

Examining the Moderating Effect of Consumer Skepticism on Guilt Appeals in Cause-Related Marketing

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Abstract

Cause-related marketing (CRM) has become an important part of a company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. Beyond helping organizations meet their social obligations, CRM also strengthens corporate reputation, shapes brand preferences, and influences consumers' purchase decisions. To communicate these initiatives, marketers often use different advertising appeals—one of which is the guilt appeal. As a moral emotion that encourages prosocial behavior, guilt can motivate consumers to act in ways that support social causes, making it a powerful tool in both social marketing and CRM. Yet, not all consumers view or respond to CRM messages in the same way. People differ in how they interpret and react to guilt-based messages, and these individual differences can significantly influence the success of such campaigns. One key factor shaping these responses is consumer skepticism. This study examines how skepticism moderates the impact of guilt appeals in CRM. Drawing on an experiment conducted with student participants, the results reveal that consumers with high levels of skepticism react less positively to guilt appeals compared to non-guilt messages. Conversely, consumers who are less skeptical respond more favorably when a guilt appeal is used. By highlighting the moderating role of skepticism, this study deepens our understanding more authentic and effective CRM communications.

Keywords: Cause-related marketing, Consumer skepticism, Guilt, Advertisement appeal

Introduction

Cause related marketing (hereafter CRM) has been one of the important promotion tools in the portfolio of CSR initiatives of many companies (Kotler & Lee, 2005). American express pioneered CRM three decades ago in the USA by linking purchase and usage of its credit card to supporting the cause of renovating statue of liberty and witnessed massive positive response from the consumers (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Ever since then, the practice of CRM has been gaining importance in US and elsewhere in the world. It is evident from the fact that the spending of CRM is increasing with passing years. According to the IEG Sponsorship report 2019, in North America alone the spending on CRM was \$2.23 billion in the year 2018. Also, consumer surveys indicate that consumers expect companies to make meaningful contributions to societal welfare by supporting various causes. According to 2019 Porter Novelli/Cone Gen Z Purpose Study, 84% buy a product with a social or environmental benefit; 85% of consumer share their positive opinion about a company that is doing good; 76% take an online action to trigger a donation (e.g., post a selfie and a company will donate to a charity).

CRM refers to the conditional support of the company to a cause based on the positive consumer response. Usually, CRM is designed and executed in collaboration with Non-Profit organisation (hereafter NPO) (Berglind & Nakata, 2005). Unlike the corporate philanthropy wherein company donates a portion of its profit to the cause, in CRM a portion of the revenue generated by each transaction is donated to the cause either in cash or kind. The company, the cause and the consumers are the primary participants as well as beneficiaries of CRM. A well-designed CRM improves brand attitude, brand image, corporate image, purchase intention, and helps company to differentiate its offering; similarly, NPO benefits through improved awareness about the cause, material and financial resources generated and transferred by the CRM, and direct donations by the consumers (Berglind & Nakata, 2005; Lafferty et al., 2016; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Consumer also benefits through satisfaction of altruistic needs of helping others in need, and by feeling warm glow. CRM also enhances consumer experience by reducing consumption guilt associated with hedonic products (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2016). Thus, a well-designed

CRM may prove to be a win-win-win proposition for all the primary participants. However, an ill designed CRM could prove costly for the company as consumer may grow sceptical of the motive of the company to engage in CRM and in some cases respond negatively (Sabri, 2018). To design workable CRM strategy, a thorough understanding of factors affecting consumer response is imperative.

Consumer is known to be sensitive towards the factors related to company such as origin of the company (Choi et al., 2016), its size (De Vries & Duque, 2018) and CSR reputation (Lii & Lee, 2012). Similarly, consumers pay attention to cause types, temporal and spatial spread of the cause, severity of cause (Vanhamme et al., 2012) and reputation of NPO (Cornwell & Coote, 2005). Another set of elements which predominantly affect consumers' response are product (Chang et al., 2018), price (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2016), place (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2016) and promotion (Samu & Wymer, 2014) associated with CRM.

Of these, promotion in general and advertisement in particular plays pivotal in determining success of CRM because it integrates all the factors and elements mentioned above in the form of an advertisement and communicates to consumers. In the literature of social marketing and charity marketing, the role of guilt appeal in eliciting positive response has been established (Basil et al., 2006; Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). Guilt being a quintessential self-conscious moral emotion (Haidt, 2003; Leary, 2007; Tangney et al., 2007), linked with the pro-social behaviour in various contexts including CRM (Baghi & Antonetti, 2017; Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2016). However, due to periodic reporting of instances of corporate fraud there has been loss of trust in the corporate among the consumers. This has also made consumers sceptical about CSR claims of company (Sabri, 2018; Webb & Mohr, 1998b). In addition to this there is a section of consumers who show dispositional skepticism (Bae, 2018). Though guilt appeal is used in CRM, their efficacy especially factoring in the individual consumer differences has not received adequate attention. A segment of consumer remains sceptical about CRM claims (Webb & Mohr, 1998) and not much is known how they react to guilt appeal. There has been suggestion to investigate the effect of

individual differences in CRM communication and constitute an important gap that needs to be filled (Chang & Chen, 2017; Howie et al., 2018). Hence, this study was undertaken to fill the gap. I designed empirical research involving experimental design with college students as respondents. The study reveals that guilt appeal is effective in eliciting positive response from consumers. Further, skepticism moderates the effect of guilt appeal on purchase intention. I next narrate a brief overview of literature reviewed, followed by description of methodology and discussion.

CRM advertisements

As mentioned above section, among the various elements contributing for the success of CRM, promotion plays a pivotal role. Promotion in general and advertisements in particular integrate diverse the elements of CRM efficiently, communicates coherently to the consumers. In CRM communication, the focus of the researchers has been on the type of message (Samu & Wymer, 2014), visual elements (Chang & Chen, 2017), valence (Grau & Folse, 2007), appeal (Chang, 2011) and their interaction with brand-cause fit, product type, and consumer attributes (Chang & Cheng, 2015).

Though CRM messages usually have elements of both the brand and cause, the dominant focus usually remains on either the brand or the cause, accordingly they are called informational ads or buy ads. The 'informational ads' with dominant focus on cause will generate better results when the fit between cause and brand is low (vs high fit); whereas, 'buy message ads' with their emphasis on brands elicit high response when fit is high (Samu & Wymer, 2009, 2014). While designing cause focused ads, marketers can use beneficiary image or social image, while former is more effective when used for promoting hedonic goods, the later is effective in promoting utilitarian product. The valence of message has been studied by Grau & Folse (2007) and found that positively framed message is effective for consumers having low involvement with the causes and negatively framed message are effective for consumers having high involvement with causes.

Guilt Appeal

Among the various ad appeals, guilt appeal is more frequently used by charity fund raisers and social

marketers (Antonetti & Baines, 2015; Basil et al., 2006, 2008; Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). It has also been researched quite intensely in social marketing and charity marketing context. Guilt is a negative emotion experienced by an individual when s/he fail to live up to the internalized standards (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Since guilt is a negative emotion, an individual experiencing guilt strives to release himself/herself from it by approaching the situation that caused the guilt in the first place by acknowledging the transgression, accepting responsibility and amending the situation (Haidt, 2003; Tangney et al., 2007).

The consumption guilt felt by consumers while consuming hedonic, luxury and frivolous goods can be reduced by linking these products to the cause charity through CRM (Zemack-Rugar et al., 2016). Existential guilt felt by consumers/donors due to the awareness of inequity in the living conditions of themselves and beneficiary of charity make consumers to respond to the charity requests (Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). Anticipatory guilt felt by consumers when they reflect and visualise negative consequences of their inactions is also known to generate prosocial behaviours (Baumeister et al., 2007; Lindsey et al., 2007). For instance, visualising the state of patient due to one's own inaction may induce a person to anticipate guilt and may prompt an individual to donate blood. In CRM persuasion context, guilt appeal has been shown to increase purchase intension and attitude towards firm. Further, guilt appeal is effective when used for promoting utilitarian product and when donation size is moderate; guilt appeal is ineffective in eliciting positive response when used for promoting hedonic product with high donation size (Chang, 2011). In fact, in the latter case, consumers may grow sceptical and show maladaptive responses. Based on the above discussion I hypothesise to retest the efficacy of guilt appeal with the experimental stimulus designed for the study.

H1: CRM ad with guilt appeal is more effective in enhancing the purchase intension than CRM ad without guilt appeal.

Skepticism

Skepticism refers to absence of trust in the marketer and not believing the claims made in the advertisements (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998).

Since CRM is unusual promotion wherein NPO/cause is the third party unrelated to the transaction between seller and buyer, but the recipient of the benefits of CRM, a sections of consumer finds it hard to trust the intent of the marketer and disbelieve the claims made in the advertisement about donations (Webb & Mohr, 1998). In the CRM context, skepticism has been studied in relation to factors such as CSR reputation of the firm (Ellen et al., 2006; He et al., 2016; B. A. Lafferty, 2007), fit between cause and brand (Ellen et al., 2000; Mendini et al., 2018), donations (Singh & Duque, 2020), consumer traits (Chang & Cheng, 2015).

Consumer remain highly sceptical about CRM when the firm communicates only about the benefits delivered to the causes (but does not reveal explicitly benefit accruing to the firm)(Bae, 2018), information related donation is ambiguous (rather than concrete), fit between cause and brand is taxonomic (rather than thematic)(Mendini et al., 2018) and unfamiliarity with CRM(Singh et al., 2009). Consumer traits such as utilitarian shopping orientation and individualistic mind set have been reported to be linked with high degree of consumer skepticism towards CRM (Chang & Cheng, 2015).

Individuals differ in their guilt sensitivity (Zemack-Rugar et al., 2016) and they also vary in their perceptions of CRM (Webb & Mohr, 1998). The processing of guilt appeal communication is affected by the individual factors. For instance, personality traits such as locus of control, self-blame, inherent guilt (Ghingold, 1981), and self-esteem (Bennett, 1998) affect response to guilt appeal. Skepticism itself is a personality trait that affect processing of guilt appeal communication (Bae, 2018). Hebert 2007 investigated skepticism towards ad on guilt appeal in charity context and found they are negatively related. In the CRM context, though the skepticism and guilt appeal have not been studied together, Chang 2001, while studying impact of guilt appeal on type of product reported that consumer perceive manipulative intent when guilt appeal is used in promoting hedonic product, resulting in negative response.

Skepticism as an individual factor influence the effect of guilt appeal of CRM on purchasing intention. An individual who is highly sceptical may perceive guilt appeal as manipulative in comparison

to CRM message without guilt appeal and respond negatively. On the other hand, an individual with low skepticism may not perceive manipulative intent when exposed to guilt appeal of CRM; hence, they experience guilt which may make them to relieve themselves from negative emotional state of guilt by responding positively to the CRM. Hence,

H2: *Skepticism moderates the effect of guilt appeal in CRM on purchase intention in such a way that high skepticism reduces the positive effect of guilt appeal on purchase intention; low skepticism enhances the positive effect of guilt effect on purchase intention.*

Methodology

In order to test the hypotheses, I designed 2 (CRM with guilt appeal V/s CRM without guilt appeal) X 2 (High skepticism V/s low skepticism) mixed experiment design. Advertisement appeal was used as a between subject factor and skepticism was within subject, but later was split into high and low to probe its moderation effect. The students of college were the respondents. A questionnaire with CRM advertisement stimulus served as data collection tool. Sample size was 150; after eliminating incomplete response the study retained 145 responses.

Stimulus design

Around 30 MBA students of the sample frame were approached to get inputs for design of stimulus. After introducing students to the concept of CRM, I collected information about popular types of causes, causes and NPOs they are aware of, the products they purchase, nature of the product, and so forth. Based on these insights and with the help of past study the stimulus was designed (Chang, 2011).

The study chose notebook as a product, I gave it fictitious brand name to avoid confounding effect of past brand experience. I chose child malnutrition in India as a cause with Rs.5 donation to a popular NPO engaged in children welfare, 'CRY India'. For CRM

with guilt appeal, the copy contained statistics about gravity of problem (Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). For CRM without guilt appeal, all elements of ad were identical except the image and the description.

The study tested the stimuli for their effects with a single question "Reading this ad makes me feel guilty". The respondents were asked to are the extent to which they agreed to the statement on a scale of 1 to 7, 1 being strongly disagree, 7 being strongly agree. Guilt appeal was perceived as more guilt inducing than the Non-guilt CRM advertisement. Hence manipulation was successful.

Post manipulation measures

Purchase intention was assessed using 3 item scale. They were averaged to derive a composite index. The study adopted Mohr et al (1998) scale for consumer skepticism about environmental claims of products in the advertisements. Since environmental causes themselves form an important category of CRM (Lafferty & Edmondson, 2014), and since it parsimoniously capture the essence of skepticism in the form of disbelief and mistrust, it suitably fitted skepticism about CRM claims (Webb & Mohr, 1998). The four items were averaged to derive an index. The questionnaire with ad copy and questions were randomly distributed to students in the classrooms in the form of printed black and white copies.

Results:

Skepticism was adopted from Mohr et al., (1998); it is a four item scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.818) and purchase intention (Chang, 2011) three item scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.844). Model 1 of Andrew Hay's PROCESS was run using Ad appeal as independent variable, Purchase intention as dependent variable and Skepticism as moderator by setting Bootstrap sample at 5000. The results reported in the Table1 and Table 2. The moderator effect is depicted pictorially in Fig 1.

Table 1: Model estimates

| | <i>coeff</i> | <i>se</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>LLCI</i> | <i>ULCI</i> |
|-------------------------|--------------|-------------------|----------|----------|-------------|-------------|
| constant | 4.7678 | 0.2733 | 17.4436 | 0 | 4.2274 | 5.3081 |
| GLT | 1.8942 | 0.4224 | 4.4843 | 0 | 1.0591 | 2.7293 |
| SK | 0.0754 | 0.084 | 0.8974 | 0.3711 | -0.0907 | 0.2414 |
| Int_1 | -0.5554 | 0.1376 | -4.0357 | 0.0001 | -0.8275 | -0.2833 |
| R ² = 0.1497 | | F (3,141) = 8.276 | | | P < 0.05 | |

CRM Guilt appeal is having significant effect on purchase intention ($b = 1.8942, p < 0.05$), thus the result supports *H1*. Skepticism does not affect purchase intention ($b = 0.0754, p > 0.05$). However, interaction between skepticism and CRM guilt appeal negatively affect Purchase intention ($b = -0.5554, p < 0.05$). Thus, *H2* is supported. Overall, the model is significant ($R^2 = 0.149, F(3,141) = 8.276, P < 0.05$).

Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the skepticism (moderator) are given in the Table 2 and Figure 1 captures the essence of the same. For lower level of Skepticism there is higher level of purchase intention for CRM guilt appeal. As the skepticism increase, purchase intention decreases for the CRM guilt appeal. However, in case of non-CRM guilt appeal (dotted line in Figure 1), Skepticism does not have statistically significant effect on purchase intention.

Table 2: Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator

| <i>SK</i> | <i>Effect</i> | <i>se</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>LLCI</i> | <i>ULCI</i> |
|-----------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|-------------|-------------|
| 1.6667 | 0.9685 | 0.229 | 4.2286 | 0 | 0.5157 | 1.4213 |
| 2.6667 | 0.4131 | 0.1655 | 2.4962 | 0.0137 | 0.0859 | 0.7403 |
| 4 | -0.3275 | 0.23 | -1.424 | 0.1567 | -0.7821 | 0.1272 |

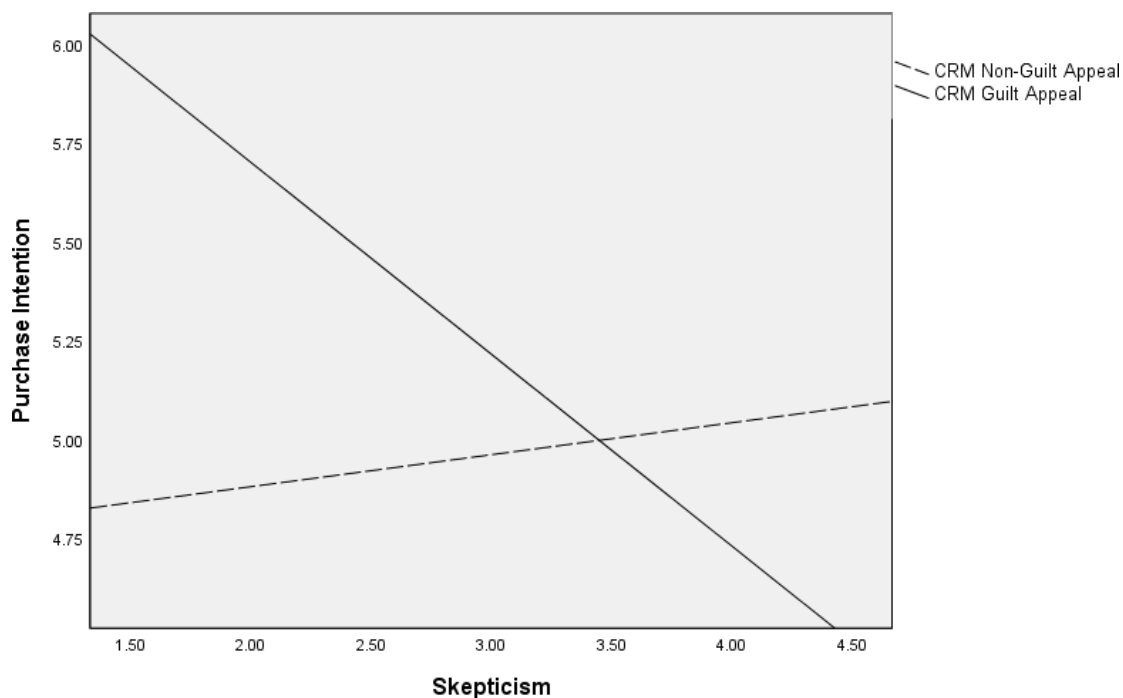


Figure 1: Interaction of guilt appeal and Skepticism on Purchase Intention

Discussion

This work contributes to theory advancement by determining the boundary condition of guilt appeal. Guilt appeal in CRM works well for consumers with low skepticism. But may have opposite effect with highly sceptical consumers.

This work demonstrates the efficacy of guilt appeal of CRM in eliciting positive response in the

developing nation context. Most previous work have demonstrated its efficacy in developed nations. Guilt appeal though effective in eliciting positive response, should be used cautiously by managers. Managers can consider segmenting the consumers based on the skepticism and deploy guilt appeal messages only to consumers with less skepticism.

Limitations and future research directions

Respondents were college students. Though homogeneity of respondents is desirable from the point of view of reducing the confounding effect and increasing internal validity, however, it reduces external validity of findings. Future research can be done in field with representative sample of the market place. The moderating effect of other individual differences like need for cognition, big five factors, involvement with cause, brand attachment can be explored as moderators. Other emotional appeal can be explored. For instance, pride in place of guilt in supporting a cause through CRM.

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