**Helping Those Who Help Us:
Co-branded and Co-Created Twitter Promotion in CSR Partnerships**

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Abstract

Partnerships between brands and non-profit-organisations (NPOs) must be strategically managed for each to maximise their benefit from the relationship. Twitter, with its potential for pass-along of messages, provides an ideal channel for reciprocal promotion within the network of an NPO and its supporting brands. For any one brand within that network, brand building will be amplified if messages are passed on to others using co-branded and/or co-created communications, providing an opportunity for a brand to engage a new audience of consumers who are part of another organisation's network. This research examines the extent of co-branded and co-created communications by a popular NPO and its network of corporate partners on Twitter, and compares that Twitter promotion with promotion of the same activity in traditional news media. The findings revealed surprisingly limited use of Twitter to promote brands' partnership efforts with the NPO, and only limited evidence of the expected reciprocity between the NPO and its partners. We find even less evidence of co-branded communications between partner brands in the network, and no co-created communications. The results have important implications for CSR partnerships, suggesting that more innovative use of social media could provide reciprocal benefits from brands' partnerships with NPOs.

Keywords: Co-created communication, brands, corporate social responsibility, reciprocity, coopetition, Twitter

Introduction/Background

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities can enhance brand and company reputations, engender goodwill among consumers, and influence the way that customers evaluate a company's products (Chernev and Blair, 2015). Partnerships with charities or causes can allow innovative programs by firms for whom it is unrealistic to come out with truly exceptional offerings, such as Avon's promotion of fundraising for breast cancer (Aaker, 2007). Yet without awareness of an organisation's CSR activities, customers are unable to reward such activities (Servaes and Tamayo, 2013) – for example, by giving their patronage to organisations that engage in CSR. So communication of brand activities, whether in CSR or other areas, is a key component of a holistic approach to brand management, or 'brand chartering' (Macrae and Uncles, 1997).

Apart from its potential for enhancing the brand and company reputation, supporting a cause (such as breast cancer fundraising) creates the opportunity for innovative communications to engage consumers, as both the supporting partner (such as Avon) and the cause (breast cancer charities) can together, or separately, promote the brand's support to their respective networks. If such a partnership moves beyond a one-off exchange, it can be positioned on a continuum of co-branding, with mere sponsorship at one end, and a joint partnership at the other (Morton *et al*, 2003). Consistent with the common practice of co-branding products that has emerged over the past three decades (Besharat and Langan, 2014), a communication could then be considered to be 'co-branded' if it involves the use of both the partner and cause brands. Communications may also be 'co-created' if two or more parties are involved in developing a message, consistent with the practice of co-creation of marketing communications by consumers and organisations (Bacile *et al*, 2014). However, in contrast with the bilateral corporate partnership involved when an organisation donates to a cause, it is

common for multiple organisations, sometimes including competing organisations, to sponsor a common cause. Under these circumstances, any communication by a sponsoring organisation can promote the cause and its own CSR efforts, but can also (either inadvertently or intentionally) promote the efforts of other organisations, possibly including competitors. In such circumstances, co-branded or co-created communications can therefore result in a form of ‘coopetition’, where competitors both compete and cooperate with each other (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). In this paper, we examine one such case, where a variety of organisations, including competitors, promote one cause, Toys for Tots, and thus have the opportunity to engage their customers with the use of co-branded and co-created communications on social media – in this case, Twitter. We examine the extent to which Twitter is used by brands to leverage their CSR efforts through co-branded and co-created communications, and the extent to which the cause promotes its corporate partner brands using the same mechanisms. First, however, we provide a brief review of the literature on CSR partnerships as a mechanism for brand building.

CSR partnerships as part of brand building

Corporate contributions to non-profit-organisations (NPOs), through donations, sponsorship, cause-related marketing or another form of partnership, are very common. These practices can be viewed as demonstrating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Kotler and Lee, 2005), and for simplicity in this study, we refer to the relationship between a corporate supporter and the benefiting NPO as a ‘CSR partnership’. We refer to a brand/company providing support or a donation as a ‘partner’, and to the benefitting NPO as the ‘cause’. With the exception of a purely philanthropic gift, motivated by altruism and without expectation of benefit, these partnerships involve an expectation of a return, or reciprocal benefit to the partner brand.

Partners typically expect a benefit for one or more stakeholder groups, such as customers, media, internal staff, suppliers, distributors, rights holders or shareholders (Meenaghan *et al*, 2013). Specific motives for company participation in CSR may include increasing brand awareness or managing brand image with customers, aligning or re-positioning the brand alongside the cause, portraying a sense of social responsibility to multiple stakeholder groups, managing relationships within the supply chain, or encouraging a sense of belonging with employees (Madden *et al*, 2006; Meenaghan *et al*, 2013; Nickell *et al*, 2011). CSR can therefore be seen as a process of investment in social capital with the expectation of long-term payback in terms of reputation, and possibly reciprocal favours (Worthington *et al*, 2006). In other words, a partner is likely to expect some reciprocal benefits from the NPO in return for its support, and these benefits often relate directly to the brand.

How these benefits accrue to the partner is dependent on the nature of the partnership, any agreed benefits to be provided by the cause, and the leveraging activities of the partner (Ruth and Simonin, 2003; Seitanidi and Ryan, 2007). The partner may undertake advertising, public relations, internal communications, and direct mail to promote the cause (e.g., Nickell *et al*, 2011). In some cases, CSR may evolve into co-branding or other forms of partnership between the sponsor and the cause, but Besharat and Langan (2014) distinguish co-branding as distinct from other practices such as brand alliances, sponsorship or cause-related marketing. They suggest brand alliances are oriented to increasing awareness and/or transferring brand values, but do not go so far as to co-develop a new ‘product’ as would be the case in co-branding. They further suggest that sponsorship and cause related marketing are more transactional, without the long-term commitment of a co-branding relationship. Sponsorship and cause related marketing may be more transactional, and oriented to building brand awareness, but they may also be developed into co-branding (e.g. Motion *et al*, 2003).

We take the perspective that there exists a continuum of CSR partnerships relevant to brands and building brand awareness. At one end, the partner donates to a cause and promotes this support to enhance its brand image and awareness, but the strategies of the two parties are largely independent, and would not fulfil the criteria of a partnership. At the other end is a long-term, integrated co-branding of the two organisations, where communicating to consumers and other stakeholders can help to achieve the branding objectives of each party.

Whether the relationship between a partner and an NPO is purely transactional or a long-term partnership, social media provide innovative ways for companies to communicate their CSR activities in pursuit of their branding objectives. Recent research has suggested that social media and public relations may be the channels of choice to facilitate a positive effect of CSR activities (Chernev and Blair, 2015), but did not investigate *how* social media could be used to promote CSR activities. This study examines the use of Twitter, a social media channel, in such partnerships, an area in need of illumination (Meenaghan *et al*, 2013). However, we go beyond the partner/cause dyad to examine the use of Twitter within the network of a cause and its different partner organisations.

Brand building and co-created communication on social media

In the past, primary communication media would include TV, radio, and print media, but social media platforms are now important channels for sponsorship activities (Meenaghan *et al*, 2013). Promotion of CSR partnership efforts on social media is particularly appropriate, since there is evidence of a relationship between individuals' social media use and their ethical engagement with NPOs, including monetary donations and volunteerism (Mano, 2014). In addition, evidence that brand community members are particularly concerned with

brand ads (Muniz Jr and O'Guinn, 2001) would suggest that the social media network of a brand – or a cause – would be more engaged in online communications with that brand.

The community focus of social media therefore provides an ideal platform for a brand to leverage its CSR activities, by bringing together a 'community' of parties aligned with a cause. A brand community creates collective value by 'impression management' regarding the brand or by evangelising its benefits and justifying its actions (Schau *et al*, 2009), so favourable communications about the brand sent to this group can help to achieve the brand's objectives. However as discussed above, the reach of a brand's communication will increase if a message is disseminated beyond its own follower network to the network of a cause or to the networks of other partner organisations. At the same time, social media provide a channel for a cause to separately or jointly promote one or more partner organisations, and thus to increase any reputation or other benefit to those organisations by their support of the cause. The use of social media in marketing has been examined in both profit and non-profit contexts, but the focus of research has tended to be on the consumer as a recipient and potential sharer of content (e.g., Araujo *et al*, 2015; Briones *et al*, 2011). In the present research, we explore the use of Twitter within the previously unexplored area of reciprocal promotion between an NPO and its supporting brands, and also within the network of those supporting brands.

Among social media, Twitter (a microblogging platform) would seem to have particular potential for co-branded and co-created communications to promote CSR activities. An organisation can 'mention' another in a tweet, incorporating an additional brand into the tweet, which thus becomes a 'co-branded' tweet. A mention in a tweet means that the tweet is forwarded to the mentioned brand (or 'Twitter handle'), thus encouraging that brand to pass

on, or ‘retweet’ the message to its own follower network. The retweet may be modified, or forwarded without alteration by the mentioned account to its followers. In either case, the retweet becomes a form of co-created communication, with each party contributing to the dissemination (by forwarding), and potentially to the construction (by modification) of the message. So a partner might mention a cause in its tweets, and the cause could retweet the message to its own followers, achieving wider dissemination of the message and brand, by passing on (and thus implicitly endorsing) the partner’s message. Thus while the partner is likely to be looking for a benefit through its sponsorship, *both* the partner *and* the cause can use Twitter to provide reciprocal benefits. Similarly, one partner organisation can mention another in a tweet promoting its own efforts, and hope that the mentioned partner retweets that message to its own network, thereby creating reciprocal benefits for both partners through co-created communication. If two competitors support the same cause, co-branded and/or co-created tweets can therefore be used to promote both organisations, in a form of coopetition.

Based on the preceding discussion, Twitter therefore allows partners to enhance their brand reputation by showcasing their CSR activities, and allows causes to demonstrate reciprocity by promoting partners’ efforts through co-branded tweets (with mentions) or by co-created tweets (through retweets). However, while previous studies have addressed NPOs’ use of social media (e.g., Briones *et al*, 2011), as discussed above, their focus has been on communication with the public and consumers. There does not appear to have been a single study considering reciprocal promotion between a supporting partner and a cause on Twitter. This research addresses that gap, and goes further, by extending the analysis beyond the dyad of a cause and a partner to the entire network of partners of the cause. Specifically, the research examines Twitter and press promotion by the network of a major U.S.-based, internationally active NPO - Toys for Tots (T4T). This is therefore the first study to examine

social media activity by both non-profit and corporate users promoting the same cause, thus assessing the joint and interactive nature of microblogging to engage customers in brand-building, and leverage multiple brands' activities in brand-building. We also compare the frequency of organisations' promotion of their association with T4T on Twitter with promotion on another medium – press reports – that does not facilitate co-creation of communications.

Toys for Tots (T4T) was selected as the focal NPO due to its high profile in the U.S., generally positive reputation, and the concentrated timing of its efforts. T4T was founded in 1947 and is active in all 50 U.S. states, Canada, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands (Toys for Tots, 2015). The organisation collects toys or monetary donations for children in underprivileged families for Christmas. As such, most of its public activity is focused on the period directly before Christmas, which is likely to encourage press and Twitter coverage each year around that time.

Hypothesis development

Promotion of own CSR activities: Despite longstanding recommendations that companies should work on increasing CSR awareness levels, there is evidence that not all firms appreciate the importance of customer awareness of their CSR activities (Servaes and Tamayo, 2013). Previous research has shown a positive association between press mentions of CSR activities and the advertising spending of a firm (Servaes and Tamayo, 2013). Press mentions are not under the direct control of an organisation, but can clearly be influenced by dissemination of media releases and other public relations tactics. In contrast, Twitter provides a mechanism for an organisation to directly promote its own CSR activities, so the frequency of mentions of CSR activities by the organisation's Twitter handles is a measure of

the extent to which it uses the channel to promote those efforts. Following the observed association between press mentions of the CSR activities of a firm and its advertising spending (Servaes and Tamayo, 2013), we would expect an organisation to promote its CSR efforts in the press and on Twitter. We would therefore expect to see a correlation between the frequency of Twitter and press promotion of those activities. As such we test for an association between Twitter mentions of T4T by a partner, and press reports containing the names of both T4T and the partner in Hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 1: Promotion of CSR activities: There will be a positive association between partner mentions of T4T on Twitter and press mentions of the partner's support of T4T.

Partners' CSR activities will vary, and those that invest more would be expected to make greater efforts to promote those activities, in order to leverage their support of the cause. T4T has five 'star' levels of sponsor (or 'partner') support, ranging from five-star partners contributing at least \$US1 million in cash or \$2 million in toys, to one-star partners contributing at least \$25K in cash or \$100K in toys. Higher-level partners would therefore be expected to have a higher incentive, and possibly more developed mechanisms, to promote their CSR efforts on Twitter and in mainstream press. We therefore test for an association between the size of the partner's contribution to T4T (as shown by its star level) and the frequency of mentions of the partner and T4T in tweets (in Hypothesis 2a) and in press reports (in Hypothesis 2b):

H2a: Investment and Twitter promotion: There will be a positive association between partner star level and partner mentions of T4T on Twitter, and

H2b: Investment and press promotion: There will be a positive association between partner star level and press mentions of the partner's association with T4T.

Reciprocity: Reciprocity is recognised as an important step in the public relations (PR) process (Kelly, 2001). Twitter provides a cost-effective way for NPOs to demonstrate reciprocity by recognising the contribution of partner organisations: one party (e.g. NPO A) can mention another (e.g. Brand B) in a tweet, and thus encourage a reciprocal mention and/or retweeting of that message. So a cause can mention a partner, who can then retweet that message, or a partner can mention the NPO, thus encouraging the NPO to mention that partner. We therefore expect to see a positive association between mentions of T4T in a partner's tweets and vice versa, suggesting *H3*:

Hypothesis 3: There will be a positive association between partner Twitter mentions of T4T and vice versa.

While, as discussed above, a cause is likely to promote a partner, in a multi-sponsor partnership, the focal cause may tweet about partners with differing frequencies. Given the norm of reciprocity (Cialdini, 1993), those who do more for a cause are likely to expect to receive more from that cause (Kelly, 2001). So if T4T is using Twitter strategically to promote its partners, T4T's frequency of partner mentions would be expected to be positively correlated with the partner's level of support, or star level, suggesting *H4*:

Hypothesis 4: The frequency of T4T's promotion of partners by Twitter mentions will be positively associated with partners' sponsorship status level.

With its visibility and potential for interaction, Twitter is also ideal for encouraging reciprocity within a network of partners, even with competitors. Twitter allows partner organisations to simultaneously promote other partners, by mentioning them in tweets, while promoting their own activity, in a form of coopetition, where competitors both compete and cooperate with each other (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). Such a mention may encourage the

identified partner to reciprocate by referring to the mentioning partner. If partners are responding to such mentions with reciprocal references, we would expect to see a pattern of reciprocity between partners, suggesting *H5*:

Hypothesis 5: Partner reciprocity: there will be a positive correlation between Twitter mentions of, and mentions by, partners.

The next section outlines the methods used to test the hypotheses.

Method

A list of 61 corporate sponsor brands (or ‘partners’) and their donation (or ‘star’) level was obtained from the T4T website in November 2014, and subsequently updated (to reflect recently added partners) in March 2015. Web and Twitter searches were conducted to identify any U.S.-based Twitter handles for these partner brands. All identified handles were checked to ensure that the handle was a verified Twitter handle. (A handle can be ‘verified’ by Twitter to show that it represents the real brand (or person) and not an imposter. Verification is indicated on the brand’s Twitter page by a blue checkmark icon next to the handle name.)

No Twitter handle could be found for 11 partners, resulting in a final list of 63 active Twitter handles for 50 partners. All tweets from these handles for the period November 1, 2014 to January 1, 2015 were downloaded using the Twitonomy premium service, resulting in 32,641 tweets, or an average of 513.8 (sd = 686.5) tweets sent per active handle, each with an average of 194,699 (sd = 606,350) followers. Tweets referring to alternative forms of ‘Toys for Tots’ (i.e. ‘T4T’, ‘TforT’, and ‘Toys4Tots’) were searched for and extracted using search functions, resulting in a final data set of 452 partner tweets referring to T4T in one of its name

formats. These tweets were analysed to identify references to other partners. U.S.-based T4T Twitter accounts were also identified using web and Twitter searches, resulting in a total of 19 active T4T Twitter handles. Over the same time period (i.e. November 1, 2014 to January 1, 2015) these handles posted 1,624 tweets (or an average of 85.5 per active handle ($sd = 152.3$)) to an average of 727.6 ($sd = 1,384$) followers. Search functions were used to identify 259 T4T tweets containing references to one or more partner brands. Because tweet counts were highly skewed, nonparametric tests were used to assess relatedness i.e. Kendall's tau to test the association between tweet mentions of and by T4T, and an ordinal extension of the Wilcoxon rank-sum test to test tweet and press mentions by partner star level.

U.S.-based press reports mentioning any partner and 'Toys for Tots' or 'Toys 4 Tots' (or any other name variation) were identified from the Factiva database, which contains a very wide range of press sources, including newspapers, online news, and press wire services. The search was consistent with Servaes and Tamayo (2013), but extended their method by including the Proquest database, in order to include additional press sources not covered by Factiva. The Proquest search identified a small number of additional press reports, along with a large number of reports already obtained from Factiva. Duplicate results from Factiva and Proquest were discarded, and the remaining reports reviewed to ensure that the partner and T4T were mentioned in the same context. Reports where both were not mentioned in the same context were discarded. This resulted in a total of 110 press reports, or an average of 1.80 per partner ($sd = 4.38$).

Results were analysed using Minitab (Version 17) for statistical tests and also through social network analysis, to provide a visual representation of the network (Borgatti *et al*, 2013). For

this, UCINET 6.605 (Borgatti *et al*, 2002) and NetDraw 2.158 (Borgatti, 2002) were employed.

Results

Publicising own activity

While many partners used Twitter and/or media to publicise their support of T4T, there was surprisingly limited use of both channels. Two partners (Toys ‘R’ Us and The UPS Store) each had more than 20 press reports associating their names with T4T, but the majority of partners (62.3%) had none. Use of Twitter by partners to promote T4T, and/or their own support of T4T, also varied widely. There was a total of 452 partner mentions of T4T, but after excluding 11 partners who were inactive on Twitter, and 24 who did not mention T4T in their tweets, the median partner mentions of T4T was 1. Press promotion was a very poor predictor of Twitter promotion: there was only a very weak association between the frequency of partner tweets mentioning T4T and the number of joint press mentions of the partner and T4T ($p = .08$), thus providing only weak support for H1. There was no significant ordinal trend for frequency of partner Twitter mentions of T4T by star level ($p > .1$), thus H2a is rejected. There was a marginal ordinal trend between star level and press mentions ($p = .099$), consistent with H2b. However, three of the five-star partners and four of the five four-star partners had no press coverage linking them to T4T, so many of the highest-level partners apparently received no press coverage of their support for T4T.

Figure 1 shows the tweets by partners about T4T, with different partner star levels shown in different shapes and colours. The number of tweets by each partner mentioning T4T is indicated by the width of the line, relative to Simply Fun, the partner who mentioned T4T most often in its tweets (103 times). Partners who did not tweet about T4T are listed on the

left side of the figure. (Note the length of lines in this and other figures varies only to allow partner names to be shown, and does not provide additional information.)

Figure 1: Number of partner tweets mentioning T4T (Partners with no tweets mentioning T4T listed on left)

Reciprocity: Helping those who help us

Promotion of partners in T4T tweets was generally low, relative to the total volume of tweets sent by T4T. Out of 1,624 tweets sent by T4T handles in the study period, only 259 (16%) mentioned partners - an average of 6.5 mentions per partner. However the distribution of mentions was highly skewed: the most frequently mentioned partner (Toys 'R' Us, a five-star partner), was mentioned 66 times, but 21 partners (including one five-star partner) were not mentioned in any T4T tweets. There was significant evidence of reciprocal tweets between T4T and partners, with a significant ordinal association between the number of partner mentions of T4T and mentions by T4T ($p < 0.001$), consistent with H3. However a majority of

the data points were clustered at low levels, with the relationship largely driven by a small number of partners that were high in both mentions of T4T and mentions by T4T. Nearly half (43%) of the tweets by T4T consisted of retweets of partner tweets, in other words co-created tweets, such as one retweet by T4T promoting Duracell:

RT @Duracell: This season, every purchase of eligible @Duracell packs will trigger a donation to @ToysForTots_USA.

However, all T4T retweets mentioning partners, like the example above, were unmodified retweets. Thus, T4T missed out on the opportunity to more directly endorse Duracell's and other brands' donations by modifying tweets to include an acknowledgement of partners' support.

There was evidence of an ordinal association between sponsorship level and the frequency of partner mentions by T4T ($p = 0.013$), consistent with H4. Figure 2 shows T4T's mentions of partners, again by star level, with partners who were not mentioned by T4T listed on the left of the figure. The width of the line indicates the number of tweets by T4T, relative to the most mentioned partner, Toys 'R' Us, mentioned 66 times by T4T.

Figure 2: T4T tweets mentioning partners (Partners with no tweet mentions by T4T listed on left)

Inviting reciprocity: Publicising those who support the same cause

There was very little evidence of partners attempting to initiate reciprocal publicity by promoting other partners, as shown by Figure 3, which shows all partner mentions of other partners (with the direction of mention indicated by an arrow). The figure also shows the sole reciprocal mention (indicated by a thick black line). Partners that mentioned others were no more likely to be mentioned by other brands ($p > 0.1$), thus rejecting H5. Only seven brands mentioned other partners in tweets that also mentioned T4T (mentioning 27 other partners a total of 70 times, ranging from one to three mentions by any one partner of another). There was also almost no evidence of reciprocity: the most prolific mentioner (U-Haul, with 21 mentions of other partners) was not mentioned by any other partner, and there was only one partner dyad involving reciprocal mentions (between Booz Allen Hamilton and Talk to

Santa). There was *no* evidence of partners co-creating tweets: that is, no partner retweeted one of the 452 partner tweets referring to T4T.

Figure 3: Tweets by partners mentioning other partners (arrow heads show direction of mention)

Discussion

The study reveals the extent to which organisations promote their own CSR efforts and/or those of other partners in the CSR network using co-branded and co-created tweets. Similarly, the results show the extent to which the cause promotes its partners using the same techniques. This joint promotion of the cause and its partners represents an innovative way of using Twitter to engage customers in brand-building by both a cause and its partners. However one of the most surprising results from the study is the apparent failure of many partners to promote their brand's support of T4T, either on Twitter or through press coverage: many did not achieve publicity by either channel, and are clearly not using either channel to leverage their CSR efforts. This represents a missed opportunity to build consumers'

evaluations of their brands as a result of their support for T4T. Such an approach may reflect what has been called a ‘philanthropic stage’ in non-profit and business sector collaboration, reflecting a level of engagement and resources which is relatively low, infrequent, simple and unstrategic (Austin, 2003).

As expected, there was an association, albeit weak, between the number of press reports mentioning a partner and T4T and the partner’s own Twitter mentions of T4T (H1). Higher-level partners had, as expected, higher levels of press coverage (H2b) (albeit only marginally significant), but did not mention T4T significantly more on Twitter (H2a). The reason why higher level partners promote their activities more in the press than lower level partners, but do not show higher use of Twitter for the same purpose, is not clear. The result does suggest a lack of coordination in media management at these organisations, with press articles being associated with the level of corporate investment, but no comparable association with Twitter mentions. The result is particularly surprising because mentions of T4T in the partner’s Twitter stream are under the control of the partner, while press mentions can be facilitated (e.g. through press releases), but are not directly controlled by the partner. The complete absence of Twitter promotion of donations to T4T by some partners, and the lack of higher promotion by higher level partners, does suggest, however, that many lack a clear strategy to promote their CSR efforts in the press and/or on Twitter – and thus fail to capture the full value of those efforts.

Examination of the brands that most frequently mentioned T4T in their tweets and vice versa suggested one explanation for which organisations were most likely to leverage their CSR efforts. Organisations that were selling toys, and/or offering collections depots (such as Toys ‘R’ Us and Walgreens) tended to mention T4T more frequently in their tweets, and also

received the highest level of press reports, often in community service type announcements, reporting on collection locations. Other partners (such as parking company Valpark, a four-star partner) appeared to have no natural association with T4T, and did not appear to attempt to leverage their donation in any way, with neither Twitter nor press mentions of their support of T4T.

One of the factors influencing the success of corporate/nonprofit collaborations is said to be the ‘fit’ between the product and cause (Berger *et al*, 2004). The extent to which fit is perceived is said to be important for a company to realise benefits, and articulation of this fit via communication messages has been said to be crucial (Cornwell *et al*, 2005). Among T4T partners, there were a number with obvious close fit with T4T – toy retailers, such as Toys ‘R’ Us, and child related charities, such as St Jude Medical Foundation. Others had less obvious product fit, such as Valpark, which as discussed above, did not mention their support of T4T in either tweets or press reports. The varying fit between different partners and T4T may therefore in part explain the low use of the press or Twitter to promote donations by partners with no natural fit with T4T. A previous experimental study found that high-fit sponsorships led to greater benefits for brand identity than low-fit sponsorships, but suggested that even low-fit sponsorships could ‘create’ fit by demonstrating fit between the sponsor and the cause (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). The strategy of U-Haul (a moving equipment and storage rental company) appeared to be consistent with that recommendation, with frequent media mentions of U-Haul trailers being used to store donated toys, and U-Haul’s repeated Twitter mentions of other partners. However the fact that many partners (even some giving large donations) did not mention T4T in their tweets, or obtain media coverage of that donation, suggests that many brands are not attempting to articulate a fit and/or capitalise on potential benefits to their brand from their donation.

The results therefore show evidence of reciprocity between T4T and partners as expected, but the strength of the relationship was less than expected. There was an association between mentions of partners by T4T and vice versa (H3), and higher mentions of higher level partners (H4). There was, however, a much higher percentage of unmodified retweets in T4T's tweets (43%) compared to those by partners (20%), suggesting that many of T4T's partner mentions were mere reactions to partner tweets, without the additional creative input involved in tweet modification. It is not surprising that an NPO like T4T would have a more reactive Twitter strategy than its corporate partners; many NPOs face time, staff and monetary constraints on their use of social media (Briones *et al*, 2011). However, the evidence of T4T's apparent reactivity suggests an opportunity for partners to drive mentions by mentioning T4T, thus encouraging T4T to retweet a message, and thereby effectively endorse the partner message and brand. Conversely, the reactivity of T4T reinforces that the 11 partner organisations not on Twitter, and the 24 partners who did not mention T4T in their tweets, were missing an opportunity to promote their support, and to potentially have T4T endorse their brand messages by retweeting them. The results also show the potential for an NPO to offer a benefit to partners by favourable Twitter mentions, extending earlier research that showed that NPOs could effectively use another social media outlet, Facebook (Waters *et al*, 2009).

The research found a surprisingly low number of partners (seven) mentioned other partner brands in tweets with reference to T4T. There was also almost no evidence of reciprocal promotion, rejecting H5: out of the total of 70 partner references to other partners, there was only one example of reciprocal promotion between partners (in two independent co-branded tweets) using mentions, and not a single example of co-creation between partners, in the form of a retweet. The T4T partner network thus appeared to be characterised by largely isolated

two-way relationships with T4T, rather than a multi-partner network, apparently reflecting competition between partner brands, rather than coopetition.

This predominance of dyadic relationships between T4T and its partners is in contrast with the ‘social’ essence of social media, and its ability to provide a network. T4T’s partners include at least 12 organisations for whom children’s toys or services are likely to be a substantial part of revenue, so low partner mentions of other partners may be partly driven by reluctance to mention competitors. U-Haul, the partner who most frequently mentioned other partners (with 20 mentions of others) does not appear to compete with other partners, consistent with this explanation. However the third highest mentioner was Alex Toys, which would compete with the other toy retailer partners. Conversely, three brands that are part of the same corporate umbrella – Toys ‘R’ Us, Babies ‘R’ Us, and FAO Schwartz – did not mention each other in their tweets. Competitive issues therefore do not fully explain the low number of mentions of other partners. In addition, the failure of so many partners to mention T4T in their tweets, and the low overall rate of mentions by those who did, suggest that the failure to mention other partners might be primarily driven, for most, by a lack of strategic use of Twitter to promote brands’ CSR efforts. This suggests an unrealised opportunity for brands to use co-branded and co-created Twitter communications to increase customer awareness of their CSR efforts by encouraging reciprocal promotion with the cause and with other partners – even competing ones.

Previous research has identified characteristics of tweets that are associated with higher levels of retweeting: for example, textual content (e.g., Araujo *et al*, 2015; Auger, 2014); hashtags (e.g., boyd *et al*, 2010; Suh *et al*, 2010), and interactivity (e.g., Burton and Soboleva, 2011; Li and Li, 2014). There have been mixed results on the effect of mentions on retweeting: Yang

and Counts (2010) found that tweets containing mentions were more likely to be retweeted, but other authors have found that mentions decreased the number of retweets (Soboleva *et al*, 2015; Suh *et al*, 2010). This research did not directly examine the number of retweets of tweets; instead, it looked at whether tweets were retweeted by the organisations that presumably had most to benefit by retweeting – that is, whether T4T retweeted partner tweets and vice versa, and whether partners retweeted tweets by other partners. In these circumstances, mentioning other organisations within the T4T/partner network brings a tweet to the attention of other network partners, and thus encourages the mentioned party to retweet the tweet to its own partner network (which for some partners, amounted to many hundreds of thousands of followers). Within the T4T partner network, using mentions thus serves an important and strategic goal, and the relative lack of such mentions (and the failure of many network partners to retweet tweets which mentioned them positively) indicates a lack of strategic use of Twitter.

The paper also demonstrates the missed potential for reciprocal promotion between partners by retweeting each other's tweets. None of the partners engaged in such retweeting, and thus failed to leverage the benefits of their CSR efforts in support of T4T. The absence of reciprocal promotion by retweeting others' tweets is less surprising than T4T's failure to mention some supporting partners, because mentions of donors by non-profits creates inclusion and develops relationships between the parties (Smitko, 2012). However, reciprocal promotion *between* partners would extend the strategic benefits of Twitter through the use of co-created communications. In the following section we discuss the implications of the results for further research.

Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

Overall, the study contributes to an understanding of social media use by NPOs and their brand partners, by assessing the use of social media by both the cause and its partners, and reciprocity within the network. The results are surprising, as they show that neither Twitter nor mainstream press were used as much as expected, raising the question of why so many partners do *not* use these channels to engage their networks by promoting their support of T4T. It is particularly surprising that T4T is clearly failing to use Twitter to recognise the contribution of many partners, reinforcing earlier findings that NPOs are failing to use the medium to its full capacity as a stakeholder-engagement vehicle (Lovejoy *et al*, 2012).

The research also showed lower than expected levels of reciprocity between the cause and its partners, again suggesting unrealised potential benefits for the NPO and its partner brands. While T4T is a not-for-profit organisation, presumably lacking social media expertise and constrained by time and staff, the limited recognition of partners by T4T on Twitter is of potential concern. The problem of a lack of balance in commitment between channel partners has previously been identified (Anderson and Weitz, 1992), and if parties believe that there is a lack of fairness (or reciprocity) in a relationship, they may transfer their commitment to other relationships (Farrelly and Quester, 2003). For T4T and other causes, demonstrating adequate recognition of partners is therefore of critical importance, and Twitter provides a cost-effective way to do this.

The almost complete lack of reciprocal promotion between partners (with only one dyad demonstrating reciprocal mentions) is also surprising, but perhaps less so. The concept of coopetition is relatively new, being first discussed in a journal article in 2000 (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). It is therefore not surprising, particularly given that many T4T partners did not

appear to have a clear strategy to promote their CSR efforts, that only two organisations engaged in reciprocal promotion. Coopetition through co-branded and/or co-created communications on Twitter requires an effort to cooperate (for example by initially promoting another organisation), and a response – reciprocation of that promotion. One organisation, U-Haul, appeared to be attempting to obtain coopetition, with 21 mentions of other partners, but none of those organisations reciprocated, despite no obvious competitive conflict with U-Haul. The limited evidence of reciprocity therefore suggests that organisations have much to gain by becoming more innovative in their social media efforts. Co-created promotion is particularly important because it has the potential to expand an organisation's promotion of its CSR efforts to a new audience – that of a network partner. Further research would be useful to understand why many T4T partners did not appear to attempt to publicise their own activities, or engage in co-branded or co-created communications in the form of retweeting other partners' messages. For T4T to mention partner organisations would be expected to be a basic demonstration of reciprocity, and for partners to promote their own CSR efforts by mentioning T4T would be a basic attempt to leverage their CSR investment. However, the research demonstrated surprisingly low levels of both activities, and still lower levels of cooperative promotion between partners. The study thus identifies an important area for future research – the use of mentions as a strategic device for reciprocal promotion within a cause/partner network.

As this study focused on only one NPO, it is possible that the findings are unique to this organisation. Further research could therefore examine multiple organisations and other causes, and reciprocity in mentions on other social media, to see if they reveal more use of social media to provide reciprocal benefits within a network of brands. Certainly, this study

shows that there is untapped potential for innovative use of Twitter to achieve mutual benefits within a network of brands.

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