



Fashion Philanthropy and Customer Collaboration for Millennial Consumers:
The Case of TOMS

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TOMS Shoes (TOMS) was founded based on the company's philanthropic mission that delivers a pair of shoes to a person in need with each purchase. The TOMS's business model is distinct from previous models of corporate social responsibility in that TOMS takes philanthropy as the nucleus of their business, and involves its customers as core execution partners of philanthropic giving. The outstanding success of TOMS's business model has motivated other brands to jump in to the bandwagon of fashion philanthropy. In reality, however, few companies have achieved a successful collaboration with consumers as TOMS does. Rather, some companies have drawn consumers' criticism that calls their giving-away campaigns copycats (Timberlake, 2012). This latest marketing phenomena challenges marketers to understand what makes TOMS's *do-good* business model approvable to consumers. Previous studies show inconsistent findings of consumers' attitude towards companies' CRM practices (Vanhamme, Lindgreen, Reast, & van Popering, 2012). In addition, the majority of extant studies examine corporate charitable giving from a corporate perspective (e.g., Garriga and Mele, 2004), and researchers have indicated lack of integrative and systematic framework of cause-related marketing which is driven from consumers' perspective (Lee, 2008). In this study, therefore, we aim to unveil meanings of fashion philanthropy from the customers' perspective.

This study employs a qualitative approach in attempt to discover emerging themes in the consumption of a philanthropy-based brand such as TOMS. A phenomenology approach enables researchers to find meanings of one's experience, which is a socially constructed and interrelated coherently (Goulding, 1999). Thus, the interpretative approach is adopted to explore millennial consumers' motivations to participate in the company's philanthropic activities. A long-form interview process involved multiple steps including the review of literature, a bracketing interview, a main interview, and hermeneutic interpretations (McCraken, 1988). Through theoretical sampling techniques, we recruited seven college students in the United States who had purchased TOMS shoes and had been involved in any activity of the company. The researchers also attended local TOMS campus club meetings to immerse in themselves in lived experiences of the brand activities. In this study, two researchers separately read and meditated meaning of details in the transcriptions in interpreting a series of interviews (Thompson & Arsel, 2004).

In our data analysis, two themes of CRM experience emerge as a result of informants' direct and proactive engagement in the brand's philanthropic activities. Our data analysis identifies two meaningful sub-categories of the CRM themes including (1) *the social stack* and (2) *the I-do culture*. First, *the social stack* implies one's tendency to relate an object to the person's identity (Greenberg, 2010). Overall, informants in this study express a strong desire to engage themselves in social issues, which, in turn, generates one's feeling of belonging in a society. In this sense, TOMS offers informants an easy access to connect with like-minded individuals and helps them fulfill their philanthropic needs. This finding elucidates individuals' tendency to make ethical decisions in the peer-group environment (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985). Second, *the I-do culture* illustrates a critical role of consumers as an active agent in carrying out the company's mission. Our informants show their enthusiastic advocacy of TOMS, which they disseminate actively through online venues. The informants' self-directed brand disclosures fortify their sense of ownership in the brand community. In summary, results of this study shed light on the need for the new level of consumer marketing which delivers more than functional and emotional value. That is, findings from this study delineate that today's consumers seek solutions to fulfill their social, economic, and environmental needs through their consumption activities (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010). In addition, findings from this study highlight that consumers' proactive engagement in brand experience is driven by a company's solid brand culture which is grounded on their trust in the company's missions and visions. Implications are drawn based on the results.

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