

Cause-Related Marketing: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis on Pinkwashing

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Abstract In recent years a growing number of companies have decided to demonstrate their sensitivity to the subject of health. Therefore cause-related marketing campaigns that involve a partnership between companies and associations engaged in scientific research have increased significantly. Considering a particular initiative of cause-related marketing connected to those pink marketing projects aimed to fund breast cancer research, this paper intend to test the effects of the phenomenon of pinkwashing (pink = rose + washing = wash), a term proposed by the American Breast Cancer Action Campaign “Think before you pink,” launched in 2002, on trust, on the perceived risk, and consumer confusion. Based on an analysis of the literature on a similar subject, i.e., greenwashing it has developed a qualitative and quantitative research to explore the effects of pinkwashing. The starting point has been a structured questionnaire. Through this a descriptive analysis also using a two step cluster analysis and a hypothesis development has been performed.

1 Introduction

Marketing literature has paid attention above all on environmental issue. Until now it has paid little attention to those initiatives of cause-related marketing tied to women, and especially to those projects financing research on breast cancer, usually highlighted with a pink packaging or a pink ribbon, and for this reason known as pink marketing [2, 12].

This paper has the aim to verify the effects of the pink marketing and the related problem of pinkwashing on trust, perceived risk, and consumer confusion.

The term pinkwashing is used to describe the practice of companies over claiming their support to the research on breast cancer through the sale of their products, but this support cannot be substantiated. It was proposed by the American Breast Cancer Action during the campaign “Think before you pink” launched in 2002 to draw attention to the phenomenon that occurs when an organization says

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it will fight breast cancer, offering products tagged with a pink ribbon, but actually produces and sells products in various ways at the same time connected to the same disease.

In 2012 a survey conducted on a sample of American consumers demonstrated that the 86% of respondents represent that they have a positive impression of companies and brands that support the cause of breast cancer and almost half (45%) declared they had purchased a product in support of the cause in the month of October, the National Breast Cancer Awareness month [7]. However, some of the messages may be ambiguous and limit socially responsible behaviors of the consumers. The same research has revealed some skepticism among respondents: the 77% believes that some of the companies engaged in support of the cause are involved only for corporate interests, 68% said that only a few of the campaigns, undertaken by companies, stand out from the others due to the large number of similar programs available on the market, 30% say they don't know if buying a pink product actually benefits the cause.

Based on an analysis of the literature on a similar subject, i.e., greenwashing it has developed a qualitative and quantitative research to explore the effects of pinkwashing.

On the bases of a structured questionnaire a descriptive analysis in order to individuate clusters of units has been considered.

A subsequent statistical analysis to test relations among pinkwashing, perceived risk, trust, and consumer confusion has been performed.

It is important to point out that all these analyses can be reconducted in a Data Mining approach which uses utilities for the management [25, 26, 34].

2 The Theoretical Framework

Cause-related marketing (CRM) is “the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives” [30].

Over the last years, CRM has become a relevant marketing tool for companies and their differentiation strategy in a competitive context. Despite this growing trend, CRM programs have been criticized and may run the risk of consumers' backlash. Indeed, regarding specific CRM programs, the attributions that consumers make of the company's reasons for conducting the program could influence how they respond [22]. Consumers are becoming increasingly more critical and skeptical concerning the authenticity of the various proposals in the environmental and social field [24], above all because some companies try to alter their image through actions of whitewashing, that is an attempt to hide unpleasant facts, in different contexts [16]. For example, companies could try to make themselves and their products look like they are really helping the environment, but if they do not actually help it, it is a case of greenwashing.

Marketing literature has paid attention above all on environmental issue, with studies on greenmarketing and greenwashing and on their effects on consumer behavior [3, 5, 13, 23], while until now it has paid little attention to those initiatives of cause-related marketing tied to women, and especially to those projects financing research on breast cancer, usually highlighted with a pink packaging or a pink ribbon, and for this reason known as pink marketing [2, 12]. Also in this case some companies could try to pinkwash their products, with effects on trust, perceived risk, and confusion of the consumers.

In marketing literature trust has been defined as the assumption that the other party will behave as expected [11] or as an intention to accept the vulnerability that comes from good intentions or expectations to the behavior of the other party. Ganesan [10] also stressed how trust is based on the expectation of skill, reliability, and kindness of the others.

The consumer confusion, conscious or unconscious, could also affect the purchasing process decisions [19]. Turnbull et al. [29] and Leek [15] define confusion as the failure of the consumer to develop a correct understanding of the various aspects of a product/service, during the information process. Three main groups of stimuli can influence the consumer confusion: excessive information, similar information, and ambiguous information [8]. Indeed it can be the result of an information overload [15], a series of stimuli such as advertising and products so similar to each other to be confused [19], or the use of misleading information. In the case under study, using exaggerated pink marketing campaigns, with ambiguous information about the amount of the donation or the composition of products, may confuse the consumer. Since the state of confusion is often associated with feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, disorientation, and indecisiveness, the buying process could be inconclusive and frustrating [20, 31].

In literature the idea that consumer confusion negatively influence his confidence is widely spread. For example, Mitchell and Papavassiliou [19] argue that confused consumers may quit or postpone their purchasing decisions and stop believing in the company offer. Singh and Sirdeshmukh [27] affirm that if consumers are confused suspicion tends to grow and confidence to decline, because of vague and unclear advertisements. For some authors, this impact is significantly negative [17, 31]. To reduce consumer confusion and, conversely, increase cognitive clarity, according to [32], it could be useful to increase consumer confidence. Morgan and Hunt [21] believe that confused consumers have less confidence in a market that provides them with product information ambiguous and sometimes conflicting. Kalafatis and Pollard [13] also argue consumers are reluctant to believe in the products of those companies promoting their offer through confusing and ambiguous statements.

According to [4], there is also a strong correlation between negative emotions and perceived risk; for this reason pinkwashing, as a phenomenon tied to negative emotions of consumption, could have effects on the perceived risk by the consumer, where the perceived risk is a subjective expectation of a loss.

According to the opinion of different authors such psychological state can influence consumer behavior [4, 9, 19] and act negatively on the purchasing process. This condition makes it very difficult for people to assess the real quality of

the product before purchase and can facilitate unethical behavior in business. Consumers will be therefore more reluctant to buy a certain product because of their lack of confidence in the seller due to the asymmetry of the knowledge in transaction. As Mitchell and Papavassiliou [19] says, if consumers perceive a high level of risk with respect to a certain product or brand, they lose confidence in it. Koehn [14] also highlights a relationship between these two aspects, because the reduction of perceived risk can increase consumer confidence.

3 The Methodology

In the present section we present the questionnaire, the descriptive analysis, the hypothesis development, and the results of the analysis.

3.1 The Questionnaire

From the methodological point of view a quantitative research has been developed using a structured questionnaire based on a seven point Likert scale [28]. The questionnaire consists of two parts and is created using Google Forms. It has been tested on a small group of Italian consumers, and then revised for the final form, made via Internet on a randomly selected group. In January–February 2015, 173 questionnaires were collected.

The questionnaire has the following structure:

1. Part 1 Opinion and knowledge of pink marketing
 - a. Evaluation of general opinions on ethics of companies to support social causes (three items).
 - b. Evaluation on the effects on consumers of the cause-related marketing (six items).
 - c. Evaluation and knowledge on pink marketing (three items).
2. Part 2 Misuration of the constructs
 - a. Pinkwashing perception (five items).
 - b. Pink-perceived risk (four items).
 - c. Trust in pink products (five items).
 - d. Consumer confusion (four items).

3.2 Descriptive Analysis

In this section we consider a preliminary descriptive analysis followed by a two step cluster analysis.

3.2.1 A Preliminary Descriptive Analysis

Part 1 Opinion and knowledge of pink marketing

(a) + (b) Opinions on cause-related marketing

Opinions on cause-related marketing have been analyzed through nine items. The former (three questions) have as an objective to include the opinions of consumers concerning cooperation between a company and a non-profit organization. The latter, (six questions), wanted to investigate consumer attitudes to firms engaged in operations of CRM. Specifically, it was considered interesting to evaluate the possible change of judgments in case the cause supported by the undertaking enterprise is a generic or a theme particularly important for respondents as they are directly involved.

The majority of respondents (82.1%) quite agree, agree, or strongly agree in believing ethically correct that companies support social causes.

The point of view changes slightly when talking about social causes, advertising and increase of profits. In fact, respondents show perplexity with regard to the use of the social causes to advertise of companies. The percentage of people who agrees are 41.1% in the case of advertising for the support of social causes and 31.2% when speaking of increased profits through social causes but 63% declares themselves in favor of the support to social causes.

The other six items of the variable “opinions on cause-related marketing” concern the attitude of consumers in the event of a transaction of CRM. The percentage of respondents who agree in saying that there is an improvement in the opinion of the company in the case of support to a generic social cause is 65%, and increases when the cause is individually significant (69.4%). The most obvious thing is the increase in the propensity to purchase in the case of support for a personally relevant cause. As regards the willingness to pay a higher price for the products involved in operations of generic CRM, more than 50% of respondents not agree to bear a higher cost, symptom that the donation according to consumers must be fully borne by the company. However in the case of a social cause personally relevant the 49% is in favor to pay a higher price (against 34.7% in the case of a generic cause).

These data are extremely useful as they stress the importance for companies to choose significant causes for most of the target since they are able to increase both the corporate reputation and the sales, with the possibility of applying a slightly higher price.

(c) Knowledge and opinions on pink marketing

As regards pink marketing, consumer behavior is quite favorable. The majority of respondents declares an increase in the propensity to purchase these products (56.7%), symptom that the cause of breast cancer is important for the majority of respondents.

More interesting are the statements regarding the level of knowledge of the pink logo as international symbol of the support to the cause. The 84% of respondents pretend to be aware of this fact.

Part 2 Misuration of the constructs

(a) Perception of pinkwashing

In order to analyze the perception of pinkwashing, five items have been used.

There is a slight tendency to believe that the words used are ambiguous (39.9% is favorable, 20.8% does not know the answer, and the 39.2% does not believe that there is ambiguity), and there is an equally favorable trend to believe that images are not ambiguous (41% do not think that there is ambiguity, 18.5% do not know, 40.5%, thinks that there is ambiguity). More effective were the other three items, 73.4% declare that the statements of the campaigns of pink marketing are hardly verifiable, 63.6% declare that the involvement of the company to the cause is not great, and 70.5% fail or conceal important information.

(b) Risk perception (pink-perceived risk)

In the case of the pink-perceived risk, respondents have a certain distrust of the campaigns of pink marketing as 47.3% believes that some companies do not really support the cause of breast cancer, with respect to the 28.3% that believes companies are sincere (the remaining 24.4% does not know the answer). In addition, the 61.3% believed that some products are not compatible with the image that the company wants to transmit of itself (20.2% instead does not know the answer).

As regards the possibility that pink products can be risky for the health, the majority do not think that this is possible. The phenomenon of pinkwashing in Italy is, in fact, as previously discussed, only to the origins and it is therefore normal that there is a general tendency of consumers to believe that the product is not dangerous for the health. The debate on the use of chemical substances which are potentially carcinogenic in the cosmetic industry, for example, arose only in recent times and there are still few websites or consumer associations which analyze the INCI products and explain the danger of chemical substances used.

(c) Consumer confidence

As regards the assessment of consumer confidence with respect to the businesses which implement campaigns of pink marketing, five different items were used. The

research has in this regard highlighted as consumers are skeptical of such marketing operations. Specifically, 64.7% of respondents do not know the answer or believe that the reputation of these companies is not reliable. The 65.9% do not know judge or believe that the products used are not reliable while almost all (84.9%) believe that the advertising are not trusted or are in doubt. Most of the sample addition does not believe that companies support the fight against breast cancer with adequate mode or believed not to be able to judge on the basis of the information provided (76.3%). The 75.2% still did not believe that businesses maintain their promises and pledges to support the cause of breast cancer or is in doubt.

(d) Consumer confusion

In order to analyze the confusion of the consumer four items have been considered. Considering the statement “I believe that the great variety of products present on the market with pink packages or bearing a pink ribbon might create confusion,” 58.4% of respondents declared that they agree. More than 60% believe that it is difficult to identify how you can support the cause more effective due to the diffusion of products with same characteristics (60.7%).

3.2.2 Two Step Cluster Analysis

Various clustering algorithms have been developed to group data into clusters, however, they work effectively either on numerical or categorical data but most of them perform poorly on mixed categorical and numerical data. Two step cluster analysis allows to avoid this problem [1, 18].

SPSS two step clustering developed by Chiu et al. [6], Xu and Wunsch [33] for the analysis of large data sets consists of two steps:

- **Step 1: Pre-clustering of cases.**
A sequential approach is used to pre-cluster the cases. The aim is to compute a new data matrix with fewer cases for the next step; in order to reach this aim, the computed pre-clusters and their characteristics (cluster features) are used as new cases. The pre-clusters are defined as dense regions in the analyzed attribute space. The results may depend on the input order of cases therefore it is recommended to use random order.
- **Step 2: Clustering of cases.**
A model based hierarchical technique is applied. Similar to agglomerative hierarchical techniques, the pre-clusters are merged stepwise until all clusters are in one cluster. In contrast to agglomerative hierarchical techniques, an underlying statistical model is used. The model assumes that the continuous variables are within clusters independent normal distributed and the categorical variables are within clusters independent multinomial distributed. Two distance measures are available: euclidean distance and a log-likelihood distance in case of mixed types of attributes.

In the next table, cf. Table 1, some results related to the collected data are presented. As one can see three clusters can be individuated.

Cluster 2 is composed mainly of young employees with a high school diploma. This group is almost always neutral in its assessments. Only in certain cases, it has demonstrated a propensity to perceive the phenomenon of pinkwashing, units in this cluster agree in saying that statements of pink marketing are hardly verifiable, that advertising seems to exaggerate the involvement of enterprises to the cause and finally that seems there is a voluntary omission of important information.

As regards the confusion of the consumer, units belonging to Cluster 1 declare to be confused because of the great variety of products pink or bearing a pink ribbon and believe that this could make difficult the identification of companies with support more effective to the cause.

Units in this cluster do not agree to declare that the choice of purchase is more difficult, while they are not able to express themselves on the difficulty to distinguish between products involved in the fight against breast cancer by others.

Cluster 1 and Cluster 3 are formed by units who take a more precise position with respect to the analyzed variables.

Specifically, the group composed mainly of adults between 45–54 years and over (Cluster 3) are more skeptical about the enterprise actions. These units appear to be the most receptive in perceiving the phenomenon of pinkwashing, the risk regarding the purchase of pink products, and to be confused by the operations of pink marketing.

On the contrary, Cluster 1 is composed mainly of young graduates, it is the one with more confidence in the commercial operations of the companies, it has the highest number of consensus as regards the credit in respect of the operations of pink marketing and the lowest perception of pinkwashing, the perceived risk, and confusion for the consumer.

The results of the cluster analysis just exposed before show a certain tendency to the division of the opinions between the two generations identifiable as parents and children. The cluster “parents” is the most skeptical and cynical about the commercial operations of the companies, probably due to a greater experience in life.

Young people instead are those with a more positive vision of marketing and advertising, probably due to a greater propensity to believe in the goodness of commercial operations.

3.3 Hypothesis Development

Based on the analysis of the literature (see [5]), we developed five research hypotheses:

1. pinkwashing is negatively correlated with consumer confidence (H1);
2. pinkwashing is positively correlated with the perceived risk (H2);

Table 1 Clusters identification

Cluster	Age	Study title	Profession	Pinkwashing	Perceived risk	Trust	Consumer confusion
1	18-24	High school	Student	-, -, -, -, -	-, -, -, -	+, +, +, +, +	-, -, -, -
	25-34	Bachelor's deg.					
2	25-34	High school	Employee	N, N, +, +, +	N, N, N, N	N, N, N, N, N	+, -, + = N, N
		Magisters deg.					
3	45-54	High school	Employee retired	+, +, +, +, +	+, +, +, +	-, -, -, -, -	+, +, +, +
	65-	Magisters deg.					

N = neutral, + = agree, - = do not agree

Table 2 Correlation coefficients

Hypothesis	Effect	Spearman coefficient	Kendall coefficient	Results
H1	–	–0.174	–0.208	Hp confirmed
H2	+	+0.564	+0.455	Hp confirmed
H3	+	+0.427	+0.337	Hp confirmed
H4	–	–0.474	–0.557	Hp confirmed
H5	–	–0.208	–0.162	Hp confirmed

3. pinkwashing is positively correlated to consumer confusion (H3);
4. consumer confusion is negatively associated with consumer confidence (H4);
5. perceived risk is negatively associated with confidence against products pink (H5)

From the statistical analysis of the data (correlation analysis between the four analyzed variables: pinkwashing, perceived risk, trust, and consumer confusion—by coefficients of Spearman and Kendall) all the hypotheses are verified, cf. Table 2

1. pinkwashing is negatively correlated with consumer confidence (H1);
2. pinkwashing is positively correlated with the perceived risk (H2);
3. pinkwashing is positively correlated to consumer confusion (H3);
4. consumer confusion is negatively associated with consumer confidence (H4);
5. perceived risk is negatively associated with confidence against products pink (H5)

The phenomenon of pinkwashing is adversely affect with regard to three relevant aspects—confidence, perceived risk, and confusion—able to influence consumer purchasing choices. The value of the coefficients shows, however, that, even in the case of a perceived risk already quite high, this influence is still slight. The reason is probably to be sought in a perception of the phenomenon still in its early stages and therefore rather low.

It emerges clearly that campaigns unclear or inconsistent with the business have negative effects on consumers that companies cannot overlook. The decline in consumer confidence, increasing the perception of risk and consumer confusion, can produce dangerous consequences, as unpleasant emotions of purchase, distrust in the enterprise and in its cause-related marketing campaigns, dissatisfaction [4, 29, 31, 32].

4 Conclusion

Pinkwashing is a very spread phenomenon due to the increasing of pink marketing.

This research enhanced some of the effects of pinkwashing on consumers that is: less trust, more perceived risk, and more confusion.

This can be a problem for companies in particular as regards the reputation and a less efficacy of cause-related marketing. In order to avoid this it is necessary to control advertisement and to control the use of the pink ribbon.

Because of the increasing role of pink marketing in the communication strategy of numerous companies, also pinkwashing is unfortunately becoming a very spread phenomenon. This research enhanced some of the effects of pinkwashing on consumers, that is to say less trust, more perceived risk, and more confusion in the buying process. As highlighted in previous studies on whitewashing, and greenwashing in particular, these emotional states of consumers can be a problem, in particular as regards the reputation and a less efficacy of cause-related marketing, both for companies implementing the process of pink marketing and for institutions benefiting from cause-related marketing campaigns. Indeed an unclear and incoherent advertising campaign could have negative effects on consumers, such as detrimental word of mouth, doubt on the firm reliability, dissatisfaction, cognitive dissonance, and at the end postponement or reject of buying decision. For these reasons, companies should pay more attention to their cause-related marketing decisions and to their communication process. At the same way, also institutions benefiting from these campaigns should evaluate and control more deeply the source of funds, in order to avoid negative consequences in long time.

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