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Developing in-store brand strategies and relational expression through sales promotions

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Abstract

This paper explores in-store sales promotion as a tool for manufacturers in developing in-store relationships with consumers. Our empirical application in the ice cream category examines the effects of sales promotions (nonmonetary vs. monetary) on perceived brand expression. The results show that non-monetary promotions generate more relational benefits than price-based promotions. They appear to be a significant lever in developing relationships with consumers within the supermarket retail channel, where brands have no formal control over their distribution. Such sales promotions convey brand willingness to develop relationships during in-store encounters. This research identifies sales promotion programs as tools for influencing the consumer–brand relationship within the supermarket retail context.

Keywords: Sales promotions, Relational orientation, Brand expression, Consumer–brand relationship

1. Introduction

Supermarkets and hypermarkets are large self-service stores in which thousands of competing branded products are displayed to consumers. Competition is tough and the stakes are particularly high for manufacturers as the channel is very dense with a small number of retailers controlling most of the market.¹ To stand out from rivals, brands must find ways to add value to their programs. Sales promotions are efficient tools for increasing sales, but as they are often based on price they can be considered detrimental to brand image (Buil et al., 2011; Yi and Yoo, 2011). Relational approaches have been suggested as bringing emotional and psychological value to brands. However mass retail outlets, which are standardized environments, allow limited possibilities in developing relational strategies. In stores, brand manufacturers have no direct contact with their consumers, except through the products themselves and their promotional offers. Consequently, implementing programs emphasizing relational benefits remains a challenge (Dewsnap and Hart, 2004; Gruen and Shah, 2000). This research investigates how manufacturer brands can use sales promotions to create informal control over the in-store purchase experience and develop customer-oriented offers.

Previous research has shown that within stores, brands can keep a degree of control over consumer relationships through specific marketing tactics, including merchandising, category management, trade marketing and sales promotions (Aurier and Séré de Lanauze, 2011; Dewsnap and Hart, 2004). When managing their strategies with

retailers, brands may send relational signals to indicate to consumers that the brand is making efforts to provide further benefits. In this regard, sales promotion is a relevant vehicle for direct messages targeting consumers. We posit that under some conditions, it helps consumers to perceive relational efforts and benefits provided by the brand. As such, sales promotions can be an interesting lever for developing consumer perceptions of in-store brand expression, which “covers the different nonproduct elements of the brand marketing expression addressed to the consumer during the in-store encounter” (Aurier and Séré de Lanauze, 2011, pp. 2–3). Sales promotion is central in trade marketing programs, a core lever in negotiations with retail chains, and a large part of brands’ marketing budgets (Blattberg et al., 1995; Bogomolova et al., 2015). However, sales promotion comes in many forms. Most mechanisms are based on price reductions and price-based value creation. These have been repeatedly questioned in terms of their effects on brand image and consumer perceptions (Buil et al., 2011). Other promotional levers can be considered, specifically in the case of hedonic products that evoke a more emotional shopping focus, which may affect the decision process (Babin et al., 1994; Bell et al., 1991; Lam and Mukherjee, 2005). These levers, such as samplings or contests, can have a positive influence on consumer attitudes toward the brand (Baxendale et al., 2015) and contribute positively to the in-store experience (Grewal et al., 2009; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

This paper examines under what conditions sales promotion contributes to consumer–brand relationships and creates relational benefits which in turn have a positive impact on brand expression and consumer loyalty. We compare the impacts of four types of sales promotion programs on consumer perceptions of brand expression: price reductions, samplings, games and lotteries. In an experiment involving four brands and 812 consumers of a hedonic category (ice cream), we show that non-monetary sales promotions (in-store samplings, in-store games, in-store lotteries based on a game) have a stronger positive impact on brand expression as compared to monetary sales promotions (in-store coupons). The results are discussed and point to managerial implications proposing ways to convey value to manufacturer brands in the environment of mass retail premises.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Previous research has mostly studied sales promotion from the transactional perspective, focusing on its impact on sales and contrasting short- and long-term effects (Ailawadi et al., 2006; Blattberg and Neslin, 1989; Delvecchio et al., 2006). Price-based promotion (e.g., discounts, coupons) is considered to increase store traffic, accelerate sales and induce brand switching. Being based on short-term purchase incentives, it forms financial bonds with consumers (Berry, 1995) that are easy to imitate. It either have no impact, or even a negative impact on long-term relationships and a number of other negative consequences, such as profit erosion, declining quality perceptions, and decreased brand equity (Ailawadi et al., 2006; Darke and Chung, 2005; Mela et al., 1997; Sriram and Kalwani, 2007). Since 1994, the Promotion Marketing Association of America, Inc. has called for fewer price-related actions (Chandon et al., 2000). In response, retailers are looking for alternative programs (e.g., gifts with purchase, sweepstakes, in-store events) to avoid these negative outcomes. However, academic research regarding these programs is still scarce (Ailawadi et al., 2009).

2.1. In-store brand expression through sales promotions

Consumer brand experiences are fostered by a broad variety of stimuli such as product design, brand identity, packaging, marketing communications, advertisements, and retail purchase experiences, all of which can have a powerful impact on brand choices (Brakus et al., 2009; Ramaneshan and Stein, 2014). In turn, purchase experiences influence consumer–brand relationships (Ramaneshan and Stein, 2014). Manufacturers therefore need to send clear signals about their efforts, although generally they rely on heavy unobservable relational investments (De Wulf et al., 2001). Signaling theory states that perceived reciprocity is stimulated by the production of signals informing the other party about the partner’s unobservable intentions (Boulding and Kirmani, 1993). From this perspective, actions implemented by brands are signals that contribute to relationship building (Aaker et al., 2004).

Among the various marketing practices available for developing in-store brand expression, non-monetary sales promotion appears suitable in a self-service context that involves a physical interaction between consumers and brands in the store environment. Sales promotions have been shown to stimulate consumer cognitive and affective activity, brand-related positive feelings (Raghubir et al., 2004), brand preferences (Schultz and Block, 2014), perceived value and purchase intentions (Feinberg et al., 2002). They also enhance consumer attitudes and loyalty to the brand (Palazón-Vidal and Delgado-Ballester, 2005). Most of these actions rely on interactivity and different forms of communication with consumers. Gedenk and Neslin (1999) show that non-monetary as compared with price-based promotion, although having a lower immediate effect on brand choice and sales acceleration, has more favourable effects on lasting impressions about the purchase. It appears as signals that can be used in store.

2.2. Sales promotion benefits and the different formats of in-store brand expression

Resulting from the contact and use of the promotional offer, sales promotion generates experiences that bring some perceived value to consumers. This includes functional and hedonic benefits like convenience, exploration, entertainment, and self-expression (Chandon et al., 2000). The effectiveness of these actions results from a congruence between the targeted benefits and the type of product, utilitarian or hedonic (Babin et al., 1994). Indeed, utilitarian products are expected to be primarily evaluated based on their quality/price ratio. At the same time, for more hedonic products, for which the purchase and consumption experience involves a more relational experience, non-monetary sales promotions could cover a wider range of perceived benefits. Indeed, hedonic products are defined as “ones whose consumption is primarily characterized by an affective and sensory experience of aesthetic or sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun” (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000, p. 61). As a consequence, and especially in the case of products including hedonic dimensions, we hypothesized that price reductions, samplings, games and lotteries activate different types of perceived benefits (Okada, 2005). Monetary sales promotions are primarily evaluated on the basis of their functional benefits or, in other words, price reductions mainly imply monetary efficiency, thus functional benefits compared to other non-monetary forms of in-store sales promotions.

H1. Consumers exposed to a price reduction perceive more functional benefits compared with those exposed to other sales promotion formats.

Consumers exposed to non-monetary as well as monetary in-store promotions tend to seek exploration, entertainment and value expression benefits (Reid et al., 2015). Hedonic benefits are linked to the feeling of being a smart shopper (Schindler, 1989) and rely on a mechanism of auto-attribution of the responsibility of promotional benefit. Among the various non-monetary promotional tools, samplings, lotteries and games are common and efficient ways to help manufacturer brands be active in stores. In-store samplings and demonstrations are a good way to liven up the point of purchase. Despite their high costs, they are widely used to encourage consumers to test products and are a powerful instrument in increasing sales (Nordfält and Lange, 2013). As samplings allow consumers to try new products and brands, they also present high hedonic benefits. Games trigger different effects, but they too provide positive experiences (Ward and Hill, 1991). Games, lotteries and sweepstakes all imply co-production, participation, shared experience and values with the brand. As lotteries and gambled price discounts involve various emotions such as uncertainty, surprise and opportunities for gain, they are stimulating and provide positive outcomes (Alavi et al., 2015). An appreciation for non-monetary promotions relates to the enjoyment of gambling and other hedonic outcomes (Reid et al., 2015). Receiving a gift can as well be a very rewarding experience, even if disappointment is a risk when the consumer does not obtain the expected reward. Games and lotteries also trigger emotions, excitement and hedonic benefits. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2. Consumers exposed to a sampling, a game or a lottery perceive more hedonic benefits compared with those exposed to a price reduction.

The hedonic and symbolic benefits of sales promotions such as relational benefits, relate to intrinsic stimulation, fun and self-esteem, and signal closeness and proximity with the brand (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Relational benefits include a special status, distinction, better treatment values, sharing and group belonging (Mimouni-Chaabane and Volle, 2010). The playful aspect of actions also reinforces the affective dimension of a relationship. Indeed, in the case of games, sweepstakes and loyalty programs, it has been shown that hedonic benefits are linked to emotional benefits and correspond to motivations associated with giving or receiving pleasure as well as entertainment (Mimouni-Chaabane and Volle, 2010). Non-monetary promotions can be considered fun and pleasant, but also relational (Carpenter and Moore, 2008).

H3. Consumers exposed to a sampling, a game or a lottery, perceive more relational benefits compared with those exposed to a price reduction.

2.3. Brand expression and loyalty

The concept of in-store brand expression is defined as “the nonproduct-based ways through which a brand physically interacts with its consumers while on the distributor's premises” (Aurier and Séré de Lanauze, 2011, p.4). It depends on the willingness and capacity of the brand to develop a relationship with the consumer, and on the perception by the consumer of this orientation. Brand expression is comprised of three components: individualization, reciprocity and a longterm perspective. Individualization refers to the ability of the brand to view its consumers as unique and not as a market segment or any other collective abstract entity. Reciprocity refers to its ability to promote a two-sided exchange of information and dialog with consumers. A longterm perspective is the consumer assumption about the brand's understanding of the relationship.

When a promotion is not directly linked to purchase but is based on a non-price consumer–brand interaction, then its relational content is clearer to the consumer (Honea and Dahl, 2005). The perceived relational benefits reinforce the perception that the brand is making efforts to benefit the consumers. Consumers rely on future benefits stemming from the relationship (Lemon et al., 2002). Non-monetary sales promotions can be used to create social links between consumers and brands (Cotton and Babb, 1978) and this contributes positively to brand equity (Buil et al., 2011). Games, for instance, are a way to share values with consumers in a way that is more closely attributed to the brand than to product purchase and to the store. We hypothesize that samplings, games and lotteries, as they generate more hedonic and relational benefits, will contribute more to brand expression as compared to monetary sales promotions. Conversely, the monetary incentive of coupons orients customers toward a short-term transactional perspective (Edvardsson, 2005; Payne, 1994).

H4. Consumers exposed to a sampling, a game or a lottery perceive higher in-store brand expression compared with those exposed to a price reduction.

Physical encounters between consumers and brands are an opportunity to create connections and shared experiences (Chattopadhyay and Laborie, 2005). A relationship can exist only insofar as consumers perceive its existence (Barnes, 1994). Compared to in-store monetary sales promotions, in-store non-monetary sales promotions including interactivity and consumer participation can have stronger effects on the brand's ability to express its relational orientation. This can occur directly and indirectly via the benefits generated by the action. Shortterm price opportunities are not associated with specific brand personality traits. We hypothesize that functional benefits do not contribute to brand expression, unlike hedonic and relational benefits.

H5. Functional benefits do not influence brand expression.

H6. Hedonic benefits positively influence brand expression.

H7. Relational benefits positively influence brand expression.

Loyalty, as part of brand equity and as a consequence of consumer–brand relationships, is created through the combination of interactions between the brand and the consumer (Blackston, 2000; De Wulf et al., 2003). The feeling that brands invest and are truly willing to improve consumer relationships has a positive effect on loyalty (Palmatier et al., 2009; Vesel and Zabkar, 2010). The consumer perception of a relational orientation affects recognition of the brand as an entity able to develop a long-term relationship, despite the asymmetry between the parties. Consumers are in demand of immaterial benefits relating to pleasure and emotions (Egan, 2000). Consumer awareness and sensitivity to brand expression is key to the implementation of a relational strategy (Aurier and Séré de Lanauze, 2012). Brand-related stimuli such as design, communications and environments together contribute to the formation of a brand expression, which directly influences brand loyalty (Iglesias et al., 2011).

H8. Brand expression positively influences loyalty.

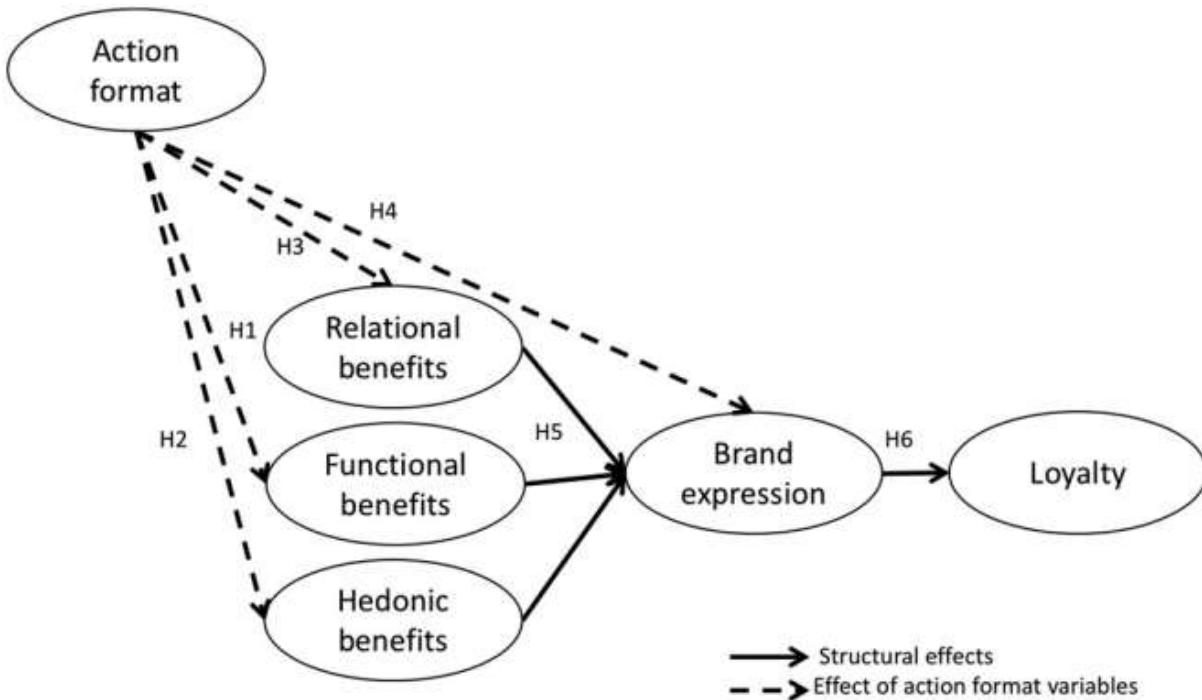


Fig. 1. Model of hypotheses.

Fig. 1 presents the model that underlies our hypotheses. Hypotheses H1–H4 which relate to the direct impacts of the format of in-store actions are at the core of our research and will be tested on the bases of one-way ANCOVAs. H5–H8, which involve indirect and direct causal links between several constructs, will be tested on the bases of a global structural equation model (SEM).

3. Methodology

3.1. Product category

Our study was conducted through an online questionnaire addressed to consumers of a fast-moving, packaged-goods category: ice cream. In the supermarket context, ice cream encompasses strong brands with high levels of awareness. Four brands with high distribution coverage and differentiated images were selected: Carte d'Or, Ben & Jerry's, Haagen Dazs and La Laitière. Carte d'Or is the leader on the market with 31.5% of market shares.² It is followed by Haagen Dazs (16.3%), targeting a super premium segment, and La Laitière (13.3%), with a more traditional image. Ben & Jerry's (5%) is considered as a fun brand with a young target, on the premium segment. All are typical examples of manufacturer brands attempting to gain control over their distribution through various types of sales promotions and category management strategies.

3.2. Experimental design and stimuli

The manipulated factor is the format of in-store actions, with four different types of sales promotions: a 20% price reduction coupon, an in-store sampling, an in-store game, and an in-store lottery based on the game. The price reduction condition took the form of a coupon distributed in the store. It had a direct impact on price and was directly linked to purchases. Conversely, the game, lottery and sampling conditions were developed independently of purchases. The sampling condition consisted of a small sample of ice cream. The game condition consisted of a situation where consumers had to vote for a future flavour that the brand could offer in its line. The lottery condition added the chance of winning a trip by adding a sweepstake to the game.

We used an inter-subject design, with every respondent being exposed to a single condition. Participants first indicated the brand they most frequently shop for and consume, following the recommendation of Leuthesser et al. (1995) for analysing brands well known to consumers. Because respondents were actual consumers of this brand, they had previously developed a specific relationship to this brand. In order to not confound the effects of the manipulated factors with this preexisting relationship we have measured attitude toward the brand. Indeed, differences in attitude toward the brand may explain observed differences in perceived brand expression and loyalty. Attitude was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Spears and Singh (2004). This measure, after summation of its items, will be introduced as a covariant in the ANCOVAs.

Then, the first screen displayed a situation where the consumer was told that he or she had entered the ice cream aisle of a store, while the second screen detailed the action (see Appendix A). Descriptions of the sales promotions followed actual practices in the category. Below we present the four stimuli (redacted as for Ben & Jerry's):

- Behind a Ben & Jerry's stand, a machine offers you the possibility of printing a coupon to receive 20% off during checkout.
- Behind a Ben & Jerry's stand, a machine offers you the possibility of serving yourself a small cup of ice cream.
- Behind a Ben & Jerry's stand, a machine offers you the possibility of playing a game that consists of voting for the brand's future ice cream flavour.
- Behind a Ben & Jerry's stand, a machine offers you the possibility of playing a game that consists of voting for the brand's future ice cream flavour and, in addition, trying to win a VIP trip to Iceland.

After exposure to the manipulated stimuli, perceived benefits and relational variables were measured. Based on previous works on measures of affective responses to promotions (Gwinner et al., 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Honea and Dahl, 2005; Mimouni-Chaabane and Volle, 2010), we adapted items measuring relational benefits. Our measurement scales are presented in Appendix B.

3.3. Administration of the questionnaire and pre-test

Our sample is made of French consumers of the four brands who regularly shop at the supermarket. They were recruited online through the dissemination of the link to ice cream consumer forums, weblogs, brand webpages, and various social media. Data were collected using an online self-administered questionnaire.

After deleting 38 questionnaires not completed properly – based on the criteria of completion time, IP address, completeness and recurrence of answers – a pre-test assessed the validity and reliability of the scales. We used confirmatory factor analysis to assess convergent and discriminant validity and to confirm the dimensionality of the constructs (maximum likelihood estimations with AMOS 23).

Table 1 shows that all reliability indices are all above the 0.7 recommended cut-off (Cronbach's alpha and Joreskog's rho). All constructs are reliable. Convergent validity is fulfilled as average variance extracted (AVE) are greater than 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was assessed following Fornell and Larcker (1981) by comparing AVE values to squared correlations between the constructs and this was found satisfactory.

Table 1. Dimensionality, reliability and validity of scales.

Variables	Final no. of items	% of explained variance	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Joreskog's rho	Mean	Standard deviation
Functional benefits	4	84.646%	0.807	0.925	0.926	3.09	1.47
Hedonic benefits	4		0.780	0.905	0.913	4.27	1.49
Relational benefits	4		0.727	0.908	0.913	2.76	1.37
Brand expression	7	70.728%	0.653	0.931	0.929	3.58	0.96
Attitude	4	86.104%	0.796	0.945	0.940	5.17	1.13

Table 2.1 ANCOVA results.

	F	p	M _{coupon}	M _{sampling}	M _{game}	M _{lottery}
Functional benefits	70.992	0.000	4.169	3.005	2.565	2.603
Hedonic benefits	46.050	0.000	3.568	4.697	4.483	4.327
Relational benefits	12.720	0.000	2.437	2.852	3.073	2.681
Brand expression	1.475	0.149	3.448	3.537	3.664	3.654

4. Results

4.1. Sample characteristics

From the final sample of 812 recruited individuals (75% women): 203 were exposed to the 20% price reduction coupon, 206 to the sampling, 203 to the in-store game, and 200 to the lottery. Chi2 tests show no significant differences for gender, age, household structure, or occupation between conditions ($p < 0.05$).

4.2. Test of hypotheses

We conducted one-way ANCOVAs with the format of action as a fixed effect explaining the different constructs (H1–H4) and attitude toward the brand as a covariate, as justified above. We consider 5% as a p value limit. For those between 5% and 10% we assumed that the hypotheses were only marginally validated (Tables 2.1, 2.2). Bonferonni post hoc tests allow us to underline the differences between the four cells.

Functional benefits: ANCOVA ($F(3, 355) = 70.99$; $p = 0.00$) shows that there is a significant effect of the type of action on functional benefits, which confirms H1. Bonferonni post hoc tests show that respondents exposed to a coupon ($M = 4.17$) perceived significantly higher functional benefits compared with those exposed to the sampling ($M = 3.01$), a lottery ($M = 2.60$), or a game ($M = 2.57$).

Hedonic benefits: ANCOVA ($F(3, 138) = 26.29$; $p = 0.00$) shows that there is a significant effect of the type of action on hedonic benefits, in conformity with H2. Bonferonni post hoc tests show that respondents exposed to a sampling ($M = 4.70$), a lottery ($M = 4.33$), or a game ($M = 4.48$), perceived significantly more hedonic benefits compared with those exposed to a coupon ($M = 3.57$)

Relational benefits: ANCOVA ($F(3, 38) = 8.06$; $p = 0.00$) shows that there is a significant effect of the type of action on relational benefits, in conformity with H3. Bonferonni post hoc tests show that respondents exposed to a sampling ($M = 2.85$) or a game ($M = 3.07$) perceived more relational benefits compared with those exposed to a coupon ($M = 2.44$). However, those exposed to a lottery ($M = 2.68$) do not perceive significantly more relational benefits than those exposed to a coupon.

Table 2.2 Post Hoc tests

	(I) format of action	(J) format of action	Mean differences (I-J)	Standard error	Significance
Functional benefits	coupon	sampling	1.173*	0.128	0.000
		game	1.640*	0.128	0.000
		lottery	1.601*	0.129	0.000
	sampling	game	0.467*	0.128	0.002
		lottery	0.428*	0.128	0.005
		game	-0.039	0.129	1.000
Hedonic benefits	coupon	sampling	-1.113*	0.131	0.000
		game	-0.850*	0.131	0.000
		lottery	-0.695*	0.132	0.000
	sampling	game	0.263	0.131	0.269
		lottery	0.418*	0.131	0.009
		game	0.155	0.132	1.000
Relational benefits	coupon	sampling	-0.399*	0.124	0.008
		game	-0.574*	0.125	0.000
		lottery	-0.184	0.125	0.851
	sampling	game	-0.175	0.124	0.958
		lottery	0.215	0.125	0.511
		coupon	0.574*	0.125	0.000
Brand expression	coupon	sampling	-0.081	0.090	1.000
		game	-0.181	0.090	0.272
		lottery	-0.172	0.091	0.346
	sampling	game	-0.101	0.090	1.000
		lottery	-0.092	0.090	1.000
		coupon	0.181	0.090	0.272
	monetary action	non-monetary action	-0.144	0.074	0.051

Brand expression: In order to test H4, an ANCOVA was conducted between two groups, one with the monetary action (coupons, $n = 203$) and the other with the grouping of non-monetary actions (sampling, games, lottery, $n = 609$). ANCOVA ($F(1, 809) = 3.82$; $p = 0.05$) shows that the type of in-store action has significant impact on perceived brand expression benefits. H4 is validated.

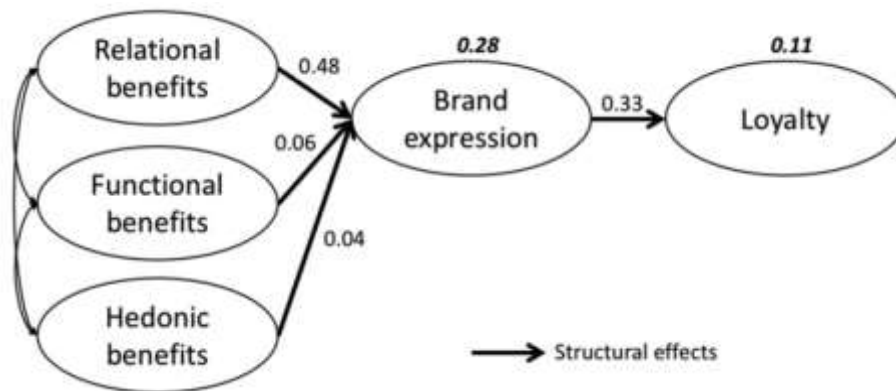


Fig. 2. Measurement model.

We used SEM (ML estimation, Amos 23) to examine the hypothesized relationships among constructs (H5–H8). The fit was analysed based on three types of indexes, absolute, incremental, and parsimonious (Kline, 2010). The overall structural model's fit indexes is satisfactory: χ^2/df : 3.75; root mean square error of approximation RMSEA: 0.06; comparative fit index CFI: 0.96 and the Tucker-Lewis index TLI: 0.95 (Fig. 2).

Based on standardized coefficients, we observe that functional benefits do not significantly influence brand expression, which validates H5, except in the case of Ben & Jerry's. However, there is no significant impact of hedonic benefits on brand expression, and H6 is not validated, except in the case of Ben & Jerry's. Finally, there is a positive significant impact of relational benefits on brand expression ($\beta = 0.48$) and of brand expression on loyalty ($\beta = 0.33$), which conforms to H7 and H8. This is true for all of the four brands. Thus, relational benefits appear as the unique path toward influencing brand expression.

5. Discussion

5.1. Sales promotions benefits

Based on a relational marketing approach, this research contributes to the understanding of how sales promotions affect consumer–brand relationships by analysing their perceived benefits. The validation of H1 and H2 adds to the typology of benefits proposed by Chandon et al. (2000) and reinforces the idea that monetary sales promotions are primarily evaluated on the basis of their functional benefits, whereas non-monetary promotions provide more hedonic benefits, a positive driver of the shopping experience.

By showing that coupons hold few relational benefits (as stated in H3) while samplings and games render the most hedonic and relational benefits, we also demonstrate that in the supermarket context relational benefits can be created independently of purchase (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Relational benefits perceived through exposure to a sales promotion are different from those resulting from loyalty programs because they do not reflect special treatment (Mimouni-Chaabane and Volle, 2010). They result from the acknowledgment that the brand is making an action toward the consumer. This is also consistent with studies about the adaptation of relational benefits to retailing (GilSaura and Ruiz-Molina, 2009) where customers perceiving a high level of social bonds with the retailer developed higher loyalty levels. However, in the case of a lottery, because of the uncertainty of the reward, we observe that risk hinders the impacts on hedonic benefits and relational benefits (Goldsmith and Amir, 2010).

5.2. Sales promotions as signals

The validation of H1–H3 jointly demonstrates that non-monetary sales promotions can impact consumer–brand relationships in the supermarket context. In line with signaling theory (Boulding and Kirmani, 1993), H4 states that non-monetary actions work as signals that the brand produces to inform consumers about its relational intentions. Interactive situations develop communication between brands and consumers, independently of product purchase, as in the case of games and sweepstakes. The negative long-term effects of promotions underlined in the literature (Shapiro, 1992), specifically on brand loyalty, have to be limited to the monetary side of sales promotion programs. According to the phenomenology of consumer–brand bonds (Fournier, 1998), consumer accumulation of experiences with a brand can result in an established consumer–brand relationship. Because these actions can be implemented independently from purchase, they represent a positive experience which can be more easily attributed to the brand. Our study complements research showing that brand relationships can be influenced within supermarkets (Aurier and S  r   de Lanauze, 2011). Non-monetary promotion programs can positively influence perceived brand expression. Consumers can view sales promotions as testimonies of brand behaviour, as they read them through certain relational norms of reciprocity (Valta, 2013). Individuals develop a relational interest, even in the case of basic in-store sales promotions. From the viewpoint of social exchange theory, this means that effective communication – for instance, the timely and accurate information that the firm provides – will satisfy the relational needs of customers.

5.3. Contributing to loyalty through sales promotions

Our results add to the literature showing that financial bonds have no impact on brand relationship quality (Huang et al., 2014). This makes it clear that price-based promotions should be used to trigger purchases, whereas non-monetary promotions can be used to nurture brand relationships. The confirmation of H5 indicates that the functional benefits associated with monetary sales promotion do not contribute to brand expression. But also, hedonic benefits do not impact brand expression (H6 not validated). Relational benefits emanating from non-monetary sales promotions appear as the unique means to contribute to brand expression. Consumers may take part in samplings, games or sweepstakes simply to have fun, or to be entertained (Ward and Hill, 1991), and this contributes positively to their shopping experience. Free gifts and samplings, because the gain is distinct from the act of purchase, also generate relational benefits (Lowe and Barnes, 2012) and they directly impact brand expression (as observed with the validation of H7). Exploring the specific case of Ben & Jerry's, we see that through its different actions, the brand is perceived as trying to build relationship with the consumer in all tested actions. However, results show that, even if a significant relationship with brand expression exists, functional and hedonic benefits have only small impacts on it. Any brand that intends to be close to a young and fun audience should reconsider its in-store presence and find ways to develop relationships with consumers.

Our results on coupons, games and samplings add to previous literature reports advocating sweepstakes or in-store events to avoid the negative outcomes of promotions (Darke and Chung, 2005; Mela et al., 1997). We observe that coupons, which generate more functional benefits, cannot contribute to brand expression because the latter is only impacted by relational benefits. This is not the case for samplings, games and lotteries, which do bring relational benefits, with a positive impact on brand expression and in turn, loyalty. Interestingly, we observe that, in association with a game, lotteries contribute negatively to relational benefits. This is most certainly because together they involve risk, reward evaluation, rationalization, and a low perceived probability of winning. Lotteries' effects would be opposite to those of an unexpected surprise gift, which could be another example of relationoriented sales promotion (Brito and Hammond, 2007).

6. Implications, limitations and future research avenues

Our results provide some useful insights for brand managers and retailers. Sales promotions can be a basis for building relational benefits, which can help to balance a lack of differentiation in ultra-competitive fast-moving goods markets. For brand managers, non-monetary promotions are a way to enhance hedonic and relational benefits without purchases, and a way to develop brand expression in markets where competitive pressure and retailer power are high. For the mass retailers, in search of competitive advantages from their direct competitors and from new forms of e-commerce, they should encourage their suppliers to develop innovative forms of promotions aimed at developing hedonic and relational benefits on their premises. Indeed, because they are contextual, hedonic benefits are certainly more easily associated with the retailer. Lastly, both retailers and manufacturers should derive appropriate benefits from innovative promotional designs, based on gamification, and potentially combining price reductions, coupons and games in a common mechanism. Such a mechanism could cover an extended perimeter including physical and digital tools, channels and media where gamification has proven to be efficient in fostering customer relations and loyalty (Shang and Lin, 2013). From our results, samplings and games emerge as effective levers in developing brand expression, showing a positive impact on brand loyalty. Due to risk aversion, lotteries induce negative feelings, which may make them less effective. Finally, sampling and game-based promotions appear to be an opportunity for small and medium-sized companies with limited communication and social media budgets to build relationships with their consumers.

From a theoretical point of view, our results confirm that nonmonetary sales promotions contribute to brand relationships within the unfavourable supermarket context where brands have few relational levers due to the

absence of formal control over their distribution (Dewsnap and Hart, 2004). We also posit brand actions such as sales promotions as signals that the brand has developed a relational orientation towards consumers (Aurier and Séré de Lanauze, 2011).

Methodologically, our experiment studied actual consumers of ice cream through an acceptable visual immersion environment, prompting them to recall a well-known and recent purchasing experience. Although our stimuli were not real but simulated, we expect that hedonic and relational effects would have been even more intense in a real-market situation.

In practice, brands are able to conduct simultaneous promotions within a product class, which can lower the negative perception of promotions (Kahn and Louie, 1990), but this was not considered in our study. The results of this study should also be broadened to include other promotional actions, such as virtual lots or plus products. In order to better assert external validity, other product categories should also be explored. Working with four different brands leads us to control for brand attitude as a potential confounding variable. Even if the results by brand show some variations in the level of significance of our hypotheses (specifically underlying the special case of Ben & Jerry's), analysis of variance with brand attitude as a covariant are significant. The brand image itself or the congruence between the non-monetary promotion and the brand image could be seen as an intermediary between the perceived benefits and the relational outcomes (brand expression and loyalty), calling for further research. Finally, ice cream, as a food product and a dessert, affirms utilitarian but also strong hedonic dimensions. Replication of the research should include other categories, such as those that are more utilitarian as well as non-food products.

Moreover, the impacts of other variables like consumer relational orientation or product involvement have to be studied. Since promotions are included in the communication strategy of a brand, it would be interesting to test actions having internet or social media phases to analyse their combined effect.

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