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Consumers of charity bracelets: cause-supporters or fashion-followers?

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Consumers of charity bracelets: cause-supporters or fashion-followers?

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare personal characteristics of buyers of rubber charity bracelets with those of non-buyers so that a deeper understanding of the success of this cause-related fashion product may be attained.

Design/methodology/approach – A convenience sample of 244 individuals in Texas and Iowa was gathered via a survey method. Items on the questionnaire were contained within three sections: assessing participants' level of fashion involvement and celebrity involvement; participants' attitudes toward the consumption of cause-related fashion products; and demographic information.

Findings – Results from this study indicated individuals who purchased rubber charity bracelets were more involved with fashion and celebrities than individuals who did not purchase rubber charity bracelets and that those who purchased the bracelets had purchased significantly more cause-related fashion products than those who had not purchased any bracelets. Purchasers of bracelets were significantly less involved with the cause than those who had not purchased any bracelets. Purchasers did not have a significantly more positive attitude toward purchasing cause-related fashion products than those who had not bought any bracelets.

Research limitations/implications – The predominately female sample of young adults may not be representative of the average US consumer.

Practical implications – This study provides useful information to manufacturers and sellers of cause-related products. Future efforts to manufacture and sell cause-related products should focus on developing products that incorporate fashion trends with celebrity endorsers.

Originality/value – This paper provides useful information for organizations wishing to create similarly successful cause-related fashion products.

Keywords

Accessories, Charity, Consumption, Fashion

Disciplines

American Material Culture | Fashion Business | Fashion Design

Comments

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Running Head: Consumers of Charity Bracelets¹

Title: Consumers of Charity Bracelets: Cause-Supporters or Fashion-Followers?

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Key Words: Ethical consumption, cause-related products, charity bracelets

Consumers of Charity Bracelets: Cause-Supporters or Fashion-Followers?

Over the past ten to fifteen years, the practice of ethical consumption has gained in popularity (Crane and Matten, 2004; Pelsmacker, Driesen, and Rayp, 2005; Randall, 2005). Ethical consumption has been defined as “the conscious and deliberate decision to make certain consumption choices due to personal moral beliefs and values” (Crane and Matten, 2004, p. 290). Ethical consumption includes either purposeful refusal to buy certain products by boycotting them or intentional decisions to purchase other products, such as cause-related products. Cause-related products result from “a general alliance between businesses and non-profit causes” (Cui, Trent, Sullivan, and Matiru, 2003, p. 310). With a cause-related product, a for-profit business agrees to make a monetary donation to a specific non-profit organization each time a consumer purchases their cause-related product (Trimble and Rifon, 2006). The products raise money for a specific charity as well as awareness of the cause.

One of the most popular fashion accessories in the United States in 2005 was a cause-related product: the silicone rubber charity bracelet (Dodes, 2005; Webster, 2005). These inexpensive, colorful, rubber bracelets were sold by a variety of businesses (e.g., Nike, 7-Eleven, Hot Topic), and the proceeds or portion of the proceeds of these sales were donated to specific charities (e.g., Lance Armstrong Foundation for cancer research, USO to support American troops stationed abroad, Hot Topic Foundation to support programs and organizations that encourage youth in art and music). According to the LivestrongTM Lance Armstrong Foundation more than 55 million people across the globe wear a yellow silicone band in support of people living with cancer (LivestrongTM, 2007).

With the overwhelming success of the rubber bracelet cause-related fashion product, both for-profit and non-profit organizations located in the United States and around the globe are trying to develop new cause-related products that will be similarly popular in the upcoming seasons (Carnwath, 2006). Thus, a need exists among practitioners for information related to the consumers of rubber charity bracelets. While general information has been collected about the consumers of ethical products and cause-related products (Cui, et al, 2003; Dickson and Littrell, 1997) the unusually massive appeal of the rubber charity bracelet as a cause-related fashion product seems to warrant further investigation of the consumption of this particular cause-related product. If practitioners can understand the reasons why consumers purchased the rubber charity bracelets, perhaps they can use this information to create similarly successful cause-related fashion products in the future.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to survey rubber charity bracelet consumers by exploring their purchasing behavior. By comparing personal characteristics of buyers of rubber charity bracelets to those of non-buyers, a deeper understanding of the success of this cause-related fashion product may be attained.

Literature Review

In many ways, American consumers seem ambivalent regarding ethically-driven purchases. Research suggests that American consumers tend to care more about paying fair prices than behaving ethically in the marketplace (“Ethical Consumer”, 2003). Yet, this is not to say that American consumers do not care at all about ethical and social issues. According to research conducted by Cone, Inc. (2002), American consumers’ interest in companies’ commitment to social issues has risen since the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. While consumers do express an interest in purchasing ethically, American consumers do

not want to be inconvenienced or sacrifice any product attributes to do so (“Ethical Consumer”, 2003; Joergens, 2006). This may have something to do with Americans’ view of the responsibilities of businesses. In the U.S., consumers indicated that a businesses’ most important responsibility was to perform well economically within the letter of the law (Maignan, 2001). Much less emphasis was placed on the importance of businesses’ social and ethical responsibilities by U.S. consumers than by French and German consumers (Maignan, 2001).

Because of American consumers’ view of the responsibilities of businesses and ethical purchases, the success of the rubber bracelets, a cause-related product, may seem initially surprising. Furthermore, the success of the rubber charity bracelet defies what previous research has uncovered about consumers’ response to cause-related marketing efforts. Cause-related marketing efforts have been found to be more successful in cases where an expensive, luxury product is offered (Strahilevitz and Myers, 1995) and when the monetary donation offered to the cause is large (Dahl and Lavack, 1995). Obviously, an inexpensive rubber bracelet (usually priced between \$1 and \$3 and sometimes provided for free) offers neither of these to the consumers purchasing it.

Yet, the rubber charity bracelet’s popularity may not have been completely illogical. Perhaps the rubber bracelets were popular because they allowed consumers to participate in cause-related purchasing without sacrificing the product attributes that they felt were important. The bracelets may have been popular because they were inexpensive and were available for purchase in a variety of retail outlets and publicized a great diversity of charitable causes. Furthermore, these bracelets may have been favored because they allowed wearers to demonstrate their level of fashion and celebrity involvement (Douglas, Taylor, and Johnson, 2006). During 2005, these bracelets fit into a larger trend to revive 1980s fashions (Anderson,

2006; “Fitted Pants”, 2006). With their bright colors and silicone composition, the charity bracelets are similar to the jelly bracelets that were popular in the 1980s (“’80s Style”, n.d.). Some (Jay, 2005) have even gone as far as to suggest that college-aged individuals wearing the bracelets cared less about the cause being supported and more about fitting in with their friends. Moreover, popular celebrities (e.g., Bono, Usher, Angelina Jolie, Bruce Willis) and athletes (e.g., Lance Armstrong, Serena Williams) were shown wearing these bracelets to support specific causes that they were associated with (Hallett, 2004; Read, n.d.). The causes supported by local and national celebrities included political causes (e.g., stars and stripes for supporting U.S. Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, social causes (e.g., school-colored bracelets for primary, secondary, and post-secondary affiliation), and health-related causes (e.g., pink for breast cancer awareness). Thus, it seems likely that the individuals who purchased these rubber charity bracelets tended to be more involved than the individuals who did not purchase these rubber charity bracelets with fashion and with celebrities. To test this assumption, the first two hypotheses were created:

H₁: Compared to individuals who do not own any rubber bracelets, individuals who own one or more bracelets are more involved with fashion.

H₂: Compared to individuals who do not own any rubber bracelets, individuals who own one or more bracelets are more involved with celebrities.

Although the mass appeal of the rubber charity bracelet seems to contradict some research that has been conducted on cause-related products, its popularity seems to be consistent with other research in which the personal characteristics of consumers have been linked to their behavior in the marketplace. One of the personal characteristics linked to ethical consumption is personal involvement with the cause being supported by the purchase of the merchandise. For instance, Hajjat (2003) found that involvement with the cause had a positive impact on

individuals' intentions to purchase cause-related merchandise. In their study, Dickson and Littrell (1997) found that more of the women who purchased apparel from alternative trading organizations had past experience visiting Latin America than the women who did not purchase from these organizations. In the case of the rubber charity bracelets, certain individuals who were more involved with the issue being supported by the sale of the bracelet through, for instance, past experience with the disease or cause (either themselves or a friend or family member) may have been more likely to purchase the rubber bracelet than those individuals who had no such personal involvement. Individuals who have had cancer, for example, might be wishing to support cancer research by purchasing one of the bracelets. Based on this reasoning, the third hypothesis was written as follows:

H₃: Compared to individuals who do not own any rubber charity bracelets, individuals who own one or more bracelets are more involved with the cause being supported by the sale of the bracelets.

Besides personal involvement with the cause, another personal characteristic that may have been associated with the purchase of the rubber charity bracelet is attitude toward purchasing cause-related fashion products. From a cognitive standpoint, consumers want their attitudes to be consistent with their behavior (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). In terms of socially responsible buying behavior, researchers (Dickson and Littrell, 1996; Kim, Littrell, and Ogle, 1999) have found that individuals who purchase products from alternative trade organizations tend to have positive attitudes toward behaving ethically in the marketplace. Extrapolating from these findings, it is expected that individuals who purchased rubber charity bracelets had a more positive attitude toward ethical consumption than those who did not buy the bracelets. Hence, the fourth hypothesis was written as follows:

H₄: Compared to individuals who do not own any rubber charity bracelets, individuals who own one or more bracelets have a more positive attitude toward purchasing cause-related fashion products.

Attitudes are not the only things that consumers want to be consistent with their behavior.

Consumers also want the different types of behavior they engage in and the various products they purchase to be consistent with each other. The items that consumers purchase often share similarities in terms of the meanings associated with these products (Davis and Gregory, 2003; McCracken, 1888). When considered as a whole, the various items that consumers purchase often fit together like pieces of a puzzle. This puzzle of goods, which is referred to as a consumption constellation, creates a bigger picture of consumers' lifestyle (Solomon and Assael, 1987). If consumers do want to behave consistently in terms of the products they purchase, it seems likely that the individuals who purchased the rubber charity bracelets may have also purchased other types of cause-related fashion products as a part of their consumption constellations. Thus,

H₅: Compared to individuals who do not own any rubber charity bracelets, individuals who own one or more bracelets have purchased more cause-related fashion products.

Understanding past consumer behavior is important because previous consumption activities influence similar future consumption activities (Bentler and Speckart, 1979). Although not a study of ethical consumption, this relationship between past behavior and future behavior was evidenced by the findings from Shim and Drake (1990). In their study of electronic shopping intention, Shim and Drake (1990) found that individuals who had high behavioral intention to shop electronically were significantly more likely than those individuals with low behavioral intention to shop electronically to have previous experience with other forms of non-store retailing. Thus, participants who had previously engaged in a similar type of consumer

behavior were more likely than those who had not to indicate that they would be likely to engage in other similar types of consumer behavior in the future. The notion that past behavior may influence future behavior has implications for cause-related product marketers. In the case of rubber charity bracelets, it seems likely that individuals who purchased the bracelets will be more likely than individuals who did not purchase the bracelets to purchase other types of cause-related fashion products in the future. Hence, the sixth hypothesis was created:

H₆: Compared to individuals who do not own any rubber charity bracelets, individuals who own one or more bracelets have a greater intention to purchase cause-related fashion merchandise in the future.

Method

Measurement

To investigate these relationships, a convenience sample from two states (Texas and Iowa) was gathered. Undergraduate students enrolled in seven apparel merchandising and apparel design courses were asked to complete a questionnaire. In order to obtain a more diverse sample, including participants who were not currently enrolled in college, the undergraduate students in each of the classes were also asked to have a friend or family member complete a copy of the questionnaire.

The items on the questionnaire used for this study were contained within three sections. The first section contained items used to assess participants' level of fashion involvement and celebrity involvement. The nine items used to measure fashion involvement were adapted from Tigert, Ring, and King's (1976) fashion involvement scale. The nine items used to measure participants' level of celebrity involvement were based on a modified version of McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran's (2002) celebrity worship scale. For all of the items in the first section, participants were asked to indicate on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 =

strongly agree) how much they agreed or disagreed with each of the eighteen items.

The second section of the questionnaire contained three items used to assess participants' attitudes toward the consumption of cause-related fashion products and one item to assess their intentions to purchase other cause-related fashion products in the future. The four items in this section were based on Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, and Warrington (2001). Participants were asked to indicate on a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement.

The third section of the questionnaire assessed demographic information (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity). Additionally, in this section of the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate, using open-ended questions, the number of rubber charity bracelets they owned and the average price they paid for these bracelets. Participants were also asked to indicate from which retail outlets they purchased these bracelets (e.g., department stores, specialty stores, the Internet). Three items in this section were used to assess participants' level of involvement with the cause being supported by the bracelets. For these three items, participants were asked to indicate whether a) they, personally, b) a family member, or c) a friend had been affected by any of the causes supported by any of the bracelets they had purchased. Participants were also asked in this section to indicate the number and type of other cause-related fashion products (e.g., ribbons or ribbon-shaped lapel pins, pink apparel items, red apparel items or accessories) they had purchased in the past.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Exploratory factor analysis. Exploratory factor analyses (EFA) with Varimax rotation were conducted on the multiple-item scales. For each analysis, Eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and

scree plots helped determine the number of factors for each scale. Items with factor loadings of at least 0.50 on one factor and less than 0.30 on other factors were retained to ensure unidimensionality. EFA revealed one factor for the fashion involvement scale. This factor (seven items) had an Eigenvalue of 5.20, explained 57.75% of the variance, and had an alpha of 0.90. All nine items in the celebrity involvement scale comprised one factor, which had an Eigenvalue of 7.25, explained 80.56% of the variance, and had an alpha of 0.97. The three items used to assess participants' attitudes toward purchasing cause-related fashion products also comprised one factor, which had an Eigenvalue of 2.52, explained 83.72% of the variance, and had an alpha of 0.90.

Demographic characteristics. Usable questionnaires were completed by 224 individuals. The majority of the participants were female (86%). Most participants indicated that they were either Caucasian American (76%) or Hispanic American (17%). The participants had a mean age of approximately 28 years, with a range of 18 to 65. Although an attempt was made to obtain non-student participants, most participants were currently enrolled as undergraduate students (72%). The number of rubber charity bracelets owned by participants ranged from 0 to 50, with a mean of 1.88. Of the individuals who owned rubber charity bracelets, the average price paid by participants for each bracelet ranged from \$0.00 to \$20.00, with a mean of \$2.55. The number of retail outlets where the bracelets were purchased ranged from 1 to 7, with an average of 2.71 outlets. Participants indicated that they purchased their bracelets most frequently from department stores (16.2%), closely followed by specialty stores (15.3%), discount retailers/mass merchandisers (14.7%), Internet websites (14.7%), and boutiques (13.8%).

Hypothesis Testing

Two groups were created to test the hypotheses. One group was composed of participants

who had not purchased any rubber charity bracelets ($N = 85$), and the other group was composed of participants who had purchased at least one rubber charity bracelet ($N = 139$). A series of *t*-tests were used to test the hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 stated that individuals who purchased rubber charity bracelets were more involved with fashion than individuals who did not purchase rubber charity bracelets. The results of this *t*-test indicated that those who had purchased rubber charity bracelets were significantly more involved with fashion than those who had not purchased any bracelets ($M_{\text{purchase}} = 31.83$; $M_{\text{no purchase}} = 28.42$; $t = 2.36$; $p < .02$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that individuals who purchased rubber charity bracelets were more involved with celebrities than individuals who did not purchase rubber charity bracelets. The results of this *t*-test indicated that those who had purchased rubber charity bracelets were significantly more involved with celebrities than those who had not purchased any bracelets ($M_{\text{purchase}} = 30.78$; $M_{\text{no purchase}} = 26.68$; $t = 1.91$; $p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 stated that individuals who purchased rubber charity bracelets were more involved with the cause being supported by the bracelet than individuals who did not purchase rubber charity bracelets. The results of this *t*-test indicated that those who had purchased rubber charity bracelets were significantly less involved with the cause than those who had not purchased any bracelets ($M_{\text{purchase}} = 4.37$; $M_{\text{no purchase}} = 4.93$; $t = 3.61$; $p < .01$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 stated that individuals who purchased rubber charity bracelets had a more positive attitude toward purchasing cause-related fashion products than individuals who did not purchase rubber charity bracelets. The results of this *t*-test indicated that those who had purchased rubber charity bracelets did not have a significantly more positive attitude toward

purchasing cause-related fashion products than those who had not purchased any bracelets ($M_{\text{purchase}} = 17.27$; $M_{\text{no purchase}} = 16.88$; $t = 0.78$; $p = 0.45$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

Hypothesis 5 stated that individuals who purchased rubber charity bracelets had purchased more cause-related fashion products in the past than individuals who did not purchase rubber charity bracelets. The results of this t-test indicated that those who had purchased rubber charity bracelets had purchased significantly more cause-related fashion products than those who had not purchased any bracelets ($M_{\text{purchase}} = 5.85$; $M_{\text{no purchase}} = 2.67$; $t = 3.14$; $p < .01$). Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

Hypothesis 6 stated that individuals who purchased rubber charity bracelets had a greater intention to purchase more cause-related fashion products in the future than individuals who did not purchase rubber charity bracelets. The results of this t-test indicated that those who had purchased rubber charity bracelets did have a significantly greater intention to purchase more cause-related fashion products than those who had not purchased any bracelets ($M_{\text{purchase}} = 5.64$; $M_{\text{no purchase}} = 5.05$; $t = 2.64$; $p < 0.01$). Thus, Hypothesis 6 was supported.

Conclusion, Future Research, and Limitations

The results of our study indicate that the success of the rubber charity bracelet was based on several factors. Its consistency with larger fashion trends and its association with popularity celebrities of the time seem to have attributed to its mass appeal, particularly among individuals who were highly involved with fashion and celebrities. Future efforts to manufacture cause-related products should focus on developing products that incorporate fashion trends. Sellers of cause-related products could consider celebrity endorsers for effective marketing of their products.

The results of our study indicate that attitude toward purchasing a cause-related fashion product was not a good predictor of behavior. A possible reason for the non-significant relationship is that most respondents indicated that they had positive attitudes toward purchasing cause-related fashion products ($M_{\text{attitude}} = 17.13$). This may have been a result of a social desirability bias (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960) to show support for particular causes and positive attitudes toward cause-related purchasing to please the researcher, despite the fact that their actual marketplace behavior is inconsistent with their responses on the questionnaire. This finding may have also been related to the wording of the items concerning participants' attitudes. Attitudes are better predictors of behaviors when they are consistent in terms of the specificity of the action (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). The wording of the items concerning attitudes may have been too general and the behavior (purchasing the rubber bracelet) may have been too specific to result in a significant finding. Future research could be conducted in situ to assess the relationship between consumers' attitudes toward purchasing a specific cause-related product and their actual purchase behavior at the time of purchase.

Another interesting finding was the significant negative relationship found between purchase of the rubber bracelets and involvement with the cause being supported by the sale of the rubber bracelets. For the participants in this study, fashion and celebrity involvement seemed to be more important than personal involvement with the cause. This is not to suggest that people who are involved with a cause are not interested in purchasing cause-related products. It may be the case, instead, that individuals who are involved with a cause may be the ones who are more willing to donate large amounts of money or to acquire luxury products, which would be consistent with the research findings of Dahl and Lavack (1995) and Strahilevitz and Myers

(1995). Future studies should continue to investigate variables that might moderate the relationship that exists between involvement with the cause and donation size.

Our study provides positive news for ethically responsible businesses. Participants in our study indicated that they had purchased other cause-related fashion products in the past and intended to continue to do so in the future. Marketers should not have trouble selling these products in the future, especially if they keep the price low and the availability high. In what might be called the Wal-Mart model of cause-related marketing, organizations can potentially earn a great deal of money to support causes if they are willing to sacrifice profit from the sale of each inexpensive unit and make up for those losses by increasing the total quantity of units sold.

Of course, our findings must be interpreted with a degree of caution. The majority of the participants were young, female undergraduates. Thus, in future research, a more diverse sample should be drawn from the larger population of adult consumers. Additionally, the results we obtained may be different from the results obtained by researchers in other parts of the United States as well as in other countries. While cause-related fashion consumption appears to be an international phenomenon, cultural differences may exist which affect cause-related consumption patterns. More cross-cultural research should be conducted with respect to cause-related fashion consumption in the future.

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