Co-branding with Collective Sustainability Schemes – Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Governance

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Abstract

Co-branding involves the combination of two well-known brands. It is used to leverage strong brands. The aim of the article is to discuss the challenges and opportunities of co-branding with a collectively owned trademark using an ecolabel as a communication tool of sustainability. The article focuses only on the alliance of a collectively owned sustainability brand and product or service brand. First, the definitions of co-branding will be discussed. Secondly, the challenges and opportunities of co-branding in the context of sustainable governance will be analyzed. Finally, the role of co-branding for sustainable governance in the future will be discussed.

1. Introduction

Corporations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) create partnerships and use these relationships as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. One way to use them is co-branding. (Poret, 2014). Historically, the attention has focused on product or ingredient co-branding. (Blackett & Boad, 1999). Only a few research works have been found, in which collectively owned ecolabels has been referred as a means of co-branding (Leslie, 2012, 148; Martin & Schouten, 2012; Lihhavtshuk, 2015, 28).

According to the global ecolabeling network, "an ecolabel is a label which identifies overall environmental preference of a product (i.e., good or service) within a product category based on life cycle considerations. In contrast to a self-styled environmental symbol or claim statement developed by a manufacturer or service provider, an ecolabel is awarded by an impartial third party to products that meet established environmental leadership criteria." (GEN, 2004). The International Standardization Organization has undertaken efforts to attempt to standardize the principles, practices, and key characteristics relating to three major voluntary environmental labeling types:

Type I - environmental labeling (i.e. ecolabels): These are usually established by an initiator (public or private) independent from the producers, distributors, and sellers of the labeled products. Products supplied by organizations or resources that are certified are then labeled with information to the consumers that the product was produced in an "environmentally friendly" fashion. The label (seal) is typically licensed to a producer and may appear on or accompany a product derived from a certified producer. Producers are usually expected to track the "chain of custody" of their products in order to ensure that the products derived from the certified producer are in fact those that are so labeled.

Type II – self-declaration claims: These are established by industry associations for their members' products. The members elaborate the certification criteria, sometimes by drawing upon external expertise from academia and environmental organizations. Verification of compliance is achieved through internal certification procedures within the industry, or by employment of external certifying companies.

Type III – environmental declarations (e.g., report cards/information labels): These are established by individual companies based on their own product standards. The standards might be based on criteria related to specific environmental issues known to informed consumers through the media or advertising. This form of ecolabeling can also be referred to as "self-declaration." This definition emphasizes the environmental aspects of the sustainability. In co-branding, the labels focusing on social responsibility are as well possible for co-branding purposes.

Ecolabels are typically collectively owned marks. Collective marks are usually defined as signs which distinguish the geographical origin, material, mode of manufacture, or other common characteristics of goods or services of different enterprises using the collective mark. The owner may be either an association of which those enterprises are members or any other entity, including a public institution or a cooperative. (WIPO, 2017). These marks and the criteria system behind them are developed in a multi-stakeholder group. The creation of the collective mark, in fact, must go hand in hand with the development of certain standards and criteria and a common strategy. (WIPO 2017). Multi-stakeholder initiatives have emerged as one of the dominant regulatory approaches in the recent years. Some of the schemes have also designed an ecolabel in order to use the scheme as a communication tool in green marketing. (Sorsa 2011; Lihhavtshuk, 2015).

Ecolabels can be perceived as brands (Lihhavtshuk, 2015; Loimukoski, 2016). For example, Reilukauppa – Fairtrade is a strong co-branding tool in sustainability marketing, and in most cases the Fairtrade logo adds credibility to the product's brand. (Lihhavtshuk, 2015, 77). There is much differentiation between industry sectors in the use of ecolabels or ethical labels.

The history and evolution of ecolabels and certification varies dramatically from one sector to another. In some sectors, concerns related to personal health and safety have been the primary forces behind the certification efforts (e.g., textiles and apparel) whereas other sectors have prioritized broader environmental or social considerations (e.g., forestry). Sectors also vary based on the maturity of the leading systems used to certify products, the relative roles of different sponsoring organizations, the level of consumer awareness, global application, and a variety of other factors. (Golden, 2010). For instance, Norwegian consumers know little about ecolabeled garments as almost none are available on the market. Therefore, consumers who want to make environmentally sound choices have to act based on other information. (Laitala & Klepp, 2013). The three most important issues that textile and apparel ecolabels cover are human health and safety (i.e., Oeko-Tex), environmental pollution (i.e., GOTS), and worker's rights (i.e., Fair Trade). The labels that have emerged or are emerging as leaders in this space have one key thing in common—they all aim to cover the entire supply chain for textiles and apparel, from raw materials through cut-and-sew operations. (Golden, 2010).

The landscape of sustainability labels is dominated by environmental as opposed to social metrics. This is consistent with the content of supply chain management literature research, which also still favors environmental issues. (Golden, 2010). Seuring and Muller (2008) note that integration of the three dimensions of sustainability and social metrics are rare. There are some fashion brands slowly adapting into sustainable practices, according to Rank a Brand, an NGO that ranks sustainability. However, a large number of the fashion brands researched create the impression that they are doing the right thing for sustainability, but then fail to produce relevant and tangible information about the action they are taking, a concept called "greenwashing" (Rayapura, 2014).

This shows a need for quantitative metrics on clothing labels to 1) raise awareness in consumers and 2) demand responsibility from brands to accurately convey and improve what is happening down the supply chain, which most likely needs the consistency and verification from 3) third-party auditing. The label study shows that consumers are more aware and affected by socially responsible labeling than before. According to Hyllegard's research in 2012, approximately 60% of participants actively look at hangtag information, whereas a 2005 British study showed that only 11% of British consumers read apparel hangtags. Hyllegard's study also showed that garments labeled explicitly with SSR information with an official third-party logo provided the best results regarding the consumer perception of the brand and purchase intention. (Hyllegard et al., 2012). Critically reviewing the study, the hangtag labels and fictitious brand "GOOD CLOTHES" created for the study was entirely theoretical and may have resulted in theoretical results, based on ideology but not genuine purchase behavior.

The company specific ecolabels and programs are excluded from the analysis. For instance, Nestlé's Nespresso AAA program is one example of a company specific system. (The Nespresso AAA Sustainable Quality™ Program was launched in 2003. At the end of 2015, the AAA Program counted over 70,000 coffee farmers in 12 coffee-growing countries.)

This article will fill the knowledge gap discussing the emergence of co-branding between collectively owned ecolabels (brands) and company owned product or service brands. The use of ecolabels in co-branding is gaining popularity in Finland. This study argues that ecolabels can be independently perceived as brands. For example, in Finland, one of the oldest ecolabels, Fairtrade, is perceived to be one of the most well-known ecolabel brands in Finland. According to the Ecolabel Index, there are currently 38 ecolabels represented in Finland.

Typically, a collectively owned brand is owned by the organization governing the multi-stakeholder initiative focusing on sustainability issues, e.g. Fair Trade, Utz Certified, Rainforest Alliance etc. The multi-stakeholder organization creates governance schemes in which NGOs, multilateral, and other organizations together create criteria, certification system, and typically trade mark in order to encourage companies to participate in the schemes. These schemes set social and environmental standards, monitor compliance, promote social and environmental reporting and auditing, certify good practice, and encourage stakeholder dialogue and social learning. (Utting, 2002).

2. Co-branding

Branding in general is viewed as a certain activity by the producer that aims to reach its customer group by the visual identity and message created for the product or service. Branding is described as a name, symbol, design, or a combination of these, which assists in identifying the brand with a unique sustainable competitive advantage (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Co-branding, instead, can be defined when "two or more well-known brands are combined into a joint market offering or marketed together in some fashion." (Kotler et al. 2009, 431). A co-branding strategy provides a tool for differentiation that leverages brands through the transfer of positive associations, such as brand-quality, image, or awareness, from one brand to another (McCarthy & Norris, 1999; Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Washburn, Till & Priluck, 2000). For example, associations of SMEs may register collective marks in order to jointly market the products of a group of SMEs and enhance product recognition. (WIPO, 2017).

In order to protect a single brand, the company needs to register its brand as a trademark according to the intellectual property right legislation. A collective trademark is an IP instrument recognized in legislation as a special form of trademark but which fulfils similar roles.

In order to understand the challenges and opportunities of co-branding, we need to use the concept of *brand equity.* When a company uses co-branding, it may either raise or lower its brand equity. Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand name and symbol, which add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service. Brand equity has four dimensions—brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality, each *providing value to a firm* in numerous ways. Brand equity also *provides value to customers.* It enhances the customer's ability to interpret and process information, improves confidence in the purchase decision, and affects the quality of the user experience. As consumers in developed markets have become more aware of the social, ethical, and environmental effects of a brand, so too have marketers become more involved with tracking the extent to which social, ethical, and environmental factors can affect a brand's equity—its value to a company. The term brand social equity is now being used to refer to the value attributed to a brand based on consumer evaluation of the brand's contribution to wider society. (Lexicon, 2017).

There is a diverse array of potential drivers for business to adopt certification and ecolabel and use it in co-branding. These drivers include reducing risk, differentiating products from competitors, finding new efficiency and cost savings opportunities, ensuring long-term supply, reputational gains, and realizing a price premium for the product. (Golden, 2010). Sustainability matters not just on an environmental level, but on an economic one, too. As consumers and investors become increasingly aware of the impacts of climate change and resource scarcity, they are looking for companies to demonstrate a high level of corporate social responsibility. There is a growing recognition that good ethics can have a positive economic impact on the performance of firms. Many statistics support the premise that ethics, values, integrity, and responsibility are required in the modern workplace. For consumer groups and society at large, research has shown that good ethics is good business. (Joyner & Payne, 2002). Responsibility has become a sine qua non of carry on business or of an opportunity to achieve competitive advantage. (Blumenthal & Bergstrom, 2003; Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014). The creation of a corporate identity of brand aims to achieve a high level of recognition by relevant stakeholders and to develop the ability to transfer value to them. Using the brand, organization conveys the promise to its stakeholders (Kitchin, 2003). Based on this we suggest that an organization can benefit using co-branding with a well-known ecolabel.

According to Vallaster, Lindgreen, and Maon's (2012) research, companies use sustainability branding in order to create or protect their brand's value. In addition, companies either integrate corporate responsibility into the business culture and strategy, or it is left as remote and superficial, marketed only when needed. On the other hand, there are still companies which use ecolabels as a green marketing tool. This may have negative impacts if the companies exaggerate and give false promises to their target customers. From the co-branding perspective, the use of type II or type III ecolabels may not be as successful as the use of type I ecolabel as these labels have a risk of being perceived as green washing. On the other hand, most ecolabeling organizations are unaware of the market share of products, services, or organizations carrying their ecolabels. Only 25% of labelers were aware of studies that assessed the market share of products carrying their label (Golden, 2010, 6). This finding is interesting and surprising, as the market share is one indicator of the extent to which ecolabels and certifications have demonstrated "success in the field." As the aim of ecolabels is to drive empirical improvements in social and environmental performance, it is important to measure how they work. Empirical assessments also examine the level of "success in the marketplace," meaning that the extent that ecolabels have raised their visibility to claim market share for the products that go through the labeling/certification process. (Golden 2010, 7).

3. Co-branding for Sustainable Governance – Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges

Creation of credibility continues to be a great challenge for many companies aiming to communicate responsible business. According to GlobeScan's global public tracking in 2012, in the ten countries tracked over the past decade, only 38% of respondents believe that companies communicate honestly about their social and environmental performance. Other findings revealed a consensus view that companies embrace CSR not because they are genuinely committed to it, but in order to improve their images. (GlobeScan 2012). According to CDP 2017 report, supplier responses revealed that those who identify themselves as being reputationally exposed on their sustainability performance are a lot more likely to engage with their own supply chain (59%) when compared with companies that do not identify exposure to reputational risks (33%).

There is unlikely to be a single solution to the lack of credibility of companies' communications around social and environmental responsibility. A franker approach to challenges that companies are facing e.g. in the coffee sector (Sorsa, 2011) in the context of co-branding is that an independent third party critically appraises company's reporting, and an embrace of social media, these both are likely to play important roles. (GlobeScan, 2012). Saying this, there is a need for a company to try to collaborate and make partnerships with organizations which are perceived to be good performers and to make this collaboration visible by using co-branding. The latest GlobeScan's report confirms that NGOs are seen as having made the largest contribution to sustainable development since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, followed by social entrepreneurs, academic organizations and citizen-led social change movements. (GlobeScan, 2016). Therefore, for instance the relationship between an NGO with sustainability agenda and a firm may be limited to a communication campaign, which can be viewed as a co-branding operation. For example, WWF has established a significant co-branding program with its Panda logo.

Secondly, according to the Sorsa and Jolkkonen's article (2014), a challenge with ecolabels is that consumers do not know the main message of the label. However, according to Sorsa and Jolkkonen's survey, consumers know the main message of the three long time ecolabels in Finland: Good From Finland (HyvääSuomesta, published in 1993), the Nordic ecolabel Swan (official ecolabel, created in 1992), and Fairtrade label, but awareness of the younger labels, such as MSC for fish products or the Utz Certified label, is quite weak. Nordic Swan was the fifth most well-known brand in 2014. Good from Finland was the sixth most appreciated product brand and the most appreciated label of origin. An interesting finding was that consumers who perceive Nordic Swan and Fairtrade brands credible told to purchase products using these labels and also other products with other labels. This connection was not found in the case of Good from Finland. (Sorsa & Jolkkonen 2014, 16). This indicates that these ecolabel brands may have a positive impact on its co-brand product.

According to Lihhavsshuk's survey on university students in Finland about the ecolabels' role in green marketing, ecolabels influence the credibility of the product's brand image more often than vice versa (Lihhavtshuk, 2015, 88). For instance, the Rainforest Alliance – Lipton is another exceptional example of the mutual credibility influence in co-branding. Lipton is a strong international brand with a negative image regarding environmental matters and sustainability, thus it can have a strong influence on the ecolabel's credibility both in a positive (for consumers not concerned about environment) and negative (for consumers concerned about environment) manner. Still, the Rainforest Alliance ecolabel possesses a strong enough image to add credibility to one of Unilever's brands.

Backhaus, Steiner, and Lügger (2011) found that brand relevance, or the relative importance of the brand in the decision-making process, is positively related to the perceived risk of the purchase and information search costs in B2B settings. In addition, their study, which spanned across 20 industries, showed that brand relevance is slightly higher when the exchange requires high specific investments from the buyer. We might suggest that a company can reduce the perceived risk by co-branding with a well-known ecolabel. However, engaging in corporate social responsibility from the wrong motives may undermine the corporate brand identity and adversely affect a brand's established reputation.

Co-branding with collectively owned trade mark may pose challenges as the legal framework governing co-branding varies in different countries. Many countries recognize "collective marks" and "certification marks." Collective marks indicate membership in a group (such as AAA, the American Automobile Association, in the United States). Certification marks – like CE ("European Conformity") and The Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval – "certify" that products or services meet a particular standard of quality, regional origin or the like, even though the products may come from various unrelated companies. (INTA, 2012). Some countries, however, do not recognize collective marks, which may create uncertainty.

Opportunities

Co-branding may *open new markets* for the developing country's operators. Collective marks may be used together with the individual trademark of the producer of a given good. This allows companies to differentiate their own products from those of competitors, while at the same time benefiting from the confidence of the consumers in products or services offered under the collective mark (WIPO 2017; Sorsa et al. 2015).

Manufacturers stand to gain from their involvement with ecolabeling programs. The Rainforest Alliance conducted a study to analyze the changes that SmartWood, a forestry certification program, required of forestry operations in order to become certified. SmartWood is Rainforest Alliance Corporate Sustainability Initiative that is accredited by the Forestry Stewardship Council. The study found that the SmartWood certification *provided economic benefits to businesses* in addition to an improved protection of high-value conservation habitat. Specifically, the certification *enhanced economic sustainability* through increasing efficiency and, therefore, profitability. This went hand in hand with improvements in accountability, transparency, management planning, monitoring, and chain-of-custody practices (Green Biz Staff, 2005).

Corporations wishing to attract potential stakeholders are showcasing actions that further a particular social good (Castaldo et al., 2009). Many suppliers describe stakeholder expectations around climate change disclosure and action as an opportunity to derive business benefits, including *positive impacts on corporate reputation, stock price, competitive positioning, and even the company's ability to attract and retain top talent.* Purchasing organizations have the potential to incentivize significant environmental changes in their supply chain. (CDP 2017, 16).

According to Willmott's research (2003), responsible branding impacts directly and indirectly the success of the company. Direct impacts are more efficient processes inside the company and more active customers. Indirect effects materialize via the growth of credibility to company and the improved reputation. Abdolvand and Charsetad (2013) innovatively proved that social corporate performance positively influences positioning, differentiation and, importantly, brand equity.

4. Summary

The article argues that collective sustainability schemes with ecolabel could be viewed as brands and that co-branding with them can be a beneficial strategy for different companies. Co-branding between collective sustainability schemes and private brands has not been thoroughly investigated. This article made an opening of discussion towards that direction. First, we defined co-branding with collectively owned brands, and after that, we discussed the related challenges and opportunities.

The co-branding challenges arise from the lack of credibility of the ecolabel or company marketing message. The goal of both partner organizations is to increase the total value of co-operation. If one partner fails, it may weaken the other partner's brand image as well. According to literature, brands can influence the credibility of ecolabels, both in a positive and negative manner. However, the influence of brands' credibility on ecolabels is usually weaker than the other way around.

A private organization may find it beneficial to co-brand with a well-known and reliable NGO in order to improve the success of its sustainability initiatives. In most co-branding cases, ecolabels added credibility to the product's brand, and furthermore, ecolabels can both strengthen a weak brand image and improve a negative brand image.

Co-branding may open new markets for the developing country's operators as the consumers in developed countries pay more and more attention to sustainability characteristics. Co-branding has also an impact on value chain management.

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