



A Path to Altruism:
Investigating the Effects of Messages Focus and Explicitness in CR-M Campaigns

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Purpose and Rationale: Fashion apparel brands have responded to the growing consumer interest in cause-related marketing (CR-M)—firms’ marketing campaign linked to cause fundraising (Nan & Heo, 2007). Most recently, to promote fashion brands, apparel companies have modified their marketing strategy to better communicate their CR-M initiatives and position themselves as more altruistic. This is particularly important given consumers’ rising scrutiny for the apparel industry’s social and environmental impact (Lee, Seifert, & Cherrier, 2017). For instance, both new to market (e.g., Rapanui) as well as long-established brands (e.g., Levi’s, Michael Kors) emphasize their environmental or charitable contributions as part of their advertising campaigns. However, despite the popularity of CR-M (Huertas-García, Lengler, & Consolación-Segura, 2017), there is still a growing need to understand how specific CR-M campaign messages craft a company’s image (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). That is, it is unclear how a fashion apparel brand should construct their CR-M message to position their brand as more altruistic. To address this need, this experimental study tests whether the message factors of a fashion apparel brand’s CR-M campaign (i.e., message focus: local vs. global, message explicitness: implicit vs. explicit) produce varying effects on consumers’ perception of brand altruism.

Conceptual Framework/Hypotheses Development: Construal-level theory (CLT) posits that the psychological distance of an event differentiates consumers’ perception toward the event (Trope & Liberman, 2003). According to this theory, the proximity (spatial distance) of the issue in a CR-M campaign (local vs. global issue) can create different level of psychological distance among consumers. That is, when a CR-M campaign is focused on a local issue (e.g., helping the local environment), consumers are likely to feel closer psychological distance, thus developing highly favorable perceptions towards the CR-M message, such as perceived brand altruism (Fujita et al., 2006). However, when a CR-M campaign is focused on a global issue (e.g., helping the global environment), it creates a further psychological distance, which is likely to generate less favorable perceptions towards the CR-M message. Based on this, H1 is proposed as:

H1: Consumers' perceptions of brand altruism is more favorable when the CR-M message is local (vs. global).

In addition, CLT suggests that such psychological distance influences consumers' interpretation of the message, using different levels of construal (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Toward a spatially close event (i.e., local issue in a CR-M), consumers can easily perform concrete assessment about the event through low construal, thereby not requiring much mental assistance (Fujita et al., 2006). For instance, when a firm utilizes a local CR-M message, even if the message does not articulate about the campaign too specifically using an implicit message, they can easily become acceptable toward the message because the issue is related to their own local community with clear proximity and importance. On the other hand, CLT posits that a spatially far event requires high level construal from consumers, where they need a more complex mental processing to assess the abstract, psychologically far event (Trope & Liberman, 2003). For example, CR-M messages with a global focus may be perceived as more abstract or unobservable to consumers (Grau & Folse, 2007). In this case, an explicit CR-M message, which articulates how consumers' donation will specifically be used and what specific benefit this will generate for the society, could be more effective to enhance consumers' perception of the global CR-M campaign. In this fashion, H2 and H3 are proposed as:

H2: When firms utilize a global CR-M message, consumers' perceptions of brand altruism is more favorable when an explicit (vs. implicit) message is used.

H3: When firms utilize a local CR-M message, consumers' perceptions of brand altruism is more favorable when an implicit (vs. explicit) message is used.

Research Design/Procedure: A pre-test (n=93) with a US consumer panel was used to select an existing brand to use in the main study. Following Dall-Olmo et al.'s (2013) pre-test method, we selected a brand that was familiar to consumers and ensured that the CR-M had high-fit with the brand (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). The main experimental study utilized a 2 (message focus: global vs. local) x 2 (message explicitness: implicit vs. explicit) between-subject factorial design where the visual experimental stimuli portrayed the brand's CR-M campaign. A global (local) message indicated that the CR-M campaign would help the global (local) environment, and an implicit (explicit) message indicated an unspecific/vague (specific/clear) contribution based on the CR-M campaign. A US consumer panel (n=232) were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: global and implicit message (n=60), global and explicit message (n=55), local and

implicit message (n=58), and local and explicit message (n=59). Following stimuli exposure, participants responded to measures of brand altruism (e.g., <Brand> has a genuine concern for the welfare of its customers) (Rifton, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004), manipulation check questions, and demographic questions. All variables were measured on 7-point Likert-type scales. Manipulation check questions ensured accurate perceptions of the manipulated variables.

Results: Findings indicate that the message focus and explicitness in a CR-M campaign produce varying effects on brand altruism. That is, consumers' perception of brand altruism was not significantly different by whether the CR-M message is global or local ($F(1,232)=.220, p=.639$). Thus, H1 was not supported. However, findings indicate that the interaction between message focus and message explicitness on brand altruism was statistically significant ($F(1,232)=4.625, p=.033$). Specifically, when firms utilized a global CR-M message, consumers' perception of brand altruism was not significantly different whether the message is explicit ($M=5.365$) or implicit ($M=5.170, F(1,232)=.857, p=.356$), rejecting H2. However, when firms used a local CR-M message, consumers' perception of brand altruism was more favorable when an implicit message ($M=5.418$) was used than an explicit message was used ($M=4.978, F(1,232) =4.530, p=.034$), supporting H3.

Discussion: Results indicate that CR-M messages need to be carefully crafted to establish a brand position as altruistic, based on what issue the CR-M campaign is focused on. Specifically, although message explicitness was not a significant factor when a CR-M campaign is globally-focused, when a CR-M campaign is locally-focused, an implicit message was more effective. Given consumers' rising scrutiny of the apparel industry's social and environmental impact, further research should continue to explore factors that can improve consumers' perception of brand altruism to enhance the effectiveness of fashion brands' CR-M initiatives.

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