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The Influences of Brand-Consumer and Cause-Congruence on Consumer Responses to Cause Related Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Cause Related Marketing (CRM) is a widely used type of brand alliance in which companies donate a portion of their sales to social causes with whom they ally. Researchers have studied many aspects of CRM to learn why these programs are effective and how to enhance their success. An overlooked component in CRM research is the extent to which consumers identify with the brand and with the cause. The present study presented 604 U.S. college students with CRM campaigns for two brands (M&Ms and Crest) partnered with the World Wildlife Fund to assess whether brand-cause congruence, brand-consumer congruence, cause-consumer congruence, and assessment of the motives of the company influence consumer purchase intention. The results show that congruence between the self-image of the consumer with the image of the brand and with the partner both positively influence reaction to a CRM campaign, as does consumer perceptions of the motivations of the company.

Keywords: cause-related marketing, consumer identity, promotion, cause-brand alliances, social marketing, brand-cause fit, corporate motive, consumer self-concept

INTRODUCTION

Cause-related marketing or CrM is a type of brand alliance defined as "the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-producing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives" (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, p. 60). CrM is a complex exchange between a company, a consumer, and a cause (Dahl & Lavack, 1995; Ross *et al.*,

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1992). In CrM, consumers purchase goods they need and want while companies make the profits they desire, and presumably, worthy causes benefit financially. While supporting issues with which consumers are concerned, corporations can meet their traditional marketing goals (Smith & Stodghill, 1994). Many U.S. corporations use CrM programs, and their use is spreading to Europe (Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013). Moreover, according to Cone Communications, a Boston based public relations and marketing agency (coneinc.com), 83% of Americans wish more companies would use CrM campaigns to support causes (Cone 2010 Cause Evolution Study). Thus, mangers need insightful information on how to enhance consumers' reaction to cause-related marketing programs.

In the age of mergers and acquisitions, downsizing, and outsourcing, CrM is a natural choice for corporations looking for a new marketing strategy and justification for their social responsibility and corporate philanthropy (Smith, 2003). Thus, many corporations form cause-brand alliances and develop CrM programs. For example, *Nabisco* animal cookies allies with donations to the World Wildlife Fund, *Cottonelle* toilet paper donates to the Ronald McDonald House, and *Hershey's* chocolates ally with donations to UNICEF. Because CrM use is increasing, many research studies have examined factors that influence the effectiveness of this tactic (e.g., Chen et al., 2014).

CrM success depends on consumers embracing the program. Several factors contribute to their willingness to do so. Chief among these are their attitudes toward the brand and toward the cause. In addition, consumer perceptions of the motives of the corporation are also important (Samu & Wymer, 2009). If consumers are suspicious of company motivation, they might be less inclined to respond than if they are convinced of the genuineness of the company's desire to do good (Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013). Finally, consumer assessments of how appropriate the alliance is (Hamlin & Wilson, 2004), is also important. Cause-brand fit, as it is often called (Lafferty, 2007, 2009), has been the focus of many CrM studies (e.g., Alcañiz et al., 2010; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013).

Long overlooked, however, is the extent to which consumers identify with the cause or with the brand, so that most empirical studies ignore feelings such as "this is my brand" or "this cause expresses the kind of person I am." Fit or congruence between the consumer and the brand and the cause might also play important roles in the success of a CrM campaign. Consumers make many decisions based on their identification with brands, that is, how much similarity in personality and values they see between themselves and brands (Sprott et al., 2009). Brand engagement describes an emotional involvement that consumers feel with marketing stimuli. Positive engagement is a powerful influence on consumer behavior and is much sought after by many marketers (Keller, 2001). One aspect of engagement is how much consumers identify with or see similarities between themselves and marketing stimuli. Consumers use marketing phenomena to develop and to express their self-concepts. Our premise is that perceptions of congruence or similarity between consumers and brands/causes influence how they react to cause-brand alliances.

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to assess the role of consumer identification with the cause and the brand, termed *brand-consumer congruence* and *cause-consumer congruence*, on willingness to purchase the brand and thus fill this gap in the literature. The remainder of this paper describes the empirical study we conducted, details the analysis and results, and presents implications for managers of both causes and brands. Moreover, we suggest several avenues for future research into these important topics.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Congruence

Fit, match, and congruence are related concepts expressing similarity or complementarity. This topic is well studied in many areas of marketing communications and advertising. Especially relevant to our study, congruence effects are predicted to positively influence attitude toward the promotions of sponsorships and attitudes toward sponsors. Cornwell and Maignan (1998) use congruence theory as a conceptual framework for explaining sponsorship effects because it explains how sponsorship influences consumers' perception of corporate sponsors. They indicate that corporate sponsorship activity that is consistent with consumer expectations should be the most influential sponsorship activity. Sponsorship research shows that a congruent partnership between sponsors and partners produces favorable thoughts (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002), more favorable attitudes (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; McDaniel, 1999; Rifon et al., 2004), stronger perceptions of corporate credibility (Rifon et al., 2004), improved recall (Cornwell et al., 2001), raised share prices (Cornwell et al., 2005), and purchase behavior (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006a, 2006b; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). The similarities between sponsorship and CrM, both examples of brand alliances where a brand partners with another party, provide a strong motivation for researchers to investigate congruence effects in CrM.

Lack of fit causes discomfort for consumers because incongruity is negatively valued (Mandler, 1982) and congruity improve retrieval (Lafferty, 2007). Most research show higher congruence or fit creates more positive effects than does low congruence (Barone *et al.*, 2000; Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Rifon *et al*., 2004). Congruence in CrM is usually viewed as product/cause complementarity (Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998), compatibility (Samu & Wymer, 2009), aligning the cause with the company's social responsibility statement (Miller, 2002; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013), matching the interests of the target audience (Quenqua, 2002), or logical associations between cause and company (Haley, 1996). However, Lafferty (2007) and Hamlin and Wilson (2004) provide contradictory evidence for the importance of fit, suggesting that researchers should continue to study its role in alliances to determine the conditions under which fit is most important (e.g., Roy, 2010).

Trimble and Rifon (2006) propose that the concept of fit or congruence should be viewed as multidimensional. Gwinner (1997) defines two different types of fit or congruence: image fit and functional fit. Berger, Cunningham, and Drumwright (2006) divided types of fit into mission fit, resource fit, management fit, workforce fit, target market fit, product/cause fit, cultural fit, cycle fit, and evaluation fit. Our focus is on the neglected aspect of how close consumers see the fit or congruence between themselves and the brand or the cause. Congruence theory provides the central framework of the present study. In addition, schema theory and self-congruity theory also argue for the importance of congruence.

Schema theory

Congruence effects through schema theory offer insight into persuasion attempts that would not trigger elaboration. Schema theory outlines a mental process of organizing knowledge about an object or domain (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). A schema cognitively represents each object or domain, and the life experiences of each individual provide the structure for this organization as well as influence the processing of information related to each schema. Individual life experiences allow individuals to makes comparisons between new and unfamiliar information or concepts and existing schema.

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Individuals use their life experiences and existing schema to determine how relevant or congruent new information is. The degree of relevance or congruence determines how consumers respond to new information. Incongruent schema create inferences about the object the schema represents (Hastie, 1984). Thus, in a persuasion attempt similar schema are less likely to result in elaboration and extrinsic attributions.

Schema theory can also provide an explanation for triggering cognitive evaluations based on the expected or unexpected nature of behaviors regardless of the congruence of the schema involved. As with congruent schema, behaviors that are consistent with expectations are less likely to trigger elaborations (Hastie, 1984), while inconsistent or unexpected behaviors are likely to result in elaboration, judgments, and resistance.

In CrM, congruence effects and schema theory provide a framework to predict the elaboration triggered by a cause-brand alliance and the subsequent consumer response. For example, Chowdhury & Khare (2011) show that a schema-cause match enhances consumer preference for a brand engaging in CrM when consumer involvement with the brand is impression relevant and when the brand is utilitarian versus hedonic. Because congruence in a CrM campaign has several sources and dimensions, a consumer's perception of the congruence of a CrM pairing is multidimensional (Trimble & Rifon, 2006).

Using schema as the foundation for cognitive modeling, we propose that consumers have a schema for the cause and the company. Congruence suggests a matching or parallelism between two objects. Thus, congruence between schemas is based on common knowledge elements. Consumers can recognize congruence between two elements of the alliance (company and cause), or consumers can recognize congruence between an element of the alliance and themselves (company and consumer, cause and consumer). This congruence should determine the amount of elaboration triggered.

Cause-brand congruence

Based on several congruence theories, many studies measure perceived congruence between the cause and corporation, brand, or product (Barone et al., 2000; Ellen et al., 2000; Menon & Kahn, 2003; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Rifon et al., 2004; Schmidt & Hitchon, 1999). Most studies find that the fit between the cause and corporation/brand/product has a positive impact on product choice. Mainly, scholars report that perceived congruence increases credibility, positive attitudes, and positive behavioral responses. For instance, Pracejus and Olsen (2004) note that CrM partnerships that have strong fit should have improved performance, such as increased consumer attitudes toward the corporation/brand/product, and thus greater likelihood of purchase. Other researchers suggest that companies with high levels of congruence between their core business and social activities are viewed more favorably than are companies with lower levels of congruence (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

In CrM programs, brands and causes should select their partners carefully to optimize the fit between them because as fit increases, consumer reaction to the alliance increases (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki, 2007; Gupta & Pirsch, 2006a, 2006b; Samu & Wymer, 2009). Well-matched, compatible product categories (Buil *et al.*, 2009; Lafferty, 2007), cohesive brand images (Buil, de Chernatony, & Hem, 2009; Lafferty, 2007), and complementary skills and compatible goals (Bierly & Gallagher, 2007) are good indicators of a congruent partnership. Some studies, however, do not support this finding. Hoek and Gendall (2008) failed to find an influence of brand cause congruence on choice behavior and

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suggest product type as the reason. Moosmayer and Fuljahn (2013) report that low fit seemed to yield higher evaluations of a CrM than high fit (!), and speculate that consumer perceptions of company motivation (profit or social good) might account for this.

Because several studies support the high-fit strategy, we include cause-brand fit in this study to examine its role compared to that of the congruence between the brand and the consumer and the cause and the consumer. In addition, we include two control variables, corporate motivation and product type, to test whether these modify the positive brand-cause fit relationship. Thus, the first hypothesis we test is:

H1: In a cause-brand alliance, the relationship between cause-brand congruence and purchase intention is positive.

Self-congruity theory

Sirgy (1986) proposes that consumer behavior is determined, in part, by the congruence resulting from a psychological comparison involving the product-user image and the consumer's self-concept (e.g., actual self-image, ideal self-image, social self-image). This psychological comparison can be categorized as high or low self-congruity. High self-congruity is experienced when the consumer perceives the product-user image to match that of his or her self-image, and vice versa. Self-congruity affects consumer behavior through self-concept motives such as the needs for self-consistency and self-esteem. Lichtenstein et al. (2004) propose that customers can identify with organizations and that this identification contributes to an individual's self-concept. Consumers want to feel good about their brands or causes, as well as themselves, so they should respond more positively to an alliance between a company and a cause when they see points of identification between themselves and brand alliance partners than when they do not identify with them. These congruence theories form the basis for our hypotheses.

Brand-consumer image congruence

Brands are assumed to have personal images, just as people do (Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price, 2008). Consumer self-concept (i.e., self-image) involves perceptions of oneself along image dimensions related to the product user (Sirgy *et al.*, 1997). Consumer self-concept researchers have long theorized that a brand image interacts with the consumer's self-concept generating a subjective experience referred to as self-congruity. This concept can explain and predict different facets of consumer behavior such as product use, product ownership, brand attitude, purchase motivation, purchase intention, brand choice, brand adoption, store preference, store loyalty, and so forth (Claiborne & Sirgy, 1990; Sirgy, 1982, 1985). According to these theories, when congruence between consumer self-image and brand image is high, consumer responses to CrM are more positive than when the congruence is low. Thus, we propose the second hypothesis.

H2: In a cause-brand alliance, the relationship between brand-consumer image congruence and purchase intention is positive.

Cause-consumer image congruence

Another element in the cause brand alliance besides the brand and the consumer is the cause. Therefore, the potential exists for congruence between consumer self-image and cause image. Broderick et al. (2003) show that respondents believe that congruence must exist between the customer and the cause, and between the customer and the corporate donor. They argue that a consumer should be able to associate him or herself with the cause and company together.

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Furthermore, when congruence between consumer self-image and cause image is high, consumer responses to CrM should be more positive than when congruence is low. Thus, we propose that:

H3: In a cause-brand alliance, the relationship between cause-consumer image congruence and purchase intention is positive.

Control variables

Both Spector and Brannick (2012) and Carlson and Wu (2012) draw the attention of social researchers to the importance and correct use of control variables (CVs), "variables that influence our understanding of the relationships between IVs and DVs" (Carson & Wu 2012, p. 414). These authors recommend including control variables in analyses formally, i.e., based on hypotheses regarding why such variables would exert their influence. Our study includes three CVs, two theory-based (perceived corporate motivation and product type), and one artifact CV (gender).

Perceived corporate motivation

Attributions are the result of a cognitive process by which people assign an underlying cause or explanation to an observed event (Kelly, 1973; Kelly & Michela, 1980). Attribution theory predicts a relationship between attributions and subsequent behaviors (Kelly & Michela, 1980). Thus, if consumers develop attributions about corporate motives for CrM, these attributions should exert some influence on later behavior. The attribution process could result in positive (altruism motive) as well as negative attributions (self-interest motive) (Dean, 2003).

A company's CrM strategy signals that it is committed to social norms (Yechiam et al., 2003). The credibility of a company and its reputation, however, play an important role in consumer evaluations of a brand alliance (Rao, 2010). Ross et al. (1992) measured consumer attitudes toward a CrM campaign. Their results showed that most of their respondents did not perceive a CrM campaign to be exploitative of the cause, and most felt the company was acting in a socially responsible manner. However, Webb and Mohr (1998) found that half of their respondents attributed a selfish interest to companies engaged in CrM, whereas the other half recognized that the motivation was altruistic to some degree. Moosmayer and Fuljahn (2013) show that if consumers attribute altruistic motives to a company's cause-related marketing campaign, they view the campaign more positively than if they attribute the company's motivation to the profit motive. Thus, if consumers suspect that the motives for entering into an alliance with a cause are less-than altruistic, they might be less-inclined to participate by purchasing the product. To account for the possible influence of motive attribution on the other variables, we include motive as a control variable and propose the next hypothesis.

H4: In a cause-brand alliance, the relationship between perceived altruistic corporate motivation and purchase intention is positive and might influence the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Product type

An important consideration in cause-related marketing is product type because there is simply so much variety in products (cf. Roy, 2010). One way in which products differ is whether they are hedonic or utilitarian. Hedonic products involve pleasure-oriented consumption, and the purchase of such a product is motivated mainly by the desire for sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun. It is something fun, experiential, and perhaps even "decadent," such as chocolate truffles, expensive cologne, or a luxury cruise. The other type is a utilitarian product. It involves utilitarian,

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goal-oriented consumption and the purchase of such product is motivated mainly by the desire to fill a basic need or accomplish a practical task. It is something that one ordinarily buys to carry out a necessary function or task in one's life, such as textbooks, laundry detergent, or skim milk. Strahilevitz and Meyers (1998) compare price reductions against charity incentives. Their results show that charity incentives work better for hedonic than for utilitarian products.

In addition, Strahilevitz (1999) examines the role of product type and donation magnitude on willingness to pay more in a CrM program and finds that when the amount of the discount/donation is large, a respondent typically chooses the discount, especially when the product is utilitarian instead of hedonic. However, when the amount of discount/donation is small, respondents choose the donation, and there is no difference between utilitarian and hedonic products.

Chowdhury and Khare (2011) show that the matching hypothesis is supported in the case of a utilitarian versus hedonic product. That is, for a utilitarian product, consumers appear to prefer a CrM brand more when there is a schema-cause match between the product and brand as compared to when there is a mismatch. However, in the case of a hedonic product, matching seems not to matter. Our study examines this issue from another perspective. Instead of manipulating the cause/brand match or congruence, we held it constant by using only one cause and measured participant perceptions of the match. We did, however, vary the type of product with the idea the utilitarian versus hedonic products might elicit different responses when allied with a cause. Consumers might be inclined to embrace the CrM alliance more strongly for a hedonic product than a utilitarian product because they might see it as more expressive of their self-image owing to the symbolic nature of these products. Because the evidence on type of product's influence on CrM is mixed, we feel it worthwhile to include type of product, hedonic versus utilitarian, as a control variable but cannot hypothesize a specific effect.

H5: In a cause-brand alliance, the type of product, hedonic versus utilitarian, might influence the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Gender

Although most studies ignore the gender of the study participants, two studies (Hyllegard et al., 2011; Trimble & Rifon, 2006) included gender and found that it does affect consumer response to CrM because the genders can differ in their attitudes toward the brand or the cause, and so we hypothesize gender as an artifact control variable in our study (Carlson & Wu, 2012), although we cannot hypothesize the direction of the gender influence (Becker, 2005).

H6: In a cause-brand alliance, gender might influence the relationship between the independent variables' and the dependent variable.

METHOD

Pilot Study

The purpose of the pilot study was to help select the stimuli for the main study. Thirty-six U.S. college students participated; 27 were women. The participants completed a questionnaire online to get extra credit for the course. These participants are appropriate for the current study because they are actual consumers, aware of cause-related marketing programs, and the products and causes used are familiar and relevant.

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We found many examples of utilitarian and hedonic products in the literature as shown in Table 1. In our pilot study, we used four brands: Lee's jeans and M&M chocolates as hedonic products, Reebok shoes and Crest toothpaste as utilitarian ones. We used the American Red Cross and the World Wildlife Fund as potential causes. We told the respondents that we were interested in what they thought of some of the brands with which they were familiar, and they responded to questions to indicate their opinions. The questionnaire includes several parts, and we will discuss the results for each part.

Table 1
Samples of Different Product Types

References	Hedonic product	Practical product
Strahilevitz and Myers (1998)	Dinner for two at French restaurant	Mountain bike
	Chocolate truffles	Required textbook
	Theme park tickets	Six-month supply of toothpaste
	Large bag of M&M's	Spiral notebook
	Chocolate brownie	Bottle of correction fluid
	Hot fudge sundae	Quart of milk
	Movie pass	Pocket dictionary
Strahilevitz and Myers (1998)	Ice cream	Laundry detergent
	Malt balls	Toothpaste (crest toothpaste)
	Weekend getaway	$500 textbook credit
	Concert tickets	Backpack
	Frozen yogurt	Dishwashing liquid
	Frozen yogurt + toppings	Thesaurus
Aaker (1997)	Jeans (Lee jeans, Levi's jeans)	Electronics
	Cosmetics (Olay lotion, Avon, Revlon)	Appliances (Michelin tires)
	Fragrance	Film (Kodak)
	Hershey's candy bar	Pain relievers
	Hallmark cards	Reebok athletic shoes
		Nike athletic shoes

Brand familiarity

In this part, we assessed respondent familiarity with the brands (i.e., Lee's jeans and Reebok shoes, M&M chocolates and Crest toothpaste) to determine which stimulus to use in the main study. Pilot study participants rated the familiarity of each brand on a 7-point scale where 1 = unfamiliar and 7 = familiar. Paired-samples t-tests assessed whether participants saw a difference in familiarity between the two brands. The mean rating for Lee's (M = 4.25, SD = 1.68) was significantly lower (t = -3.15, $p < .01$) than the mean for Reebok (M = 5.11, SD = 1.47). The mean rating for M&Ms (M = 6.28, SD = 1.19) was not significantly higher (t = .96, $p = .34$) than the mean for Crest (M = 6.06, SD = 1.37). Thus, familiarity with Lee's and Reebok are significantly different and familiarity between M&Ms and Crest are similar. Because the familiarity of the stimulus may influence the results of consumer responses, we wanted to keep the familiarity similar. Thus, we choose M&Ms and Crest for the brands in main study.

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Hedonic or utilitarian product

One way to think about brands is to consider if they are utilitarian or hedonic. In this part, we want to know the respondents' opinions on the brand characteristics. We used paired-samples t-tests to assess whether the pilot study saw a difference in utility between the two brands. They rated each brand on a 5-point semantic differential scale where 1 = utilitarian and 5 = hedonic. The mean rating for Lee's (M = 2.61, SD = 1.32) was not significantly different (t = -.13, p = .88) than the mean for Reebok (M = 2.64, SD = 0.99). The mean rating for M&Ms (M = 3.89, SD = 2.01) was significantly higher (t = 5.27, p < .0001) than the mean for Crest (M = 2.14, SD = 1.22). Thus, the brand characteristics between Lee's and Reebok are similar and the brand characteristics between M&Ms and Crest are significantly different. Thus, we used M&Ms as the hedonic product and Crest to represent utilitarian products in main study.

Cause-brand congruence

In this part, we wanted to know the respondents' opinions of the fit between cause (American Red Cross, ARC or World Wildlife Fund, WWF) and brand (Lee's jeans, Reebok shoes, M&M chocolates, or Crest toothpaste) so as to decide which cause to use in the main study. Pilot study participants rated the fit of each brand-cause pair on a 5-point scale where 1 = very poor fit and 5 = very good fit. We use paired-samples t-test to assess whether the participants saw a difference in fit between the causes and brands.

The mean fit rating for ARC-Reebok (M = 3.47, SD = 1.83) was significantly higher (t = 2.80, p < .01) than the mean for ARC-Lee (M = 2.53, SD = 1.25). The mean rating for ARC-Crest (M = 3.56, SD = 1.65) was significantly higher (t = 2.51, p < .05) than the mean for ARC-M&M (M = 2.72, SD = 1.60). The mean rating for WWF-Reebok (M = 3.11, SD = 1.56) was not significantly different (t = .20, p = .84) than the mean for WWF-Lee (M = 3.06, SD = 1.80). The mean rating for WWF-Crest (M = 2.53, SD = 1.44) was also not significantly different (t = -.14, p = .89) than the mean for WWF-M&Ms (M = 2.56, SD = 1.60).

Thus, the fit of ARC-Reebok and ARC-Lee, the fit of ARC-Crest and ARC-M&M are significantly different. However, the fit of WWF-Reebok and WWF-Lee, the fit of WWF-Crest and WWF-M&M are not significantly different. Consequently, we chose WWF as the cause in main study. In this way, we controlled familiarity with the cause and used a cause that was widely familiar and appropriate for the alliance. Thus, we were able to present the study participants with brand-cause alliances that varied in product type, but did not vary in familiarity with the brand or the cause, and further by controlling perceive fit between the two brand-cause pairs, we were able to measure perceive fit for equivalent alliances. At the end of the questionnaire, we also collected demographics information including sex, age, and race. In order to receive extra credit, the respondents entered their last names and first initials.

MAIN STUDY

Stimuli and participants

Based on the pilot study, we used M&Ms chocolates to represent a hedonic product, Crest toothpaste to represent a utilitarian product, and the World Wide Fund as the cause. We used one cause because

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consumer response to CrM can vary by type of cause (Hyllegard et al., 2011) and we wanted to control experimentally for that source of variance (Carlson & Wu, 2012). The questionnaire presented the participants with one of two possible brand-cause combinations: M&M's with the World Wildlife Fund or Crest with the World Wildlife Fund. Six hundred and four undergraduates at a large southeastern U.S. university participated in exchange for extra credit. Because this is a theory application study, student subjects were deemed appropriate (Calder et al., 1981). Kardes (1996) also presents a cogent set of arguments supporting the use of college students in such studies of consumer psychology, and similar CrM studies have also used student subjects (e.g., Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013; Roy, 2010; Samu & Wymer, 2009; Yechiam et al., 2003). The pilot studies ensured that the brands were suitable for the purpose of the study. There were 279 (46%) men and 325(54%) women. Ages ranged from 18 to 56 years (M = 22.5, SD = 4.2). Men and women did not differ in mean age.

Procedure

We designed two scenarios, one for the hedonic product (M&Ms) and one for the utilitarian product (Crest). The participants were randomly assigned to one of these two scenarios, thus controlling experimentally for product type. We measured the congruence between brand-cause, brand-consumer, and cause-consumer in these two situations. The survey was conducted online. Participants were told that the study was a survey seeking consumer opinions. They were instructed to read some statements and then were asked to indicate what they thought for each question by choosing the answer. They were told that there were no right or wrong answers, only their honest opinions.

Manipulation check

A manipulation check assessed whether the participants saw a hedonic/utilitarian difference between the two brands. The participants were asked to indicate how utilitarian or hedonic they thought M&Ms (or Crest) were by rating the brand in their scenario on a 5-point semantic differential scale where 1 = utilitarian and 5 = hedonic.

Independent variables

All the multi-item scale items appear in Table 2. The participants rated the cause-brand alliance they viewed for how congruent they saw it using three measures formatted as a 7-point semantic differential scale: the degree of compatibility (1 = not compatible at all, 7 = extremely compatible), how well they matched (1 = poorly matched, 7 = well matched), and how consistent is the overall alliance (1 = not consistent at all, 7 = extremely consistent).

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Table 2
Items in the Questionnaire

Item	Loading
Purchase intent	
If you were in the market for chocolates (toothpaste), would you be more likely to buy M&Ms (Crest) if it benefited World Wildlife Fund than if it did not? (More Unlikely More Likely)	.81
Would you buy M&M chocolates (Crest toothpaste) that were part of this cause-brand alliance? (Not at all/Very much)	.80
Cause-brand congruence	
Please rate the degree of compatibility that you perceive exists between M&Ms (Crest) and the World Wildlife Fund. (not compatible at all/extremely compatible)	.91
Please rate how well matched are M&Ms (Crest) and the World Wildlife Fund. (poorly matched/well matched)	.88
Please rate how consistent is the overall alliance between M&Ms and the World Wildlife Fund. (not consistent at all/extremely consistent)	.86
Brand-consumer congruence	
Eating M&Ms (Using Crest) in daily life is consistent with how I see myself. (strongly disagree/strongly agree)	.89
Eating M&Ms (Using Crest) in daily life reflects who I am. (strongly disagree /strongly agree)	.81
People similar to me eat M&Ms (use Crest) in daily life." (strongly disagree/ strongly agree)	.74
Cause-consumer congruence	
If you consider the types of people who give to the World Wildlife Fund, do you identify with these people? (do not identify/do identify)	.89
If you consider the types of people who give to the World Wildlife Fund, are you like these people? (not like/like)	.86
If you consider the types of people who give to the World Wildlife Fund, are they similar to the way you see yourself? (not similar/similar)	.78

Then the participants were asked to take a moment to think about M&Ms (or Crest) and to think about the kind of person who typically uses M&Ms (or Crest). Then, they were asked to imagine this person in their minds and describe the person using one or more personal adjectives such as, stylish, classy, masculine, sexy, old, athletic, or whatever personal adjectives they can use to describe the typical user of M&Ms (or Crest). Once they had done this, they were asked to indicate how much they thought they were like this type of person with the following statements on 5-point scale at "eating M&Ms in daily life is consistent with how I see myself," "eating M&Ms in daily life reflects who I am," "people similar to me eat M&Ms in daily life," with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree" (Sirgy et al., 1997).

To measure cause-consumer congruence, the participants were asked how much they identified with the cause, i.e., World Wildlife Fund. Participants expressed their opinions on three 5-point scales: "If you consider the types of people who give to the World Wildlife Fund, do you identify with these people" (1 = do not identify with this kind of people, and 5 = do identify with this kind of people), "If you consider the types of people who give to the World Wildlife Fund, are you like these people" (1 = not like this kind of people, and 5 = like this kind of people), "If you consider the types of people who

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give to the World Wildlife Fund, are they similar to the way you see yourself" (1 = not similar to this kind of person, and 5 = similar to this kind of person) (Govers & Schoormans, 2005).

After they read the scenario presenting the description of the cause-brand alliance, the participants completed items to evaluate the motivation of the brand to enter the alliance with a single item: "Please indicate the extent to which you think M&M Mars's [Crest] motive for forming the cause-brand alliance" with a five-point semantic differential item that read, "Little motivated to help" and "Strongly motivated to help." Descriptive statistics for the variables appear in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variables	Range	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurtosis	α	CR
Purchase Intention	2 – 10	1.00	2.10	-.598#	-.163	.79	.79
Cause-Brand Congruence	3 – 21	9.12	4.17	.271#	-.550#	.91	.91
Brand-Consumer Congruence	3 – 15	8.23	3.07	.031	-.653#	.85	.88
Cause-Consumer Congruence	3 – 15	9.43	3.13	.236#	-.484#	.88	.86
Company Motivation	1 – 5	3.33	1.00	-.351#	-.264#		
	Correlations						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. Purchase Intention	(.65)	.04	.03	.24	.27		
2. Cause-Brand Congruence	.21**	(.77)	.04	.07	.07		
3. Brand-Consumer Congruence	.16**	.19**	(.71)	.02	.03		
4. Cause-Consumer Congruence	.49**	.27**	.13**	(.66)	.11		
5. Company Motivation	.52**	.26**	.16**	.33**	--		
6. Gender[b]	-.12**	-.04	-.10*	-.12**	-.10*	--	
7. Product type[c]	.08*	-.02	-.42**	-.08*	.05	-.03	

Note: CR = Construct Reliability; # more than twice its standard error; * $p \leq .005$, ** $p \leq .001$, [a] zero correlations below the diagonal, AVE in parentheses on the diagonal, and squared correlations above the diagonal; [b] 0 = women and 1 = men; [c] 0 = Crest and 1 = M&Ms.

Dependent variable

After reading the following background statement, "Recently, M&M Mars (or P&G) launched a cause-brand alliance marketing program. When consumers buy M&Ms (or Crest), the company will donate a part of the sales to the World Wildlife Fund," they were asked to indicate their purchase intention towards the brand with two, 5-item bi-polar scales (unlikely/likely, and not at all/very much). The demographic questions came at the end of the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses

Product type manipulation check
A manipulation check assessed whether the participants saw a hedonic/utilitarian difference between the two brands. The mean rating (where 1 = utilitarian and 5 = hedonic) for M&Ms (M = 3.58, SD = 1.73) was significantly higher ($t_{(2, 552)} = 10.81$, $p < .0005$) than the mean for Crest (M = 2.22, SD = 1.32).

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Thus, the manipulation was successful in creating different perceptions of the utility of the brands used in the experiment.

Fit between brand and cause manipulation check

A manipulation check assessed whether the participants saw a difference in fit between WWF-M&Ms and WWF-Crest. The mean rating for fit between WWF and M&Ms (M = 9.03, SD = 4.30) was not significantly different ($t_{(2, 602)}$ = -.48, p = .63) from the mean for fit between WWF and Crest (M = 9.20, SD = 4.05). Thus, the scenarios successfully created similar perceptions of the fit between brand and cause used in the experiment.

Scale psychometrics

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) assessed the psychometric properties of the four multi-item scales (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). All constructs were tested simultaneously in one model, with each item forced to load on one factor without the ability to cross-load on other factors. The results suggest that the CFA model fit the data well ($\chi 2$ = 60.9, df = 38, p = .011, $\chi 2/df$ = 1.6; GFI = .98; AGFI = .96; CFI = .99; TLI = .99; NFI = .98, SRMR = .025; RMSEA = .032). The chi-square statistic was significant (p = .011), but it is recognized that it is sensitive to large samples (n > 200; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hu & Bentler, 1999). All items loaded significantly on their respective factor, and all item loadings exceeded .7 (see Table 2). Reliability was established with construct reliability (CR) estimates ranging from .79 to .91 (see Table 3). Convergent validity was established as the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded .5 for each construct, (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Discriminant validity was established (see Table 3) with the AVE for each construct exceeding the squared correlations between all other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Scale items were summed to represent the constructs, with higher scores indicating higher levels of each construct. Although each variable was not normally distributed, the amount of skewness and kurtosis was minimal (< |0.8|) and so we felt we did not need to transform the scores to normal distributions (Osborne, 2013).

Hypotheses tests

For the first tests of the hypotheses, we computed zero-order correlations among all the variables. These results appear in Table 3. The results show that purchase intent was related significantly both to the independent variables and to the control variables. Thus, the three substitutive hypotheses forming the basis for the study are supported: congruence between a brand and the cause and as well as congruence between the consumer and both the brand and cause, influence the outcome of a cause-related program. However, the correlations show company motivation, product type, and gender should be included in the multivariate analysis as control variables to explore the conditions under which these generalizations hold (Carlson & Wu, 2012).

To test the multivariate relationships using hierarchical multiple regression (see Table 4), we followed the recommendations of Carlson and Wu (2012) by first regressing scores on the dependent variable (purchase intent) across scores on the three independent variables: cause-brand congruence, brand-consumer congruence, cause-consumer congruence. This step tested the hypotheses. To account for the effects of the control variables we then included the two theoretical control variables, perceived corporate motivation and product type, and finally to account for the artifact control variable, we included gender. Collinearity among the independent variables was virtually absent with the largest VIF being only 1.2.

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Table 4
Regression Results

Variables	beta	t	*p*	part
Model 1: Substantive hypotheses				
Cause-brand congruence (H1)	.084	2.2	.028	.079
Brand-consumer congruence (H2)	.085	2.3	.022	.083
Cause-consumer congruence (H3)	.415	11.0	< .001	.398
R^2 = .217, adjR^2 = .213, df = 3, 600, F = 55.4, sig. < .01				
Model 2: Theory based control variables	beta	t	*p*	part
Cause-brand congruence (H1)	.006	.18	.858	.006
Brand-consumer congruence (H2)	.108	2.9	.003	.095
Cause-consumer congruence (H3)	.316	8.9	< .001	.291
Corporate motivation (H4)	.390	11.0	< .001	.357
Type of product[a] (H5)	.134	3.7	< .001	.120
R^2 = .373, adjR^2 = .368, df = 5, 598, F = 71.2, sig. < .01				
Model 3: Artifact control variable	beta	t	*p*	part
Cause-brand congruence (H1)	.007	.20	.838	.007
Brand-consumer congruence (H2)	.104	2.8	.005	.091
Cause-consumer congruence (H3)	.312	8.8	< .001	.286
Corporate motivation (H4)	.388	11.0	< .001	.355
Type of product[a] (H5)	.131	3.6	< .001	.117
Gender[b] (H6)	-.033	-1.0	.314	-.033
R^2 = .374, adjR^2 = .368, df = 6, 597, F = 59.5, sig. < .01				

Note: the part (or semipartial) coefficient shows the unique effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable.
[a] 0 = Crest and 1 = M&Ms [b] 0 = women and 1 = men.

Hypothesis one proposed that in a cause-brand alliance, the relationship between cause-brand congruence and purchase intention is positive. Consumers are thought to respond more positively to alliances where they perceive a good "fit" between the partners than when fit is poor. However, when the effects of the control variables are included, cause-brand congruence is not important to the success of the CrM campaign (ß = .01, *p* = .84). Several studies show that cause-brand congruence is significantly related to CrM outcomes (e.g., Lafferty, 2009), but others fail to find the relationship (e.g., Hamlin & Wilson, 2004). We will discuss this paradox in the discussion section.

Hypothesis two proposes that in a cause-brand alliance, the relationship between brand-consumer image congruence and purchase intention is positive. That is, consumers should feel more inclined to purchase a brand in an alliance where they perceive similarity between the image of the brand and their own self-images than when they do not. The results in Table 4 support this hypothesis (r = .16, ß = .10, *p* = .005), and the relationship remains after the effects of the control variables are accounted for.

Hypothesis three proposes that in a cause-brand alliance, the relationship between cause-consumer congruence and purchase intention is positive. When consumers identify with a cause, they are more likely to support it by purchasing an allied brand than when they do not feel identity with the cause.

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The results do support this hypothesis (r = .45, ß = .31, $p < .001$), and the relationship remains after the effects of the control variables are accounted for.

Hypothesis four proposes that in a cause-brand alliance, the relationship between perceived corporate motivation and purchase intention is positive. When consumers perceived a positive corporate motivation, they are more likely to purchase an allied brand than when they perceived a negative motivation. The results do support this hypothesis (r = .52, ß = .39, $p < .001$). Perceived corporate motivation also seems to affect the relationship between cause-brand congruence and purchase intention, which diminishes (ß = .007) in the presence of corporate motivation.

Hypothesis five proposes that the type of product influences consumer reaction to a cause-brand alliance. The results support this hypothesis (r = .08, ß = .131, $p <.001$), where the effect seems to indicate that the pairing of a hedonic product with the cause increased purchase intention more than when the utilitarian product was the partner. Inclusion of type of product in the regression analysis also reduces the effect of cause-brand fit.

Finally, the results show that gender had no meaningful influence on the reaction to the cause-brand alliance, failing to support hypothesis six. Thus, the two theoretical control variables are related to the dependent variable, but the artifact control, gender, is not. Moreover, when company motivation and product type are controlled, brand-cause congruence is no longer significantly related to purchase intent, but the influence of the other variables remains.

DISCUSSION

Cause brand alliances are a significant and growing component of many marketing strategies. Consequently, this topic has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly research seeking to determine the characteristics of these alliances that promote their success. The present study contributes to this effort by testing hypotheses derived from a variety of theories and empirical studies. The specific goal was to test whether perceptions of congruence or fit between the brand and cause, the brand and the consumer, and the cause and the consumer influence reaction to an alliance. In addition, the study replicated the important role that motivation perceptions play in CrM outcomes. Brands representing both a utilitarian product and a hedonic product were used to control the influence of product type. The present study extends the literature on the effectiveness of CrM by examining a variety of possible choices that managers of both brand and causes must make in the decision to enter into such an alliance.

Applications for Practioners

The results only weakly support hypothesis one: cause-brand congruence had only a small positive effect, and did not significantly influence purchase intention when the control variables were included. Additional analyses showed that neither company motive nor product type moderated the relationship, only that brand-cause fit seems to be redundant to the stronger effects of either variable. The track record for the hypothesis in prior studies is mixed, suggesting that marketers cannot take for granted that having a strong fit is essential to CrM success (cf. Hamlin & Wilson, 2004). Although an intuitively appealing idea, strong fit might be more important for high involvement products than for low involvement products such as the ones used here. In the low involvement situation, it might simply be sufficient for a brand to have a CrM program for it to work. The influence of perceived company motivation has much higher impact than cause-brand fit, so that companies entering into

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cause-brand alliances should ensure that consumers perceive their intentions to be socially rather than profit motivated. Inconsistent findings in prior studies might be attributable to variation in perceived corporate motivation and product type that researchers left uncontrolled. The findings do not suggest that cause-brand fit should be ignored, only that other elements of the CrM strategy are more important to its success.

Compared to brand-cause it, whether consumers identify with the cause or brand appears to have more impact. Hypothesis two, the positive impact of brand-consumer image congruence, was supported, but the effect was small. Although some participants did indicate that the brand was congruent with their self-image, this variable had little influence on their purchase intention. This likely could be because again, consumers are less likely to identify strongly with a low involvement product than with a high involvement product, so the influence of this variable is likely to be minimal. Perhaps, consumers are more focused on the cause than the brand when they encounter a CrM so that their self-cause schemas dominate the decision to buy. In cases where it is evident that most buyers are involved with the brand, the marketer might want to either try to build involvement, or engagement as it often called, prior to launching a CrM, or focus on the more important aspect of the CrM, the self-cause engagement, as noted next.

Hypothesis three regarding the impact of cause-consumer congruence, in contrast, had a large influence. In this low-involvement product context, consumers seem more motivated by the cause than the brand. This find implies that causes that engage the feelings and motivations of either large numbers of consumers or are especially engaging for a smaller number, but highly motivated consumers, would be the best choice for a brand to partner with than a cause with weak engagement. Moreover, some CrM strategies might be relatively unsuccessful when the partner cause is not engaging for many people or even elicits the opposite response, i.e., a negative feeling toward the cause that actually works against the brand.

Finally, the study confirms (H4) the important influence that consumer perceptions of corporate motivation for entering into a CrM alliance have on its success. Firms should be careful to avoid seeming to enter into the cause-brand alliance solely for the financial benefits. The brand needs to make efforts to ensure that its motivation is genuinely to do good. The best way to create this impression is to actually be motivated to help the cause. Having members of the firm testify to the relevance of the cause to their own lives would promote the genuineness of the brand's commitment to the cause. Doing other activities in addition to the alliance such as volunteer participation in cause-related activities would also attest to the authenticity of the brand's commitment.

In summary, the results support the hypotheses that in a cause-brand alliance, brand-cause congruence, brand-consumer congruence, and cause-consumer congruence along with perceived corporate motivation do have a positive impact on purchase intention. These findings are consistent with previous research and provide support for the general model of brand alliances that posits that these are important aspects of a successful CrM campaign. Most importantly, the findings suggest that, at least in the low involvement product context, how much consumers identify with the cause is more important to the outcomes than the other forms of congruence. In particular, they provide quantitative support for Broderick et al.'s (2003) qualitative findings that cause-consumer congruence is important to the success of a CrM campaign. Therefore, the company should choose a cause that has a congruent image with their target consumer. It may be more important for a brand to select a cause that resonates with consumers than it is for a cause to select a brand that is important for consumer self-image, at least for low involvement products.

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Consumer perceptions of corporate motivation also seem to influence the purchase intention positively when a brand allies with a cause. The company should pay attention to the consumers' skepticism on the company's motivation in CrM. Furthermore, companies should naturally strive to develop positive consumer perceptions of their motives for doing good in all their marketing strategies. How consumers feel about company motivations appear to be more important than whether the brand-cause congruence is high or whether consumers identify with the brand. A cause-brand alliance likely will not compensate for poor perceptions of the company's motivations.

It appears that poor perceptions of a brand cannot be improved remarkably by allying with a cause if consumers suspect the company's motivations. They may see the alliance as a cynical attempt to mislead consumers into favoring a brand without correcting the fundamental reasons the brand is viewed poorly in the first place. If consumers perceive corporation motivation as altruistic and consistent with other behavior and not cynically as a self-interested one, the cause-related marketing program should be successful. In the end, the company should pay attention to the consumers' perceived corporation motivation.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the study was limited in generalizability by the sample, the use of only two brands, and the specific measures, its findings did fit will with the body of findings in this research stream and do extend our understanding of CrM as a dimension of promotion strategy. Further research addressing the possibility that differences exist between high and low involvement products in CrM would add a lot to our understanding of these phenomena. We recommend that further studies should test the hypotheses with high involvement products that are important to consumer self-image to determine if our surmise that product involvement plays a key role in these relationships is supported. If so, it would suggest that for low involvement products with positive brand images, CrM programs can be very beneficial if they partner with causes that resonate with consumers. Just the fact that there is an alliance seems to have a positive impact on buying intentions for low involvement products, but for high involvement products greater attention might have to be paid to the character of the brand and to the fit between the cause and the brand because these factors might be more important for these types of products. We also recommend inclusion of additional dependent variables in future studies to explore the causal links that lead from exposure to the brand-cause alliance to the outcome. It might be the case that more complex relationships between the independent and dependent variables exist than can be modeled by linear regression so that further studies using structural equation modeling are needed to assess this possibility. We can endorse Yechiam et al.'s (2003, p. 329) conclusion that "the exact effect of CRM appears to be situation specific."

In that vein, future studies should assess the generalizability of these findings among consumers in countries other than the U.S. Cultural influence might moderate these effects so that as companies market their brands around the world, they can adjust their CrM programs to fit the specific requirement of consumers in different countries. The effort to understand cause-related marketing will involve a large amount of research because the phenomenon is so complex. The interactions of many variables determine the outcomes. The present paper is one contribution to this effort.

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