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School of Business and Management  
Master's Programme in International Marketing Management

Master's Thesis

**Impact of cause-related marketing on brand equity in the video  
games industry**

Janne Toppinen 2020

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## Abstract

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The aim of this research is to investigate the impact of Cause-related marketing to the customer-based brand equity in the context of video games industry. More precisely, this research focuses on community and customer reactions towards different brand's cause-related marketing campaigns and how they build the brand equity of these video game brands and the studios behind them.

The theoretical part of this research provides an overview on different benefits of cause-related marketing and factors that impact the effectiveness of cause-related marketing campaigns, as well as an overview of brand equity as a concept and the different dimensions that form the concept. The empirical part explores two cases of cause-related marketing campaigns by two different video game brands, where the case data is gathered and analyzed using netnographic research method.

The findings of this research shows that cause-related marketing is an effective tool in building brand equity for video game brands, and that companies can utilize it for building brand awareness, positive associations towards the brand as well as the organization behind it, brand loyalty and customer engagement.

## Tiivistelmä

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Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää järjestöjen ja yritysten yhteistyön vaikutus asiakaspohjaiseen brändipääomaan videopelialan kontekstissa. Tarkemmin ottaen, tämä tutkimus keskittyy yhteisöjen ja asiakkaiden reaktioihin eri brändien ja järjestöjen yhteistyökampanjoihin ja kuinka nämä kampanjat rakentavat kyseisten videopelien ja niiden takana olevien studioiden brändipääomaa.

Tämän tutkimuksen teoreettinen osuus tarjoaa katsauksen järjestöjen ja yritysten yhteistyön tuomien hyötyjen, sekä tämän yhteistyön onnistuneisuuteen vaikuttavien tekijöiden osalta. Lisäksi brändipääoman konseptia tullaan tarkastelemaan kyseisen käsitteen muodostavien ulottuvuuksien läpi. Tutkimuksen empiirinen osuus kattaa case-tutkimuksen kahden eri videopelibrändin järjestöyhteistyön osalta, jossa tutkimuksessa käytetty data on kerätty ja analysoitu käyttäen netnografista tutkimusmenetelmää.

Tutkimuksen tulokset paljastavat, että yritysten ja järjestöjen välinen yhteistyö on tehokas työkalu brändipääoman rakentamiseksi videopelibrändeille, ja että yritykset voivat käyttää sitä rakentaakseen tietoisuutta brändistä, positiivisia mielleyhtymiä sekä brändiä että sen takana olevaa yritystä kohtaan, brändiuskollisuutta, sekä asiakkaiden osallistamista ja aktiivisuutta.

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# 1 Introduction

This chapter is the introduction to the research, providing the reasoning and background behind it. First a background of the study is given, followed by the key definitions and research questions. Literary review will be conducted in order to find out the existing literature around the subject, based on which the theoretical framework of the study is established. Finally, the research methodology is explained along with the delimitations that come with it, followed by an overview of the structure of this research paper.

## 1.1 Background of the study

Video games industry has grown to be the largest entertainment industry existing with \$120.1 billion total revenue in 2019 (Venturebeat 2020). With its growth in size, easy access to the digital goods and low barrier of entry, the industry has become highly competitive, and companies are constantly seeking for ways to stand out from their competitors.

In recent years there has been active movement and a large call to action for the games industry to be more active in doing good. On September 23, 2019 United Nations Environment Program and 21 largest game companies together pledged to reduce their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 30 million tons by 2030 (Playing for the Planet, 2019). Multiple non-profits aim to impact social issues through gaming, such as Child's play that gathers and donates toys and games to children's hospitals, Extra Life that gathers funds for different charities through their online streaming event and Special Effect, which dedicate their action to accessibility of gaming, and bringing the form of entertainment available to those with physical disabilities and limitations. Additionally, there are plenty companies related to the gaming industry with charity included in their key value proposition such as online game store Humble Bundle where customers themselves decide what amount of their purchase is donated to charity.

One of the ways to improve a company's social responsibility, and answer to the call of "doing well by doing good" is cause-related marketing, where a company pledges to donate revenue generated through monetary transactions by their customers to a



cause of the company's choosing. This is a widely utilized strategy within the industry with examples such as the recent indie game hit "Untitled Goose Game" giving 1% of all its profits to indigenous groups in Australia (Polygon 2020), and with the global health crisis caused by COVID-19, multiple videogame companies pledged to both direct donations as well as cause-related campaigns to aid in answering to the crisis (gamesindustry.biz, 2020).

Extensive research exists in the effect of cause-related marketing in brand image and consumer perceptions, but most of it focuses on retailing industry, and very little research is done on its effect in digital products and the communities that form around them online. This is the research gap that this paper aims to contribute to.

## **1.2 Key definitions**

### **Cause Related Marketing (Referred as CRM for the most of this research).**

Cause related marketing is a promotional activity where companies engage in providing funds and resources to charitable causes as a result of customer participation. The first definition of CRM was given by Varadarajan & Menon (1988, 60) as "Cause-related marketing is the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives".

### **Brand Equity**

Brand equity is defined by Aaker (1991, 27) as follows: "Brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers." Brand equity is divided further into five dimensions: Brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty.

## **1.3 Research questions**

The aim of this research is to map out whether cause-related marketing campaigns have an impact on brand equity within the video games industry, and in which ways.

Therefore, due to the inductive nature of the study, the main research question is defined as:

**How do cause-related marketing campaigns impact customer-based brand equity in the video games industry?**

Due to the broadness of the main research question, it is further divided into sub-questions using the customer-based definition of brand equity, where the impact of cause-related marketing on brand equity is answered through Aaker's (1991) four dimensions that make up brand equity: Brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty and perceived quality. Through this model, four sub-research questions are formed:

- 1. How does cause-related marketing affect brand awareness for video game brands?**
- 2. How does cause-related marketing affect brand associations for video game brands?**
- 3. How does cause-related marketing affect perceived quality for video game brands?**
- 4. How does cause-related marketing affect brand loyalty for video game brands?**

#### **1.4 Literature review**

Since Varadarajan & Menon's paper in 1988, CRM has spawned a wide field of research around itself. As researchers try to find the exact impact and best ways of implementing CRM campaigns, many different topics and viewpoints have arisen around CRM. Additionally, there have been those who are more skeptical towards the altruistic intentions and ethicality of companies promoting their contributions to social issues, which has started a whole field of research of its own.

When researching the field of study around CRM through text mining, Guerreiro et al. (2016, 118-122) identify 24 different main topics of research around CRM. In this study focus will be placed on research that relates to the performance of CRM campaigns. The wide adoption of CRM campaigns by both academia and corporations has proven

its effectiveness, but exact impact of CRM on sales has been difficult to measure due to the wide range of impacting factors. The most cited example of CRM's effectiveness has been the campaign by American Express in 1983, where the company promised to donate a penny to the renovation of the statue of Liberty for each of its charge and a dollar for each new card. The card usage increased 28% and the number of new cards by 17% with \$1.7 million donated to the renovation (Varandarajan & Menon 1988, 59; Dean 2003, 92; Kotler & Lee 2005, 82; Anuar & Mohamad 2012, 72; Vanhamme et al. 2012, 269; Guerreiro et al. 2016, 111) which itself is an example of the high potential of CRM campaigns for both the companies and the social causes they aim to support.

There has been a wide range of research on the different factors that play into the success of CRM campaigns, and through that the impact on company's financial performance. The main topics would be impact on purchase intention, brand image, brand-cause fit, brand loyalty, differences between strategic and tactical CRM campaigns, and product fit.

It has been clearly established that CRM increases the consumer's purchase intentions (Hajjat 2003, 103; Andrews et al. 2014, 120; Shabbir et al. 2016, 149; Patel et al. 2017, 14) and so there has been plenty of research on the factors driving this phenomenon. It has been found that the purchase intention of consumers in response to CRM is dependent on their cause involvement, where those more involved respond favorably when the donation level is larger, and those less involved are more favorable towards CRM when the donation is small (Hajjat 2003, 104). It has also been suggested that CRM works better in driving purchase intention for hedonistic and luxury products than utilitarian ones through reduction of guilt as the purchases of hedonistic products become easier to justify (Chang 2008, 1105; Hagtvedt & Patrick 2016, 60; Baghi & Antonetti 2017, 2045; Silva & Martins 2017, 490; Chang et al. 2018, 1001-1002). In the case of luxury product and non-profit CRM co-branding, it has been found that the presence of luxury brands in the packaging should be stronger than the non-profit brand in order to drive purchase intention (Baghi & Gabrielli 2018, 727).

The fit between the brand and supported cause has been established as an important factor driving CRM campaign performance (Melero & Montaner 2016, 166, Yun et al. 2019, 998). Vanhamme et al. (2012, 268-267) compared the differences in cause

composition, and found out that consumers identify more with local causes but noticed that allying with international causes has a greater impact on brand image as well as that consumers identify more with acute issues such as disasters and with causes that affect primary needs such as livelihoods compared to secondary needs.

The effect of product type on CRM performance is a recent field on CRM research, and an important one, as research aim to identify which product fields can utilize the marketing tool. Even though it has been established that CRM campaigns produce the best results when paired with hedonistic products (Hagtvedt & Patrick 2016, 60; Baghi & Antonetti 2017, 2045), very little research has been aimed at the field of modern digital services. Hassan & AbouAish (2018, 295-296) found that CRM campaigns can drive customer mobile services provider switching intentions but otherwise research has mainly focused on the field of retail and other physical products.

It is clear that CRM campaigns have a positive impact on the brand and company image (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 79; Hajjat 2003, 106; Lafferty & Goldsmith 2003, 428; Patel et al. 2017, 12; Chang et al. 2018, 1002) and it increases word-of-mouth among consumers (Shabbir et al. 2016, 149), but whether CRM increases brand loyalty is still not entirely clear. Van den Brink et al. (2006, 21-22) found that CRM may increase brand loyalty, but only in the case of long-term strategic CRM campaigns on products for which the consumers are not highly involved.

## **1.5 Theoretical framework**

The study is based on Aaker's definition of Brand Equity which defines it as a construct that consists of four different dimensions: Brand Awareness, Brand Associations, Perceived Quality and Brand Loyalty. Through this view on brand equity theoretical framework is built for the study seen in figure 1.

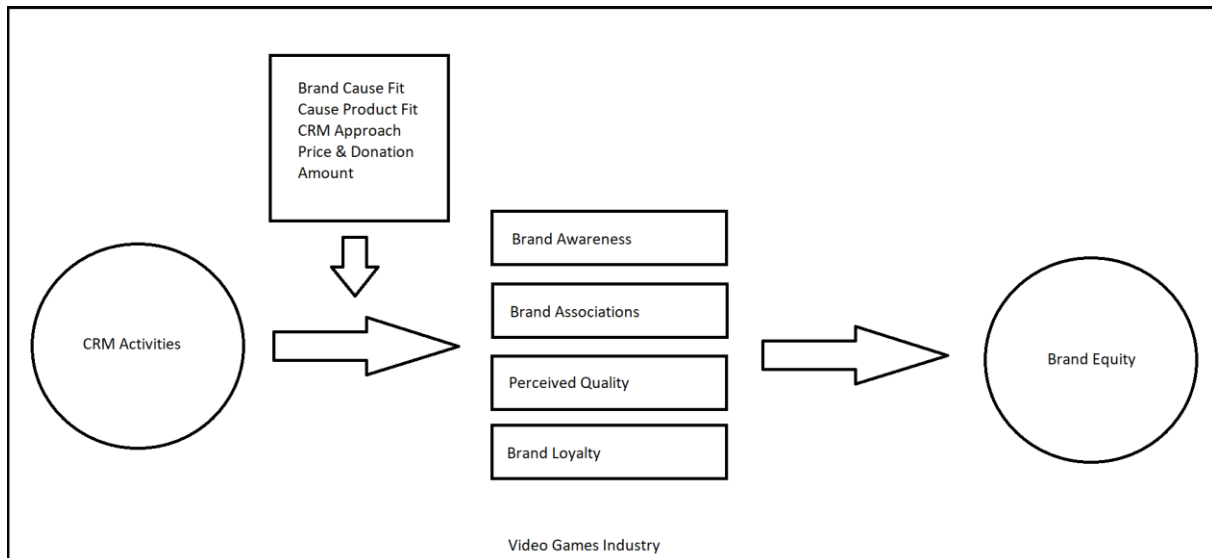


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

The framework depicts how the success of CRM marketing activities launched by the brand are impacted by the different CRM success factors, brand cause fit, cause product fit, brand's approach to CRM and price & donation size. The success of the CRM marketing campaign then defines its impact to the four dimensions of brand equity: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty, which together build up the concept of brand equity. As the study is done within the video games industry, it works as a frame for the setting.

## 1.6 Research methodology

Qualitative research method was chosen to understand the multidimensional nature of brand equity impact of CRM campaigns. A multi-case study is used in order to build a larger understanding of the phenomenon across different actors in the industry and provide understanding over real-life events and data. Multiple game companies across both PC, console and mobile gaming market are used as the research context to build a thorough understanding of the CRM impact on brand equity in the video games industry.

This study utilizes a broad range of secondary data to build a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. The main sources of data are collected secondary sources such as company marketing communications around their CRM campaigns, digital gaming publications, social media posts, forum and board discussions and community

reactions to the CRM campaigns of the chosen companies. As the method of analysis for the collected data, netnographic multiple-case study will be used in order to explain and interpret the collected data.

### **1.7 Delimitations**

As brand equity has multiple different approaches and definitions, mostly divided into three different categories: financial, product market and customer-mindset approach. This study will be focusing on the customer-mindset approach, guided by Aaker's framework for brand equity.

As the focus will be within the video game industry, the findings cannot be generalized across different industries. Nor does the study seek to cover all similar interactions between brand equity and cause-related marketing within the video games industry, as the methods of conducting such campaigns can vary between different games and communities surrounding them.

As the CRM campaigns used as the research cases contribute towards current and acute crisis, the findings of this study cannot either be generalized across all different brand-cause combinations, as the brand-cause fit often determines the results of the CRM campaign.

### **1.8 Structure**

This study is divided into three parts, introduction, theoretical and empirical. In this first chapter the research proposal is presented along with the research questions, theoretical framework, and literary review. The second part focuses on the theoretical foundation of the study, which is further divided into two parts. First CRM is discussed at length, its goals and benefits to the brand practicing CRM will be studied, and secondly what makes a CRM campaign successful will be examined. The second part of this chapter focuses on Brand Equity, breaking down customer-based brand equity and its four dimensions according to Aaker's brand equity construct, along with which metrics can be used to measure customer-based brand equity. The third part of this study contains the empirical study of the thesis. First methodology of the research is explained, with discussions on netnographic research, the chosen method of data

collection and research design. This will be followed by the findings chapter discussing the observations that have been made from the gathered data and analysis, with finally a chapter concluding the research summarizing the findings and discussing the implications, contributions and limitations of the research.

## 2 Cause-Related Marketing

As corporate philanthropy has become an increasingly popular way for corporations to increase their corporate social responsibility image, there has been a further interest on how this philanthropy can be turned into a valuable business strategy and a source of competitive advantage. On the field of marketing, the strategy of Cause-Related Marketing has risen to answer this question. By pairing their product with a cause related to a certain social issue, companies can improve their brand image and sales volume. This way companies can make corporate philanthropy a part of their business strategy instead of just treating it as a reactive or defensive act for the company image. This chapter will focus on the history and prevalent theories of Cause-Related Marketing.

Cause Related Marketing (CRM) is a meeting point between corporate philanthropy and business strategy, in which companies pair their products with a specific cause and which has become a major philanthropic trend to donate portion of company's sales to charity (Chang 2008, 1090). For many companies, philanthropy is seen as a way to improve their impact on society and as a morally and ethically right thing to do, but also as to utilize their charitable actions as a marketing tool. Indeed, CRM campaigns usually include paid advertising, is likely funded and managed by the corporation's marketing department and includes a concrete marketing plan for the campaign just like any other part of company's marketing tools (Kotler & Lee 2005, 82, 111-112).

As companies have included in and aligned their charitable donations with their marketing strategy, this business activity has been named as Cause Related Marketing (CRM) and Varadarajan & Menon (1988, 60) gave it the first widely accepted definition: "Cause-related marketing is the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives". Therefore, instead of donating a fixed sum to charity from their usual grants and funds, companies donate a certain contribution to a cause on behalf of their customers who purchase their



products or services producing revenue. (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 59) There have been other terms for this marketing activity as well such as cause marketing (CM), but cause-related marketing has become the most widely used one. This marketing strategy had already been already utilized before the paper, but it gave a start to a wide field of academic research on it. The first company to use this marketing tool was the American Express in 1983 in their support of renovating the statue of liberty, which produced great results (Kotler & Lee 2005, 82; Guerreiro et al. 2016, 111 Thamaraiselvan et al. 2017, 342).

Later on, as companies have created and ran multiple different CRM campaigns the concept of CRM has grown along these new initiatives, and Tangari et al. (2010, 35) wished to expand the definition of CRM beyond purely sales tied promotional strategy, defining it as “a promotional strategy that combines public relations and sponsorship strategies where a company makes a philanthropic commitment to a societal need or “cause” through a specific campaign that is promoted to and requires participation from consumers.”. There are multiple different marketing campaigns that fit under the definition of CRM that donate to causes in a different way, and Kotler & Lee (2005, 83-84) list following examples and common attributes of CRM campaigns:

- Specified monetary donation to a cause for each sold product or new account opened.
- Percentage or portion of a product’s sales pledged to charity, which may or may not be disclosed.
- Company matching consumer contributions related to cause-related items
- Percentage of company’s net profits donated to charity
- Campaign where only specified product or product families are cause-related
- Campaign tied to a specific timeframe or an open ended one
- Company may set a ceiling to the total donation amount

## **2.1 CRM Objectives & Benefits**

Since CRM is thought as a marketing activity, it needs to set clear goals and objectives for the campaign’s marketing plan. It has been found that CRM campaigns offer multiple different benefits and opportunities for companies utilizing it in their marketing mix and setting them for the campaign will dictate the activities and partnerships built

for and during it. Broadly, these goals can be divided into three different objectives: Increasing sales, building brand equity, and building brand-cause alliances.

### **2.1.1 Increasing Sales**

Increasing sales is naturally one of the key objectives of CRM activity and has been found to have a positive impact on companies' sales (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 61; Andrews et al. 2014, 132-133) as CRM affiliations increase the purchase intention of consumers (Hajjat 2003, 103; Shabbir et al. 2016, 149; Patel et al. 2017, 14). This is argued to be due to the reduction of guilt caused by the purchase when the purchase would induce financial or other types of guilt to the consumer (Silva & Martins 2017, 488) and the "warm glow" feeling caused by contributing to a cause through their purchase (Andrews et al. 2014, 122, 133).

Additional benefits that contribute to increased sales can be to attract new customers (Kotler & Lee 2005, 87) and CRM campaigns can encourage customers of competing companies to switch to the brand practicing CRM (Hassan & AbouAish, 2018, 297) increasing the amount of customers consuming the company's products. Further on, CRM can also work as a tool for market entry (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 62; Kotler & Lee 2005, 112) and companies can reach niche markets through CRM gaining grass roots support (Kotler & Lee 2005, 91) broadening their customer base to new target groups. Finally, companies can increase the level of their trade merchandising activities for the brands promoted through CRM (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 62) providing further channels for product sales.

### **2.1.2 Building Brand Equity**

When corporations practice CRM they get to associate their brand with such causes improving the brand image (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 79; Hajjat 2003, 106; Lafferty & Goldsmith 2003, 428; Kotler & Lee 2005, 97; Westberg & Pope 2014, 431; Patel et al. 2017, 12) which is one of the clear benefits of running a CRM campaign. In their research, Westberg & Pope (2014, 430-431) found that customers react to CRM more positively compared to sponsorship and sales promotions, which is likely due to the customer's ability to partake in doing good through their purchasing choices, and that CRM can even change the customer's attitude towards the brand in a positive manner.

CRM has also been proven to increase the consumer's identification with the company which in term leads to increased customer satisfaction to their interactions with the company leading into further customer loyalty (Perez et al. 2013, 229-230). Hoeffler & Keller (2002, 79) specifically list out six means through which they believe CRM campaigns contribute to building brand equity to the company practicing this marketing activity.

1. Building brand awareness, which consists of a customer's ability to recall the brand from memory unaided and recognize the brand from prior experience of and interactions with it. This includes recognition of the brand name, logo, products and other aspects of the company brand. Due to the nature of CRM campaigns, they're good at building brand recognition, as consumers already purchasing the brand products associate it with the related causes. However, CRM is not a good tool for building brand recall, as it is not a way for new consumers to be repeatedly exposed to the brand. (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 79) Building brand recognition is a good way for the company to create consumer loyalty and repeated purchases, increasing sales.
2. Enhancing brand image, which includes building imagery and meaning that consumers use when relating to the brand. Through CRM companies can build positive abstractive images and associations of the brand to the minds of their customers, which offers an effective tool for brand differentiation. However, as CRM doesn't often include product related information, the benefits of CRM on brand imagery are often restricted to more abstract associations and benefits. This happens through CRM contributing to the brand personality, especially the aspect of brand sincerity. (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 79-80)
3. Establishing brand credibility, that happens through the abstract associations mentioned previously and affecting the feelings and judgements of the consumers linked with the brand. Through CRM, consumers may perceive the company as more caring and willing to stand up for important causes improving its' trustworthiness, or even establish the perception its' expertise further if the cause is related to the core business proposal of the company. (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 80)

4. Evoking brand feelings, that arise when consumers link their self-worth to the brands and products they consume. Especially important feelings that CRM can affect are social approval and self-respect. Social approval arises when consumer believes that interacting with the brand improves their social standing and outlook. As consumers get to show their support to the causes through their support of the brand, they can show to others their standing, especially when there are visual aspects related to the CRM campaign participation. Self-respect happens when consumers get to feel good about their consumption choices which CRM campaigns can offer to them, as they may feel a sense of pride and accomplishment about their contribution to a cause through their purchases. (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 80-81)
  
5. Creating a sense of brand community through the judgements and feelings established by the CRM campaign. As companies can broaden their stance on the causes contributed, it may provide a rallying point for consumers and create a feeling of brand community for its customers as they get to feel a sense of belonging when contributing to the same cause together. This feeling of community can also extend to company employees and representatives. (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 81)
  
6. Eliciting brand engagement, where customers of the brand will invest their time, money, energy or other resources beyond the immediate act of purchase and consumption of the brand products. Examples of this are customers visiting the company website, participating in chat rooms discussing brand related matters, joining clubs and corresponding with other brand users or brand representatives. Participating in cause-related marketing activities is one way of eliciting brand engagement among the customers and employees of the company. (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 81)

Through CRM companies can thwart negative publicity by demonstrating themselves as good corporate citizens, preventing future mishaps from spiraling into larger issues and it offers a tool for customer pacification by addressing issues through which the

company might have caused their customers to be offended by some of their activities (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 62).

### **2.1.3 Building Brand-Cause Alliances**

Running more long-term CRM programs has been demonstrated as a more beneficial approach for companies to organize their corporate philanthropy as this offers much more in terms of public relations visibility compared to a short-term single campaign approach (Van den Brink et al. 2006, 21-22). Additionally, companies running long-term CRM programs or multiple different ones with the same nonprofit organization might lead into creation of long relationships and alliances between the two organizations, which can be a source of further opportunities and collaboration, which can provide the company visibility and benefits beyond a single promotion (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 63; Kotler & Lee 2005, 95-96).

Companies can even bring in other for profit companies into these relationships (Kotler & Lee 2005, 96) There are different levels of relationships which go from organizational level involving the entire company, product line level associating a product family with the cause, or a brand level where the company aims to develop these relationships and associations with only single one of their brands. (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 64)

## **2.2 CRM Success Factors**

In order to have the CRM campaign contribute positively to the company's sales and brand image, there are multiple aspects that need to be taken into account when planning the campaign. Like any other marketing activity, the company needs to build a plan for CRM campaigns need to consider both the goal of the campaign as mentioned in the previous chapter, but also the factors that contribute to the success of the campaign. Broadly divided, these factors are cause brand fit, product cause fit and the donation amount.

### **2.2.1 Brand-Cause Fit**

Choosing the cause is arguably the most important strategic decision when building a CRM campaign (Binge et al. 2012, 586). In order to reach their CRM campaign goals,

companies need to carefully consider the cause they wish to contribute to. The cause needs to resonate with their target group and work well with the brand supporting the cause, as consumers often express their identity by purchasing cause-related products (Vanhamme et al. 2012, 158; Yang & Yen 2018, 2106). When choosing a cause to contribute to, companies should look for ones that resonate with their customer target groups as in many causes the cause should already have a large donor base in order to offer an increase of customers as they move to support the company that donates to the cause they care about, and if they already have ties on other forms of collaboration with a cause, running a CRM campaign with them is a good way to strengthen the bond between the two (Kotler & Lee 2005, 88, 111). The attitude generated by CRM depends on both the congruence between the brand and the cause as well as the consumer's familiarity with the social cause, and when working with a cause that consumers are more familiar with the meaning of fit between the brand and cause lessens but attitude towards brand increases. Additionally, when consumers are familiar with a social cause, they do not seem to care much about where the support for it comes from. (Zdravkovic et al. 2010, 158) However, if the charity working with the company has had controversies or scandals for example concerning management of funds or activities, this might actually lead to consumers not purchasing the products linked to the CRM campaign (Kotler & Lee 2005, 101).

A good fit between the brand and supported cause helps in building CRM campaign credibility (Westberg & Pope 2014, 430; Melero & Montaner 2016, 166; Yun et al. 2019, 999-1000) and when consumers have positive attitude towards both the brand and the cause, there are positive spillover effects to the benefit of both actors in the CRM campaign (Yun et al. 2019, 1000). CRM campaigns run by companies with high brand equity with a high level of perceived fit between the brand and the cause are most likely to be met favorably by their customers and to increase participation compared to companies with low brand equity or low brand-cause fit (Choi & Seo 2019, 3459).

Zdravkovic et al. (2010, 158) identified two different dimensions of fit between the brand and cause supported through CRM: Marketing strategy fit, and prominence fit. Marketing strategy fit is determined how similar the segmentation, targeting and positioning are between the brand and the cause. Prominence fit then relates to how well the brand communicates their relationship with the cause in terms of explicitness,

visibility, and involvement. Both of these dimensions have a positive effect on the attitudes generated by the sponsorship, and they also have an interconnected relationship where the increase of one improves the other. (Zdravkovic et al. 2010, 156, 158)

Many companies commit to causes with high visibility and wide appeal in order to maximize their own contribution's visibility (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 65) and this can be seen as most common CRM campaign beneficiaries are associated with large scale health issues, children's needs, basic needs such as hunger and homelessness and the environment (Kotler & Lee 2005, 84). Further research has shown that consumers identify more with acute causes such as sudden disasters that impact the first-grade needs such as peoples' health and livelihoods compared to ongoing issues with lesser direct impact (Vanhamme et al. 2012, 266) which makes these well-fitting beneficiaries for CRM campaigns.

Additionally, companies need to consider whether to commit to one or multiple causes, depending on the opportunities and associations they wish to create for their brands. The geographic scope of the selected cause needs to be considered as well, since this determines whether the campaign provides the company national or worldwide visibility, and different causes have different impacts varying between different geographic and cultural locations. (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 65) And even though consumers identify more with a local cause, international causes have a bigger impact on brand image, which is a factor that needs to be taken into account when companies consider the goals of their CRM campaigns (Vanhamme et al. 2012, 268).

### **2.2.2 Cause product fit**

When considering running a CRM campaign, the company needs to make sure that the product for which the campaign is utilized works well in tandem with CRM to begin with, as not all products benefit equally from CRM as their marketing tool. Additional point of consideration would be whether the product matches the cause supported by the campaign as it has been found that a high fit between the product and the cause improves the CRM campaign performance compared to low fit (Chang & Liu 2012,

645). Products that have a large market or market appeal, and well-established distribution channels work well for CRM purposes (Kotler & Lee 2005, 111).

Whether the product is utilitarian or hedonistic by nature also affects the way companies should plan their CRM campaigns. With utilitarian products, a consistent-fit cause is more effective for CRM campaign performance, whereas for more hedonic products, a complementary-fit cause seems to have a higher impact (Chang & Liu 2012, 645-646). Overall, more frivolous, and hedonic products seem to have more to gain through CRM than utilitarian ones (Chang 2008, 1105; Westberg & Pope 2014, 430).

The company needs to decide whether to run the CRM campaign with a single product in their catalogue, or whole product families (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 64; Kotler & Lee 2005, 113). However, it has been discovered that a positive product perception brought by CRM campaigns on one product in the product family carries over to other products as well even if they weren't involved in the campaign originally (Henderson & Arora 2010, 54).

### **2.2.3 Donation size and Product Price**

Higher donation sizes do not always directly lead to increased sales when companies run CRM campaigns. The donation size does have a positive impact on customer's purchase intentions, but in a concave trend where the effect lessens after a certain point. However, for customers that are more involved with the cause and highly willing to help others, high donation size does lead to increased purchase intention, which puts further emphasis on the importance of targeting for CRM campaigns. (Koschate-Fischer et al. 2012, 921-922) When advertising the amount of donation to the charity for each purchase of a cause-related product, framing the donation in absolute dollar amounts is the most beneficial way of framing the donation in order to drive sales (Chang 2008, 1105-1106).

In addition to the donation size, prices of cause-related products clearly affect the impact of CRM campaigns both in terms of the customer's perception of the brand and purchase intentions. High prices on products related to CRM increase the skepticism



consumers on whether the intentions of the campaign are truly altruistic. This makes increasing the product prices to compensate the CRM contributions a highly risky move, and marketers need to be careful when considering the price for CRM related products. (Nguen 2015, 192-193) Further on, coupling CRM with price discounts can lead to the higher sales revenue increase for CRM campaigns (Andrews et al. 2014, 132-133) which supports the importance of getting the product price right when planning a CRM marketing campaign.

### **2.3 Strategic and Tactical CRM**

CRM can be leveraged on both strategic and tactical marketing and has different resource needs for both. In order to form long-term strategic impact, the CRM campaign needs high level top management involvement and has to be implemented throughout the company's business operations with high resource investment (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 67; van den Brink et al. 2006, 16-17). This requires a high amount of resources from the company to set up but forms a more stable basis for long alliances with causes and public opinion benefit (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 67). Tactical CRM consists of short term campaigns which don't require much resources, time commitment nor top management involvement (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 67; van den Brink et al. 2006, 16-7), but runs the risk of having its CRM campaigns labeled as pure leveraging mechanism for its sales (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 67). In figure 2. the level of CRM implementation within a company's strategy can be reviewed and determined at whether the company is deploying CRM on a strategic or tactical level.

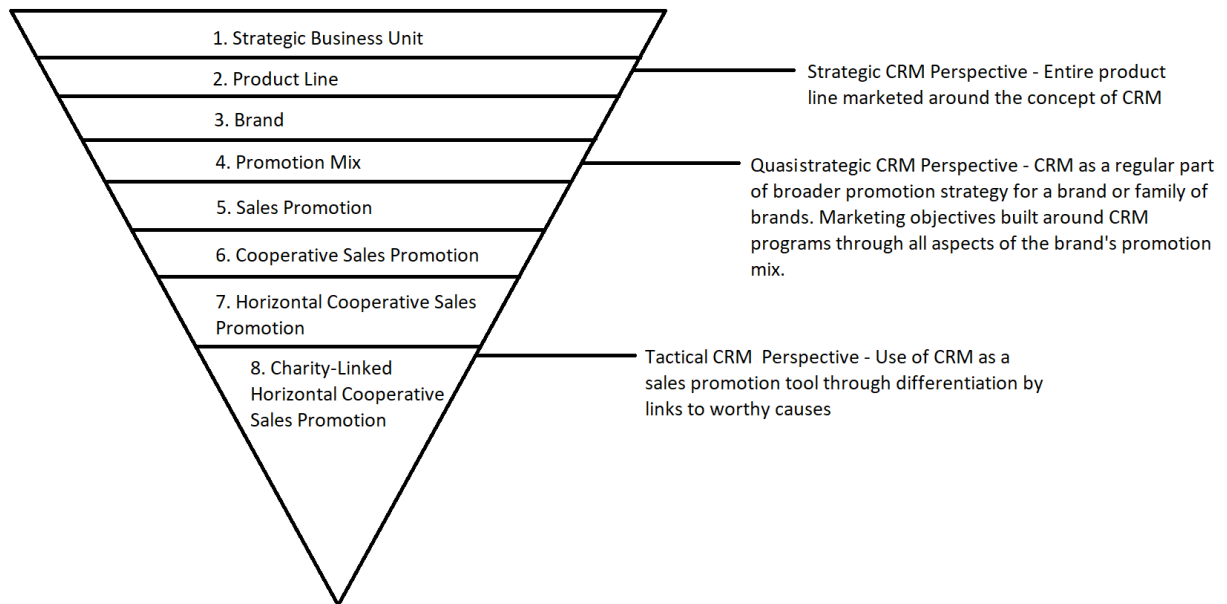


Figure 2. Alternative Perspectives of Cause-Related Marketing. (Varadarajan 1988, 66)

Strategic CRM campaigns have been found bringing greater benefits to the company compared to tactical CRM (van den Brink et al. 2006, 21-22; Hassan & AbouAish 2018, 296) and purely tactical short-term CRM campaigns can be met with skepticism (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 67).

## 2.4 Controversies and Limitations

CRM has not been without criticism either. As philanthropy is the fundamental basis of CRM activities this contradicts with many of the business interests of the companies executing these CRM activities.

CRM takes more resources and time compared to other forms of CSR initiatives such as cause promotion or employer volunteering. This is due to the needs to form contribution conditions between the company and the cause, legal disclosures and auditing needs and tracking of the funds which all require additional resources committed by both the company and the charity. (Kotler & Lee 2005, 100-101)

The usual small donation amounts mean that the CRM campaign's sales figures need to be large enough to make a substantial impact (Kotler & Lee 2005, 101). This requires

advertising of the initiative and the product through which the contributions will be made which in itself can be seen as problematic by some observers (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 69) As companies advertise their contributions to the causes instead of driving those resources to the causes themselves, make their contributions tax deductible and use CRM as a sales leverage, it offers plenty of room for criticizing points of view. Additionally, if consumers perceive the campaign being opportunistic, it might backfire and bring negative attention to the company. (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 62, 69)

However, CRM is here to stay, and it is on the companies themselves and the nonprofits they ally with to make sure that their contributions and campaigns make the greatest social impact possible. To achieve this companies need to create a company culture that internalizes the philosophy of CRM in ethical business conduct and social responsibility, as well as remain open and transparent on their CRM activities to be truly cause-related instead of cause exploitative (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 69-70) and disclosing the goals of CRM campaigns and funds raised helps increasing consumer confidence in the initiatives (Kotler & Lee 2005, 101).

### 3 Brand Equity

Brand equity has been defined in multiple different ways by multiple scholars throughout the years, each depending on their approach to the matter. Different definitions include:

- Outcomes that accrue to a product with its brand name compared with those that would accrue if the same product did not have the brand name. (Ailawadi et al. 2003, 1)
- The overall utility that the consumer associates to the use and consumption of the brand; including associations expressing both functional and symbolic utilities. (Vazquez et al. 2002, 27)
- Brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers. (Aaker 1991, 27)

Other terms that have been used interchangeably with brand equity are also brand strength and brand loyalty which only adds to the multitude of approaches to the theory. Since brand equity is a wide subject matter, which cannot be covered with only one universal definition, different approaches have evolved, each focusing on one aspect of brand equity's effect on companies' operations. (Wood 2000, 662) In essence though, all of the different approaches focus on the incremental value that a product or service gains when it is associated with a brand instead of not having one (French & Smith 2013, 1356). Keller and Lehman (2003, 30) have grouped these into three different approaches. Customer mind-set being the first, which encompasses everything that the customers think of the brand. Product market approach focuses on the effects of brand equity on the product's market standing in terms of market share, price premium, new product launches and marketing cost-efficiency. The third approach is focused on the financial markets, which reflects the brand equity's impact on company stock price, investor sentiment, company's growth potential and how it can help in managing risks for the company. (Keller & Lehmann 2003, 28-31) This paper will focus on the customer mind-set approach, as it is the most relevant one for the research topic.

One of the most subscribed to customer mind-set approaches to brand equity has been set by Keller (2013, 69), who defines customer-based brand equity as: “the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand”. Brand equity is driven by all of the company’s marketing activities, such as marketing mix, promotions and marketing communications, which establish the brand in the minds of its customers (Pitta & Katsanis, 1995 52; Stahl et al. 2012, 44) and through their actions and words the brand value is established (Keller and Lehmann 2006, 745, Keller 2013, 69).

No single measure can cover all the approaches and characteristics of a concept as complex as brand equity. (Ailawadi et al. 2003, 3) One of the core benefits of a strong brand equity is the price premium that the company can set for the products bearing said brand name and this is the most used measurement of brand equity for many (Aaker 1996a, 105; Ailawadi et al. 2003, 2, 15). For the customer-mindset, the most accepted approach to the sources of brand equity is a model set by Aaker, defining brand equity as a construct that is built upon four different dimensions: brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations. (Aaker 1996a, 105; Ailawadi et al. 2003, 2; Keller & Lehmann 2003, 28-29; Kim et al. 2003, 337) These aspects have an interlinked relationship which build on one another, and the customer is guided from one step to another, as a customer needs to be aware of the brand in order to build associations with it, judge its quality and ultimately become loyal to it (Aaker 1991, 43; Keller & Lehmann 2003, 29).

### **3.1 Brand Awareness**

Brand awareness measures how familiar the customer is with the brand, and whether they are able to recognize the name, products and imagery related to the brand (Keller & Lehmann 2003, 28). Keller (2013, 73) divides brand awareness into two parts. First one is brand awareness, which covers whether the consumer is able to recall the brand they’ve been exposed to on the moment of purchase, guiding their consumption behavior. This is especially important if the product choice is made at the point of purchase, such as in the case of consumer products. The second part is brand recall, which indicates whether the consumer can recall the brand from memory when considering the category of products that the brand belongs to, driving their behavior

of seeking out knowledge or channels of purchase. Brand recall becomes the more important aspect if the choice of product is done in some other setting than point of purchase, such as in the case of digital goods and services. (Keller 2013, 73-74)

Advantages of high brand awareness are multiple: through awareness customers can build other associations of the brand in their minds, further establishing the brand's presence in their minds, customers are more likely to consider the brand at the moment of purchase or consumption and make it less likely for customers to consider other competitor brands at the moment of purchase (Keller 2013, 73-74) and more bluntly, the brand can't be considered as a purchase choice if the consumer is not aware of the brand's existence and brand awareness is necessary before any brand associations can be built in the minds of the customers (Pitta & Katsanis 1995, 53-54). These benefits make brand awareness the key building block for brand equity (Campbell & Keller 2003, 301).

Brand awareness can also be distinguished into different levels depending on the consumer's familiarity and previous exposure to the brand. Aided recall is when consumer is able to recall the brand only with some aid helping them remember the existence of the brand, be it seeing the name or logo, or having someone remind them of it to consider it as a purchase choice. This is considered as weak brand awareness. Whereas when a consumer is able to recall the brand without any aid when considering a product choice is considered as high brand awareness. Even though high brand awareness is more desirable, even weak awareness does bring benefits to the company especially in the case of low involvement products. (Pitta & Katsanis 1995, 53)

Brand awareness is built through exposure to the brand itself. This is often achieved through advertising, visible logo placement, sponsorship, public relations, and publicity, and is further reinforced by repeated exposure through multiple different sources. (Keller 2013, 75) Social media has been identified as an efficient tool for building brand awareness (Godey et al. 2016, 5839). And in their study, Cobb-Walgren et al. (1995, 36-37) found that the brands that invested most into advertising achieved the most liking amongst customers, establishing that awareness builds further brand equity which further builds purchase intent. Also, the other way around strong brand

equity feeds the effectiveness of repeated advertising and communication, as it improves the communications' effect to build positive associations and is less likely to cause weariness (Campbell & Keller 2003, 301).

### **3.2 Brand Associations**

Brand associations cover all the experiences, thoughts, feelings, images, beliefs and attitudes that exist in the consumer's mind when thinking about the brand (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000, 39; Kotler 2009, 241). In short form, Keller & Lehmann (2003, 28) state that brand associations define whether the brand fulfills the customers' needs. Different brand associations can vary by their strength, and not all of them are relevant in the purchase situation (Keller 2013, 78; Pitta & Katsanis 1995, 55). Brand image and associations are formed through different touch points that the consumer has with the brand such as packaging, promotions and advertising (Nandan 2005, 276), and so through their marketing efforts, companies are able to affect the brand associations their customers hold in their memory (Kotler 2009, 242). Through activities such as sponsorship and charity, brands can attach associations to their products and services that aren't directly related to the product itself (Park & Srinivasan 1994, 274). Aaker (1996b, 25) determines that the brand associations are driven by the brand identity, and that developing and implementing this identity is key to building favorable associations in the minds of the brand's customers. Keller (1993, 3-4) divides brand associations into three different groups: Attributes, Benefits and Brand attitudes.

Attributes are the factors linked directly to the product or service, formed by what the consumer thinks it is and what is involved with the purchase or consumption. These product related attributes are further divided depending on how directly the attributes relate to the product performance. Product-related attributes are the ingredients required to engage with the product or service, so encompassing the physical properties of a product and requirements of performing a service. Non-product-related attributes are the external factors involved in purchasing and consuming a product or a service. Main types of non-product-related attributes are price information, packaging or product appearance information, user imagery and usage imagery. The two latter ones refer to what types of people engage with the product or service, and in which situations are they engaged with. (Keller 1993, 4) Out of these two, Park & Srinivasan

(1994, 286) found non-attributed associations to be more impactful than attributed ones when comparing their impact to the brand equity of a product. The non-product related associations are also often related to the brand personality, which might also affect the emotions that the brand evokes in its customers (Keller 1993, 4).

Benefits cover the value that the customer attributes to the product and what they think the brand provides for them. These benefits can further be divided into three different groups: Functional benefits, experiential benefits, and symbolic benefits. Functional benefits are literally the ways in which the product's functionality can help the customer either satisfy a need or solve a problem. Experimental benefits are the feelings that using the product or service evokes in the customer. These vary from sensory pleasure, variety and cognitive stimulation. Symbolic benefits are often related to the potential of a brand to bring its customer more social approval, help them build their self-image and express themselves. Symbolic benefits are more often linked to the non-product-related attributes. (Keller 1993, 4) Lassar et al. (1995, 13) call this association the "social image" and define it as "the consumer's perception of the esteem in which the consumer's social group holds the brand".

Brand attitudes are the opinions that customers hold towards the brands they are aware of, and they form the basis for customer's behavior and purchase choices. These attitudes can be related both to the functionality of the product or service, or more extrinsic qualities, showing that through these attitudes customers may express their self-concepts through the brand. (Keller 1993, 4-5)

### **3.3 Brand Loyalty**

Brand loyalty is defined by Aaker (1991, 39) as "the attachment that a customer has to a brand" and by Oliver (1999, 34) as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior". Brand loyalty can be considered as a culmination of brand equity, as through awareness, positive brand associations and high perceived quality, the customer becomes loyal to the brand (Yoo & Donthu 2001, 12).



The brand's value is tied to the customers' brand loyalty, as it guarantees cash flows in the future through repeat purchases of the products and services of the company (Wood 2000, 663). High degree of brand loyalty can help the brand retain its customers even during difficult times or if the company does something that offends its customers (Keller & Lehmann 2003, 29), presents a barrier of entry to competitors, a basis for the price premium, provides response time to new innovations and shields the company of price competition (Aaker 1996a, 106). Factors that build brand loyalty are consumer trust (Matzler et al. 2005, 158; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán 2005, 192), brand affect (Matzler et al. 2005, 158) and satisfaction (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán 1999, 1254; Matzler et al. 2005, 159). Additionally, modern advancements in the fields of internet and mobile technology have given birth to new kinds of brand communities and ways to manage brand loyalty. Studies have shown that increased commitment to brand communities online lead to increased brand loyalty (Jang et al. 2008, 75) and that brand's presence in social media strengthens the consumer brand-relationship, building further commitment and thus brand loyalty (Jibril et al. 2019, 13-14).

Aaker (1996, 22) distinguishes five different levels of brand loyalty among customers: noncustomers who only use the competitors' products, price switchers who's loyalty fluctuates based on price levels, the passively loyal who purchase the brand's products rather out of habit than based on any particular reason, fence sitters who are indifferent and switch between multiple different brands and committed who are truly loyal to the brand. Oliver (1999, 35) has a consumer loyalty phase framework where customers loyalty develops through multiple phases. Cognitive loyalty is the first step, where the consumer's commitment to the brand is shallow, and based on pure awareness of the brand's presence. Affective loyalty follows after the customer develops a liking to the brand's products or services based on satisfactory experiences with it but is still under risk of brand switching. Conative loyalty is developed after the customer has repeated occasions of positive events and associations towards the brand. This is when the consumer has a behavioral intention of repeatedly purchasing and engaging with the products or services of the brand. However, the desire still does not guarantee realized purchasing behavior. Finally, the customer develops action loyalty, where they are

committed to engaging with and purchasing the brand they are loyal to, despite situational obstacles or competing marketing efforts. (Oliver 1999, 35-36)

### **3.4 Perceived Quality**

Keller (2013, 187) defines perceived quality as “customers’ perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service compared to alternatives and with respect to its intended purpose”. Perceived quality can be thought of as a special case from the brand associations, as its effect on the associations manifests in multiple different ways and it has been perceived to affect the profitability of the firm (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000, 39) and can be considered central to building brand equity (Aaker 1996, 109). Perceived quality is less likely to be affected by advertising than brand associations (Kirmani & Zeithaml 1993, 145).

Zeithaml (1988, 3) emphasizes that perceived quality differs from objective quality of a product or service, it contains a higher level of abstraction rather than relating to a single attribute of the product or service, resembles the customer’s attitude and it is usually a judgement made within this attitude set. Perceptions of quality are formed by both intrinsic and extrinsic cues among customers. Intrinsic cues are the more physical elements of the product or service, such as the appearance and performance of the product, whereas the extrinsic cues are also product related, but not physical qualities, such as the price, brand name or warranty. Defining the universal traits that lead to perceptions of superior or inferior quality is difficult naturally due to the different attributes across different products, services, and industries, and even within a single product category different attributes may elicit different perceptions. (Kirmani & Zeithaml 1993, 145)

### **3.5 Measuring Brand Equity**

As brand is one of the most valuable assets for any company, there have been multiple ways of trying to measure brand equity across different companies and to capture its exact monetary value. Keller (1993, 12-13) has suggested that customer-based brand equity can be measured both directly through evaluating customer responses to company’s marketing activities and indirectly through different test such as memory measures, association tasks, and projective techniques. Aaker (1996, 103-104)

constructed a framework called Brand Equity Ten for measuring brand equity across different markets and industries. The brand equity ten provides a set of measures which can be utilized in measuring the brand equity of a company.

As an intangible asset, measuring the brand equity of a company is a challenging task, and there have been multiple different ways of addressing the need. When measuring the brand equity of a company, the measurement should reflect the sustainable advantages brought by it, instead of focusing on tactical advantages such as the elements of marketing mix. The measures should reflect aspects that drive future sales and profit as well as be responsive in detecting shifts in brand equity caused by either competitor actions or the company's own mistakes and they should be applicable across different brands, product categories and markets. (Aaker 1996, 104)

Aaker 1996 (1996, 105) argues that the measures should reflect the construct being measured and using the structure of brand equity development created a set of measures called the Brand Equity Ten. The ten different measures have been grouped into five different categories, one for each of the brand equity dimension: Brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty and perceived quality, as well as a group for market behavior measures. (Aaker 1996, 105).

Loyalty is at the core of brand equity in the Brand Equity Ten, as customer loyalty represents a barrier of entry to competitors, a basis for price premium, reaction time to competitor's actions and protection from price competition. Loyalty is measured using two different indicators: price premium and satisfaction. Price premium is the additional price the customer is willing to pay in order to purchase products or services from the brand instead of its competitors offering similar benefits. Price premium can be determined by asking the customer how much they would be willing to pay for the company's products or services compared to other brands or through a conjoint analysis, where customers are asked about their choice of brand at different price points to find out how much they would be willing to trade off for the brand of their choice. Price premium is held as one of the best measures of brand equity as in most cases anything that increases brand equity also increases the price premium (Aaker 1996, 105; Ailawadi et al. 2003, 15). However, price premium does have its limitations especially when there are multiple different markets and competitors to measure

against with different price points and consumer preferences. Additionally, in markets where legal restrictions or different market forces make different pricing difficult, price premium becomes a less relevant measure for brand equity. (Aaker 1996, 105)

Customer satisfaction can be measured through customers who have used the product or service of the brand within a certain, still relevant time frame. Satisfaction is an important measure of brand equity in service businesses, as it is often a result of repeat engagement with the brand and its products or services, and high satisfaction represents repeat purchasing behavior and brand loyalty. The obvious limitation of satisfaction is the fact that it only applies to existing customers, and so does not measure brand equity beyond the already existing customer base. Additionally, measuring satisfaction with all loyalty segments present, loyal customers, brand switchers and those who engage with other brands, makes satisfaction measures inconclusive (Aaker 1996, 105-106).

Perceived quality is held as one of the core components in order to reach high brand equity as it is associated with high price premiums, brand usage and stock price. In the brand equity ten, perceived is accompanied by the measure of leadership which relates directly to it. Perceived quality can be measured through the scale of quality from good to bad, whether the brand is perceived as the best or worst in its quality, and whether the quality is perceived as consistent or inconsistent. This requires a competitor for reference and comparison, which makes interpreting the results complicated, and is again affected by the different levels of loyalty across customer segments, with more loyal customers exhibiting much different results compared to other segments, brand switchers and non-users. Additionally, it might not be the driving force of brand equity in some contexts, nor very responsive, which is when leadership can offer a more responsive measure to use. Leadership, or popularity, can be used to measure the brand equity loss or increase even when the perceived quality of the brand might not change itself, but competitors' actions affect its standing in the market. Leadership has three different dimensions: Nr. 1 syndrome where most sales translate to an image of superior quality, even if this might not be the case, innovation leadership and whether the brand is considered technologically ahead of its competitors, and finally whether the brand is increasing in popularity and responding to current trends. The weakness

of leadership is the ambiguity of the term and complexity of market forces, and it is not as well researched as perceived quality. (Aaker 1996, 109-110)

Since brand associations are usually tied to factors unique to the individual brand, the challenge when measuring them is to create measurements that work across different product classes and markets. To capture this variety of factors, there are three different perspectives to measure the brand associations: brand-as-product (value), brand-as-person (brand personality) and brand-as-organization (organizational associations). All of these measures focus on factors that provide the brand ways to differentiate from its competitors and finding whether that is true should be the focus of these measures. (Aaker 1996, 111, 114)

Value focuses on the brand's value proposition as a product, and whether it provides the customer value upon purchase or consumption, which usually involves the functional benefits of the brand. This way value is measured on whether the brand provides good value for the money spent on it and if it is perceived as more valuable to purchase rather than its competitors' products or services. The challenges are that there needs to be a frame of reference against other competing brands, and whether value associations are mixed up with perceived quality, overlapping the two measures. However, there are brands for which it makes sense to prioritize value over perceived quality, especially when high competition makes providing products or services with good value for price the priority. Brand personality becomes vital when the consumption of the brand is linked to certain social situations and perceptions of what kind of people use the brand's products or services. As the relevant brand personality characteristics might vary across different industries since the nature of product and service changes what kind of characteristics the consumer is looking for when choosing which brand to engage with. The measures for brand personality can include metrics such as whether the brand has a clear personality, if the personality is interesting, and if its clear which kind of people would engage with the brand. These are all features that can help the brand differentiate from its competition. Not all products and industries benefit from or need brand personalities, so the measure can't be used universally, and as brand personality is rather stable even if market trends change, it might not always be the most flexible measure of changes in brand equity. Organizational associations focus on aspects of the organization that is behind the

brand such as its employees, company values and programs run by it. This is an especially useful measure when the company is clearly visible actor in the market, product attributes are similar or when there is a corporate brand involved. This measure clearly separates the company from its products, as for example having innovative products versus the company being dedicated towards innovation, which is likely to create more long-lasting associations amongst their customers. These measures can be some such as whether the organization behind the brand is trustworthy, is the brand admired, and if it has credibility. Measuring organizational associations has the same limitations as brand personality, where it is not always relevant across all industries and its limited flexibility when market dynamics change. (Aaker 1996, 111-114)

Brand awareness measures focus on the prominence of the brand in the minds of its customers. The measures should capture the three levels of brand awareness: recognition, recall and top-of-mind. Which one of these is most important depends on the brand's current standing in the market and industry it is in. For example, new and niche brands should focus on recognition, and more established brands care more about top-of-mind presence. Important measures are whether consumers can recall the brand or if they have an opinion about it. As mentioned, the relevant measures will depend on the brand and industry it is in, and additional complexity to measuring awareness is caused by the fact that some customers might not be familiar with the brand name, but might instead recognize symbols and imagery related to it. (Aaker 1996, 115)

The two remaining measures in brand equity ten are focused on market behavior and the brand's performance within it. These are market share and market price & distribution coverage. Measuring the brand's market share and sales gives a good reflection of the brand's current relationship with its customers and relevance within the market. It is an advantageous measure because it is easily available, measurable, and sensitive to both changes within the brand's own standing and its competitors' actions. However, defining the competitors to establish the market share of the brand is complicated and market share can be influenced positively by actions that are often not beneficial to brand equity, such as aggressive sales or promotions. Additionally,

brand-building activities might not always be the driving force behind changes in the brand's market share. (Aaker 1996, 115-116)

The challenges behind measuring market share are why it is also relevant to measure the market price at which the brand's products and services were sold. To achieve this, knowledge of product prices across the market need to be obtained and weighted in order to form a relative market price at which the product was sold. Additionally, to further enhance the reliability of market share data, measuring distribution coverage, as changes in product or service availability have an impact on the brand's market share as well. However, prize level statistics and market coverage figures are complex and often expensive to gather, with also a lot of variance between different markets due to local taxes, laws and in the case of market coverage, also brand and product related differences. (Aaker 1996, 115-117)

When using the brand equity ten for measuring a certain brand's brand equity, it is important to understand the context and market of the brand that's being researched and decide which measures should be used based on that. Using too many of the measures gets unwieldy and might not measure aspects of brand equity relevant to the brand in question. Additionally, it needs to be decided what weight should be given to each measure of brand equity, how they should be combined how to measure different markets and what are the competitors that the brand will be compared against. (Aaker 1996, 117-120)

## 4 Research Methodology

As the aim of this study was to gather insights and understanding, qualitative research was chosen as the research method. Since qualitative research tends to be exploratory and its main purpose to seek insights and construct explanations or theory It was chosen as the method for this research. And as qualitative data appears in a multitude of forms, be it in text, pictures, or verbal communications, it serves well for the aim of the study to gain understanding of community reactions online. (Ghauri et al. 2020, 129-130)

This research uses a mixture of deductive and inductive approach to achieve its goals, as both can be utilized together in research. A deductive method was used to form the research questions using known research and theory as a baseline. In analyzing the research data, an inductive approach was taken to allow the theory to emerge from the data. Inductive research approach suits the purposes of this research as it allows the researcher to condense rich and varied textual data into an easily summarized format, establish links between the research objectives and findings summarized from the research data as well as develop models and theories based on structures that are evident from the textual data. (Thomas 2006, 238) As the aim of this study was to gain insights in how CRM affects customer-based brand equity within the context of the video games industry using rich textual data as the main source of information, inductive approach suits the goal of the research well in finding patterns and themes from the gathered data.

Multiple case study was chosen to gain a wider understanding of the phenomenon, include different kinds of online communities and industry “categories” on both PC and mobile gaming. The chosen cases were “Days of Nature and “Days of Healing” CRM campaigns by Thatgamecompany in their mobile game Sky: Children of Light and “Plex for Good” CRM campaign conducted by CCP Games in their long running PC game Eve Online.

In the age of information technology, internet provides a rich source of information and data. Through multiple online forums, internet publications and social media platforms,



geographic boundaries and cultural lines are crossed and mixed which provides access to unparalleled amount and variety of information. To interpret this rich variety of data online, netnographic research is used as the method of analysis.

#### **4.1 Netnographic Research**

Netnography is the application of ethnography to study the forming of online communities and the methods of communication and cultures that form within them using computer mediated communications as the source of data (Kozinets 2010, 60; La Rocca et al. 2014, 691). Netnography is directly linked to the rise and relevance of social media and the online communities and cultures that are developed within these digital platforms, the effect of which on buying behavior cannot be ignored (La Rocca et al. 2014, 691). As the availability of data and low barrier for communication shape the way companies and customers engage with each other and seek information, understanding these interactions and their effect on customer perceptions is crucial.

Netnographic method has proven to be a highly useful research method for marketers in understanding communities online and has been widely used to both research how online communities transform the meaning of companies' marketing messages and vice versa (La Rocca et al. 2014, 691). Netnography has many advantages in marketing research, such as providing access to direct and rich consumer insights, communications, and expressions unobstructed by the researcher's presence (Kozinets 2002, 70), which makes it ideal for researching consumer-based brand equity as the online communities are often where consumers partake discussions around the brands they engage with the goal of informing and influencing others (Kozinets 2002, 61). In terms of data collection, according to Kozinets et al. (2014, 263) netnographic field data has four distinct advantages to it:

1. Accessibility
2. Communicative variety
3. Communication connections across platforms
4. Auto-archiving

As this research aims to understand the consumer-based brand equity impact around video game brands, which being digital products, have their communities form mostly online, netnography offers the needed toolset for collecting and analyzing the relevant data.

The challenges of netnographic research include the sheer volume of the data available, online anonymity and the difficulty of categorization (Kozinets et al. 2014, 262). In order to limit these problems, this study focuses on finding information using keywords related to the cases studied, and data is categorized according to each case, and based on which dimension of brand equity the source of data relates to as well as the nature of the data source. Also, even though a lot of the information search and communication that was previously done offline has moved to internet, netnography provides only a partial view without including the “real world” to its analysis (Kozinets et al. 2014, 264-265). Another important aspect of netnography is the ethics of netnographic research which needs to be taken into consideration.

## **4.2 Case study**

Yin (2018) defines case study as an empirical method which: “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident”. Case study allows the researcher to look at the phenomenon that’s being studied in context, collecting data that is actually taking place and gain particular understanding in the topic being researched (Farquhar 2012). Case study is often exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive, and the favored method of research when the research questions are concerned with “how” and “why” instead of “what” (Ghauri et al. 2020, 103). Therefore, case study suits well as the research method for this research and is used.

When case study contains more than one case, it is considered a multi-case study. Multi-case study is considered a variant of the single-case study within the same methodological framework, so by their nature they are not uniquely distinct. Multi-case study provides the advantage of more robust data but can take more resources and time commitment compared to single case data. (Yin 2018) In order to build a broader

understanding across different brands in the video games industry, a multiple-case study was chosen as the method for this research.

### 4.3 Data Collection

The data used in this research consists of qualitative second hand data, which has been collected from company social media platforms, fan communities online on sites such as reddit and closed communities like Discord, as well as online publications discussing gaming related matters by searching information and discussion around the chosen CRM campaigns. Names of the CRM campaigns and brands the behind them were used as keywords when conducting the search for data. All data was archived manually instead of mining tools in order to enter the field data with a netnographic focus and build a deep understanding of the phenomenon. When gathering data from discussions and customer reactions to the brand's social media posts, forums, discussion boards and other publications, comments and discussions that did not relate to the CRM campaign in any manner were not collected for the analysis. For the research a total of 289 data sources were identified and archived across different platforms and communities. The breakdown of these sources can be seen in the table 1.

Data source type	Amount
Articles	28
Facebook Posts	12
Instagram Posts	9
Tweets	189
Reddit Posts	6
Forum posts	13
Discussions in Discord	27
Blog Posts	5

Table 1. List of data sources

All gathered data was stored in Microsoft Excel and sorted by the case in question, which dimension of brand equity the data source relates to and data source. Although technically all information posted publicly in the web is considered published and

subject to further quotations and analysis, for ethical and privacy reasons all social media data will be anonymized (Kozinets et al. 2014, 268).

#### **4.4 Data Analysis**

In order to understand the complexity and nuances of the rich available data online, Kozinets et al. (2014, 269) recommend an “old-fashioned” hands on approach to analyzing netnographic field data instead of automated processes which might mislead the researcher’s approach to analyzing the data through the pre-defined programming. This is what this study aims to do follow through storing and re-reading the data gathered through which the analysis was made.

All gathered data has been archived and documented using Microsoft Excel, sorted individually for each brand, and within divided to the four different dimensions of brand equity which the data at hand is seen related to. This process allows to build the breadth of the impact and community response to CRM activities for each project separately and sorting them according to each dimension an analysis of the impact of CRM on each dimension of brand equity can be drawn. This way themes and patterns in the data can be identified based on the impact on each brand equity dimension and where do these interactions take place in order to gain a broad understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, to gain an overview of the community sentiment and reactions around each brand’s CRM campaigns, the collected textual data from community reactions around each campaign has been coded and compiled in NVIVO 12 to form a word cloud and sentiment analysis which are used in the analysis.

#### **4.5 Reliability and Validity**

Yin (2018) states that four types of tests are often used to establish the level of quality in empirical research that can be applied to case research: Construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. The four tests, how case studies respond to them and at which point of the research the test should be addressed can be seen in table 2.

Test	Case Study Tactic	Phase of Study Addressed
Construct validity	Use multiple sources of evidence Have key informants review draft case study report	Data collection and composition
Internal validity	Do pattern matching Do explanation building Address rival explanations Use logic models	Data analysis
External validity	Use theory in single case studies Use replication in multiple-case studies	Research design
Reliability	Use case study protocol Develop case study database Maintain a chain of evidence	Data collection

Table 2. Case study tactics for four design tests (Yin 2008)

Construct validity is often challenging in Case study research as it is often criticized for being based on subjective judgement and seeking for data that already confirms the beliefs held by the researcher. To combat this, it is important to use multiple sources of evidence, establish a chain of evidence and have the case study report reviewed by a key informant. (Yin 2018)

Internal validity is crucial mainly for explanatory studies, where causality between different variables is tried to establish. This same logic cannot be applied to exploratory or descriptive studies. Additionally, when making inferences based on data collected during the study, it is important to make sure all other potential explanations are closed

out. Internal validity can be improved through four analytic tactics: Doing pattern matching, explanation building, addressing rival explanations and using logic models. (Yin 2018)

External validity concerns whether the study results can be generalized beyond itself. This is a challenge when conducting qualitative studies. In order to reach external validity, these issues need to be accounted when conducting the research design, establishing a solid theoretical base and through replication with multiple-case study. (Yin 2018)

Reliability measures whether the same results can be reached if the research is replicated following the same steps and research methods as the original. In case study, replicating the study is challenging, and opportunities to do so are rare. The general method of establishing reliability is through transparency, clear documentation and making one's research methodology and data gathering easy to follow. (Yin 2018)

## 5 Research Findings and Analysis

This chapter discusses the findings and analysis of this research. Firstly, each game and brand are briefly discussed, and the CRM campaigns of each company introduced. Then the overall community sentiment for each CRM campaign is discussed utilizing a word cloud based on the collected data, which is used in order to find out how the CRM campaigns ranked in factors affecting CRM success such as brand-cause fit. After this the impact of each CRM campaign on all four dimensions brand equity are discussed in their own chapters, with finally a chapter conducting a cross-case analysis on the differences between these two cases.

### 5.1 Sky: Children of the Light

Sky: Children of the Light is a free to play mobile game created by a game studio named Thatgamecompany, that first became widely known for their hit game Journey, which broke the PSN sales records of its time (Gamasutra 2012) and the studio has been widely cherished for their game design focus centering around positivity and emotional experiences and distancing itself from violence and competition which can be held common among video games. The company's co-founder and figurehead Jenova Chen has given multiple interviews about his design ethos and aim to push the video games as a medium and industry by exploring new ways of eliciting emotion and engagement (Financial Times 2019).

Sky: Children of the Light is no exception to this principle and became quickly known for its different approach to mobile gaming compared to the norm in the highly competitive market. The game released first on iOS mobile phones in July 2019 and arrived on Android devices in April 2020 with a port to the Nintendo Switch console scheduled to arrive in 2021. The game is a puzzle platformer in which players explore a world uncovering its secrets in order to progress through a story told within the game. Sky can be played through as a single player experience, but its core mechanics rely heavily around multiplayer and engaging with other players. These interactions focus on positivity with features and emotes like hugging and giving other players high fives and sharing items and benefits with other players boost both players' progress towards their next goal. The game has reached success with its unique approach to mobile

gaming and it had been downloaded over 50 million times by October 2020 (Pocketgamer 2020). The monetization of the game is centered around purchasing cosmetics and in game currency that can be used in different events and even shared with other players, following the game's focus on altruism and teamwork (Forbes 2019).

Thatgamecompany has launched two different CRM campaigns within Sky: Children of the Light. The Days of Nature, which was held to aid reforestation after the wildfires in Australia and Amazon as well as Days of Healing, that aimed to aid in the global pandemic crisis caused by COVID-19. In Days of Nature the company partnered together with the non-profit organization One Tree Planted which focuses on planting trees to fight deforestation and protect biodiversity (One Tree Planted 2020). The trees were planted in Australia and Amazon after the widespread wildfires on each continent. In this campaign Thatgamecompany sold an exclusive cosmetic item in the game called "Earth Cape", which cost \$4.99, and promised to plant one tree together with the non-profit for each item sold. The campaign reached the result of total 40,576 trees planted together with the non-profit.

Days of Healing saw Thatgamecompany working with the medical organization Doctors Without Borders in gathering funds for the non-profit's COVID-19 relief fund. In the Days of Healing, players could purchase a "Healing Pack" that was sold for the price of \$19.99 and included a flower cosmetic hair accessory and 75 candles which are the currency used in the game. All net proceeds from the pack were donated to Doctors Without Borders, and the Thatgamecompany donated \$1,027,340 to the organization in the end of the campaign. (Thatskygame.com 2020) As both of these CRM initiatives were announced together, and their results were shared at the same time, this analysis will mostly focus on their impact together on the brand equity of the game. The initial announcement of both campaigns can be seen in figure 3.





Figure 3. Sky: Children of the light CRM campaign announcement

## 5.2 EVE Online

Eve Online is a PC game developed by an Icelandic game studio CCP Games. In the game, players are placed in an open-world Sci-fi universe, where they captain their own spaceship and are given freedom to do whatever they want with minimal restrictions.

The game has been live for 17 years, which would place it as the 6<sup>th</sup> longest run massively multiplayer online game. Despite its high barrier of entry as older players have been able to amass large amounts of resources and already established guilds dominate the game's inner politics and high learning curve due to the complexity of the game mechanics, the game still has a userbase of 300 000 monthly players (Venturebeat 2020b) and has been able to reach a higher active player count in 2020 than it had in 2016 (PC GamesN 2020). The game is well known for its large scale space warfare between competing guilds (Wired 2014), expensive ships with their prices ranging in tens of thousands (International business times 2013), and the

freedom within the game universe, where players are allowed to do almost anything they can achieve with the game mechanics.

Plex for good is a long running CRM campaign in Eve Online which was first launched in 2005 to aid the victims of Indian Ocean tsunami. The program has since then been run total of nine times, each time gathering funds to aid in the response to a current natural disaster. Below are all countries and disasters listed along with the donation amounts gathered during each Plex for Good campaign (Eveonline.com 2020a; Eveonline.com 2020b)

- 2005 - \$25,326 – South East Asia (tsunami)
- 2010 - \$34,350 – Haiti (earthquake)
- 2010 - \$38,900 – Pakistan (monsoon)
- 2011 - \$44,600 – Japan (earthquake and tsunami)
- 2011 - \$32,900 – United States (Hurricane Irene)
- 2013 - \$190,890 – Philippines (Typhoon Haiyan)
- 2015 - \$103,650 – Nepal (earthquake)
- 2020 - \$107,454 – Australia (bushfires)
- 2020 - \$135,550 – Global (COVID-19)

In the campaign, players in Eve Online can donate the in game currency of the game called Plex to the cause, which can be purchased in the game store and is used to pay for the player's reoccurring subscription to the game. In the end of the campaign, CCP Games tallies up the total dollar value of donated in game currency and donates the said amount to the non-profit organization named as the recipient for the CRM campaign.

Because of data availability, this analysis will focus mostly on the two most recent installments of Plex For Good to gain a current view of the impact of this CRM campaign to the game's brand equity. The first campaign collected funds for Red Cross in their response to the Australian bushfires. The announcement of this campaign can be seen in figure 4. The second campaign aimed to donate the funds to the COVID-19 response fund by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the announcement can be seen in figure 5. After receiving community feedback, the company added an option

for the players to direct their donations to John Hopkins Center for Health Security (CHS) instead of WHO in the campaign.



Figure 4. Plex for Good Red Cross announcement

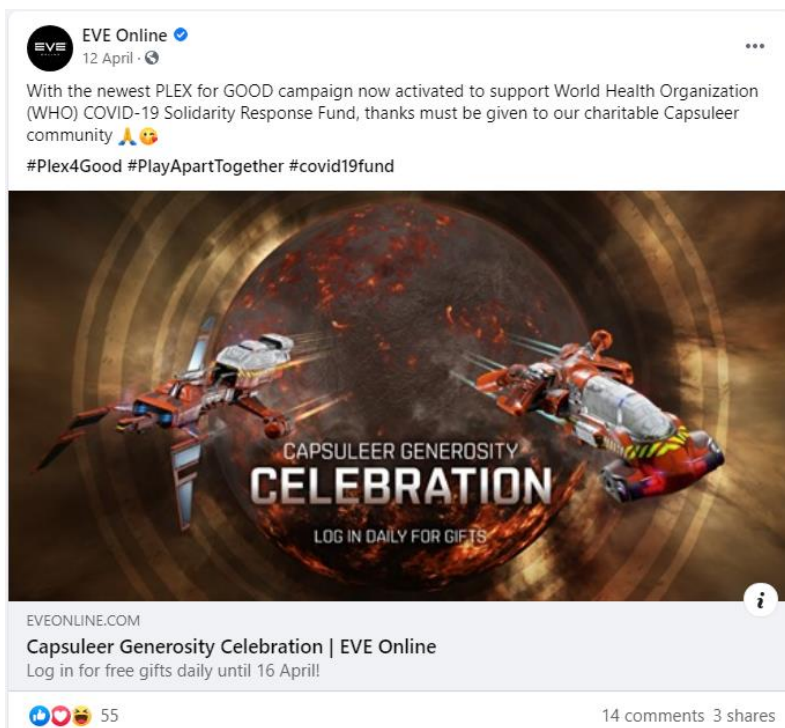


Figure 5. Plex for Good WHO announcement

### 5.3 CRM Campaign findings

In this chapter, the CRM success factors for each campaign are discussed to determine how well each brand organized their campaigns. Each campaign's community reactions are coded for sentiment analysis using NVIVO 12 in order to gain an overview of the community reactions towards the campaigns. Using the sentiment analysis an overview of the customer perception of the campaign is generated, and different factors affecting the successfulness of the campaign are discussed.

The cause-product fit can be estimated on the same standards for both campaigns. As video games are hedonistic products instead of utilitarian, the product fit for both campaigns are perceived as high as stated by Chang (2008, 1105) as well as Westberg & Pope (2014, 430). Both brands are also supporting complementary causes rather than consistent, which according to Chang & Liu (2012, 645-646) provides a higher impact for CRM campaigns conducted by brands around hedonistic products.

#### 5.3.1 Sky: Children of the Light

For Sky: Children of the light's CRM campaigns, 305 comments from the players related to the CRM campaigns on the brand's social media posts, Reddit and Discussions on the game Discord channel were gathered for a sentiment analysis and the breakdown of comments divided between different sentiments can be seen in table 3.

<b>Total Positive Comments</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>Very Positive</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>Moderately Positive</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Total Negative Comments</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Moderately Negative</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Very Negative</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Neutral Comments</b>	<b>16</b>

Table 3. Breakdown of Sky: Children of the light community sentiment

The community response to the brand's CRM campaigns were overwhelmingly positive, which would indicate a good brand-cause fit. With the game's goal of fostering

altruism and compassion, donating to reforestation and pandemic relief through CRM are a well-fitting concept. As both causes were cherished by the players of the game, it could be seen that the brand-cause fit between both causes was strong. Beneficial factors seen here for a strong brand-cause fit are marketing strategy fit between the brand and both causes (Zdravkovic et al. 2010, 158), both causes are linked with widespread health and environmental issues (Kotler & Lee 2005, 84) and currently ongoing disasters (Vanhamme et al. 2012, 266).

When looking at the two different CRM offers within the game, the \$4.99 price point for the “Earth Cape” seems to have reached an optimal cause-related product price, with very little if any controversy around the topic. However, in the case of the “Healing Pack”, many players felt like the price of \$19.99 was too much for them, even if the pack came with additional in-game content on top of the visual asset. Especially many players from countries with lower levels of income voiced their concern over the price, and some even stated how large of a portion of their income purchasing the pack would be. Even though the donation size was set to be the entire revenue of the campaign, this did not prevent the players from perceiving the price as too high for a cause related purchase.

However, contrary to findings of Nguen (2015, 191), the higher price of a cause-related product did not lead to increased skepticism among customers, but this is likely due to the company’s clear communication around the fact that entire revenue is donated to the cause, which does highlight the importance of donation size and framing it in clear dollar values as observed by Chang (2008, 1105-1106). Most of the player complaints around the price therefore focused around the price overall being too high for them to obtain, and discussing how they would like to contribute, but won’t be able to, and that the campaign would be able to gather more funds to the cause if the cause-related product was sold at a lower price, an example of which can be seen in figure 6.



Figure 6. Negative community reactions to the CRM item price

However, there were players who would point out to others the donation amount and defend the brand's decision, which is an indication of a strong brand equity and overall positive image generated by the campaign as well as further proof of the importance of the relationship between the cause-related product's price and framing of the donation size. An example of this can be seen in figure 7.

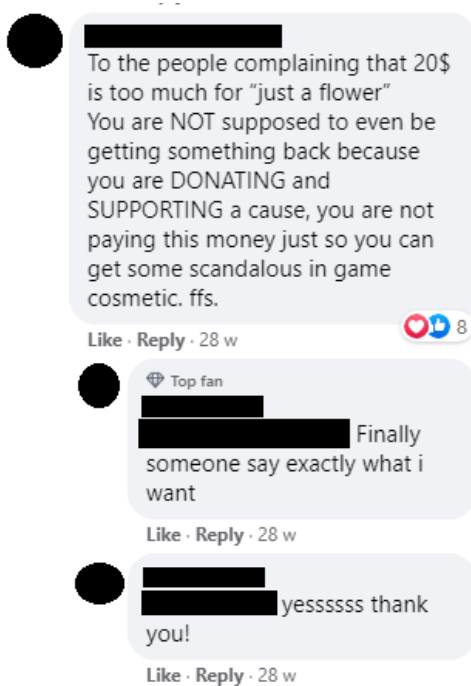


Figure 7. Players defending the brand

The CRM approach of Sky: Children of the Light can be perceived as tactical, since the campaigns were held as a single time sales promotion with no further relationship was built between the brand and the causes, and no major aspects of the brand's product line or marketing mix have been linked to the causes supported. However, despite this the impact of the promotion can be seen as positive due to the strong brand-cause fit, and no signs of skepticism were seen amongst the players which is one of the risks of tactical CRM listed by Varadarajan & Menon (1988, 67).

### 5.3.2 Eve Online

For Eve online, 200 comments from the brand's social media posts, Twitter, Reddit and Eve Online forums related to the Plex for Good campaign were archived and run for sentiment analysis. The results of the analysis are divided between the different sentiments identified in figure 11.

<b>Total Positive Comments</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>Very Positive</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Moderately Positive</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Total Negative Comments</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Moderately Negative</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Very Negative</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Neutral Comments</b>	<b>6</b>

Table 4. Breakdown of Eve Online community sentiment

From the sentiment analysis, it can be seen that the community sentiment around the CRM initiative is highly positive, even despite the vocal complaints towards the causes. The player base of Eve online is clearly skeptical of both the Red Cross and WHO as organization, and they are eager to voice their discontent against the organizations, which indicates a low brand cause fit. Both organizations are perceived as poor recipient for funds collected through a CRM campaign, although for different reasons. Red Cross is accused of being inefficient with the funding they receive and spending them to administration costs instead of directing them towards the causes they are meant to support. Further on, players shared news articles of Red Cross withholding

funds during the Australian fires for which the CRM campaign donations were to be directed to criticize the organization. As with the WHO, players stated that they did not trust the organization in the wake of conflict over the organization's responsibility in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many players shared their opinion of not wanting to fund the organization due to these controversies. Following this feedback, CCP Games added an option during the COVID-19 Plex for Good campaign to donate to John Hopkins Center for Health Security (CHS) instead of WHO (Eve Online 2020c). Examples of such negative reactions can be seen in figures 12. and 13.

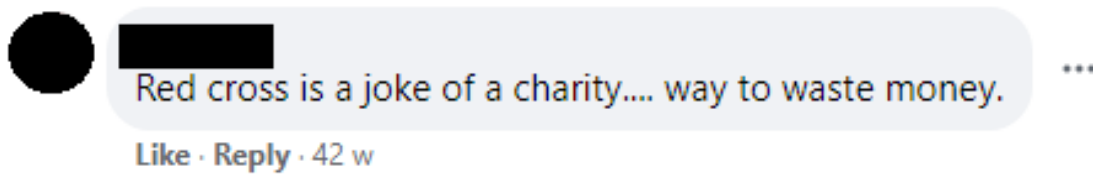


Figure 8. Negative reaction to Red Cross

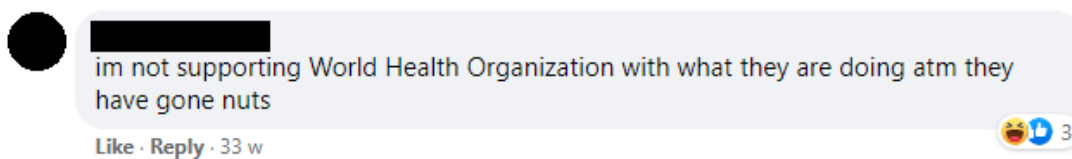


Figure 9. Negative reaction to WHO

Nevertheless, despite the negative attitudes of some players towards the causes, the overall community sentiment around the CRM campaigns were positive, and there is no evidence of a spillover effect of the negative attitude from the causes towards the brand. Further on, the negative reactions did not have a large impact on the success of the campaign itself, as both of them were able to gather some of the largest donations in the history of Plex for Good initiative. Eve Online seems to have been able to improved their prominence fit on the campaign towards Red Cross in the end through their communications including a video of an Australian firefighter discussing the contributions of the campaign, which received a much more positive response from the community compared to the initial reactions towards the cause. Despite this, there were still skeptical comments towards the use of funds gathered, but not as strong of a reaction as the initial announcement of the campaign received. Just like in the case of Sky: Children of the Light, both causes chosen contributed to the same widespread environmental and health issues and ongoing crises, which according to Kotler & Lee



(2005, 84) as well as Vanhamme et al. (2012, 266) make them ideal causes to partner with.

As the players are free to choose their donation size, and all of its value in dollars is directly donated to the charity in question, the donation size and framing are considered to be well set for a successful CRM campaign. There was some confusion among players on the conversion rate of the in-game currency to dollars, but both the game's communications and other community members helped players asking such questions reach the right number, and the final total sum was communicated by Eve Online at the end of the campaign. This transparent CRM campaign arrangement also leaves very little space for skepticism among the customers, which is supported by the observations of both Varadarajan & Menon (1988, 69-70) and Kotler & Lee (2005, 101).

As Plex for Good has been run by the brand since 2005 consistently, and it has been a steady part of their marketing mix, the CRM approach of Eve Online could be considered quasi-strategical where greater benefits compared to purely tactical campaigns should be expected according to Varadarajan & Menon (1988, 67).

## **5.4 CRM Brand Equity Impact Findings**

In this chapter the impacts of CRM campaigns to the brand equity of each game are discussed. This study uses direct method of measuring brand equity from customer response to the brand's marketing activities as suggested by Keller (1993, 12-13). The chapter is divided based on the dimensions of brand equity, as the CRM campaigns' effects on each dimension of brand equity is discussed. Finally, the two cases are compared in a cross-case analysis.

### **5.4.1 Brand Awareness**

According to Hoeffler & Keller (2002, 79) CRM is a good tool for building brand recognition through their associations to the related causes, but not brand recall among non-customers through exposure to the brand since most of the focus in running CRM is in interacting with the current customers of the company. In this research, this assertion is slightly challenged as the CRM campaigns were picked up by related

media around video games, and the social media activity of the company around the campaigns allows people to share the CRM messages forward, expanding the reach of the Brand's communications beyond their usual audience through word-of-mouth.

For Sky: Children of the Light, most of the publications that published articles around the CRM campaign were mobile gaming focused such as Droid Gamers and Pocket Gamer, but also other more console and PC market focused ones, namely Gamasutra and Gamespot. Additionally, the technology focused Venturebeat published an article highlighting the results of the campaign. Additionally, as social media is an effective tool for building brand awareness (Godey et al. 2016, 5839), the social media posts concerning both the announcement of the CRM campaign and its results were shared over 1180 times by its followers, exposing their networks to the brand. As the CRM campaign included visual assets that the players gained through their purchase, many of them were eager to share images of their in game characters wearing the cause related assets as well , which further contributes to the brand's visibility on social media platforms.

As for Eve Online, different installments of Plex for Good have been regularly published by different gaming related publications such as PCGamer, Gameinformer, and Kotaku and the game's CRM efforts have seen much more widespread media attention compared to Sky: Children of the Light. The added interest could be caused by the platform difference, as these more established publications in the industry often focus more on PC and console gaming related matters compared to mobile gaming. On top of this, even some of the community organized activities to contribute to the campaign were published by the gaming related media outlets, such as one of the community members auctioning one of the rarest spaceships and donating the proceedings to the Plex for Good campaign towards the Australian bushfires, contributing a single \$33 000 donation through the sale (PC Gamer, 2020).

The social media posts of Eve Online did not reach as many shares and engagement as those of Sky: Children of the Light. However, as Plex for Good is a CRM event where customers are able to raise and contribute an amount of their choice towards the cause, the campaign was successful in eliciting community activity around it which the players were eager to promote on social media. Within the game, players streaming

themselves contribute to the campaign and other activities such as guilds gathering funds together or competitive player-versus-player events were shared by the players to bring attention to the CRM program and encourage participation.

From this evidence it can be stated that CRM campaigns can impact brand awareness through brand recall in the video game industry, as they give brands opportunities to leverage the CRM campaigns and their contributions for public relations through gaming related publications. Additionally, through their digital communities, the CRM campaigns can contribute to word-of-mouth as players share their contributions and campaign results.

#### **5.4.2 Brand Associations**

Brand associations are the images, thoughts, and attitudes that the customer holds towards a brand (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000, 39; Kotler 2009, 241). This chapter discusses the impact of the case CRM campaigns to each game's brand equity. To support the analysis, community reactions, comments and discussions surrounding the CRM campaigns were coded into a word cloud using NVIVO 12.

When the Days of Nature and Days of Healing initiatives were announced on the social media channels of Sky: Children of the Light, the initial response of customers was overwhelmingly positive, which can be seen as a result of a good brand-cause fit between Sky: Children of the Light and the receiving causes. When looking at the word cloud built from community reactions and discussions around the campaign in figure 10., words like "love", "amazing", "help" and "charity" are commonly used among the players, which shows positive brand associations that have been built with the campaign. These associations contribute to the brand attitudes help by the customers (Keller 1993, 4-5), and through this to the construct of brand personality as listed by Aaker (1996, 112-113) in the brand equity ten.



The Earth Cape elicited much more of such reactions and engagement from the community compared to the flower accessory for Days of Healing. This could be attributed to a few different factors. Firstly, the accessory introduced a bug in the game which “broke” certain visual features of the player’s character which made wearing the accessory impractical during the start of the campaign, but players did share the images of these bugs, most of which they found funny so this did not cause large negative sentiment. Secondly, the accessory was covered by different hairstyles which was brought up by disappointed players as seen in figure 12. And thirdly, the \$19.99 price point was brought up as too expensive by multiple players, which formed a bigger barrier for participation when compared to the \$4.99 price for the Days of Nature pack.



Figure 12. Days of Healing Community reaction

This behavior can be seen as a manifestation of the CRM campaign evoking brand feelings in the customers of the brand, where they get to improve their own self-worth and social approval by being able to take part in doing good, as suggested by Hoeffler & Keller (2002, 80-81). This is enabled by the visual aspect of the campaign, as players can easily show their support to the causes by wearing the visual assets which supports the statement of Hoeffler & Keller (2002, 80-81) that visual assets related to the cause help customers build brand feelings when they can show off their contributions. However, factors forming barriers for customers to share their

contributions lessen the impact of CRM campaign in terms of building associations among customers through their engagement.

When the results of the campaign were released, the community reactions were highly positive, praising the brand and the community surrounding it. According to Hoeffler & Keller (2002, 81), CRM has the potential to create a sense of brand community within its customers through contributing to a good cause together through the brand. This can be witnessed in the community's reactions to the campaign and its results, as well as the prominence of the word "community" in figure 10. Across all channels related to the game, it is evident that the players feel a sense of pride and accomplishment over their contributions to these causes along with a feeling of togetherness over their common contribution, as seen in the figure 13.

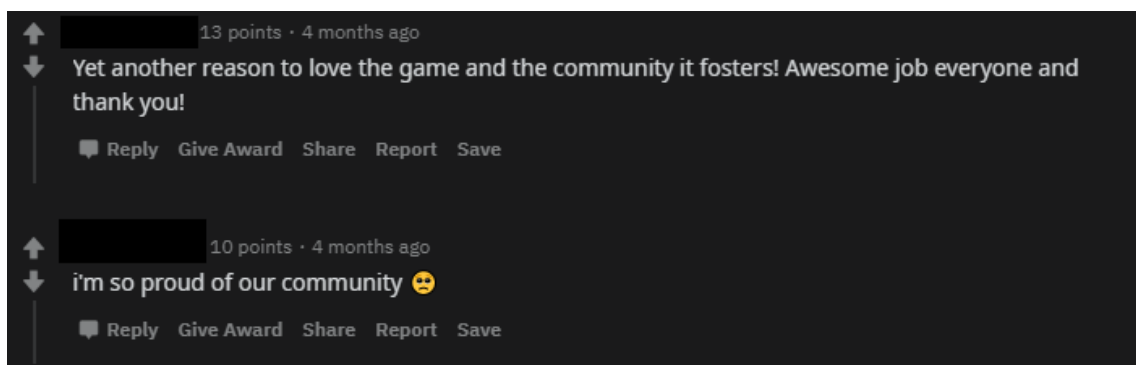


Figure 13. Expression of the sense of community in Sky: Children of the Light

This sharing of one's contribution along with the positive comments regarding the nature of the community surrounding the game when celebrating the results of the CRM campaign can be seen as contributors to symbolic benefits of the brand defined by Keller (1993, 4), which contains the brand's impact on the consumer's social status. As players feel like they are part of a community that stands for good through the brand, they get to build these associations which brings positive benefits to the brand. Further on, some players in Twitter tagged the co-founder of the company, Jenova Chen to their tweets praising the achievements of the campaign, and some commenters directed their positive comments at the development studio Thatgamecompany behind the game instead of the brand, which shows us that in addition to building associations to the brand personality, the CRM campaign was able to build organizational associations towards the company behind the brand, which have been highlighted as

a part of the Brand Equity Ten by Aaker (1994, 114). This is also supported by the prominent presence of the shorthand for Thatgamecompany “TGC” in the word cloud of Sky: Children of the Light.

After the CRM campaign was over, when someone brought up either of the accessories in the game’s discord channel for example in asking where they could get either the cape or the flower, other players would often bring up the charity association of the accessory as seen in figures 14. and 15.

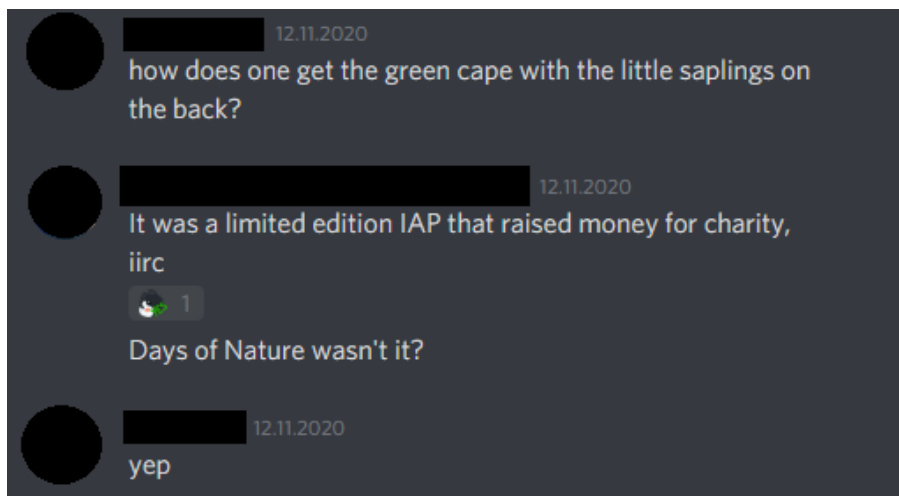


Figure 14. Post Days of Nature Discussion



Figure 15. Post Days of Healing discussion





Here as well, as the results of the campaigns were shared, multiple players gave voice to being proud of being part of the brand community, and this conforms as well with Hoeffler & Keller's (2002, 81) observation of CRM cultivating the sense of brand community and through this contributing to the symbolic benefits of the brand (Keller 1993, 4). Especially as Eve Online is known of its "anything goes" approach to guiding in game behavior, where the company only intervenes in the most extreme misbehaviors, but allows acts such as warfare, piracy and scamming other players, players seem to be especially proud of their contributions strong contrast to the behavior in-game. Example of this can be seen in figure 17.



Figure 17. Expression of the sense of community in Eve Online

Even though players that took part in the Plex for Good received visual items representing their contributions to the campaigns, the activity of sharing images of players' avatars with these items was not as prevalent as it was in the case of Sky:

Children of the Light. Part of this is explained by the facts that the asset was given after the campaign had already concluded which gave players less convenient opportunities sharing their participation, and human avatars are not as central to the game as they are in Sky: Children of the Light, since the focus of Eve Online is in the spaceships that players pilot.

However, players did comment to share that they had donated or intended to do so, as well as shared images of their guilds contributing to the campaigns, remind each other to donate, and comment on announcements of results confirming their own contributions. This does show that the potential of building the similar brand feelings as predicted by Hoeffler & Keller (2002, 80-81), and contributing to the symbolic benefits that exist as associations in the minds of the brand's customers (Keller 1993, 4). Nevertheless, such activity was less commonplace compared to Sky: Children of the Light.

### 5.4.3 Perceived Quality

There is no major evidence present about increased perceived quality among the community reactions of either game. A few comments that could be linked to perceptions of leadership as indicated in Aaker's Brand Equity Ten (1994, 110) did appear in the data in terms of the game or community in question being only ones to do such contributions or campaigns as seen in figure 18. But the evidence for such perceptions being common or concrete patterns emerging from the data are not strong enough to form any conclusions supporting the assumption in a significant manner.



Figure 18. Perception of leadership

#### 5.4.4 Brand Loyalty

Aaker defines brand loyalty as (1991, 39) “the attachment that a customer has to a brand”. In this chapter the brand loyalty effects of the CRM campaigns are discussed based on the findings during netnographic analysis.

On Sky: Children of the Light, during the announcement the first signs of loyalty effects were player’s pledges of donating to both causes and expecting further cause related bundles which they could purchase as seen in figure 19. This commitment repeat purchase behavior is one of the cornerstones of brand loyalty (Oliver 1999, 34). As the game is free to play, and players are able to play it unlimitedly without spending money, the CRM campaigns were also an opportunity to convert these players into spending customers in the game as some players declared purchasing the cause-related assets would be their first time of purchasing something in the game. Additionally, as the game’s design is based around gifting to others, some players also voiced their wishes being able to purchase the cause-related bundle and gifting it to other players. An example of this can be seen in figure 20.

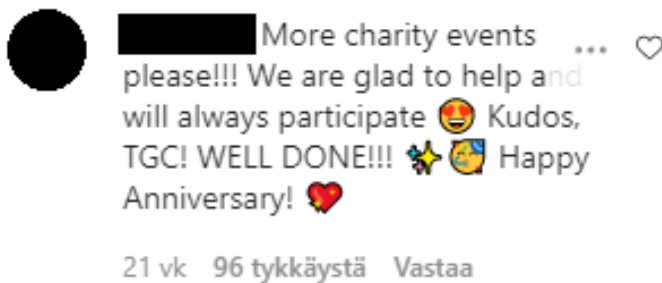


Figure 19. A player requesting more CRM campaigns in Sky: Children of the light



Figure 20. Call for gifting CRM assets

Also, one common sentiment observed was people asking for the events to be done again, especially if they had missed it. There are multiple comments regarding players

wanting to contribute to the causes through the game and hoping for re-runs of the event. Further on, many players expressed their wishes to contribute to more causes through the game, asking the developers to re-run the previous campaigns for the same causes, and to contribute to different ones. All these interactions can be seen as opportunities to elicit repeat purchases from the customers, moving them towards action loyalty as determined by Oliver (1999, 35-36) and therefore the CRM campaigns contributing to brand loyalty.

Among the comments are people declaring how glad they are to contribute; how happy they are with the game and glad to be a part of its community. This is linked to brand loyalty through increased satisfaction, which is one of the metrics of brand loyalty in the Brand Equity Ten (Aaker 1996, 105), and players stepping up to defend the brand when others complain either about the price of cause-related products or current technical issues can also be seen as a significant attachment to the brand and as an act of loyalty. However, it should be noted that the high price of a cause-related product during the \$19.99 Days of Healing pack did cause a negative response, which would indicate that players might not be willing to pay further price premium for cause-related products, but rather seemed to expect cause-related products to have a lower price point, so anyone could donate even a small amount. This could be seen as a negative impact to brand loyalty as price premium is one of the pillars of it as seen in the brand equity ten (Aaker 1994, 105).

On Eve Online, calls for more Plex for Good campaigns are also prevalent. Community members can be seen posting on the forums and Reddit asking to support current events and disasters through the game's CRM campaign as seen in figure 21. Even further than that, as some players were requesting more Plex for Good campaigns from the brand, or inquiring when the next one would be taking place, other players showed confidence that more would come, and advised the original posters to save their currency to donate when that happens as seen in figure 22. This bears evidence of again repeat purchase behavior and deep commitment to the CRM campaign.

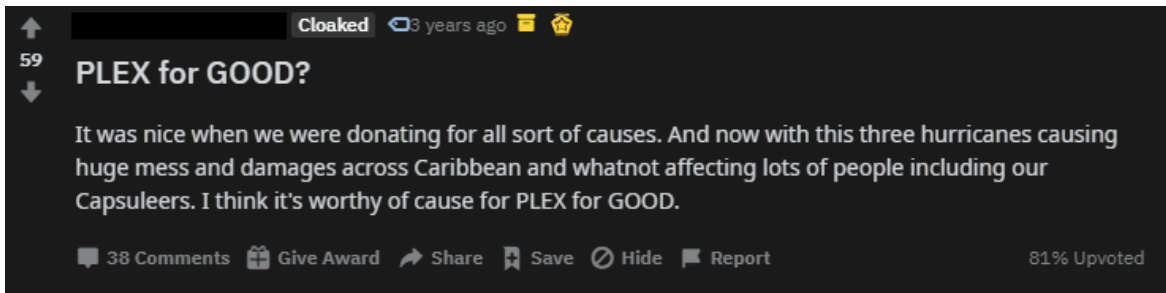


Figure 21. Player asking for more Plex for Good campaigns

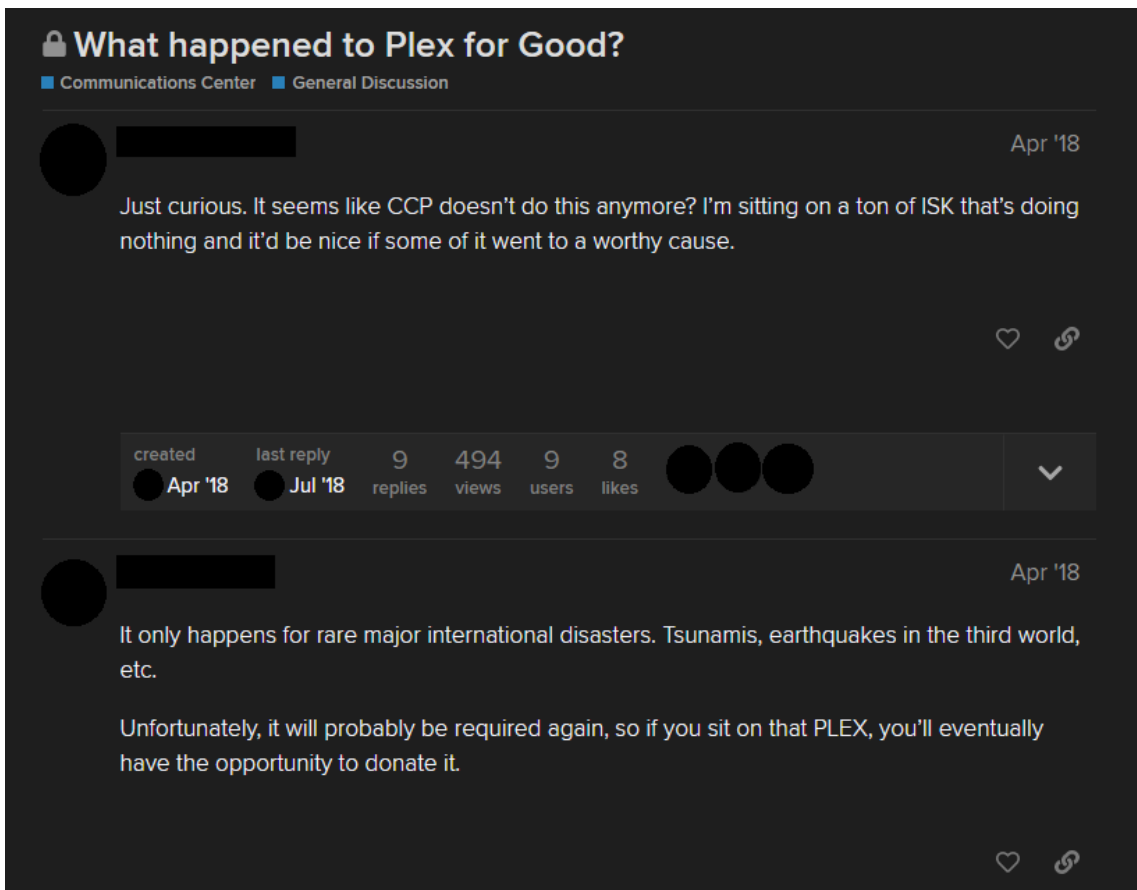


Figure 22. Player advising to save for Plex for Good

Contrary to Sky: Children of the Light, Eve Online did not see its players take a stance for the brand when other players came up with complaints and skepticism towards the company or the CRM campaign. This could be explained by the non-optimal brand cause fit and lower brand equity impact. Additionally, as the brand published the results of the CRM campaign for the Australian bushfire response on Facebook, most commenters seemed to be more focused on protesting against an unpopular game feature that had been recently implemented in the game than discussing the results of the campaign. Therefore, it can be observed that CRM cannot shield the brand from

backlash originating from a fault in the product itself especially if the campaign's brand cause fit is not high.

Beyond this, the CRM campaign clearly creates a lot of engagement among players to both games' social media channels and discussion boards, as well as unique interactions within the game in the case of Eve Online such as auctions, people streaming for the cause and player-versus-player combat events to bring awareness to the campaign. Engagement beyond consumption of the product is seen as one of the brand equity contributors by Hoeffler & Keller (2002, 81), and as Jang et al. (2008, 75) have stated, increased engagement to brand related online communities builds brand loyalty among customers, so this increased engagement can be seen as further contribution to the brand equity of these games.

## 5.5 Cross-Case Analysis

In this chapter the differences in brand equity impact between each case are compared by using a table (figure 27.) to highlight the differences and similarities between each CRM campaign itself, followed by a table listing differences and similarities in the community reactions towards each campaign (Figure 28.).

CRM Campaign Aspect	Sky: Children of the Light	Eve Online
Brand-cause fit	High	Medium
Cause product fit	High	High
Price impact	Mixed	Positive
Donation Framing	Clear	Clear
CRM Approach	Tactical	Quasi-Strategic

Table 5. Breakdown of CRM campaign features

Brand Equity Impact	Sky: Children of the Light	Eve Online
Awareness through publications	Low	Medium
Awareness through word of mouth	Medium	Low

Awareness through community activity	None	Medium
Positive brand personality associations	High	Medium
Positive organizational associations	Medium	High
Brand feelings evoked	High	Medium
Sense of community evoked	High	High
Perceived quality	None	None
Commitment/wishes to re-purchase more case-related products	High	High
Players defending the brand	Yes	No
Engagement	High	High

Table 6. Breakdown brand equity impact of each CRM campaign

The main differences in each brand's CRM efforts which caused the biggest differences in their results are brand-cause fit and the impact of cause-related product's price. Sky: Children of the Light contributed to causes that were better perceived and received by their players than those of Eve Online. On the other hand, Eve Online did not face any controversies regarding the CRM campaign's price, which were brought up in Sky: Children of the Light's Days of Healing \$19.99 cause-related product sale. This is due to the fact that players would choose the amount they wish to contribute themselves.

Both brands' CRM campaigns achieved factors contributing towards brand awareness through their CRM campaigns, but through different methods. Sky: Children of the Light's CRM efforts did catch the attention of some gaming related publications, but they were mostly of lower profile compared to those that shared Eve Online's announcements and activity around Plex for Good. However, more people took part in sharing and discussing Sky: Children of the Light's contributions towards the causes

when compared to Eve Online, which on the other hand saw its community engage in activities in-game which they shared further on social media, bringing attention towards the campaign.

Brand associations were divided differently between the brand and organization behind it when looking at the data. For Sky: Children of the Light, most of the positive comments focused on praising the game and community surrounding it, whereas many of the compliments around Plex for Good were directed towards CCP Games instead of Eve Online itself. Both games were able to evoke pride and sense of togetherness in their communities online, but when looking at the gathered data, Sky: Children of the Light was much more efficient in evoking brand feelings and contribute to the player's self-image through the campaign. This is most likely due to the higher brand-cause fit and strong visual assets tied to the campaign which allowed the participants showcase their contributions to the cause.

Both brands saw their players commit towards re-purchasing behavior when it came to cause-related products, and even asking for more such campaigns in the future, which were also supported by other players. Unlike Sky: Children of the Light, Eve Online did not have players defending the brand when the community showed signs of skepticism towards the causes or complained about the game itself. Finally, both games achieved a high engagement impact with their CRM campaigns.



## **6 Research Summary and Discussion**

In this chapter the findings of the research are summarized, and the theoretical contributions based on the finding discussed. This will be followed by the managerial implications of this research and finally the limitations and future research opportunities are established.

### **6.1 Summary of the Findings**

As the video games industry becomes more saturated and competitive each year, video game brands are looking for different methods of differentiating from their competitors through their marketing activities. Cause-related marketing can provide an efficient tool for such efforts when utilized correctly, increasing sales (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 61; Andrews et al. 2014, 132-133) and improving brand image (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 79; Hajjat 2003, 106; Lafferty & Goldsmith 2003, 428; Kotler & Lee 2005, 97; Westberg & Pope 2014, 431; Patel et al. 2017, 12). However, there has been very little research of the effectiveness of CRM when utilized by digital services and products, and the perceptions of the digital communities that form around these services towards the activity. This is what this research aims to contribute towards.

First, a theory basis of cause-related marketing was established. The goals and main benefits of CRM were discussed, followed by what factors need to be accounted for in order to successfully reach the established goals. This was followed by theoretical discussion of brand equity, and all the dimensions that make up the construct: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty, along with methodology how brand equity can be measured.

In the third part of this research, the research methodology was explained, and analysis of findings followed. Multi-case study was used to form a cohesive view of CRM impacts on brand equity across different types of brands, and netnographic analysis was utilized in order to interpret the multiple different data sources into practical results where patterns could be recognized and turned into actionable deductions.

To summarize the findings of this research, the main research question will be referred to, which stated: **How do cause-related marketing campaigns impact customer-based brand equity in the video games industry?**

The purpose of this research was to find out how CRM impacts the brand equity of video game brands. As brand equity itself is a broad context, four sub-research questions were formed in order to understand the implications of CRM to each of brand equity's dimensions and therefore answer the main research question in a more detailed manner. Each of those sub-research questions will be answered first before addressing the answer of this research to the main research question.

**Sub-research question 1: How does cause-related marketing affect brand awareness for video game brands?**

Very little research has been dedicated to the impact of CRM to brand awareness overall, with mostly Hoeffler & Keller (2002, 79) stating that CRM can contribute to brand awareness, but mostly through brand recognition and not brand recall as it is not likely to expose the brand to new potential customers. The findings of this paper challenge these assumptions.

From both case studies, it can be seen that CRM carries potential for increased brand awareness in the video games industry, as many gaming related online publications are interested in publishing articles about different games' CRM campaigns, and their results. This could be part of the general trend of interest towards games and gaming communities contributing to good causes, which provides companies opportunities for increased awareness in the markets. Additionally, as players were eager to share the announcements and results of such campaigns, as well as discuss and highlight their own contributions to the causes through the games they play, CRM provides a tool for increased brand awareness through word of mouth from its community.

**Sub-research question 2: How does cause-related marketing affect brand associations for video game brands?**

The findings of this research conform with the previous findings of CRM having a positive impact on brand image (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 79; Hajjat 2003, 106; Lafferty & Goldsmith 2003, 428; Kotler & Lee 2005, 97; Westberg & Pope 2014, 431; Patel et

al. 2017, 12). CRM campaigns clearly created positive associations among the customers of both case companies, with words such as “charity”, “amazing”, “great” and “thank you” being prevalent in the community reactions towards the campaigns. These associations also extended to the organization behind the brand, building organizational associations in addition to those directed at the brand itself. However, it should be taken into account that the brand cause fit and price set for cause-related products impacts the associations built through the campaign, and these aspects of the campaign should be thoroughly planned to fit the customer’s perceptions and expectations.

In addition to confirming the positive impact of CRM to brand image, the research was able to delve in which aspects of brand associations CRM contributes to within the video games industry. The positive associations were non-product related and focused on brand attitudes, user imagery and symbolic benefits. Through positive associations built through the CRM campaigns, customers held a positive attitude towards the brand and the organization behind it. As players were eager to celebrate the community’s participation to the good causes and describing their fellow players with adjectives such as “kind” and “awesome”, associations of user imagery were built. Finally, especially when players were able to share their contributions to the causes with visual assets tied to the campaigns, they were able to express their direct support and build their self-image. From the repeat references by customers to the brand’s past charity affiliations, it was also confirmed that the brand associations generated by CRM were long sustained.

### **Sub-research question 3: How does cause-related marketing affect perceived quality for video game brands?**

This research did not find that CRM has a potential of impacting the customers’ perception of the quality towards the brand’s products. This is supported by the fact that the brand associations build during the campaign were almost exclusively non-product related. This is not surprising, as CRM campaigns do not affect how the product itself functions or how it is used by its customers.

**Sub-research question 4: How does cause-related marketing affect brand loyalty for video game brands?**

As research on CRM's impact on brand loyalty is scarce, and the results have been unclear, this research is able to contribute to the discussion on this topic. In the analysis it became apparent that CRM campaigns can contribute to the customer's willingness for repeat purchases and to moving them on the loyalty hierarchy towards action loyalty as determined by Oliver (1999, 35-36). Evidence was also found of CRM increasing customer satisfaction, which can be seen contributing towards further brand loyalty (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán 1999, 1254; Matzler et al. 2005, 159). No signs of increased trust through CRM were found which is the second dimension of brand loyalty. Finally, CRM was found to increase customer engagement on the communities and platforms online around the brands, which also has been proven to contribute to brand loyalty (Jang et al. 2008, 75). However, customers were still found to be price sensitive when it comes to cause-related products even when all the revenue was donated to the cause, lessening risks of the brand being perceived as greedy. This marks that CRM might not build more willingness to pay a price premium at least for cause-related products, thus not contributing to one of the core pillars of high brand equity (Aaker 1994, 105).

**Main research question: How do cause-related marketing campaigns impact customer-based brand equity in the video games industry?**

From the results of this research, it is apparent that CRM has great potential to increase the brand equity in the video games industry. If the CRM campaign has been well implemented with a high brand-cause fit, correct price for the cause-related product and clear donation amount framing, CRM can impact the brand equity of video game brands and those of the organizations behind them in a positive manner.

These brand equity benefits are mainly achieved through increased brand awareness through public relations and word of mouth, positive non-product related brand associations and increased brand loyalty through increased satisfaction, engagement, and willingness for repeat purchases.

## 6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the ongoing research and discussion of cause-related marketing literature. This research combines the research and knowledge built through various literature on CRM and explores the phenomenon in the video games industry and the digital communities that form around it.

On the aspects of CRM campaigns themselves, the study further reinforced that high brand-cause fit, (Westberg & Pope 2014, 430; Melero & Montaner 2016, 166; Yun et al. 2019, 999-1000) clear donation amount framing (Chang 2008, 1105-1106) and high cause product fit (Chang & Liu 2012, 645) improve the results of a CRM campaign. The positive reception towards high visibility and widespread health and environmental causes also confirms the findings of Vanhamme et al. (2012, 266) and to Kotler & Lee (2005, 84) who established that consumers identify highly with such causes. As for the donation size, the findings of this study support those of Koschate-Fischer et al. (2012, 921-922) in that the higher donation amount does not always lead to increased willingness to purchase the cause-related products. These findings establish that the factors affecting CRM campaign effectiveness also apply within the video game industry.

The research results were in accordance with many of the previous findings, such as CRM improving the brand image, (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 79; Hajjat 2003, 106; Lafferty & Goldsmith 2003, 428; Kotler & Lee 2005, 97; Westberg & Pope 2014, 431; Patel et al. 2017, 12), customer purchase intention, (Hajjat 2003, 103; Shabbir et al. 2016, 149; Patel et al. 2017, 14), and protect the brand from negative backlash when the brand-cause fit is high (Varadarajan & Menon 1988, 62). Additionally, this paper was able to contribute towards several research proposals set by Hoeffler & Keller (2002, 86) in their paper regarding the brand equity impact of CRM. Firstly, it was found out that CRM can drive brand awareness, and findings were in accordance with their assumption that the campaign did not lead to enhanced associations towards brand consumption situations. Secondly, as they hypothesized, abstract associations were more likely to transferred from the causes to the brands than concrete associations. Third, the research confirmed with their proposal that CRM causes enhanced feeling of social approval when customers are provided with external symbols and visual assets to show their contribution towards the cause. Finally, it was also found that

providing customers with opportunities of self-reflection for their contributions towards the causes such as celebrating the campaign results enhanced the levels of self-respect achieved through CRM. (Hoeffler & Keller 2002, 86)

The research was also able to contribute to the discussion on whether CRM has the ability to impact brand loyalty, as the findings supporting the assumption thus far have been few. Contrary to the findings of van den Brink et al. (2006, 21-22), who found CRM contributing to brand loyalty only in the case of long-lasting CRM campaigns run with products that have low involvement from the customers, this research does establish that even more tactical-approach to CRM can enhance customer loyalty through repeat purchase behavior and increased satisfaction when the brand-cause fit is high. Further on, this research established that CRM can be used to increase customer engagement with the communities online surrounding the brand, building further brand loyalty through the customer's engagement.

### **6.3 Managerial Implications**

For managerial implications, this research offers various insights and approaches to engaging in CRM within the context of video games industry. The study establishes that CRM can be an effective tool in building awareness through media focusing on video game journalism, as well as word of mouth among the players. CRM campaigns are also efficient in building positive associations towards both the game brand in question, as well as the studio behind the game itself, which provides further opportunities in building the brand of the studio organization. Even though CRM does not contribute towards product-related associations or perceived quality among the players, high cause-product fit CRM campaigns may provide game brands with protection from negative events escalating into larger issues by increasing community goodwill.

CRM campaigns should be accompanied by visual assets that allow players to show their contribution towards the cause if it is possible within the game's systems. This allows people to attach positive associations to the game and express themselves within it and provides further incentive for players to advertise their contributions, increasing the campaign visibility.

CRM also provides a tool for enhancing the sense of community among the game's players, which establishes it as an effective tool for building the platforms and digital groups surrounding the game. If the game's systems allow it, game marketers and community managers should also aim to take advantage of the potential of CRM eliciting community engagement towards different events and activities both within the game itself and in the digital communities surrounding them.

Finally, CRM provides an avenue for building further brand loyalty among the customers through increased satisfaction, will for repeat purchases, and even as a tool for converting non-paying players into payers, which is especially important in the context of free-to-play games. CRM campaigns might even open new avenues of monetization within the games.

#### **6.4 Limitations and Future Research**

This research is bound by certain limitations. Most important of them is brought by the research method. As netnography focuses only on the communities online, it only provides an image of half of the reality, as the communications and interactions within real life are not accounted for. Also, the method of communication online restricts the depth of the analysis, as many of the complex communication methods are simplified when interacting through a computer-mediated interface.

The sheer amount of data online provides another challenge when using netnography as a research method. It is possible to drown in the amount of information, and lose focus of the main research goal, as well as miss critical pieces of information if the researcher does not manage to separate the useful information from the large amount of data available. Another limitation to netnographic case study is the limited repeatability of the research, as cases are difficult to replicate, and the data availability and quantity issues related to netnography further complicate the fact.

As it was established in this research, CRM can be a source of increased brand awareness within the video game industry and the communities surrounding it such as social media platforms and streaming sites. However, this research was not able to

establish the exact impact on brand awareness caused by the campaign. This could provide further avenue of research on how familiar consumers who identify themselves as gamers would be with the CRM activities of different brands.

As the research established the potential of CRM in turning non-paying players into players in free-to-play games, future research could be conducted on how widely CRM is able to turn these players into spenders, and whether these players will repeat their purchasing behaviour even outside cause-related offers and products.



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