affinity of the audience. Similarly, related articles have used the same sample size for comparative purposes. For example, the work of Jung et al. (2016) was performed with a sample of 217 users of Facebook to investigate the evolution of their attitudes once they were exposed to three different social-network ads.

Table 1
PHASE 1 general sample socio-demographics profile.

		Frequencies (Freq.)	*Percentages (%)*
CAUSE experience (dog adoption)	Yes	200	56%
	No	160	44%
BRAND experience (Product buying)	Yes	160	44%
	No	200	56%
Gender	Man	72	20 %
	Woman	288	80 %
Age	Up to 30	140	38%
	31- 40	110	31%
	40 & above	110	31%
	360 (n)		100 %

Table 2
PHASE 2 three affinity sub-samples socio-demographics profile.

		Low Affinity		*Moderate Aff.*		*High Affinity*	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
CAUSE experience (dog adoption)	Yes	–	–	40	67%	60	100
	No	60	100	20	33%	–	–
BRAND experience (Product buying)	Yes	–	–	20	33%	60	100
	No	60	100	40	67%	–	–
Gender	Man	12	20 %	12	20 %	12	20 %
	Woman	48	80 %	48	80 %	48	80 %
	180 (n)	***60 (n_1)***		***60 (n_2)***		***60 (n_3)***	

Before being exposed to the advertisement stimulus, both cause and brand were presented to the respondents; pre-attitudes towards both were measured, and their previous experience with them was checked. Previous affinity or experience with the brand and the cause was requested in a categorical way to obtain 60 individuals in each of the 3 sub-groups (high, intermediate and low affinity) and maintain the initial gender distribution (80 % of women and 20 % of men) (Table 2).

4. Results

4.1. Results for PHASE 1: evolution of attitudes (towards the brand and the cause)

The first *t*-test analyses **attitudes towards the brand evolution** by comparing the average scores before and after exposure to the advertisement. As supported by data extracted from Table 3, Internet users show, on average, better attitudes towards the brand involved in a cause-related marketing campaign after viewing the viral video advertisement that promotes its alliance with the cause on social networks ($M = 4.92$; $SD = 1.53$) than before ($M = 4.56$; $SD = 1.32$); thus, the difference is significant ($t\ (359) = 6.24$ * *; $p < 0.01$). Therefore, H1 is supported because attitudes towards the brand have been significantly improved. Consequently, association with a cause is highly

Table 3
t-test PHASE 1: Internet users' t-distribution (GLOBAL SAMPLE).

H1: Pre and post attitudes towards the BRAND							
M	*SD*	*t*	*Df*	*Sig.(2-tailed)*	*Mean difference*	95 % *confidence interval of the difference* Lower	Upper
PRE-ATTITUDE 4.56	1.32	6.24	359	.00	−.36	−.48	−.25
POST-ATTITUDE 4.92	1.53	* r = .31 MEDIUM EFECT, significant.					
H2: Pre y post attitudes towards the CAUSE							
M	*SD*	*t*	*Df*	*Sig.(2-tailed)*	*Mean difference*	95 % *confidence interval of the difference* Lower	Upper
PRE-ATTITUDE 6.55	.94	.96	359	.34	−.05	−.13	.04
POST-ATTITUDE 6.60	.85	* r = .05 SMALL EFECT, non-significant.					

recommended for a brand.

The second *t*-test analyses **attitudes towards the cause of evolution**. In this case, the average scores before and after exposure to messaging related to the cause (after exposure to the campaign advertisement once allied with the brand) were compared. As Table 3 shows, Internet users have better attitudes towards the promoted cause after viewing the viral video advertisement ($M = 6.60$; $SD = 0.85$) than before ($M = 6.55$; $SD = 0.94$;). However, this difference is not significant (t (359) $= 0.96$; $p = 0.34$ n.s.); that is, H2 is not supported. Therefore, the association with a brand to promote a social cause is not so effective for the cause.

In summary, Internet users participating in this study significantly improved their overall attitude towards the brand after viewing a viral video; hence, the magnitude of this effect is medium-sized ($r = 0.31$). On the contrary, the effect caused by the campaign on attitudes towards the cause is non-significant and small ($r = 0.05$).

A plausible explanation for the unequal effect for alliance partners can be found, firstly, in the detailed analysis of the participants' particular evaluations of the brand before exposure to the advertisement (Lafferty et al., 2004) and, secondly, in the examination of the stimuli's specific characteristics (Samu & Wymer, 2009). In this case, we are talking about an alliance in which both the brand ($M_{brand_attitude} = 4.55$ out of 7) and the allied cause ($M_{cause_attitude} = 4.55$ out of 7) are evaluated positively by the whole audience, although the previous attitude towards the cause is markedly better than the previous attitude towards the brand. Likewise, the stimulus itself is also perceived favourably by the whole audience ($M_{ad_attitude} = 6$ out of 7).

4.2. Results for PHASE 2: the role of audience affinity on attitudes

In this second phase, developed to test H3, the objective was to contrast the moderation role of the audiences' affinity levels to explain pre-attitudes and post-attitudes after watching a viral, cause-related marketing advertisement: 2 (pre-attitudes and post-attitudes) x 2 (allies: brand and cause) x 3 (affinity levels: high, intermediate and low). H3 was divided into the following four sub-hypotheses:

1 **Pre**-exposure and **brand** attitudes: H3a [(pre-attitude) x (brand) x 3 (affinity levels)]
2 **Pre**-exposure and **cause** attitudes: H3b [(pre-attitude) x (cause) x 3 (affinity levels)]
3 **Post**-exposure and **brand** attitudes: H3c [(post-attitude) x (brand) x 3 (affinity levels)]
4 **Post**-exposure and **cause** attitudes: H3d [(post-attitude) x (cause) x 3 (affinity levels)].

A multiple one-way analysis of the variance (ANOVA) on the level of experiential affinity for the four dependent variables (i.e. pre-attitude towards the brand, pre-attitude towards the cause, post-attitude towards the brand and post-attitude towards the cause) reveals a significant effect of the level of affinity on pre-attitudes towards the brand (F 2.177 $= 9.03$; $p < 0.01$), on pre-attitudes towards the cause (F 2.177 $= 6.08$; $p < 0.01$), on post-attitudes towards the brand (F 2.177 $= 3.38$, $p < 0.05$) and on post-attitudes towards the cause (F 2.177 $= 6$; $p < 0.01$). The corresponding sample means are listed in Table 4.

Table 4
ANOVA to compare the three affinity segments.

H3	Dependent variable: 3 levels of audience affinity					
Independent Variables	LOW1		MODERATE2		HIGH3	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
H3a Brand Pre-attitude	4.20	1.19	4.36	1.23	5.12	1.37
H3b Cause Pre-attitude	6.22	1.14	6.67	0.64	6.77	0.88
H3C Brand Post-attitude	4.86	1.42	4.60	1.73	5.30	1.34
H3d Cause Post-attitude	6.32	1.07	6.62	0.81	6.84	0.51

As far as **previous attitudes** are concerned, the ex-post analyses (Games-Howell) reveal:

1 Regarding **pre-attitude towards the brand**, Internet users with high experiential affinity ($M = 5.12$) showed significantly better values, compared to those with intermediate affinity ($M = 4.36$; $p < 0.01$**) and compared to those with low affinity ($M = 4.20$; $p < 0.01$ **); whereas, the difference in means between the latter two groups is not significant ($p = 0.75$ ns). Thus, as expected, H3a is supported: pre-attitudes towards a brand are higher for the high-affinity segment than for the intermediate- and low-affinity segments.
2 Regarding **pre-attitude towards the cause**, spectators with high affinity ($M = 6.77$; $p < 0.05$*) showed significantly better values, compared to those with intermediate affinity ($M = 6.67$; $p < 0.05$*) and compared to those with low affinity ($M = 4.20$; $p < 0.01$ **), ($M = 6.22$); whereas, the difference between the groups with high and intermediate affinity ($p = .77$ ns) is not significant. Thus, H3b is partially supported: pre-attitudes towards a social cause are higher for the high-affinity segment, as expected, but also for the intermediate-affinity segment.

As far as **subsequent attitudes** are concerned, the Games-Howell test shows:

3 Regarding **post-attitude towards the brand**, Internet users displaying strong experiential affinity ($M = 5.30$) showed significantly better values, compared to those exhibiting intermediate affinity ($M = 4.60$; $p < 0.05$*) but, on the contrary, their mean is not significantly different from that of the low-affinity segment ($M = 4.86$; $p = 0.18$ n.s.). Thus, H3c is not supported: post-attitudes towards a brand depend on users' affinity levels, but the high-affinity segment is not the most significant, mainly because it does not differ from the low-affinity segment.
4 Regarding post-**attitude towards the cause**, spectators with high affinity ($M = 6.84$; $p < 0.01$**) show the highest mean, which is significantly better than that of the group with low affinity ($M = 6.32$; $p < 0.01$**), but it is not substantially different from the group with intermediate affinity ($M = 6.62$; $p = 0.17$ n.s.). Likewise, the difference in means between Internet users with intermediate ($M = 6.62$) and low affinity ($M = 6.32$; $p = 0.17$ n.s.) is not statistically significant; so, the alignment of this user segment with the high-affinity group is a researcher's decision, based on patterns observed. Thus, H3d is partially supported: post-attitudes towards a social cause are higher for the high-affinity segment, as expected, but also for the intermediate-affinity segment.

In the light of these results, we can partially support the general hypothesis of moderation of the affinity level stated in H3, but with some unexpected results. We can conclude that there are significant differences between at least two of the three groups compared, but not always among the three groups.

Table 5 summarises the average attitudes for each affinity group, before and after viewing the viral video. Following the Games-Howell tests, several noteworthy aspects should be discussed. Firstly, in all cases, the **high experiential affinity group** of spectators shows the best pre-attitudes and post-attitudes towards both the brand and the cause. This group always belongs to a 'high attitude cluster'. So, for this group, a viral campaign will work perfectly because their pre-attitudes were high, but they are reinforced (Table 5). As Table 4 shows, the change in brand attitudes is, in fact, the smallest of the three segments because the starting point was higher.

Secondly, the **low experiential affinity group** of spectators belongs to the 'moderate attitude cluster' (i.e. its pre-attitudes towards both the brand and the cause are low) (Table 5). After the viral campaign, this

Table 5
Games-Howell. Affinity segments belonging to two attitudinal clusters: high and moderate.

	CLUSTER 1: HIGH ATTITUDE (>5 out of 7)	CLUSTER 2: MODERATE ATTITUDE (<5 out of 7)
	HIGH affinity segment	
Brand pre-attitude	HIGH	
Brand post-attitude	HIGH	
Cause pre-attitude	HIGH	
Cause post-attitude	HIGH	
	MODERATE affinity segment	
Brand pre-attitude		MODERATE
Brand post-attitude	HIGH	
Cause pre-attitude		MODERATE
Cause post-attitude	HIGH	
	LOW affinity segment	
Brand pre-attitude		MODERATE
Brand post-attitude	HIGH	
Cause pre-attitude		MODERATE
Cause post-attitude		MODERATE

group developed better attitudes towards the brand that promoted the cause. Indeed, this group has the greatest increase in brand attitude because the starting point was lower. On the contrary, attitudes towards the cause do not improve significantly, although the starting point was also the lowest of the three segments.

Thirdly, the **intermediate affinity segment** maintains its 'moderate attitude' towards the brand and its 'high attitude' towards the cause after the campaign. Therefore, attitudinal evolution does not appreciate for both brand and cause; thus, the viral marketing campaign leaves intermediate-affinity spectators indifferent.

5. Discussion

Firstly, a cause-related marketing campaign will improve the attitudes towards the promoted cause and the sponsoring brand, as explained by with the Theory of Associative Learning. Even more, our results have corroborated, as Basil and Herr (2006) defended, that when previous attitudes are positive towards the brand and the cause, a stronger synergistic attitudinal response is produced.

Secondly, based on the dominance patterns in the content of message stated by Samu and Wymer (2009) and aligned with the Integration Theory (Anderson, 1981), the bias in the message content will affect the results. That is, a message biased towards the brand will favour the brand more, while a message biased towards the cause will favour the cause more. We assert that the asymmetry found in our results is due to the dominance of one of the partners in the message. Following these authors, it is clear that the content of the message within the viral video was led by the brand and not so much by the cause.

Thirdly, affinity is linked to experience. Three consumers' experiential profiles were identified in our study, considering their affinity levels and following current trends: high affinity (i.e. previous experience with the brand and the promoted cause), intermediate affinity (i.e. previous experience with the brand or the cause) and low affinity (i.e. without experience). The close interrelation between the concepts of familiarity–affinity and experience used in work is already evident from the original conceptualisations of 'brand familiarity'. For example, Alba and Hutchinson (1987) defined familiarity–affinity as the 'number of direct or indirect experiences related to the brand that have been accumulated by the consumer', meaning experiences that increase familiarity such as the 'exposure to brand advertisements, exposure to the brand in store, purchase or use'. Analogously, contemporary definitions of 'brand experience' also consider that this concept 'reflects a degree of individual relative familiarity with a brand resulting from some form of exposure' (Ha & Perks, 2005), or in terms of Garg et al. (2020), their engagement with firm.

Fourthly, brand familiarity/experience affects communication effectiveness, as the Self-Congruity Theory (Lee & Jeong, 2014) and the Social Identity Theory (Sheikh & Beise-Zee, 2011) defend. However, this influence is partial. That is, a real link between the attitudes—towards the brand and the cause—and the affinity–proximity of the users exists, but this link is limited.

As in previous research (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010), this study has proven that it is possible to identify different consumer experiential profiles that respond differently to the same stimuli. Following current trends, we observe that the most engaged target (experienced target) is the one who receives the greater impact of marketing/branding communications activities in the hearts and minds of its members (Garg et al., 2020). But our results partially support Lafferty and Edmondson (2009), which concluded that higher familiarity levels imply more positive attitudinal responses towards the cause and the brand. In our study, the higher familiarity levels imply more positive attitudinal responses towards the cause, but lower familiarity levels showed more positive attitudinal responses towards the brand. Thus, as in the work of Garg et al. (2020), the moderating role of affinity (i.e engagement in their work) is partially accepted.

This contradictory result was anticipated by Campbell and Keller (2003), who suggested that a high familiarity may not always be positive because it limits the advertising effectiveness and reduces the amount of information that the audience processes (Stammerjohan, Wood, Chang, & Thorson, 2005). This study found that the low-affinity segment is able to improve post-attitudes more than high-affinity segments, but only towards the brand because their attitudinal response towards the promoted cause did not improve significantly.

5.1. Theoretical contributions and implications

Firstly, our results corroborate the proposals stated in the Theory of Associative Learning: a cause-related marketing campaign help to improve attitudes towards the partners (brand and cause). In our study, this synergistic attitudinal response is biased towards the brand, which is the partner that actually benefits from the alliance. Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, the Theory of Associative Learning works better for sponsoring brands than for the causes they sponsor.

Secondly, we support the theory underpinning the branch of research that warns of the limiting influence of familiarity on advertising effectiveness (Campbell & Keller, 2003; Stammerjohan et al., 2005). That is, novel and fresh segments represent an interesting opportunity for advertisers as often their lack of previous experience (with the advertised brand and/or the promoted cause) leads them to be more predisposed towards advertising.

5.2. Implications for practice

PHASE 1 allows us to conclude that a cause-related marketing campaign, spread virally through social networks is capable of causing a positive impact on audience attitudes towards both the brand and the cause, reinforcing the empirical evidence of positivist research regarding the positive effect direction of these types of alliances (Basil & Herr, 2006; Lafferty et al., 2004; Nan and Heo, 2007; Wymer & Samu, 2009). However, the brand seems to benefit more than the cause under

this type of strategy. Contrary to Lafferty et al. (2004)—who argue that the cause seems to benefit more than the brand—this study suggests that it is necessary to propose several scenarios, in which one or the other partner will benefit more or less, depending on different aspects, such as previous participants' evaluations of the brand and cause (Lafferty et al., 2004) or the specific characteristics of the campaign or stimulus (Samu & Wymer, 2009).

These two conclusions infer an important managerial implication: a cause-related marketing campaign is an effective strategy to improve Internet users' attitudes towards the brand and the allied cause. However, both partners gain rarely the same. For this reason, it is important to decide on the partner with whom to ally and how to communicate that alliance to avoid asymmetries. That is, the most appropriate partner must be selected for the specific achievement of certain objectives, and the stimuli should be designed accordingly since both partners can be favoured to a different extent. In order to avoid asymmetries between the results, some points should be considered: the previous brand and cause evaluations (Basil & Herr, 2006; Lafferty et al., 2004); partnership fit (Lafferty et al., 2004; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Samu & Wymer, 2009; Sénéchal, Georges, & Louis Pernin, 2014;); the dominance of one of the allies (Samu & Wymer, 2009); or the alliance presentation format in the form of text, image or video (Buford & Daniels, 2012; Chiu, Hsieh, Kao, & Lee, 2007; Samu & Wymer, 2009), and, of course, the message itself for content marketing plays an important role in the success of marketing communications (Dwivedi et al., 2020). In sum, these are key aspects to be observed when developing a cause-related viral marketing campaign.

PHASE 2 allows us to conclude that affinity (i.e. previous experience with the brand or the cause) can be considered a moderating variable of the effectiveness of a cause-related marketing campaign. This second phase of the study verified the existence of significant differences among the three segments under evaluation: high, intermediate and low affinity. As in the work of Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010), homogenous responses were obtained, depending on the previous viewers' familiarity with the sponsoring brand or the promoted cause. Secondly, and closely related to the former, the capacity of a cause-related marketing campaign to improve viewers' initial attitudinal patterns will be, to a certain extent, conditioned by the viewer belonging to one or another experiential affinity segment.

Both conclusions converge in a relevant managerial implication: brands and causes should be aware that the most convenient strategy is to focus exclusively on a specific audience segment, considering its previous level of affinity. If brands address several segments, different messages should be prepared and adapted for each one, incorporating the most appropriate arguments into each of them according to the target audience. Following Garg et al. (2020), we recommend the use of social networks to reach different targets because this tool helps in delivering consistent, contextual and adapted experiences—using an effective data-driven strategy for engaging different customer profiles.

5.3. Limitations and future research direction

The five main limitations arising from this study present opportunities for future research. Firstly, there are some restrictions to the generalisation of the results of this study. Although the use of a single stimulus from a brand, a specific cause in a very particular sector and a specific geographical area helps to improve the external validity of the experiment, it limits the generalisation of these results. Consequently, it would be advisable for future research to incorporate more varied brands, causes and sectors, as well as cross-cultural analyses that incorporate different countries.

Secondly, this study analyses the effectiveness of cause-related marketing and affinity marketing in attitudinal terms and considers the moderating effect of affinity derived from previous experience with alliance partners. The evaluation of these types of strategies based on other independent variables, such as the emotional audience response (Eze & Lee, 2012) or their behavioural intentions specifically adapted to a context of social networks in terms of sharing intention (Hsieh, Hsieh, & Tang, 2012) or e-WOM (Doh & Hwang, 2009), are still scarce approaches Likewise, considering the effect of certain sociodemographic characteristics as moderating variables, such as the involvement of the receiver, gender (Dubé & Fisher, 2005), or age, could bring new knowledge to the existing body of literature body on the subject.

Thirdly, in our study the previous attitudes towards brand and cause, although positive, were not balanced, being the cause's evaluation more positive than the brand's. Some empirical evidence suggests that the magnitude of the effect of cause-related marketing and affinity marketing could vary in intensity, depending on the initial evaluations (Lafferty et al., 2004) and the balance between them (Basil & Herr, 2006) or its inclination one way or another. Consequently, the approach of balanced versus unbalanced starting conditions—favourable to one partner or another—could provide knowledge that would help to explain the variability in the results from applying this type of strategy.

Fourthly, this study proposes a scenario in which the familiarity of both allies is positive but unequal, with familiarity towards the cause being greater than familiarity towards the brand. The approach of confronting balanced starting conditions versus unbalanced and favourable towards one partner, could provide insights that would help to explain the variability in the results when applying these types of strategies and check whether conditions of high familiarity limit the advertising effectiveness, rather than the choice of partner.

Fifthly, experimental studies on this subject have predominantly used text or printed stimuli. However, the current prevalence of online video format, as a means of disseminating cause-related marketing messages (Buford & Daniels, 2012), makes it advisable for more research to be carried out using new audio-visual formats as well as in-depth study of the different presentation formats as a moderating variable. For this reason, more research based on methodological experimentation is required.

Finally, given that gender bias could have influenced our results, a future research line could be the study of gender differences, and also the influence of additional explanatory variables, such as the type of media used to communicate the message.

6. Conclusions

A cause-related marketing campaign spread through social networks represents an interesting opportunity for brands and causes to connect with the target. However, some factors will condition the success of the partnership. This paper has highlighted the relevance of two of these factors: the bias of the message communicated (towards the brand or the cause) and the profile of the audience (more or less experienced with the brand and/or the cause).

The findings help to bridge the existing gap between cause-related marketing and new technologies, stressing the importance of defining the content of the message without bias (so that one partner does not benefit more than the other) and of segmenting the audience (since not all Internet users react the same way to the same message).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Elísabet Mora: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Writing - review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Natalia Vila-Lopez:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing - review & editing. **Inés Küster-Boluda:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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