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When for-profit companies evaluate potential nonprofit partners focused on youth development, what is the role of symbolic brand association in that evaluation?

Bridging the Gap for Nonprofits: Understanding Corporate Judgments of Nonprofit Brand Image

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Abstract

Literature suggests that, “symbolic associations refer to the abstract cognitions that translate the values of the organization, personality traits associated with the brand and even emotions” (Michaelidou, Micevski, & Cadogan, 2015, p. 1658). Here, in order to measure the value of clear and powerful symbolic brand associations for nonprofits as they seek corporate support, commercial managers evaluated the symbolic brand associations of five nonprofit organizations devoted to youth development through sport. This type of commercial-nonprofit linkage warranted analysis due to the association benefits offered by both sport and youth. Professionals in this sector, standard literature from both commercial and nonprofit sectors, and current professional resources give us a background on the intricacies of the partnership marketplace as it exists today, offering potential reasons for each sector to engage in mutual partnership.

This research adds to the literature by helping us determine the role that symbolic brand associations have in this intersection and by helping nonprofit managers understand the value of such associations in a process full of brief psychological judgment. Usefulness, efficiency, dynamism, affect, reliability, ethicality, and typicality were the measured associations. Affect (compassionate, favorable, friendly) and reliability (responsible, reputable, sincere) of the nonprofit were the two associations that correlated most strongly with corporate engagement (money, time, resources, partnership, leveraging). This correlation underscores the value of clearly articulated symbolic brand associations. Strategies from literature and examples from successful corporate development teams in the nonprofit sector begin to help us understand how symbolic associations are used to create relevance for nonprofits that can use these associations to find connections and grow their corporate alliances.

I. Introduction

In order to answer how for-profit companies examine symbolic associations when evaluating nonprofit partners focused on youth development, several key areas relating to the nonprofit- commercial partnership marketplace warrant analysis. First, it is important to gain an understanding from the literature how relationships between non-profits and corporations have changed over time and where they stand now. Second, a background on the offerings of youth development nonprofits will help clarify the strategic benefits of partnering with this type of nonprofit. Next, an analysis of the main reasons companies partner with nonprofits can illustrate some of the reasons corporations may be interested in these partnerships. Finally, an analysis of why nonprofits should care about clarifying their brand image and how they can build recognizable brands can begin to suggest some areas of growth for nonprofits and can begin tell us more about ways they can become more attractive to for-profit companies. Ultimately, each of these areas can help in answering the role that symbolic brand associations play for nonprofits. An analysis of both for-profit and nonprofit sectors and common partnership reasons can begin to bridge the gap between the two sectors and allow nonprofits to gain an understanding of how they might differentiate themselves to potential for-profit partners. In order to fully grasp the role that nonprofit brand image plays in the formation of these relationships and comprehend the intricacies of this partnership marketplace as it exists today, it is important to engage with professionals within the marketplace, analyze standard literature, and leading professional resources such as IEG.

Previous research in this field typically analyzes what for-profit companies look for from nonprofits in general. This paper not only seeks to identify how for-profit companies evaluate youth development nonprofits specifically, but it also focuses on how corporations value

symbolic brand associations for nonprofits, not just explicit, surface level judgments or functional brand associations. This research also investigates nonprofits that often use sports as a way to positively socialize youth and will also shed light into an area that offers clear associative links to commercial entities but that current research has not explored in depth. This unique approach can help nonprofits in this area decipher in more detail what for-profit decision-making entails by having corporations evaluate five youth development nonprofits on the brand associations of each one. The research will examine The Boys and Girls Club, The Y, KaBOOM!, Playworks, and Positive Coaching Alliance.

The current research gives us an understanding of the success of nonprofit-commercial alliances, but rarely does current research analyze the actual decision making process itself. Some for-profit companies may be more rigorous in their analysis of potential nonprofit partners and companies in general have been more strategic in support and engagement over time. Both functional and symbolic brand associations impact the decisions of for-profit companies in this analysis. Therefore, it is important to apply standard for-profit sector research of symbolic brand associations to the world of nonprofits as well, because the aim of this research is to help nonprofits clarify those intangible, or symbolic brand associations and make them an asset. Current brand association research is focused on the consumer view of nonprofit and on explicit cognitive or functional brand associations. The partnership prospecting process is increasingly a “data-driven approach” for commercial entities, but at times may still include a level of subjectivity that requires more research (Andrews, 2016).

The specific scope of this research is intended to help nonprofits to eliminate part of that subjectivity. Through a commercial managers perception of symbolic brand associations, nonprofits can begin to understand the symbolic brand associations they offer and make them an

asset. Thus, even when for-profit companies don't look into the key associations of a nonprofit closely, they can understand the associations that the nonprofit offers in a clear and concise manner that doesn't require as much scrutiny. This research can, in broad strokes, begin to give researchers, commercial marketers and nonprofit managers a view of this partnership landscape, but is definitely most helpful for nonprofit managers seeking to clarify their symbolic brand associations that may already be present but not realized. This research will be more important for those nonprofits that need to grow rapidly, as more established nonprofits usually do not face the same issues of differentiation and clarity. This research could indicate that although some symbolic associations between nonprofits are similar, the nonprofits that have the clearest associations in the minds of companies also attract the most support and engagement from their corporate partnerships. This could ultimately underscore the importance of clarifying these symbolic associations.

II. Literature Review

1. The changing nature of commercial-nonprofit relationships

When analyzing the decisions that for-profit companies make when partnering with a nonprofit, it is important to keep in mind all the various ways companies can associate with a nonprofit. Nonprofits and for-profit companies can engage in anything “from strategic philanthropy to purpose-based brands to sustainability” (Andrews, 2012). This includes, but is not limited to, cause marketing, corporate philanthropy, fundraising partnerships, promotional partnerships, strategic philanthropy, and last but not least, meaningful marketing (IEG, 2014). Meaningful marketing is the way “corporate partners are seeking to integrate their efforts behind a singular and truly meaningful idea that can achieve economies of scale and generate significant impact” (Goldberg, 2012).

To Goldberg and others, meaningful marketing is the “amalgam of a number of ways that the for-profit and nonprofit worlds have been collaborating lately” (Andrews, 2012). This is relevant because it means for-profit companies today usually do not see their nonprofit partnerships as merely a donation, but as a way to positively impact their own business in terms of both bottom line and consumer perceptions of their brand. Indeed, the research shows that “Relationships between nonprofit organizations and businesses are becoming increasingly varied and strategic as they shift from charitable relationships between benevolent donors and grateful recipients to alliances that create diverse benefits for both parties and added value for communities” (IEG, 2014). This shift indicates that corporations are often becoming more strategic when they evaluate potential nonprofit partners.

Additionally, Giving USA reported that, “Americans donated an estimated \$358.38 Billion to charity”, the highest total ever and a 7.1 percent increase from 2013. Not only is the focus on alignment shifting, but money donated by both individuals and corporations continues to increase, with corporate money representing nearly \$360 billion in 2016 (Goldberg & Knoepke, 2016). Given this increase and shift, investigating *the value* of symbolic brand associations can help nonprofits to understand exactly what this strategy entails for companies. An understanding of the value of symbolic brand associations can help nonprofit managers whether partnership decisions are made after intense data-driven research or are made based only upon those symbolic brand associations that come across most clearly and concisely. As symbolic brand associations are inherently present, this understanding is helpful in either case.

2. Youth development nonprofits

Several youth development nonprofits work to “positively socialize youth and others involved in sport” (Stinson & Pritchard, 2014, p. 225). While it is not immediately obvious why

a corporation would be interested in a youth development nonprofit partner that works in sport, this type of nonprofit is situated uniquely for opportunities because they work on value chain social issues that can thus improve competitive context for corporations. A value chain social issue invested in by a corporation not only supports a social cause, but can also directly impact the long-term ventures of a business because of its relevance to measurable for-profit returns and brand associations.

For instance, “the MLB can undertake CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility] activities that improve the well-being of the youth themselves” (Stinson & Pritchard, 2014, p. 231). At the same time, the MLB’s CSR actions turn those youth into long-term baseball fans, essentially getting “fans into a funnel through philanthropy” (R. Maiore, Personal Communication, February 19th, 2016). While the MLB is a sports property and not a corporation, nonprofits devoted to youth can provide value chain social benefits to corporations that either have a vested interest in youth or can use their vested interest in youth to create a halo effect. A halo effect is a momentary positive brand association, in this case created due to involvement with positively socializing youth. Coca-Cola, Under Armour, Kohl’s, General Mills are companies that already engage in several of these value chain social issues that serve youth (Goldberg, 2012). For instance, Coca-Cola’s Live Positively campaign positively socializes youth by working with the Boys and Girls Club of America, the National Park Foundation and others as a way to gain positive associations to consumer facing products while funding educational programs in local communities (Goldberg, 2012). Further, the most active companies sponsoring social causes are Bank of America, Microsoft, Google, Procter & Gamble. Similarly the most active companies sponsoring education causes are Wells Fargo, Time Warner, Walt Disney and Chase (IEGSR, 2015). In other words, several of the worlds top corporations are utilizing these value chain

social issues for their benefit already, but current research is usually devoted to the success of those relationships, and less attention is given to how those companies judge potential nonprofit partners.

Ultimately, youth development nonprofits are worth investigating because they can, and have, provided values to corporations in several unique ways. Several such nonprofits can offer these value chain social benefits to corporations. While a plethora of nonprofits focus on youth development, little attention has been given to those that use sports specifically to positively socialize youth. Of particular relevance, research suggests a change in focus towards positive reinforcement and quality role models that “will also increase participation rates, perhaps offering a business benefit to the sport brand as well” (Stinson & Pritchard, 2014, p. 226). In other words, a direct link exists between corporations involved in sports and youth development nonprofits that can offer benefits to both groups. While explicit associative links clearly exist between certain commercial brands (in sport or otherwise) and all youth development nonprofits, the symbolic brand associations for certain youth development nonprofits that come across more strongly is perhaps what allows those nonprofits to gain more funding, resources, and partnerships.

While links between nonprofit and for-profit have been explored before, this particular linkage has not been explored and this research intends to do so by investigating the ways that for-profit companies involved in sports evaluate potential nonprofit providers that positively socialize youth in sport. Household names in youth development such as The Boys and Girls Club and The Y, as well other, less recognized nonprofits that offer value chain benefits such as Playworks, KaBoom, and Positive Coaching Alliance will all be evaluated. In this research, although all five nonprofits may offer similar benefits and alignment opportunities for

corporations, their brand image may be evaluated differently, leading to different levels of corporate support. This research could thus underscore the importance of brand clarity for youth development nonprofits as they seek corporate relationships.

3. Commercial reasons for nonprofit support

When for-profit companies partner with nonprofits, they judge nonprofits subjectively and other times objectively. In both cases, companies often focus on the creation of a halo effect for their company or on the brand and mission alignment between themselves and the nonprofit. In a 2015 corporate partner survey conducted by For Momentum (a cause marketing agency in Atlanta), corporations, “When asked to select the single most important factor, 92 percent chose brand and mission alignment” (Rhea, 2015). For corporations, brand and mission alignment means that the nonprofit is aligned with their core values, core purpose, and the core competencies (R. Maiore, Personal Communication, February 19th, 2016). This is consistent with Stinson and Pritchard, who say “Choosing nonprofit partners that are relevant and important to the fan base and align with the competencies of the organization will lead to the most positive results” (2014, p. 224). Essentially, corporations evaluate their nonprofit partners with certain goals in mind, such as “reinforcing specific brand associations/brand images, increasing brand credibility, lowering perceived risk, and generating feelings of sincerity” that may be achieved through “cognitive consistency” with a nonprofit (Becker & Hill, 2006, p. 79). In order to truly reach those goals and get value from that cognitive consistency, corporations also need to partner with a nonprofit brand that can, because of its scale, reach audiences the corporation cares about. At the very least, nonprofits need to make the cognitive connection obvious to corporations.

When a for-profit company seeks this cognitive consistency, they usually intend to gain positive brand associations often described as a “halo effect” and in turn, increased trust,

credibility, and authenticity. As one example, Olympic sponsorship, while not commonly thought of as a sponsorship relating to a cause, is a sponsorship that is sought after because companies are then “associated with the pursuit of excellence” (Porter & Kramer, 2002, p. 58). The Olympics is also valuable to sponsors because sponsors are then “recognized by the audience as a supporter of a worthwhile cause” (Stipp & Schiavone, 1996, p. 23). In essence, the Olympics, one of the most sought after sponsorships in the sports industry, is valuable because of the pro-social brand associations it carries. Thus, nonprofits should recognize the value of their pro-social brand associations and make them as clear as possible.

Overall, cause sponsorship is also often used as a “platform from which to build equity and gain affinity with target audiences” (Irwin, Lachowetz, & Cornwell, 2003, p. 131). However, “engaging a CSR activity can backfire on the company if consumers perceive that the company’s true motives for the CSR activity is only to improve its image to sell more products than to act for the sake of consumers” (Yeosun, Zeynep, 2003, p. 323). In this case, the program a for-profit company undertakes with a nonprofit must be seen as authentic. Thus, it is important that for-profit companies evaluate which nonprofit partners give them that authenticity. This reinforces the importance of cognitive consistency, as “strong fit in CRM is taken as a signal of sincerity” (Polonsky & Speed, 2001, p. 1376).

The above paragraphs outline the various ways that a business can be strategic when evaluating potential nonprofit partners. In essence, companies seek cognitive consistency, otherwise known as authentic brand alignment, that gives them associations that are desirable to key stakeholders and consumers of that corporation. Some research has even suggested that these relationships and associations can result in better competitive context for that corporation. For example, Microsoft’s partnership with the Special Olympics happened because “Microsoft is

squarely focused on developing technology that helps people achieve more. Special Olympics is all about celebrating the achievements of athletes and people with intellectual disabilities. We realized we are very much aligned from a brand perspective” (IEGSR, 2014). Similarly, “AT&T’s “It Can Wait” campaign was not a marketing ploy, but something that is a significant part of AT&T’s brand DNA” (Kander, 2011). Some companies are making this shift, which supports IEG’s claim that relationships between nonprofits and for-profit corporations are becoming “increasingly varied and strategic” (IEG, 2014).

Despite all this information about what for-profit corporations commonly look for in nonprofit partners, it still remains an inexact science, but if nonprofits strengthen their symbolic associations they can gain more control in the process. Some nonprofits struggle to articulate their core competencies or offerings because they do not understand the value of their symbolic brand associations and thus give them less attention. Therefore their brand associations are not as clear or powerful, so nonprofits that would otherwise be seen as a competitive brand that can provide value for a corporation lose out on partnership opportunities. This shows that if the nonprofit aligns with a corporation but cannot show it, that corporation will not be interested. Potentially, this suggests that corporations not only seek alignment with core competencies, but explicit alignment with core competencies.

Scholars debate whether corporations are rigorous in evaluating cognitive consistency in their nonprofit partners, or if their decisions are more subjective, based on a short ‘elevator pitch’ description of the nonprofit. In other words, a for-profit manager may make a partnership decision based on if “employees and customers will know what the organization is about and understand why we [corporation] are connecting to it” (Daw, 2006, p. 134). As Porter and Kramer suggest, “Rather than being tied to well-thought-out social or business objectives, the

contributions often reflect the personal beliefs and values of executives or employees” (Porter & Kramer, 2002, p. 58). It could be as simple as “You’re big, we’re big, so we understand each other” (Kylander & Stone, 2012) The idea that the evaluation process is more based on subjective beliefs than objective evaluation may suggest to some that “Philanthropy will never become an exact science- it is inherently an act of judgment and faith in the pursuit of long-term goals” (Porter & Kramer, 2002, p. 68). While Rich Maiore, VP of For Momentum, has said that strategic analysis is increasing, subjectivity still remains at the core for many for-profits that are evaluating nonprofit partners. In either a subjective or objective for-profit analysis, though, nonprofits that can offer the clearest linkages to a company will ultimately gain more resources and partners.

While some corporations move forward with a nonprofit partner for a strategic reason, some more subjective reasons remain unexplained. Here, I attempt to untangle some of those more subjective reasons for partnership. One of the possible explanations is that for-profit corporations, when they make decisions perceived as subjective, are actually evaluating certain brand associations with brief psychological judgments. As Michaelidou, Micevski, and Cadogan describe:

“brand image differentiates the role of functional and symbolic associations of the brand...functional associations relate to organizational characteristics, the mission, and tangible quality of the organization, whereas symbolic associations refer to the abstract cognitions that translate the values of the organization, personality traits associated with the brand and even emotions” (2015, 1658).

As the literature suggests, symbolic brand associations often reflect and are related to psychological and social values (Chernatony, 1998, p. 421). In fact, nonprofit brand image scales tend to be evaluated based on trust, reliability, usefulness, efficiency, affect, dynamism, and typicality, some of which are functional and some of which are symbolic. Companies that rigorously analyze nonprofits may at times include symbolic associations in their analyses as

well, but are more likely to partner with nonprofits based on functional or clear symbolic associations. Subjective nonprofit partner analysis may only entails brief psychological judgment, underscoring the importance of strong symbolic associations. Thus, the more clarity nonprofits can bring to their symbolic associations, in both subjective and objective analyses, the more success they will have in this space, as research shows “symbolic benefits were significant and positive leading to brand preference” (Salciuviene, Lee, & Chung-Chih, 2007, p. 468).

Most of the research on symbolic brand associations has been devoted to the for-profit sector, but this research is intended to show how clear symbolic brand associations in the nonprofit sector may or may not help nonprofits differentiate themselves so that they can better withstand brief psychological analyses from for-profit managers. An understanding of symbolic brand associations in the nonprofit sector can help nonprofits untangle themselves in the “bland homogenous mass of well-meaning but similar organizations with which donors find it hard to bond emotionally and financially” (Laidler-Kylander & Stenzel, 2014, p. 39). The Boys & Girls Club, The Y, KaBOOM!, Playworks, and Positive Coaching Alliance may offer similar benefits to corporations, but there are certain symbolic associations that allows some to stand out more than others in what otherwise might be considered a homogenous mass of similar organizations. I hypothesize that the youth development organizations that corporate organizations are most willing to fund also have the strongest, and most clear symbolic brand associations. Hopefully, this can help nonprofit organizations identify areas of growth for symbolic brand associations and give managers more control as corporations evaluate partnership fit. Potentially, this research could uncover the idea that these so-called subjective decisions by corporations are in fact psychological analyses that nonprofits have more control of then they realize.

4. Reasons nonprofits should care about symbolic brand associations

While this research is relevant to all nonprofits because it helps nonprofits differentiate themselves, it is more important for those nonprofits that are less well known because otherwise, they would be judged in the homogenous nonprofit mass. In this research, both Boys & Girls Club and The Y have already differentiated themselves as strongly recognizable brands that carry very positive brand associations. Smaller organizations may carry similar symbolic brand associations as the larger nonprofits, but may not be seen as “distinctive, sometimes generating powerful emotional reactions” and instead may be perceived as just another youth development nonprofit (Laidler-Kylander & Stenzel, 2014, p. 39). In order to really differentiate from the rest, a stronger brand becomes incredibly crucial.

Nonprofits should also focus on brand image because of their unique position in the market. They should realize that “nonprofit brand knowledge structures usually have higher levels of trust and confidence that can be transferred to the commercial entity” than other businesses (Dickinson & Barker, 2006, p. 77). As Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel claim, “trust is both a precursor and a result of successful partnerships” (2014, p. 32). However, if nonprofits cannot offer the association of trust and “clear, unique strong favourable brand meanings” are difficult to perceive, then they are not taking advantage of this position in the marketplace (Dickinson & Barker, 2006, p. 77). This should indicate the value of clarifying symbolic associations. It is well worth it if done right because of the opportunities and resources it may result in for a nonprofit.

Further, nonprofits should focus on clarifying their brand image (and thus associations), a brand equity antecedent, because it allows nonprofits to “communicate a certain distinctiveness that will have a positive effect on people’s perception” (Faircloth, 2005, p. 3). Nonprofits can

focus on these “brand equity antecedents” to communicate their symbolic associations clearly and develop a stronger brand (Faircloth, 2005, p. 11). If nonprofits focus on brand equity antecedents, such as brand image, it can “permit the development of stronger relationships and resource provider support. This may distinguish nonprofits marketing to resource providers who do not necessarily receive the tangible reward of a product or service” (Faircloth, 2005, p. 11). In the nonprofit world, research shows that “competition for funding has intensified”, so nonprofits must be more explicit in clarifying their symbolic brand associations than ever before (Laidler-Kylander & Stenzel, 2014, p. 3).

Overall, if nonprofits succeed in clarifying their symbolic associations, this not only results in increased partnerships, but the partnerships they acquire can play an instrumental role in other aspects of the nonprofit. Increased and strategic branding alliances can lead to “cost savings particularly with marketing expenditure, revenue enhancement and unprecedented support for their cause” (Dickinson & Barker, 2006, p. 77). Not only does clarifying symbolic associations result in more corporate partners, but in turn this makes nonprofits for efficient and effective in their missions, which may ultimately be more important than increased partnership opportunity.

5. How nonprofits can build recognizable brands

Nonprofits can differentiate their brand from others by creating brand integrity, establishing distinctiveness, relevance, and passion. As Daw explains, branding makes it clear what an organization does, what they are about, and how these characteristics make them different in a very competitive marketplace. It also helps to begin the process of considering associative links” (Daw, 2006, p. 134). Essentially, some nonprofits have more difficulty in clarifying their brand associations that corporate partners may be interested in.

One of the ways that nonprofits can clarify their symbolic brand associations is through an alignment between nonprofit identity and image. As Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel argue, “The alignment between who you are (identity) and how people perceive you (image) is what creates powerful, trusted brands and is at the heart of the brand Integrity principle” (2014, p. 10). When brand identity and image are aligned, symbolic associations become clearer. One of the most common symbolic brand associations for any nonprofit, let alone youth development nonprofits, is trust. However, certain nonprofits are trusted more than others, not because they can’t offer the same symbolic brand associations to corporations, but because their alignment between identity and brand image is not as strong so the valuable associations they could offer may not come through as strongly.

Nonprofits not in the youth development space in particular have already made an effort to position their brand for clarity, which helps attract more resources and corporate partners (Laidler-Kylander & Stenzel, 2014, p. 41). The Center for Civilians in Conflict organized a re-branding effort around the “clarity that came from an understanding of the nonprofit’s external image and positioning relative to other organizations” (Laidler-Kylander & Stenzel, 2014, p. 41). In other words, an understanding of their symbolic associations and clarifying those associations played a major role in the development of their brand and their organizations ability to acquire resources. Similarly, Stephen Parker, a leadership and organizational change expert, explains that “Knowing and being comfortable with who you are sits at the heart of your ability to be authentic, while your ability to share your values and beliefs creates resonance and build deep trust with your followers” (Laidler-Kylander & Stenzel, 2014, p. 16). In essence, key leaders in the nonprofit world are already thinking about the value of clarifying beliefs and values. This study takes it further by analyzing youth development nonprofits specifically and helps

nonprofits understand how symbolic associations are important in sharing and values and beliefs that create resonance.

Nonprofits are already working on ways to clarify brand image which, as I mentioned before, comes from an organizations ability to align brand identity and image. Although this is much easier said than done, the benefits of doing so include generating powerful emotional reactions and can distinguish one nonprofit from the next. As Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel suggest, “powerful brands need to take a stand and be distinctive, sometimes generating powerful emotional reactions (2014, p. 39). Of course, their argument is that nonprofits achieve that through brand integrity or alignment. They elaborate on this position when they argue that, “brand is the first step for helping people understand the organization” (Laidler-Kylander, 2014, p. 66). As they explain, nonprofits need to clearly articulate who they are, what they do, and why it matters in order to influence external constituents. They explain that the “why” is what allows audiences to emotionally connect. If nonprofits cannot articulate the why, it is unlikely that their symbolic association will be apparent, as “Symbolic associations are abstract cognitions that translate the values of the organization, personality traits associated with the brand and even emotions” (Michaelidou, Macevski, & Cadogan, 2015, p. 702).

Daw further elaborates on this position when she says, “A brand that captures your heart gains commitment” (Daw, 2006, p. 134). However, according to Daw, capturing the heart of external audiences relies on passion, which “must come through in the brand positioning statement and express that emotional and value connection” (Daw, 2006, p. 135). In other words, certain nonprofits focus on service delivery and less on identity, which can make it difficult for external audiences (both consumers and corporations) to begin to understand and connect with the several value propositions that nonprofits often try and advance. If nonprofits clarify their

symbolic brand associations, they can more powerfully and effectively capture the hearts of their external audiences.

III. Methodology & Hypothesis

Nonprofit brand image is often evaluated based on usefulness, efficiency, dynamism, and affect. However, another major study proved “reliability or trustworthiness to be a key element of what charities represent and attempt to achieve” (Michaelidou, Micevski, & Cadogan, 2015, p. 1664). Michél and Reunier also explained that typicality, or how typical a nonprofit is in its “mission category” the higher the giving intentions for that organization will be” (2015, p. 702). The aim of this methodology, which measures all the aforementioned associations, is to identify the ways in which each of the five nonprofit organizations can improve by evaluating which dimensions of brand image need the most growth. In the end, this can help those nonprofits that struggle more to clarify their symbolic associations to realize the value of clarifying their symbolic brand associations, enabling them to improve their competitive context and build trust with corporations that allows them to acquire more resources.

The study will start by asking respondents to give some demographic information about their company and respond about the brand associations they would be interested in to gauge their alignment interests. Then, in order to capture all the symbolic brand associations that a particular youth development nonprofit may offer, I will ask corporations to evaluate five nonprofit organizations by answering 19 likert-scale questions that pertain to usefulness, efficiency, dynamism, affect, reliability, ethicality, and typicality. Although the focus of this research will be on symbolic associations, functional brand associations were included to see what the differences may be. While those dimensions have typically been used to study

consumer reaction to nonprofit brand image, “such a study could clearly identify the link between a charity brand and a corporate brand in case of their mutual partnership” (Michél & Reunier, 2015, p. 707). All of these dimensions “correlate with intentions to donate money and time at significant levels and simultaneously” (Michaelidou, Micevski, & Cadogan, 2015, p. 1664). Due to the changing nature of nonprofit relationships and the multitude of ways in which corporations can partner with a nonprofit, survey participants were asked about their willingness to donate money, time, resources, partner, and leverage partnerships with each nonprofit they were familiar with. Although the dimensions accurately and significantly indicate this correlation, the changing nature of nonprofit for-profit relationships suggested that this was worth evaluating as well. Evaluating correlation between association and corporate support and engagement will help nonprofits identify those associations that are most significant.

In order to effectively and carefully implement the survey, the survey was distributed to for-profit managers who often work in community relations, corporate giving, strategic philanthropy, marketing, senior leadership, at major for-profit companies and those who work at marketing agencies and represent for-profit interests. The survey was also distributed on LinkedIn to those same target audiences. Those who completed the survey and indicated ‘likely’ or ‘highly likely’ to partner or leverage a partnership with a nonprofit were asked to give more qualitative responses. Separate qualitative interviews with successful corporate development teams in the nonprofit sector helped to round out the research and identify ways that they have valued, or not valued, symbolic brand associations. This evaluation will determine if successful corporate development teams realize the value of symbolic associations, as was suggested by Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel in recent research. Informed consent was required and participants were only asked to respond about nonprofits they were familiar with, a pre-test called

spontaneous recognition. Spontaneous recognition was implemented because knowledge of both the sector and charity is essential for accurate evaluation of brand image (Michaelidou, Micevski, & Cadogan, 2015, p. 1664).

As I mentioned previously, and based on the fact that certain nonprofits do a better job differentiating themselves than others, I hypothesize that although youth development nonprofits in general offer similar cognitive consistencies to corporations, some have done a better job in clarifying their symbolic brand associations. Previous research suggests that nonprofits that align show explicit alignment with corporations indeed are more successful at acquiring resources. I believe this study will show that the clarity of symbolic brand associations may even play a larger role than functional associations as for-profit companies evaluate nonprofits for partnership. Ultimately, this may indicate that symbolic brand clarity plays a role in helping nonprofits with similar brand associations differentiate themselves and acquire more funding and resources. If anything, this may encourage nonprofits to rethink the values and resources they devote to clarifying symbolic brand associations as they get a better idea of what corporations truly look for.

IV. Analysis and Results

In total, 24 survey responses were collected from individuals at some of the largest companies in apparel, retail, consumer goods, technology, banking and finance, as well as from marketing agency employees that represent these corporate interests. Of those responses, every single respondent was familiar with The Boys and Girls Club and The Y, while 21% of respondents were familiar with Playworks and KaBOOM!, and 38% were familiar with Positive Coaching Alliance. The highest percentage of respondents (9) came from San Francisco, while

Atlanta (2), Indianapolis, Baltimore, New York, Columbus (2), Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle, and St. Petersburg were all represented in the study. Five respondents also agreed to conduct additional qualitative interviews and four nonprofit managers shared examples of successful corporate development strategies as well. Although the five youth development nonprofits, 24 quantitative survey responses, and the additional qualitative research are not sufficient to provide statistical significance at this point, these results can begin to tell us about both the current partnership marketplace as well as the value of symbolic brand associations that work for those nonprofits.

My hypothesis, based on earlier research, was that powerful and clear symbolic brand associations play an impactful role as for-profit companies evaluate nonprofits for partnership. If proven true, this would indicate that these so-called subjective decisions by corporations are in fact psychological analyses that nonprofits have more control of than they realize. Youth development nonprofits in general offer similar cognitive consistencies to corporations, so I hypothesized that some had done a better job in clarifying their symbolic brand associations, ultimately resulting in more support and engagement from corporate partners. The results indicate that certain symbolic associations do strongly correlate to engagement and support from corporate partners. As you see in table 1, it is worth noting that symbolic associations such as reliability and affect have stronger and more positive correlations to support and engagement than usefulness and efficiency, which would typically be thought of as functional brand associations. All correlations were calculated using the Pearson Correlation coefficient.

Several other strong or moderately strong correlations exist

Table 1: Correlations

	r value	strength
Typicality		
Money	0.5312	moderate
Time	-0.0139	very weak
Resources	0.0008	very weak
Partner	-0.0719	very weak
Leverage	-0.205	weak
Usefulness		
Money	-0.0986	very weak
Time	0.4317	weak
Resources	0.3351	weak
Partner	0.476	weak
Leverage	0.5355	moderate
Efficiency		
Money	-0.4304	weak
Time	0.2864	weak
Resources	0.1686	very weak
Partner	0.2981	very weak
Leverage	0.4364	weak/moderate
Dynamism		
Money	-0.3577	weak
Time	0.5169	moderate
Resources	0.2771	weak
Partner	0.4567	weak
Leverage	0.6037	moderate
Reliability		
Money	0.9269	strong
Time	0.4453	weak
Resources	0.7982	strong
Partner	0.6707	moderate
Leverage	0.5338	moderate
Affect		
Money	0.6242	moderate
Time	0.6038	moderate
Resources	0.836	strong
Partner	0.8059	strong
Leverage	0.7544	strong
Ethicality		
Money	0.6737	moderate
Time	-0.3007	weak
Resources	0.1707	very weak
Partner	-0.0708	very weak
Leverage	-0.2444	very weak

between these associations and corporate support or engagement. As you can see, typicality (how typical a particular nonprofit is in their niche) is moderately correlated to corporate donations of money. Previous research indicated that typicality resulted in higher intentions to donate money, time, or resources, but in the youth development sector, these results show that it only had an impact on willingness to donate money. Not only is typicality less meaningful in this sector, but the results show that ethicality (ethical, moral, righteous) has a stronger positive correlation to corporate donations than typicality does.

Similarly, partners are more willing to leverage a nonprofit partnership with a nonprofit that is deemed useful (effective, worthwhile, helpful). This is consistent with Goldberg’s idea that corporations are willing to “integrate their efforts behind a singular and truly meaningful idea that can achieve economies of scale and generate significant impact” (Goldberg, 2012).

Previous research indicates that nonprofits that can demonstrate their effectiveness, or impact, receive more support. However, this functional or tangible association does not correlate

as strongly as reliability (trust) or affect. Similarly, efficiency had the weakest overall correlations to support of any dimension, which signifies in several ways that corporate

supporters care less about the business acumen of the nonprofit than symbolic associations like reliability and affect.

Reliability (responsible, reputable, sincere) and affect (compassionate, favorable, friendly) were the two symbolic associations that correlated most strongly to both corporate support and engagement with this group of nonprofits. As I mentioned before, this is significant not only because it begins to show the value of symbolic associations but because it demonstrates that the heartstrings can at times, be more effective in attracting corporate support and engagement than hard numbers can. As Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel claim, “trust is both a precursor and a result of successful partnerships” (2014, p. 32). This survey confirms that reliability, or trust, is incredible important as a precursor to partnership. More specifically, these strong positive correlations also indicate that both the nonprofits and the companies that evaluated them cared about these associations

Dynamism (innovative, forward-thinking, progressive) also had strong positive correlations with intentions to donate time and leverage partnerships, which indicates once again, the strength of symbolic brand associations for youth development nonprofits. If nonprofits symbolize dynamism, that nonprofit is more likely to acquire corporate *engagement* from employees and from corporate marketing departments who are willing to promote the partnership with cause-related marketing. This correlation was further supported when one respondent said their company “strongly encourages team members to volunteer time and money to non-profits.” Another corporate member said they are “willing to support a 360 degree partnership with nonprofits that are innovative with the problems they are trying to solve.” While affect and reliability may be more important, dynamism from youth development nonprofits is helpful in attracting further engagement.

Beyond these correlations, corporations were also asked to respond about 3-5 desired brand associations of their company. Although nearly 30 different responses were given, by far the most common responses and desired associations were innovation (9), togetherness, integrity (7), creativity, excellence (5), family and authenticity. Not coincidentally, certain nonprofits also reflected these associations more strongly than others, so it makes sense that these corporate respondents had high intentions to support and engage those nonprofits who represented dynamism (innovation), reliability (trust, excellence, top quality), and affect (family, togetherness).

According to this survey, the nonprofits that have done the best job at clarifying their symbolic associations were Playworks and Positive Coaching Alliance. Originally, my hypothesis was that some nonprofits do a better job clarifying their symbolic associations, ultimately resulting in more corporate support and engagement. However, the nonprofits that I thought would have done the best job clarifying their associations for the benefit of additional corporate resources were the larger, more established nonprofits such as The Y or The Boys and Girls Club. As tables two and three show below, despite their size and experience as a youth development nonprofit over time, they do not score as well in terms of partnership or leveraging due to their lack of established symbolic associations. Despite my earlier presupposition, nonprofits like Positive Coaching Alliance and Playworks do have symbolic associations that differentiate them from others. This research is useful for them because it allows them to recognize how they are different and allows them to use recognize those associations and find connections to like-minded corporations that may be interested in that shared ethos.

Table 2: Nonprofit Associations
Respondents rated nonprofits on a scale of 1-5, 5 being strongly agree

Youth Development Nonprofit	Typicality	Usefulness	Efficiency	Dynamism	Reliability	Affect	Ethicality
<u>Boys & Girls Club</u>	3.7	4.13	3.48	3.35	4.24	4.23	4.05
<u>The Y</u>	3.74	4.3	3.51	3.34	4.27	4.28	4.07
<u>KaBOOM!</u>	2.75	4.33	4.08	4.17	4.08	4.17	3.56
<u>Playworks</u>	3	4.42	4.17	4.75	4.22	4.33	3.44
<u>Positive Coaching Alliance</u>	2.71	4.48	4.16	4.21	4.33	4.43	4.03

*Full results, broken down by loading in Appendix A

Table 3: Nonprofit Support and Engagement
Respondents were asked to respond on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being very likely

Youth Development Nonprofit	Donate Money	Donate Time	Donate Resources	Partner With	Leverage Partnership With
<u>Boys & Girls Club</u>	3.33	3.54	3.79	3.67	3.5
<u>The Y</u>	3.24	3.67	3.62	3.67	3.43
<u>KaBOOM!</u>	2	3.25	3.25	3	3
<u>Playworks</u>	3	4.25	4	4.5	4.5
<u>Positive Coaching Alliance</u>	3.29	3.71	4	4.14	4

Some corporate executives argued that nonprofit support decisions come down to scale, and that is reflected only by the likeliness to donate money. However, the fact that corporations are more willing to partner with the less familiar and smaller nonprofits may indicate that corporations are also becoming more rigorous and are finding which nonprofits offer better value in terms of aligned symbolic associations. I originally supposed that nonprofits that corporations were familiar with and were more established over time would also have desired symbolic associations, as corporations would be comfortable engaging with a familiar brand. My hypothesis did not explicitly say so, but I suspected that The Boys and Girls Club and The Y would have the highest results for symbolic associations due to their larger corporate partnership base and because I thought the subjective corporate analysis led to an equivocation of familiar or established with the highest quality symbolic associations.

The higher symbolic associations given to the less familiar and established nonprofits may indicate that although they are less familiar, they have pronounced and desirable symbolic associations and a shared ethos that makes them attractive (Goldberg & Knoepke, 2016). It could also indicate that larger and more established organizations struggle to clarify their associations because they want to stand for so many different things. Similarly, established organizations may be in the process of moving away from associations they once wanted, but don't want anymore, which could muddle their associations as well. At any rate, corporations are not simply choosing the nonprofit that feels right or that they are familiar with, but as this research shows, they are choosing nonprofits based on symbolic associations such as reliability, affect, and dynamism. In other words, corporate choices may be subjective psychological judgments, but judgments based on these symbolic associations.

Although respondents that were familiar with Positive Coaching Alliance and Playworks rated them highly on reliability, dynamism, and affect and that strongly correlated with partnership, their lack of overall familiarity and establishment still poses a significant challenge for them as the organizations that do have that familiarity and established recognition also score well in terms of symbolic associations, just not as well. Symbolic associations are important in their contribution of the brand because they are crucial in helping people understand the organization quickly, but this is less beneficial if corporations do not have a chance to understand them, or when they do, those associations are not made clear enough right away. As several commercial organizations responded, they are looking for nonprofits to be explicit in their value propositions, authentically align with their business objectives, show ways their contributions are impactful, and make their requests simple and specific. As one corporate executive said, "putting the altruistic aspect aside, this is about strategy, and it better fit with what we are trying to do." In

other words, strong symbolic associations alone are not enough. In order to grow and attract more corporate support, nonprofits must also be explicit in how those strong symbolic associations connect to their potential supporters and also tell their stories in language that corporations understand, likely with both “heartstrings and hard numbers” (Goldberg, 2016). Simply having strong symbolic associations that people become familiar with once they experience your organization matters, but for growth, communication of those associations is equally important.

V. Conclusion, Strategies, Future Research

As my hypothesis states, nonprofits that do a better job clarifying their symbolic associations gain more corporate support and engagement. Both Playworks and Positive Coaching Alliance performed the best in terms of symbolic associations, which also correlated significantly with partnership and willingness to leverage a partnership. This ultimately indicates that symbolic associations are important for partnership and engagement while corporations evaluate nonprofits. These symbolic associations are helpful in attracting strong partners, but its possible that if communicated more effectively, these associations could also catalyze rapid growth for nonprofit corporate development teams that do research on those corporate partners that align with their associations.

The results indicate that shared ethos is valuable so it is important for nonprofits to maintain, create, and communicate strong symbolic associations. The results from the survey show that the ability to instantly connect with the desired associations of a for-profit company allows for that instant relatability and shared ethos. This research breaks down that instant psychological connection further and tells us more about what that means. This gives nonprofits

some ability to handle their own evaluation, insofar as they can manage and strengthen their symbolic associations and find corporations that connect with those associations.

These results indicate the value of symbolic associations, especially dynamism, reliability and affect for youth development nonprofits. The results demonstrate, at the very least, that there is alignment between these symbolic associations for nonprofits and corporations and that corporations are interested in that shared ethos. Although subjectivity remains and partnership reasons still sometimes come down to who you know, this research proves that if presented the right way and to the right people, these symbolic associations matter in getting people emotionally connected. Ultimately, it is important for nonprofit brands to be intentional in the way they build these symbolic associations because of how valuable they can be as corporations evaluate fit. However, nonprofits also must be intentional about not only identifying their own symbolic associations, but also about finding connections to corporate partners who are interested in those associations- that is where the real value of shared ethos comes into play.

This study made it clear that symbolic associations are valuable for nonprofits in youth development that use sports to positively socialize youth and made it clear that emotional connections can be utilized in acquiring corporate support and engagement. This research not only begins to tell us which emotional connections are valuable for these five nonprofits, but for all youth development nonprofits. It helps nonprofits identify which associations differentiate them from others in the same nonprofit sphere. Ultimately, it allows nonprofits to gain an understanding of the symbolic associations they offer which can allow them to take more control of what can otherwise seem like an entirely subjective corporate judgment. Once nonprofits are aware of their symbolic associations and can identify corporations that desire those same associations, it can result in more corporate support. Without clearly building and understanding

their own symbolic associations, nonprofits would have no way to build this emotional connection that interests corporate partners in that shared ethos before nonprofits can be specific in helping businesses overcome challenges and meet objectives. In many ways, symbolic associations allow nonprofits to “make them feel, then make them think” and are the antecedent to the hustle in which nonprofits then show social and bottom line value to the corporation (Goldberg & Knoepke, 2016).

Members of several nonprofit organizations in the youth development sector and beyond shared strategies they used to acquire corporate partners and discussed how they have made use of symbolic associations, giving examples of how they have grown their corporate portfolios and added value to their corporate partnerships and how they hope to continue doing so. These nonprofit leaders suggest that cause, reputation, efficacy, and quantifying impact all matter. However, what is more important than any of that is doing research, finding shared connections and communicating to corporations how what you do matters for them in terms of bottom line objectives and social goals. Finally, several nonprofit leaders also spoke about the need to further integrate marketing departments behind their work so they could successfully and authentically communicate their different value propositions to their different audiences.

When various nonprofit managers working in corporate partnerships shared their success strategies, many of them discussed the need to be rigorous in their research of the corporation to be able to ask the right questions and understand the work and goals of that company. Only at that point, can you as a nonprofit manager begin to find connections between the corporations goals and your own and begin to explain the benefits of partnership. As that happens, it is important to “tick the relevance box” and contextualize your own benefits in terms of theirs (Goldberg & Knoepke, 2016). In this instance, communicating symbolic associations and

contextualizing those associations in terms the company understands is incredibly beneficial, especially because, as one nonprofit manager put it, “there is rarely a direct line built from nonprofit to commercial entity in terms of business benefits” and companies won’t be interested in the inner working of your organization at first. As Goldberg and Knoepke explain, depending on the company, it is important to first use symbolic associations to become relevant and identify shared ethos (2016). If nonprofit managers can understand the brand of the corporation and also understand their own associations well, they can work to find the symbolic associations that resonate and tick the relevance box.

Throughout that process, it is also important to “speak common business language” as corporations have shorter attention spans and shorter benefit cycles. As a nonprofit, this means building enough lead time, showing corporations the immediate benefits for them, how their contributions make a difference, planning thoroughly and understanding the cadence of the corporation. Some may think using common business language is only about the data or efficacy of an organization and this does help in becoming “a player in that space”, as one nonprofit executive mentioned. However, many nonprofits do not get the chance to explain how their business will help in terms of awareness, bottom line, or otherwise if symbolic associations have not been used to create relevance. Some nonprofit managers in corporate partnerships explained that its all about the right person, the right time, who has the budget and ultimately that every conversation is extremely different so you have to be able to communicate the right value proposition to the right audience. As one nonprofit manager explained, “It’s about patience, persistence, and articulating your value propositions clearly...you have to have all three.” It is without a doubt at this point that if research is done on the corporations, nonprofits can then use symbolic associations to clarify and connect the appropriate value propositions.

Ultimately, these nonprofit managers also explained that a successful corporate-nonprofit relationship should be defined not as a partnership, but as an authentic and in-depth alliance that has proven to be more beneficial for both parties as over time, each group can clearly show where their shared ethos overlaps which builds authenticity into the partnership. This is crucial in any cause marketing alliance, because for the partnership to be successful, it truly has to be part of the brand DNA of a corporation or it will fail. To really build that authenticity, these nonprofit managers suggested a stronger alignment with marketing departments to help make their value propositions and symbolic associations as strong as possible. This could also, in their eyes, stimulate growth of corporate development as corporations could more easily identify that symbolic relevance more quickly. Several nonprofits are currently not as aligned in this aspect as much as they would like, due to the multitude of audiences and value propositions, but all explained how much better the impact of their mission would be if marketing and corporate partnerships departments worked more closely together.

This research evaluated five different nonprofits, but research on a wider spectrum of youth development nonprofits could help make this research statistically significant. Future research could also work to explain differences between those that are familiar and those who are only exposed to short value propositions to see if they are making full use of those strong symbolic associations as they grow and communicate those associations to new audiences. The current research did not engage new audiences, but this addition could help nonprofit managers identify more specifically which symbolic associations create relevance, with which corporations, and at what point in the process they are most important. Further, research could be done on which symbolic associations matter most to which corporate industries to allow nonprofit managers to build brands connected to those interests. The research would also be

strengthened if only corporate interests were represented, removing doubt that these are individual analyses for support or engagement. Specific additions aside, this current research is useful in explaining that corporations do care about symbolic associations and certain associations are particularly valuable for youth development nonprofits as a way to create relevance. Finally, the insights of current nonprofit managers helped give us strategies and examples of how these symbolic associations are used in action and how they could add value to current nonprofit teams.

Ultimately, these strategies, literature on symbolic associations and corporate-nonprofit relationships, and this research show that symbolic associations do have value for nonprofits seeking corporate partnerships in the youth development sector. Although the emotional and rational must come together for nonprofit managers and they must create corporate relevance through both heartstrings and hard numbers, the symbolic associations often come as a prerequisite for connection, as a shared ethos is incredibly important in building an authentic and successful corporate alliance. If nonprofits can understand what their ethos is, they can more effectively connect with a corporate audience that maintains those same associations and be more informed as corporations evaluate them for partnership. Ultimately, this helps make the process more objective for nonprofits as they can start to understand psychological judgment from corporations and can appropriately use symbolic associations to succeed in that judgment process.

Appendix: Full Results

<u>Question</u>	<u>Boys & Girls Club</u>	<u>The Y</u>	<u>KaBOOM!</u>	<u>Playworks</u>	<u>PCA</u>
Nonprofit Familiarity	24/24 respondents	24/24 respondents	5/24 respondents	5/24 respondents	9/24 respondents
Typicality Mean	3.7	3.74	2.75	3	2.72
Effective	3.95	4.27	4.5	4.5	4.43
Worthwhile	4.23	4.42	4.25	4.5	4.57
Helpful	4.2	4.21	4.25	4.25	4.43
Usefulness Mean	4.13	4.3	4.33	4.42	4.48
Efficient	3.5	3.6	4.25	4	4.17
Well-Managed	3.44	3.5	4	4.5	4.14
Uses Assets Wisely	3.5	3.44	4	4	4.17
Efficiency Mean	3.48	3.51	4.08	4.17	4.16
Innovative	3.33	3.38	4.25	4.5	4.17
Forward-Thinking	3.33	3.38	4	4.75	4.29
Progressive	3.38	3.25	4.25	5	4.17
Dynamism Mean	3.35	3.34	4.17	4.75	4.21
Responsible	4.31	4.18	4	4	4.29
Reputable	4.14	4.32	4	4	4.29
Sincere	4.26	4.32	4.25	4.67	4.43
Reliability Mean	4.24	4.27	4.08	4.22	4.33
Compassionate	4.37	4.21	4	4	4.29
Favorable	4.17	4.21	4	4.5	4.57
Friendly	4.15	4.42	4.5	4.5	4.43
Affect Mean	4.23	4.28	4.17	4.33	4.43
Ethical	4.18	4.28	4	3.67	4.29
Moral	4.28	4.22	3.67	3.67	4.14
Righteous	3.71	3.71	3	3	3.67
Ethicality Mean	4.05	4.07	3.56	3.44	4.03
Donate Money	3.33	3.24	2	3	3.29
Donate Time	3.54	3.67	3.25	4.25	3.71
Donate Resources	3.79	3.62	3.25	4	4
Partner With	3.67	3.67	3	4.5	4.14
Leverage Partnership With	3.5	3.43	3	4.5	4

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