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The Communication of Corporate-NGO Partnerships: Analysis of Sainsbury's Collaboration with Comic Relief

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Abstract

This study focuses on CSR communication using the example of Corporate-NGO partnership between British supermarket chain Sainsbury's and Comic Relief. Questionnaires were distributed to 40 participants asking them about their consumer behaviour and opinion on partnerships. Using thematic analysis, two main themes have been identified in the data set: some consumers are sceptical towards cross sector partnerships because they assume selfish reasons behind the collaboration and view them as corporate PR tool. On the other hand, the majority of consumers evaluate Corporate-NGO Partnerships as appropriate and a gain for society at large. The analysis showed that Sainsbury's customers know about the partnership with Comic Relief while non-customers lack awareness, and that the most successful means of communication of partnerships is the supermarket promotion.

Key words: corporations, partnerships, supermarket, Sainsbury's, Comic Relief

Introduction

The influence of business in society has grown over time. However, there has been a shift in society's expectations towards business operations due to changing environmental and societal settings. In times of digital communications, consumers and other stakeholders are increasingly aware and demand a more socially responsible approach from corporations. The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) meets these growing expectations and encourages businesses to modify their approaches (Tench *et al.*, 2014).

Different forms of CSR activities have been developed in order to reach the relevant stakeholders and meet their expectations. For instance, over the last two decades, there has been a significant rise in Corporate-NGO Partnerships in line with the increased importance of CSR policies. Occasionally, these cross sector collaborations are even referred to as CSR partnership (Eid and Sabella, 2014). Such collaborations are not only about donating money to charities as used to be common practice when the concept of philanthropy became popular (Sethi, 1977 and Bowen, 1953). Nonetheless, there is still no agreed definition of CSR nowadays (Tench *et al.*, 2014), however, some authors argue that consumers have increased expectations of corporations, and they seem to become more active and involved when a particular problem is important to them (Golob *et al.*, 2008).

Corporate-NGO Partnerships are one example of modern CSR practice; however, certain collaborations seem to be more successful in terms of recognition than others. Recent studies suggest that in most cases, corporations partner with NGOs for reputation reasons, whereas NGOs use corporate partners as a source of funding. Despite the different motivations, the

collaborations are usually considered to be a win-win situation because businesses can prove their environmental, social and economic commitment and increase their reputation among the public, while NGOs raise awareness among a broader public about their causes (Pedersen *et al.*, 2013).

In this paper we will explore cross-sector partnership in the British context, by focusing on cross-sector partnership of British supermarket chain Sainsbury's and Comic Relief.

When it comes to cross-sector partnerships in the UK, the collaboration between British Marks & Spencer and Oxfam has been ranked as the most admired partnership in the UK (C&E Corporate-NGO Partnerships Barometer, 2014). This partnership is considered to be innovative, accessible and well communicated internally and externally (C&E Corporate-NGO Partnerships Barometer, 2014). Nevertheless, Marks & Spencer also scores high in the ranking of "Most Admired Companies" (BMAC Ranking, 2014). Additionally, Oxfam enjoys a high reputation among the British public and is the most admired NGO partner in the UK (C&E Corporate-NGO Partnerships Barometer, 2014). In comparison, the partnership between Sainsbury's and Comic Relief is less admired and not considered to be outstanding. Nevertheless, Comic Relief is considered to be a trusted NGO partner on its own (C&E Corporate-NGO Partnerships Barometer, 2014), although their partnership with Sainsbury's has scored very low.

This leads to the question why society positively responds to one partnership and negatively to another when majority of companies have CSR policies and what is the key for a successful partnership communication. Using the case of Sainsbury's partnership with Comic Relief, this paper therefore explores how the collaboration is perceived by the members of the British society, which communication channel contributed towards visibility of partnership the most, and what type of customers are aware of the partnership.

Corporate Social Responsibility and Importance of Stakeholder Relations

CSR has been a common practice among businesses in the USA since the late 1800s, and the first focus of CSR was on donating to charities (Sethi, 1977). In 1953, Bowen wrote the book *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* suggesting that managers as representatives of the business have responsibilities beyond profit-making (Bowen, 1953). However, since then the concept developed from mere social responsibility of businesses to the current concept of CSR.

According to Johansen and Nielsen (2011), CSR describes businesses' good deeds in society but covers a range of issues from legal compliance and environmental management, sustainability and animal's rights to workers' rights, community investment and welfare. Overall, "CSR means different things to different people at different times" (Pedersen, 2006, p.139), since new issues can be added and others may become less dominant. However, CSR has been often intertwined with PR practice, and Golob and Bartlett (2007, p. 1) argued that CSR is actually "a central charter for public relations in communicating and creating mutual understanding, managing potential conflicts (...) and to *achieve legitimacy*" (our emphasis).

It can be argued that CSR plays a significant role in the retail sector, and particularly when it comes to achieving legitimacy. CSR in the retail sector is not only shaped by the implemented value-driven activities of the retailer, but simultaneously, it also depends on the responsible or irresponsible behaviour of the suppliers (Homburg *et al.*, 2013). Retailers often work with fairly wide networks of suppliers which leads to a complex monitoring process on the responsible or irresponsible behaviour of each supplier. Irresponsible behaviour on the suppliers' side is likely to have a negative impact on the retailer (Schramm-Klein *et al.*, 2015; Homburg *et al.*, 2013).

This is because “retailer acts as a intermediary in the marketing channel. Therefore, CSR in retail not only relates to retailers’ own value-added activities but also depends on the extent to which retailers can guarantee the responsible behaviour of their suppliers (...) and other parties in the supply chain (e.g. logistics providers)” (Schramm-Klein *et al.*, 2015, p. 405).

This view is linked to the stakeholder theory, which is now arguably the most accepted view of how corporations should manage their relations with the society. The theory argues that if a definition of CSR will assert that business has a responsibility to society then a definition must embody “the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary categories of business performance” (Carroll, 1979, p. 499). While Carroll debated CSR and related it with the stakeholder theory, Freeman and his colleagues developed and introduced the stakeholder theory that does not necessarily relate to CSR but it does relate to ethics. Many authors discuss CSR in terms of the so-called “Friedman-Freeman debate” even though Freeman denies that these two approaches are diametrically opposed. He argues that the stakeholder theory is not a rival to the shareholder theory but that stakeholder approach “rejects the very idea of maximizing a single objective function as a useful way of thinking about management strategy. Rather, stakeholder management is a never-ending task of balancing and integrating multiple relationships and multiple objectives” (Freeman and McVea, 2001, p. 10). This is where cross-sector partnerships with NGOs come across as part of stakeholder approach as these partnerships can bring an added benefit to both corporation and society, as we will present in the next section.

Following the growth of popularity of the stakeholder theory, corporations also faced a question on whether and how to communicate CSR and their social commitments. Scholars agree that CSR communications are a delicate matter (Morsing and Schultz, 2006; Podnar, 2008; Brønn and Vrioni, 2001; Walter, 2014; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009; 2007; Tench *et al.*, 2014). CSR messages do not only cause positive reactions among stakeholders, but also lead to critical attention. According to Morsing and Schultz (2006), “the more companies expose their ethical and social ambitions, the more likely they are to attract critical stakeholder attention” (p. 323). Nevertheless, as soon as an organisation introduces CSR policies, the communication process begins whether intentionally or not (Walter, 2014). However, while in some countries, such as Denmark, communicating CSR is seen through a negative lens due to consumer scepticism on CSR communication (Morsing *et al.*, 2008), this does not seem to be the case in the UK where some companies do communicate CSR and still retain high reputation. For example, British supermarket chain Waitrose communicates CSR in its advertising, and yet still has a high reputation including among critical NGOs such as Ethical Consumer (for details see, Tench and Topic, 2017). However, not all companies do the same and reasons for partnering with NGOs are usually intertwined with reputation management and funding, as we will explain in the next section.

Corporate-NGO Partnerships

Over the last decades, there has been a significant rise in Corporate-NGO Partnerships in line with the increased importance of CSR policies which has been recognised by scholars (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Pedersen *et al.*, 2013; Tulder *et al.*, 2016). According to Selsky and Parker (2005), in cross sector partnerships “organizations jointly address challenges such as economic development, education, health care, poverty alleviation, community capacity building, and environmental sustainability.”

As already emphasised, corporations partner with NGOs for reputation reasons as well as to increase legitimacy and social status, whereas NGOs use corporate partners as a source of funding (Molina-Gallart, 2014; Arya and Salk, 2006); however, it has been recognised that the

primary aim of partnerships is to solve social problems and address legal voids when such exist (Tulder *et al.*, 2016).

Despite the different motivations, the collaborations are usually considered to be a win-win situation because businesses can prove their environmental, social and economic commitment and increase their reputation among the public, while NGOs raise awareness among a broader public about their cause (Pedersen *et al.*, 2013). However, Bendell *et al.* (2010) stress the possible challenges that may develop due to the different positions of partners in collaborations. On the NGO side, actors are likely to worry about their integrity and independence when partnering with businesses. On the corporation side, managers may be concerned about the economic goals when spending a considerable amount of time and money on stakeholder dialogues. In addition, Arenas, Lozano and Albareda (2009) argued that one of the concerns is also NGO legitimacy because some see NGOs as keen to gain access to corporate resources and as such are not sufficiently engaged with businesses. Nevertheless, growing interest in CSR has increased the motivation of businesses to partner with organisations from the third sector (Never, 2011).

However, recently, scholars argued that cross sector partnerships go beyond the charitable donor-recipient model. Even though businesses primarily provide funding to their partner, both sides can also learn from each other. The different actors have different capabilities and specialisations which can help to develop new innovations. Partnerships which are based on greater perceived value, communication, lower conflict, mission and strategy alignment, trust, and commitment are the most beneficial collaborations for both sides (Sanzo *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, the two parties can increase their reach as both sides are connected to different audiences (Molina-Gallart, 2014). According to Lasker *et al.* (2001) collaborations “enable different people and organizations to support each other by leveraging, combining and capitalizing on their complementary strengths and capabilities” (Lasker *et al.*, 2001, p. 180). Nevertheless, Samii, Vam Wassemhove and Bhattacharya (2002) argued that in order for partnership to be successful partners must share common goal symmetry, converging working cultures and communicate partnership intensively. This is not always the case and thus the lack of common goals (or perception of the lack of common goals) as well as poor communication among partners may influence success of the partnership. For example, Jamali and Keshishian (2009) analysed five partnerships in Lebanon only to discover that “partnerships crafted were mostly symbolic and instrumental rather than substantive and integrative” (p. 289).

It can be argued that cross sector partnerships are defined by their ability to effectively influence the issues they face. A collective agency can have a greater influence on the relevant outcomes as shared endeavours go beyond a single actor’s capabilities. Communication processes play a considerable role in affecting the overall outcome as they construct the meaning and interpretation of the partnership (Koschmann *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, the growth of all kinds of cross sector partnerships has developed new forms of governance meaning that the lines of the government, business and civil service sectors are converging (Albareda *et al.*, 2008). In addition, we could argue that corporate-NGO partnerships are a win-win-win situation given the fact they benefit NGOs (as it gives them resources), corporations (as it can serve as an additional evidence of commitment to serve society) but also consumers who can decide to shop with corporations that support charities, or in case that partnerships with charities become a mainstream, choose to purchase from corporations that work with charities consumers particularly like to support. In addition, it has been recognised that while cross-sector partnerships are gaining more popularity and recognition, there is still a need for assessing their impact (Tulder *et al.*, 2016).

This paper thus focuses on the evaluation of communication of partnerships using Sainsbury's as a case study to investigate to what extent consumers are aware of partnerships and what their views on partnerships are.

The UK Grocery Retail Market

The British grocery retail market is dominated by four supermarkets: Tesco (28.4% of the market), Asda (17.1%), Sainsbury's (16.4%) and Morrisons (10.9%). Together, these supermarket chains hold 72.8% of the whole field, leaving only about a quarter of the market to smaller retailers (Statista, 2015).

Tesco has been able to attract the most main shoppers both in-store and online, while Aldi has had the biggest gains proportionally. However, consumers are likely to shop in their local supermarket or find a suitable store close to them. Nonetheless, Sainsbury's has the highest levels of consumer satisfaction compared to the key competitors, while Tesco had the lowest satisfaction levels among its customers (Mintel, 2014a). Furthermore, it is important to note that over a fifth of consumers are sceptical towards supermarket promotions (ibid, 2014a), and there is no data on the level of attachment with individual retail companies in the UK. However, the knowledge on the level of attachment with brands is generally low as "there is still much to learn about the role of consumers' identification with a brand, as well as its relation to consumer behaviour and branding" (Tuškej *et al.*, 2013, p. 53).

The main food retailers spent £532.2 million in total on advertising in 2013, almost 6% more than in 2012. However, overall their share on advertising within the market fell to 66.9% in 2013 compared to 72.4% in 2012, while about 80% of the advertising spending within the sector was used for press and TV channels (Mintel, 2014b). The discounter retailers are increasing the pressure on the main supermarkets by focussing more on advertising in general; however, Tesco had the greatest advertising budget in the market. Sainsbury's, in particular, spent almost 10% of its advertising budget on its Nectar Loyalty Card and more than £5 million on promoting its own clothing range Tu (ibid, 2014b).

In addition, retailers used 14% of the annual media advertising spend in 2013 in November because it marks the start of the Christmas season, i.e. the time of year when all major British companies launch annual campaigns that always create public discussions and media coverage. The months of November and December together made up one quarter of retail advertising spend (Mintel, 2014c). Usually, advertising spending rises in spring again due to the Easter season before decreasing during the summer months. The monthly spending is more volatile than monthly all-retail sales, because marketers try to create events, which will attract more customers (ibid, 2014c).

Research on supermarkets' CSR communication in the UK shows that consumers prefer interactive communication compared to non-interactive (Lauritsen and Perks, 2015). Asking consumers which cause should be supported by the supermarket might be one way to engage customers. Lauritsen and Perks (2015) found out that consumers prefer supermarkets which implement CSR initiatives because these initiatives also benefit society and the planet. On the other hand, a survey conducted by UK's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014) revealed that 49% of all UK adults do not consider retail companies to be ethical. Scepticism is a general trend when it comes to consumer trust in brands.

Sainsbury's plc

Sainsbury's is one of the four biggest supermarkets in the UK and the chain was founded in 1869. It currently consists of over 1,200 supermarkets and convenience stores around the UK. Overall, it has approximately 161,000 employees and over 2,000 direct supplying sites in over 55 countries (Sainsbury's, 2015a). According to its own website, the store handles over 24 million customers' transaction each week and plans to open about 450,000 square feet of new selling space in each of the two coming financial years (ibid, 2015a).

The supermarket follows the vision "[t]o be the most trusted retailer where people love to work and shop" (Sainsbury's, 2015a) which is linked to the goal "[w]e will make our customers' lives easier, offering great quality and service at fair prices, serving customers whenever and wherever they want" (ibid, 2015a). The corporation's promise "Live Well For Less" forms the basis of the five self-established values: 1. Best for food and health, 2. Sourcing with integrity, 3. Respect for our environment, 4. Making a positive difference to our community and 5. A great place to work (ibid, 2015a). The supermarket has committed to the Sainsbury's 20x20 Sustainability Plan which states several aims that need to be achieved by 2020 based on the five values (ibid, 2015a).

Sainsbury's publishes Corporate Responsibility updates and other reports regularly in order to inform its stakeholder about achieved progress relating to the five different values. Case studies are presented as well as running campaigns which show Sainsbury's commitment in the fields of sustainability, environmental and societal responsibility, employee responsibility and community involvement (ibid, 2015a).

Comic Relief

Comic Relief was founded in 1985, and is one of the best known UK charities. It follows the vision "of a just world, free from poverty" (Comic Relief, 2015). Since the start of its charitable work, Comic Relief has raised over £1 billion, money which has been primarily raised through their two main fundraising campaigns *Red Nose Day* and *Sport Relief* (ibid, 2015). The contributions are spent to fight the causes of poverty and social injustice in the UK and around the globe. Moreover, the popular charity uses its brand influence to raise awareness of social issues (ibid, 2015).

The Red Nose Day was launched in 1988 and takes place every second year in March. People wear red noses and "do something funny for money" in order to raise funds for Comic Relief's work. The day ends with a TV event on a BBC show casting a night of comedy and entertainment to motivate people to donate money (Comic Relief, 2015). The Sport Relief event is a weekend every two years during which sport tournaments and challenges are organised in order to raise money. The event also finishes with a TV event on BBC (ibid, 2015).

Comic Relief works together with several partners from across the public, private and third sector in order to increase the effectiveness and success of their fundraising. Sainsbury's is one of the charity's strategic partners as they have been working together for a long time and actively supports the causes of Comic Relief (Comic Relief, 2015).

The Partnership between Sainsbury's and the Comic Relief

The cross sector partnership between Sainsbury's and Comic Relief was founded in 1999. According to the Sainsbury's website, over £95 million has been raised for the charity since the start of the partnership (Sainsbury's, 2015a). Sainsbury's is especially visible as a partner during Red Nose Day and Sport Relief as merchandise is sold in the stores and several fundraising events take place in the weeks before the actual fundraising events. Sainsbury's is

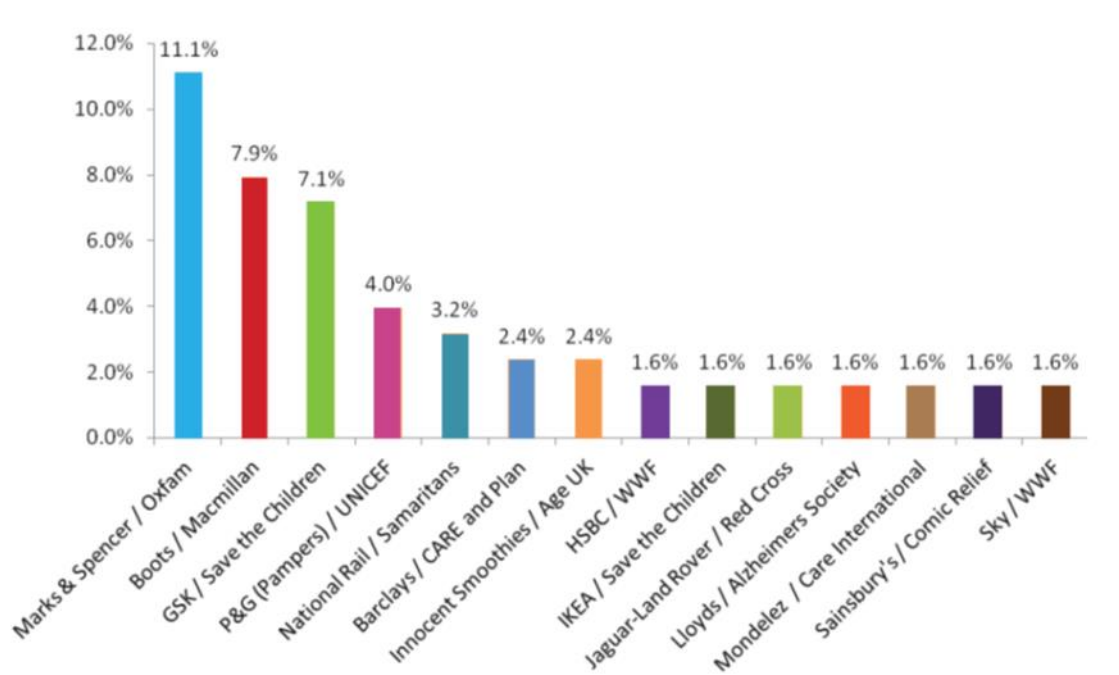
one of the main contributors to Comic Relief, for instance the supermarket raised £11.5 for Red Nose Day 2015 and £6.7 million for Sport Relief 2014 (Sainsbury's, 2015a).

In 2007, Sainsbury's and Comic Relief founded the Fair Development Fund and £4 million has been collected so far. The fund aims to develop partnerships with small producers, local farmers, NGOs, donors and retailers. It provides long-term economic, environmental and social support to producers and their communities within the Sainsbury's supply chain (Sainsbury's, 2015a).

The partnership between Sainsbury's and Comic Relief is not much admired or considered outstanding among other cross sector partners. Nevertheless, Comic Relief is considered a trusted NGO partner on its own (C&E Corporate-NGO Partnerships Barometer, 2014), although their partnership with Sainsbury's has scored very low. However, for example, the M&S-Oxfam partnership is well known and appreciated whereas the Sainsbury's-Comic Relief partnership is less prominent among practitioners and the public even though it has been established since 1999.

The scale with most admired partnerships in the UK is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. NGO-Corporate Partnerships: Most Admired Partnerships



Source: C&E Corporate-NGO Partnerships Barometer 2014, p. 22

Sainsbury's Current Communications of the Partnership

Sainsbury's uses a variety of communication channels to promote their partnership with Comic Relief, and to raise funds for the charity. The corporation makes use of their own website, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and in-store advertisements. In addition, different TV ads have been launched in order to increase the public's awareness of Sainsbury's commitment. In-store advertisement is considered to be a valuable part of Sainsbury's communications, however, it will not be further outlined in the following overview as specific information is difficult to collect.

When it comes to Sainsbury's corporate website, from 2010 until June 2015, Sainsbury's has published 59 pieces of content mentioning the partnership with Comic Relief (Sainsbury's, 2015b). Using the website's search tool, the different publications can be found consisting of press releases, case studies, blog posts of employees and corporate responsibility and sustainability updates. Moreover, there is also a broad coverage on the different Red Nose Day events (2011, 2013, 2015) and Sport Relief events (2010, 2012, 2014) (Sainsbury's, 2015b).

In terms of social media, Sainsbury's uses its Facebook account mainly for cooking shows; however, it does promote campaigns such as the Red Nose Day and Sport Relief (Sainsbury's, 2015c). For instance, Facebook was used to share video content and pictures prior to the Red Nose Day. The advertisement videos promoting the different red noses were very popular with up to 23,141 views on Facebook (Sainsbury's, 2015c). Furthermore, the @sainsburys Twitter account is used in a similar manner (Sainsbury's, 2015d). Overall, the corporation has been able to attract a large group of followers; the Facebook page has currently 1,151,864 Likes (Sainsbury's, 2015c) while the Twitter account counts 365.000 followers (Sainsbury's, 2015d). Consequently, the reach of their social media platforms can be considered to be fairly broad.

The YouTube channel of Sainsbury's is organised in different playlists, five of which focus on the partnership with Comic Relief. The playlist "Supporting Comic Relief" consists of six public videos and the playlist "Supporting Sport Relief" includes two public videos. Both playlists have not been updated since June 2014 (Sainsbury's, 2015e). Moreover, there are three different playlists from the Red Nose Day 2015: "The Red Noses" (9 videos), "Make Your Face Funny For Money" (two videos) and "Opening The Red Noses" (six videos). Overall, 21,827 people have subscribed to the YouTube channel; however, the number of views varies considerable among the different videos (Sainsbury's, 2015e).

In addition, Sainsbury's has launched a TV advertisement for the Red Nose Day 2011 in co-operation with Jamie Oliver. The advertisement was first aired on 2 February 2011 during the commercial break for Emmerdale. The advertisement shows Sainsbury's staff and Jamie Oliver dressed in costumes and red noses in order to promote the fundraising event (Sainsbury's, 2015b). In 2013, Sainsbury's produced a 10 seconds TV advertisement promoting the red noses sale in the Sainsbury's stores (Sainsbury's, 2015e). The TV advertisement for Red Nose Day 2015 presents the nine different red noses which were on sale in the Sainsbury's stores (Sainsbury's, 2015e). Information on other TV advertisements promoting for example the Sport Relief campaign is not available online.

Method

This qualitative study was of an exploratory nature, and used an online questionnaire. The research period was from 16th June 2015 until 16th July 2015. The questionnaire had 10 questions in total and consisted of two parts, i.e. the first part with general questions on purchase habits, demographic characteristics and knowledge of corporate-NGO partnerships, and the second part consisted of open questions asking respondents to express their opinion on corporate-NGO partnerships. In total, 40 UK residents participated in the research. The participants were recruited via personal contacts and social media connections of both authors of the paper using a snowball method. The research was granted ethical approval by University's Local Research Ethics Coordinator (LREC).

Majority of respondents were in the age group 18-35, while the other participants were between 35-65 years old. In terms of gender, majority of respondents were males.

The responses to the open questions were analysed using the thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis can be defined as “a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalties, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles” (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926). However, thematic analysis is not bound to one specific theory but can be applied within different research methods (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is because thematic analysis is a sense making approach with the ability to reduce large data sets. Coding is used as basic analytical tool in order to identify recurrent themes or topics which are labelled accordingly. In addition, thematic analysis allows systematically reducing the data set without losing important information and findings and as a method is mostly aimed towards capturing trends which allow further research rather than creating new theories. Since our sample was small and we were thus unable to offer generalised conclusions, thematic analysis was deemed as the best method for capturing views of the supermarket communication, and these findings can then inform future research on a larger sample.

During the thematic analysis, a step-by-step guide presented by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed. In general, these steps were taken: the dataset was read several times before content irrelevant for the analysis was removed. Initial codes were generalised in order to organise the dataset into groups. After this, themes were developed from the codes and the relevant data was linked to the theme. It was then checked to see whether a theme really covered all the codes it is linked to and changes were made accordingly (Rizk *et al.*, 2009).¹

The main research question for this study was:

- a) What are the keys for successful partnership communication?
- b) Why society positively responds to one partnership and negatively to another when both companies have CSR policies?

Using the case of Sainsbury's partnership with Comic Relief, this paper explores how the collaboration is perceived by the members of British society, which communication channel contributed towards visibility of partnership the most, and what type of customers are aware of the partnership.

Findings

The respondents were asked to identify all supermarkets where they carried out shopping. They predominantly chose the four biggest supermarkets, the so-called *Big 4*, i.e. Tesco (16 participants), Sainsbury's (26 participants), Asda (9 participants), Morrisons (23 participants). New winners of the market share, Lidl and Aldi were selected by eight of respondents (Aldi) and seven (Lidl).

When it comes to Sainsbury's, the majority of respondents stated they shopped there once a week (9 respondents), and then several times per week (8 respondents), and one participant stated they shopped at Sainsbury's every day, i.e. 18 participants can be considered as regular Sainsbury's customers. The rest of the sample either visited Sainsbury's stores at least once a month (6 respondents), or several times per month (6 respondents). This question also functioned as a filter question, leading only people who shop at Sainsbury's to the next question

¹ Due to the word count, we cannot present coding process. However, full tables explaining the coding process are available upon request.

which asked why they shopped there. The results reveal that the majority of customers who visit Sainsbury's, do so because it is close to their home, or to do top-up shopping.

When it comes to actual views on cross sector partnerships and knowledge of these partnerships, the results reveal misunderstanding of the issue, and the lack of knowledge about it. Respondents were asked whether they found cross-sector partnerships appropriate or not. Overall, it can be said that the majority of consumers evaluate such collaborations as positive (i.e. 20 respondents evaluated partnerships with value 5 or "strongly agree", while six respondents evaluated it with value 4, or mostly agree). However, at the same time, more than half of the respondents (28) were not able to name any collaboration between business and NGO but some have heard of Sainsbury's partnership with Comic Relief (19 participants). This information also underlines the lack of awareness and interest in cross-sector partnerships as 18 participants stated they do not know whether Sainsbury's supports charities or not, while three participants incorrectly answering that Sainsbury's does not support any charity.

When it comes to the partnership with Comic Relief, 21 respondent stated they did not hear about the partnership while 19 stated they were aware of the partnership. This number almost entirely corresponds with the number of customers who relatively regularly shop in Sainsbury's, i.e. 18 respondents stated they shop at Sainsbury's on a regular basis, as stated above whereas 19 respondents report awareness of Sainsbury's partnerships. The respondents stating they knew about this collaboration were asked where they heard about it. According to their responses, 17 respondents stated they became aware of the partnerships in the supermarket itself.

Thematic Analysis

The second half of the questionnaire was dedicated to Sainsbury's partnership with Comic Relief and Corporate-NGO partnerships in general. The interviewees were asked whether they had heard of Sainsbury's partnership with Comic Relief, and if so, where. After that, they were asked to describe what they knew about the partnership. In the following question, they were asked about their opinion on the use of partnerships. Finally, the participants were asked if they could name any partnership between any charity and NGO and describe it.

The responses to the open questions were read several times, and the initial codes were then applied to the collected data. The codes represent interesting features of the responses and were organised into groups according to their meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After completing the list with all codes, which have been identified in the data set, themes were generated. This step focused on the broader level of themes and linked different codes to overall themes. The relationship between codes was considered in order to generate the themes and possible sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

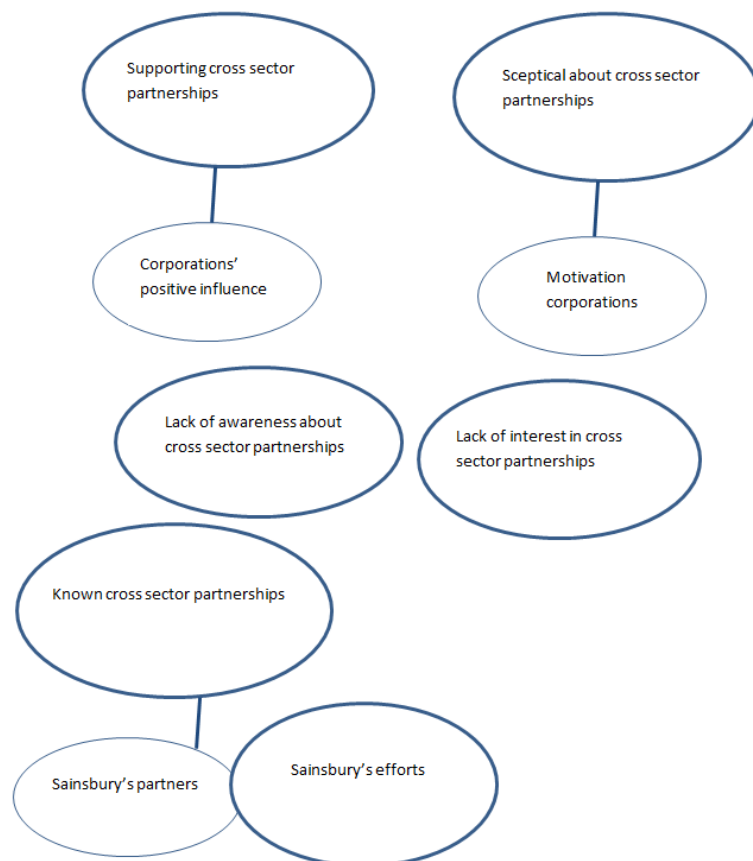
Overall, seven themes were generated: 1. "Known cross sector partnerships" plus the sub-theme "Sainsbury's partner", 2. "Sceptical about cross sector partnerships" plus the sub-theme "Motivation corporations", 3. "Lack of awareness about cross sector partnerships", 4. "Lack of interest in cross sector partnerships", 5. "Supporting cross sector partnerships" plus the sub-theme "Corporations' positive influence", 6. "Sainsbury's efforts" and 7. "Miscellaneous".

While coding the data, it appeared that some respondents were very supportive of cross-sector partnerships, while others took a more sceptical position. Moreover, there seems to be a lack of interest and awareness in the field of Corporate-NGO Partnerships.

Two of the generated themes were linked to the questions asked in the questionnaire. For instance, one question asked to name cross-sector partnerships. These replies represent single codes and are collated in the theme “Known cross sector partnerships”. The theme was further broken down by generating the sub-theme “Sainsbury’s partners”, which represents another question on the questionnaire.

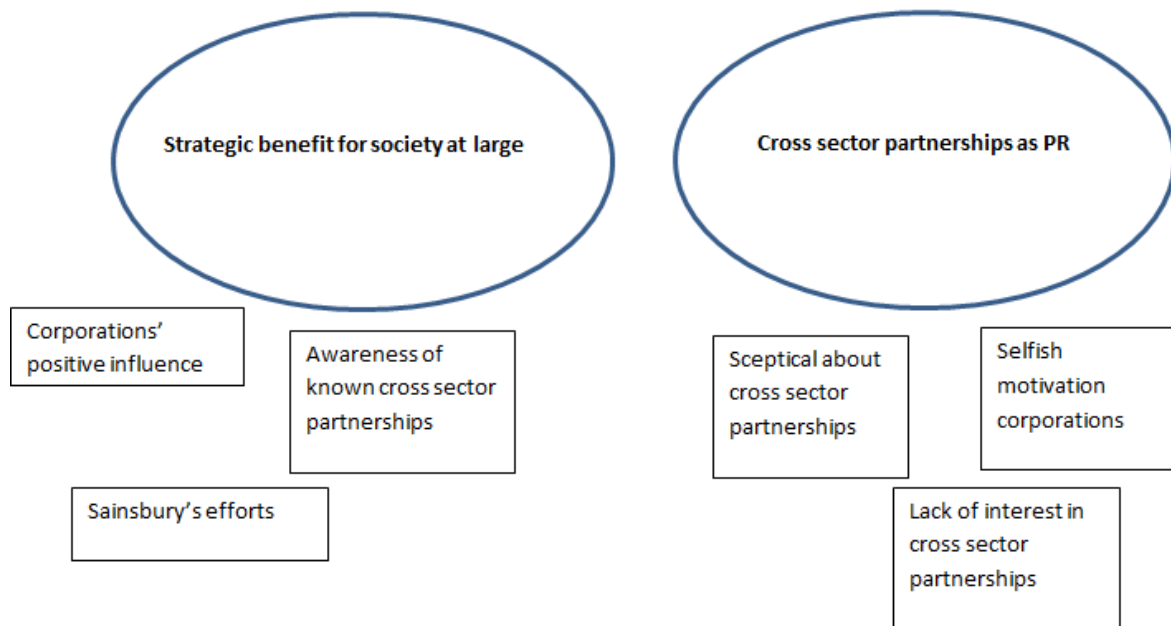
The participants, who knew about Sainsbury’s partnership with Comic Relief were asked to explain what they knew about it. Most of these replies were collected in the theme “Sainsbury’s efforts”, because they showed mainly specific tools Sainsbury’s uses to promote and communicate the partnership. Moreover, the theme “Miscellaneous” gathers all codes which cannot be linked to a specific theme. However, these codes will not be considered any further as they discuss subjects which are not relevant for this paper. Figure 2 outlines the thematic map of this analysis.

Figure 2. Initial Thematic Map



Following the thematic analysis guide from Braun and Clarke (2006), and looking at the thematic analysis of Braun and Wilkinson (2003), two main themes were identified in order to reduce the data set further. While reviewing the six initial themes, it was possible re-organise the findings, which can be seen in the final thematic map:

Figure 3. Final Thematic Map



In general, two main contradictory themes were identified, i.e. some participants stated their support for cross-sector partnerships and highlighted the positive influence a corporation can have on an NGO and society at large, while the others labelled cross-sector partnerships as nothing but PR and questioned the motivation for such partnerships. The former identified theme of “Supporting cross-sector partnerships” is renamed into “Strategic benefit for society at large” because while respondents support cross-sector partnership, they still hold a pragmatic view on them. Furthermore, the theme “Cross-sector partnerships as PR” becomes one of the main themes and it derives from the theme “Sceptical about cross-sector partnerships”, which is considered to be a sub-theme. This reinforces the possible selfish reasons to partner on the corporations’ side, which seem to be the reason why some respondents are sceptical towards such partnerships.

Main Theme 1: Strategic benefit for society at large

This theme relates to the overall approval of Corporation-NGO Partnerships. Respondents said giving back to the society and donating to charities is important, and considered to be positive. NGOs need funding in order to support good causes, which can be provided by private business. Especially the positive impact a corporation can have regarding raising awareness of a good cause or increasing funding has been mentioned throughout the collected data. Moreover, businesses can prove their commitment to be good citizens when partnering with NGOs. In general, it seems that the majority of respondents support cross-sector partnerships, or at least does not mind such collaborations. One participant summarised this position by saying:

“I think it is good for the charity and generates a big part of the funds for the charity. I do not really care about the motivation of the businesses [...]”.

Although some participants said they were sceptical towards Corporate-NGO Partnerships, the overall agreement among participants was that such partnerships supported society at large which was the most important feature:

“[a]ny kind of donation to charities is a good thing. It doesn't matter who donates the money, they end up going to a good cause, even if there are hidden agendas for private businesses to donate”.

As mentioned above, recent research on CSR policies in British supermarkets found out that customers knew about the possible advantages for the corporation when partnering with a charity, however, most shoppers still preferred these supermarket to others which are not involved in CSR at all (Lauritsen and Perks, 2015). This analysis supports these findings, because informed shoppers approve CSR activities:

“If a successful business has the funds and has already attracted a base of investors/custom, then this helps the charity gain awareness”.

Nevertheless, it seems that Sainsbury's customers approve their cross-sector collaborations because they had already chosen to support the business, when they decided to shop there. As one participant, who shops at Sainsbury's, stated:

“[b]usiness the size of Sainsbury have the resources to make a meaningful difference to the money a given charity can raise”.

It could be argued that customers try to justify their decision to shop at Sainsbury's, and that they do not express concern over motifs for donating to charities so long as the money goes to a good cause.

Moreover, it is essential to note that most customers know about Sainsbury's partnership with Comic Relief through in-store promotions. This suggests that non-customers of Sainsbury's are highly unlikely to know about their CSR activities. Consequently, they are also unlikely to decide to start shopping at Sainsbury's even if they agree with Sainsbury's CSR activities.

Nonetheless, the widespread pragmatic view of Sainsbury's customers needs to be considered. Although, respondents think cross-sector partnerships are appropriate and giving back is important, it seems that they understand such collaborations as a strategic benefit for society at large. They tolerate Corporate-NGO Partnerships because they can raise awareness and funds for good causes, however, the quotes above also show that consumers do not necessarily believe corporations partner with NGOs only due to moral obligations. However, if looking overall, it can be argued that consumers in general accept cross sector partnerships because society can benefit from them, but not because they automatically believe in the good intentions of corporations.

Main Theme 2: Cross Sector Partnerships as PR

On the other hand, some respondents outlined their sceptical position towards cross-sector partnerships within the open questions of the questionnaire. The motivation for such partnerships is thought to be for the corporation's own advantage only. It was said that the cross- sector partnerships seem to be inappropriate in general, in particular if the corporation influence remains unclear or the NGO is dominated by business interests.

The motivation of corporations to collaborate with NGOs was questioned and it was assumed that corporations focused on their own reputation and partner for PR reasons, which was also proved by past research (Pedersen *et al.*, 2013 and C&E Corporate-NGO Partnerships Barometer, 2014). However, this was considered to be one of the critical aspects by the participants. One participant questioned the corporation's motivation in particular and assumed that businesses only partnered with charities due to profit-making reasons:

“I'm slightly uncomfortable with it because private business do it to increase their own profit rather than for any moral obligation”

Additionally, sceptical consumers stated that corporations collaborate with charities to improve their own reputation and image but not necessarily due to moral considerations, which can also be seen in the quote above. Focussing on the corporate reputation aspect, one respondent, for instance, said:

“Big corporates are in their current "big" position mainly because of the support so giving back to communities enhances their good reputation and association between customer and the brand”.

Furthermore, the whole strategic PR background of such partnerships is evaluated critically:

“It's just PR for them. The state should really be doing it.”

The organisations indeed try to differentiate themselves from their competitors in order to be perceived positively by their stakeholders (Illia and Balmer, 2012; Melo and Garrido, 2012), and Corporate-NGO Partnerships are considered to be a possible driver of a beneficial perception. However, the collected data also shows that there are always critical stakeholders.

Due to the rise of the internet, stakeholders are better informed which makes it more likely to attract critical attention. CSR activities are one way to please the growing expectations of stakeholders, however, a suitable communication channels needs to be decided on (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009; Tata and Prasad, 2014). This is also underlined in the following statement by a participant:

“[...] however, should be a meaningful cooperation and not be done only for green washing reasons / out of image reasons.”

Finally, it can be argued that the lack of interest in cross-sector partnerships derives from the possible immunity of consumers towards corporate campaigns. Over the last decades, consumers have become used to different kinds of promotions, advertisement and communication campaigns, therefore, only innovative and unique communications are actively perceived (Cornelissen, 2014).

Overall, the Sainsbury's - Comic Relief partnership was known by the customers, but respondents found it hard to explain the partnership in detail. Replies such as “[f]ootball (somehow... cant think how!)”, “I don't know which charity, just that they usually support one” and “Sainsbury Family stuff” were common when asked what is known about the collaboration. On the one hand, this shows the need of increased communication efforts and more information about the partnership should be provided. On the other hand, this lack of knowledge provides the possibility to build a positive perception of the partnership in the future.

The findings from this study suggest that consumers understand the strategic purpose of partnering with NGOs, but they do not always approve such behaviour. This is also supported by other research findings (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013, Pérez, 2014 and Melo and Garrido, 2012), however, it is important that the corporation is transparent on their motivation as dishonest communication would lead to even more sceptical attention (Kim, 2014 and Morsing and Schultz, 2006).

Conclusion

Overall, Sainsbury's clearly includes the promotion of their partnership with Comic Relief as part of their corporate communication processes. Moreover, the collaboration is in line with the

overall brand identity and can be considered as part of the corporate mission, which is centred on CSR issues. Customers recognise this policy and evaluate the cross-sector partnership with Comic Relief positively. Furthermore, the different staff engagement events to support Comic Relief (Sainsbury's, 2015a) show that Sainsbury's also makes use of a two-way communication approach by involving internal stakeholders. Although there are sceptical perceptions of such partnerships, Sainsbury's has been able to gain legitimacy of their internal publics, with which they have fulfilled a purpose of achieving legitimacy as argued by Golob and Bartlett (2007).

However, according to the C&E Corporate-NGO Partnerships Barometer 2014, the partnership between Sainsbury's and Comic Relief is not highly admired, and customers are generally sceptical of supermarket's intentions. Arguably, this is the case because the collaboration is only well-known among Sainsbury's customers due to store promotions, while non-customers are not likely to know about it. If we adopt a view that corporate-NGO partnerships are good not just for corporations but also for charities and society at large, then this shows the need to target a broader public and focus more on communication channels outside the store so that corporations that do support charities receive more commendation and support from customers. This would particularly be the case if corporations would communicate their corporate vision in symmetry with NGOs values as suggested by Samii, Vam Wassemhove and Bhattacharya (2002), with which they would demonstrate a genuine commitment towards helping societies. However, for this to happen NGOs also need to be proactive and engaged with businesses they partner with, as suggested by Arenas, Lozano and Albareda (2009).

So far, Sainsbury's has linked their promotion of the partnership to specific events such as the Red Nose Day or Sport Relief and it can be argued that a continuous information flow is needed in order to increase the visibility of partnerships. In addition, the involved organisations need to communicate the reasons of the partnership transparently and honestly, in order to reduce sceptical perception. However, communication of Sainsbury's should not be centred only on promotions and collaborations with NGO sector, but Sainsbury's should include partnerships with NGOs in their mission and communicate that the Sainsbury's brand as such is based on helping society by supporting charities.

This study as well as recent research on CSR communication among British supermarkets has shown that consumers are aware of the possible strategic motivation to partner with an NGO (Lauritsen and Perks, 2015). Even though it is hard to determine the reasons why a corporation partners with an NGO, the majority of consumers prefer organisations committed to CSR policies. This has also been proved in the presented data set; the majority of participants find cross sector partnerships appropriate, although one of the identified main themes is "Cross sector partnerships as PR", which discusses the sceptical perception of such collaborations. This is in line with past research showing a history of PR's bad perception (Bowen, 2011) that influences all corporate attempts to work not just for profit but also for betterment of societies, and this includes corporations that have not been included in corporate misconduct scandals but are still affected by it.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Subjectivity represents a constant limitation of research. The researcher needs to be as objective as possible, however, complete objectivity cannot be guaranteed. Critics of qualitative research methods argue that qualitative analysis and its findings are too subjective as they rely on the researcher's interpretation (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

Because of the response rate, some age groups are over-represented. This may be due to the personal circle, which served as one recruitment base since it is very difficult to attract larger response from the society. Moreover, most participants have an academic degree, which is not representative of the population. Nevertheless, the sample is considered to provide solid insights in the perception of cross sector partnerships, which is also supported by other recent research findings discussed in the paper.

Further research could explore the ways people are being informed about cross-sector partnerships using a larger sample to draw general conclusions. That research would help in explaining how corporations communicate their cross-sector partnerships as well as what expectations consumers have from these partnerships. In addition, further research should look at benefits stakeholders may gain from specific CSR initiatives would help explain what makes partnership communication successful and these findings would then be used to further advise both corporations and NGOs on how to form and communicate partnerships. Nevertheless, future research should look whether NGOs are legitimate cross sector partners in all cases, given that not all NGOs engage sufficiently with their corporate partners.

Finally, future research should look at the nature of partnerships further to establish whether the partnerships are substantive and integrative (Jamali and Keshishian, 2009), and whether the lack of these characteristics is affecting perceptions of partnership among consumers in the UK.

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