

# CHOOSING THE RIGHT CAUSE: THE MODERATING ROLE OF META-COGNITIONS IN CAUSE-RELATED MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS

Frank Huber, University of Mainz, Germany  
Frederik Meyer, University of Mainz, Germany  
Katrin Stein, University of Mainz, Germany  
Kerstin Strieder, University of Mainz, Germany

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, consumers' expectations in terms of corporate obligations have changed, such that the ethical and philanthropic dimensions of Carroll's (1979) corporate social responsibility (CSR) pyramid have evolved from desired to presupposed responsibilities. Beyond the consequentially increasing prevalence of CSR activities, considerable attention has been given to cause-related marketing (CRM) in marketing research and practice (Bigné Alcañiz, Chumpitaz Cáceres, and Currás Pérez, 2010). CRM is defined as a "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" (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988). Existing research supports the notion that CRM exerts an important impact on consumers' buying behavior and enhances the image of the sponsoring company or brand (Barone et al., 2000; Bigné Alcañiz et al., 2010; Gupta and Pirsch, 2006; Lafferty, Goldsmith, and Hult, 2004; Nan and Heo, 2007). Furthermore, literature indicates that a systematic choice of the cause affects the effectiveness of CRM activities (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988). More specifically, the majority of studies highlight the importance of fit between the cause and the sponsoring company or brand (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill, 2006; Ellen, Mohr, and Webb, 2000; Lafferty et al., 2004). There is, however, some evidence that fit might be necessary but not sufficient for CRM success (Pracejus and Olsen, 2004). As such, additional research on relevant cause characteristics is needed in order to guide managerial decisions (Nan and Heo, 2007). With this in mind, this study empirically examines the impact of meta-cognitions in terms of the validity of consumer attitudes toward the cause in a high-fit condition.

## CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

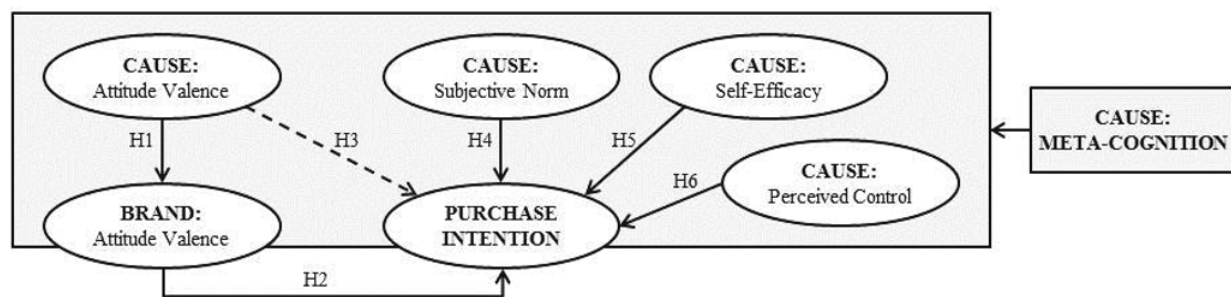
Recent CRM research implies that pre-existing mental structures about the brand affect the evaluation of CRM campaigns (Torelli, Monga, and Kaikati, 2012). The present study elaborates this thought by arguing that pre-existing cognitive structures representing the cause should similarly impact the perception of CRM activities. The meta-cognitive model of attitudes by Petty and colleagues (2006) serves as the conceptual foundation of consumers' mental structures. The authors maintain that, in human memory, attitudes are represented by positive as well as negative evaluations that are linked to an attitude object. Moreover, a validation tag connects to each evaluative association certifying whether the individual considers the evaluation to be true and has confidence in the personal object assessment. As such, the validity tag represents a meta-cognition referring to secondary thoughts about other prevalent primary thoughts (Briñol, Petty, and Tormala, 2004; Petty, Briñol, and DeMarree, 2007). In addition, the meta-cognitive validation tags show conceptual overlap with the concept of attitude confidence or certainty, which is one dimension of attitude strength (Gross, Holtz, and Miller, 1995; Krosnick and Petty, 1995; Petty, Briñol, and Tormala, 2002). The concepts of attitude confidence and strength are distinct from attitude valence, which corresponds to the degree of positivity or negativity of the attitude (Park et al., 2010). Consequently, meta-cognitive thoughts implying confidence in one's object evaluation strengthen attitudes, such that the valence of confidently-held attitudes exerts stronger influences on thought and behavior. Furthermore, certain attitudes tend to persist over time and are resistant to change (Gross et al., 1995; Krosnick and Petty, 1995; Petty et al., 2002; Priester et al., 2004; Tormala and Rucker, 2007). This research therefore treats attitude valence and attitude certainty as two dimensions of attitudes and examines their specific outcomes (Park et al., 2010).

Figure 1 depicts the hypothetical model proposed and tested by this study. The relevant constructs and their direct interrelationships were derived from literature. The model expands existing knowledge by incorporating the moderating role of meta-cognitions. When a brand is associated with a social cause, positive evaluations of the cause can transfer to the brand. Based on this affect transfer, the valence of the attitude toward the cause should enhance the valence of the attitude toward the brand [H1] (Barone et al., 2000; Gupta and Pirsch, 2006; Nan and Heo, 2007). Moreover, information integration theory suggests that consumers' attitudes toward the cause and the brand are integrated to form an evaluation of the CRM product (Anderson, 1981; Barone et al., 2000; Gupta and Pirsch, 2006). As a result, both brand and cause attitude should affect buying intention in relation to the CRM product [H2, H3]. Behavior is, however, best predicted by comprehensive attitudes, which is why the model proposes that the effect of attitude toward the cause is (partially) mediated by brand attitude (Fazio

and Zanna, 1978). Based on the meta-cognitive model of attitudes, the impact of cause attitude valence should be moderated by cause-related meta-cognitions, such that high validity will enhance the effect of cause attitude valence on brand attitude valence and purchase intention [H1<sub>mod</sub>, H3<sub>mod</sub>].

The remaining antecedents of purchase intention were derived from the theory of planned behavior. Due to its focus on cognitive self-regulation, the theory identifies several primary cognitions that might interact with secondary meta-cognitions [H4-H6] (Ajzen and Madden, 1986). Although the behavior of interest is purchase of the CRM product, it can be assumed that normative and control beliefs about the cause guide behavior toward the CRM product, in addition to similar beliefs regarding the act of purchasing the CRM product. As a result of the emphasis on cause-related meta-cognitions, the model limits itself to the normative and control aspects surrounding the cause. As such, subjective norm implies the perceived social pressure to purchase the CRM product in order to support the cause (Armitage and Conner, 2001). Literature on attitude certainty suggests that uncertainty creates a predisposition to social influence (Gross et al., 1995). Individuals therefore tend to rely more on normative pressures when their own attitudes toward the cause are perceived as less valid. Accordingly, meta-cognitions concerning the attitude toward the cause should reduce the effect of the subjective norm on purchase intention [H4<sub>mod</sub>]. Within this framework, perceived behavioral control refers to the perceived control over the achievement of improvements with regard to the cause. Literature indicates a two-dimensional structure of perceived behavioral control, which is worthwhile considering (Ajzen, 2002). On the one hand, self-efficacy describes the confidence in one's ability to improve cause-related issues by purchasing the CRM product. The higher the confidence that one's own purchase makes a difference, the higher the purchase intention. On the other hand, perceived control represents beliefs that positive outcomes relating to the cause can be influenced by one's own efforts. As a result, when the issue is severe and a solution to the problem is beyond the consumer's own abilities, the willingness to buy the CRM product will decrease (Manstead and Eekelen, 1998). Both effects should be more pronounced when the attitude toward the cause is perceived as valid as opposed to invalid, since firmly-held attitudes enhance the individual's faith in related personal judgments, including control beliefs [H5<sub>mod</sub>, H6<sub>mod</sub>] (Krosnick and Petty, 1995).

**Figure 1. Structural Model**



## METHODOLOGY

An empirical study among 311 German participants, the majority of whom were MBA students, serves as a basis for testing the hypothetical model. The unit of analysis is a CRM campaign implemented by the German milk brand “Bärenmarke”. During the promotional period “Bärenmarke” donated one cent per milk product sold to a project devised by the conservation organization WWF, which aims to prevent the extinction of brown bears in the German Alps. The campaign implies a high cause-brand fit, since the word bear is part of the brand name and “Bärenmarke” uses bears as advertising characters as well as in its brand logo. Furthermore, the Alps represent the typical imagery of the brand. The sample was generated by means of an online questionnaire. All constructs were measured by reflective multi-item scales that were chosen from existing literature. This investigation applies Partial Least Squares (PLS), implemented by the software package SmartPLS 2.0, as the estimation procedure for the structural equation model (Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2011; Ringle, Wende, and Will 2005). In order to test the proposed interactive effects, the product indicator approach by Chin and colleagues (2003) was applied.

## RESULTS

The quality of the measurement model was examined according to the suggestions by Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt (2011). The measurement model utilized shows satisfactory internal consistency and indicator reliability, as well as convergent and discriminant validity. Few items were eliminated due to a lack of indicator reliability. Table 1 summarizes the results of the

final structural model. All direct effects were supported [H1, H2, H4-H6], except for the direct impact of cause attitude valence on purchase intention [H3]. Similarly, there is no significant interactive effect of cause attitude valence and validity on purchase intention ( $p > 0.1$ ) [H3<sub>mod</sub>]. The results do, however, support the prediction that the effect of cause attitude valence on brand attitude valence is moderated by cause-related meta-cognitions [H1<sub>mod</sub>]. As such, the direct and the interaction effect of cause attitude valence on purchase intention are perfectly mediated by brand attitude valence (Barone and Kenny, 1986). Moreover, there is evidence for the moderating impact on the effect of self-efficacy [H5<sub>mod</sub>]. Contrary to the predictions, the moderation is not supported for subjective norm and perceived control [H4<sub>mod</sub>, H6<sub>mod</sub>]. While the former fails to reach significance, the latter interaction effect is significant. An increase in cause attitude validity does, however, cause the impact of perceived control on purchase intention to decline, which contradicts the predicted positive effect. The model shows satisfactory explained variance and predictive relevance for purchase intention ( $R^2 = 0.330$ ,  $Q^2 = 0.276$ ).

**Table 1. Structural Model Results**

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Path Coefficient	t-Value
Valence Cause	→ Valence Brand	0,311	5,7373**
Valence Cause x Meta-Cognition	→ Valence Brand	0,085	1,6681*
Meta-Cognition	→ Valence Brand	0,209	3,7026**
Valence Brand	→ Purchase Intention	0,256	4,3717**
Subjective Norm	→ Purchase Intention	0,147	2,3715**
Subjective Norm x Meta-Cognition	→ Purchase Intention	-0,005	0,0921
Self-Efficacy	→ Purchase Intention	0,213	3,1031**
Self-Efficacy x Meta-Cognition	→ Purchase Intention	0,098	1,8097*
Perceived Control	→ Purchase Intention	0,095	1,9051*
Perceived Control x Meta-Cognition	→ Purchase Intention	-0,093	1,7970*
Meta-Cognition	→ Purchase Intention	0,070	1,4931

\* p-value < 0.1, \*\* p-value < 0.05

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

First, the results support the notion that brands engaging in CRM can profit from choosing a cause that elicits favorable attitudes and self-efficacy. A favorable attitude toward the cause translates into a more favorable attitude toward the brand which in turn enhances purchase intention. Similarly, the greater the self-efficacy, representing the consumer's faith in the contribution to resolve the cause by buying the CRM product, the higher the purchase intention towards the CRM product. Beyond favorable cause attitudes and high self-efficacy, companies can take advantage of partnering with social causes of whom the target audience holds meta-cognitions indicating high validity of their cause related evaluations. Cause attitude validity enhances the positive impact of cause attitude valence and self-efficacy on brand attitude valence and purchase intention, respectively. Although not hypothesized, cause attitude validity also improves brand attitude valence directly. Existing literature provides several implications on potential characteristics identifying social causes which elicit valid attitudes. Antecedents of attitude validity include, for example, extensive elaboration and knowledge structures, direct experience, argument quality, source credibility, social consensus or self-relevance (Fazio and Zanna, 1978; Gross et al., 1995; Petty et al., 2007; Tormala and Rucker, 2007). Companies should therefore choose causes or partnering organizations that are well known, have a strong public presence, or have existed for a long time. Moreover, there should be a strong social consensus about the relevance of the cause. Besides, the partnering cause or charitable organization should allow for consumer identification by demonstrating shared values, objectives and personality traits with the target audience (Currás Pérez, Bigné Alcañiz, and Alvarado Herrera, 2009). Furthermore, it is worthwhile communicating the underlying issue thoroughly and via established sources.

Second, the study implies that normative beliefs, as represented by subjective norm, increase purchase intention toward the CRM product. Contrary to the predictions, the positive effect of normative beliefs does not diminish when valid cause attitudes are present. This might be due to the very nature of the investigated behavior. It is likely that CRM inherently evokes social associations, enhancing purchase intention, irrespective of the personal attitude structure. Thus, in choosing a partnering cause, marketing managers should consider the strength of normative beliefs irrespective of the cause related meta-cognitions. Beyond the individual's cause related meta-cognitions, future research could investigate how the social interaction partners' perceived cause related meta-cognitions affect the individual's normative beliefs and in turn behavioral

intentions. Possibly, consumers do not only consider their social interaction partners' primary but also their perceived secondary cognitions in forming their normative beliefs.

Third, the results suggest a rather weak direct impact of perceived control on purchase intention. This finding mirrors previous research suggesting that perceived control is a better predictor of actual behavior, whereas self-efficacy is an important antecedent of behavioral intentions (Manstead and Eekelen, 1998). The effect of perceived control further diminishes in the presence of valid cause-related attitudes. It may be assumed that consumers tend to rely more on internal control aspects, as represented by self-efficacy, as opposed to external control facets, implied by perceived control, when valid cognitive structures are present (Armitage and Conner, 2001). In developing CRM activities, managers should therefore emphasize aspects of the target audience's perceived internal control over considerations of external control.

In conclusion, this study implies that meta-cognitions enhance the effect of internally-grounded evaluations, including cause attitude valence and self-efficacy, while not affecting or reducing the impact of externally-grounded evaluations such as subjective norm and perceived control. Future research should investigate this result further. Moreover, since the findings presented here are drawn from the context of a high brand-cause fit, this study adds to the literature showing that a high brand-cause fit is not sufficient to maximize CRM outcomes. Future research should therefore compare the effect of meta-cognitions relating to the cause in high- and low-fit conditions. Lastly, this paper focuses on a functional product, which suggests that different findings could emerge for hedonic products (Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998).

References available upon request.