

## The Impact of Cause-Related Marketing on Consumer Attitudes: Theoretical Explanations

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### Abstract

Cause-related marketing is a strategy for communicating corporate social responsibility and enhancing brand image. When companies associate with cause-related events, consumers can gain opportunities to participate in charity. Attribution Theory, SOR Theory, Self-Signaling Theory, and Balance Theory can be used to explain the impact of cause-related marketing on consumer attitudes. Future research should further explore whether there are other factors influencing consumer attitudes in cause-related marketing, conduct in-depth investigations into the effects of cause-related marketing from the consumer perspective, and attempt to analyze the internal mechanisms through which cause-related marketing influences consumer attitudes from new theoretical perspectives.

### Full Text

## The Influence of Cause-Related Marketing on Consumer Attitudes and Its Theoretical Explanations

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### Abstract

Cause-related marketing represents a strategic approach for communicating corporate social responsibility and enhancing brand image. When companies align themselves with charitable causes, consumers gain opportunities to participate in philanthropic activities. Attribution theory, SOR theory, self-signaling theory, and balance theory provide robust frameworks for explaining how cause-related marketing influences consumer attitudes. Future research should further

explore additional factors affecting consumer attitudes in cause-related marketing contexts, investigate these effects from the consumer perspective, and examine the underlying mechanisms through novel theoretical lenses.

**Keywords:** cause-related marketing; consumer attitude; corporate social responsibility

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In August 2016, Alibaba Group launched a cause-related marketing campaign called “Ant Forest” through its Alipay platform. In this initiative, consumers could nurture a virtual tree by generating “green energy” through everyday Alipay transactions such as paying utility bills or purchasing movie tickets. Once the virtual tree matured, Alibaba Group would partner with the Alashan SEE Foundation to plant a real tree to protect local ecosystems. According to the latest data from Ant Forest, by the end of 2017, the program had attracted 280 million users, reduced carbon emissions by 2.05 million tons, and resulted in the planting of 13.14 million actual trees while protecting 12,111 acres of conservation land. The *Blue Book of Philanthropy: Report on China’s Charitable Development (2016)*, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, revealed that in 2016, 84% of China’s top 100 state-owned enterprises actively promoted philanthropic participation among their subsidiaries, with 20 establishing corporate foundations. For businesses, cause-related marketing has become an increasingly popular strategy for enhancing commercial value (Guerreiro, Rita, & Trigueiros, 2016). From the consumer perspective, participation in cause-related marketing satisfies needs for self-esteem, self-satisfaction, and honor, creating benefits for both individuals and society (Kim & Johnson, 2013).

The positive impacts of cause-related marketing on businesses, consumers, and society have established it as a valuable and popular marketing tool. As cause-related marketing strategies have matured, academic research in this domain has advanced considerably, primarily examining the phenomenon from both consumer and corporate perspectives (Lafferty, Lueth, & Mccafferty, 2016). Koschate-Fischer, Stefan, and Hoyer (2012) argue that cause-related marketing, which combines corporate donations to social causes with product sales, ultimately depends on consumer attitudes for its success. In recent years, the relationship between cause-related marketing and consumer attitudes has garnered increasing academic attention, with scholars applying social psychological theories such as attribution theory (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001; Pharr & Lough, 2012; Youn & Kim, 2018), SOR theory (Guerreiro, Rita, & Trigueiros, 2015; Andrews, Luo, Fang, & Aspara, 2014), self-signaling theory (Savary, Goldsmith, & Dhar, 2015; Hanks, Line, & Mattila, 2016), and balance theory (Basil & Herr, 2006) to elucidate the underlying mechanisms.

Theoretical contributions examining cause-related marketing’s influence on consumer attitudes from the consumer perspective have significantly advanced the field, yet they have also increased the complexity of related knowledge. Since consumer attitudes are ultimately formed through individual cognitive process-

ing, understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying attitude formation represents the most critical aspect of this research domain. However, existing literature reviews on cause-related marketing (e.g., Guerreiro et al., 2016; Lafferty et al., 2016) have not sufficiently emphasized theoretical analysis of these underlying mechanisms. To address this gap and systematically present the current state of research, this paper focuses on the impact of cause-related marketing on consumer attitudes, constructs a theoretical explanatory framework, integrates relevant theoretical perspectives, and proposes directions for future research.

## 2.1 Factors Influencing Consumer Attitudes in Cause-Related Marketing

Cause-related marketing is defined as a process in which companies implement marketing activities by donating a specified amount or percentage of product sales to designated non-profit organizations to support social causes when customers engage in product exchanges to meet personal or organizational objectives (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). This approach combines charitable activities with promotional efforts, with the genuine purpose of enhancing corporate social benefits (such as reputation) or economic benefits (such as profits), while simultaneously improving social welfare. Additionally, purchasing cause-related products can provide consumers with a sense of “changing the world,” thereby creating and enhancing value for them (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

This paper categorizes the factors influencing consumer attitudes in cause-related marketing into five dimensions: enterprise characteristics (e.g., Lafferty, 2007; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013; He, Zhu, Gouran, & Kolo, 2016), cause characteristics (e.g., Hou, Du, & Li, 2008; Vanhamme, Lindgreen, Reast, & Popering, 2012), fit between enterprise and cause (e.g., Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004; Huertas-García, Lengler, & Consolación-Segura, 2017), product characteristics (e.g., Guerreiro et al., 2015; 江若尘, 郑玲, 2017), and consumer characteristics (e.g., Bester & Jere, 2012; Kerra & Das, 2013).

**2.1.1 Enterprise Characteristics** As the initiator and implementer of cause-related marketing campaigns, the enterprise plays a crucial role. Specific corporate attributes significantly influence consumer attitudes. In cause-related marketing contexts, a company’s existing image and reputation substantially impact consumer attitudes. For instance, Lafferty (2007) found that perceived corporate reputation affects cause-related marketing effectiveness, with perceived reliability positively influencing consumer attitudes. Corporate social responsibility behaviors affect consumer satisfaction and purchase intentions, with this relationship strengthened by corporate competence (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). He et al. (2016) similarly found that a brand’s existing social responsibility image positively influences purchase intentions for cause-related products. Furthermore, consumers’ perceptions of corporate motives affect their attitudes. Perceived altruistic motives positively influence brand choice and product eval-

uation (Barone, Miyazaki, & Taylor, 2000; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013). However, when consumers attribute corporate participation to self-serving motives (such as profit enhancement or reputation building), they may develop distrust and negative attitudes toward the company (Rifon et al., 2004).

**2.1.2 Cause Characteristics** A defining feature of cause-related marketing is that consumers can simultaneously participate in social causes through everyday consumption activities. Social causes provide consumers with feelings of self-fulfillment and positive emotions (Andrew et al., 2014). Since the cause itself represents a primary reason for consumer participation and generates positive emotional experiences, variations in cause characteristics significantly influence consumer attitudes. Existing research indicates that cause importance positively affects purchase intentions, with increased perceived importance leading to higher purchase intentions (Hou et al., 2008). Vanhamme et al. (2012) found that cause urgency influences consumer identification. Additionally, geographic proximity affects consumer attitudes, as local causes can enhance positive attitudes toward cause-related marketing even among consumers with low cause involvement (Grau & Folse, 2007).

**2.1.3 Fit Between Enterprise and Cause** The purpose of aligning brands with social causes is to transfer the positive emotions consumers experience when supporting a cause to the brand (Grohmann & Bodur, 2015). Enterprises, causes, and consumers constitute the principal actors in cause-related marketing campaigns, and coordination among these parties significantly impacts effectiveness. Consumer attitudes are influenced by the fit between the enterprise and the cause, which generally exerts a positive effect. Rifon et al. (2004) demonstrated that enterprise-cause fit positively affects consumer trust and attitudes toward sponsoring companies. Barone, Norman, and Miyazaki (2007) similarly found that fit positively influences cause-related marketing effectiveness. Brand-cause fit comprises five dimensions: slogan fit, mission fit, goal fit, promotion fit, and geographic fit (Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010; Huertas-García et al., 2017), all of which significantly correlate with consumer attitudes toward brands (Zdravkovic et al., 2010). In research on cause-related marketing advertising, Huertas-García et al. (2017) further found that slogan fit and geographic fit positively influence purchase intentions. Specifically, the degree of association between brand slogans and the cause, as well as the geographic match between brand location and cause location, positively affect consumers' emotional responses to cause-related advertisements, thereby influencing purchase intentions.

**2.1.4 Product Characteristics** Cause-related marketing typically involves corporate donations based on consumer purchase or product usage behaviors. In these campaigns, product characteristics represent an important consideration that influences consumer attitudes. Compared to utilitarian products, hedonic products associated with cause-related marketing more readily evoke consumer

emotions, thereby enhancing consumer choice (Guerreiro et al., 2015). Barone et al. (2000) noted that when corporate products have similar prices to competitors, implementing cause-related marketing can enhance competitive advantage and increase selection probability. However, when price differences are substantial, cause-related marketing has limited effect unless corporate motives possess significant advantages that can increase purchase desire. Additionally, in cause-related marketing contexts, consumers develop more positive attitudes toward products with higher donation levels compared to those with lower levels (江若尘, 郑玲, 2017).

**2.1.5 Consumer Characteristics** Since consumer attitudes are ultimately formed through individual processing, consumer characteristics also influence attitudes toward cause-related marketing. This paper categorizes consumer characteristics into three aspects: relationship with cause-related marketing activities, needs and motivations for participation, and personal traits. The relationship with cause-related marketing activities constitutes an important factor affecting consumer attitudes. Bester and Jere (2012) found that consumer involvement with social causes positively influences attitudes and purchase intentions. Familiarity with corporate cause-related advertising can reduce skepticism toward claims (Singh, Chao, Kristensen, & Villaseñor, 2009). Both consumer-cause fit and consumer-company fit positively affect consumer attitudes (Chowdhury & Khare, 2011; Vanhamme et al., 2012). Consumers' needs and motivations for participating in cause-related marketing represent another critical factor. Kerra and Das (2013) indicated that consumers with higher need for recognition may exhibit stronger purchase intentions for products with specific donation amounts. Koschate-Fischer et al. (2012) found that warm-glow motives moderate the effect of donation amount on willingness to pay. Personal traits also influence participation, as Moosmayer and Fuljahn (2010) demonstrated that women perceive corporate cause-related marketing more positively than men. Both individualistic thinking and gender differences affect skepticism toward cause-related marketing advertisements (Chang & Cheng, 2015). Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, and Felps (2009) found that participants with higher moral identity support cause-related marketing brands more strongly, particularly when moral identity is primed.

## 2.2 Effects of Cause-Related Marketing on Consumer Attitudes

Varadarajan and Menon (1988) proposed that companies adopt cause-related marketing for two primary purposes: supporting social philanthropy and improving marketing performance. A review of the literature reveals that cause-related marketing can generate positive corporate evaluations and increase purchase intentions, yet improper implementation can also produce severe negative consequences. This paper analyzes these effects from the consumer perspective, categorizing them into positive and negative outcomes.

**2.2.1 Positive Effects on Consumer Attitudes** When brands claim to support social causes in advertisements, this information generates positive emotions among consumers (Huertas-García et al., 2017). Andrews et al. (2014) noted that social causes provide consumers with self-satisfaction and positive emotional experiences. Numerous studies (e.g., Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012; Baghi, Rubaltelli, & Tedeschi, 2009; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001) have demonstrated positive effects of cause-related marketing on consumer attitudes. This paper analyzes these positive effects through purchase intentions and corporate attitudes.

In most cases, cause-related marketing positively influences purchase intentions. Perceived altruistic motives positively affect brand choice and product evaluation (Barone et al., 2000; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013). Cause importance, consumer involvement, and brand-cause fit also positively influence purchase intentions (Hou et al., 2008; Huertas-García et al., 2017; Bester & Jere, 2012). Additionally, larger corporate donations lead to higher consumer willingness to pay (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012).

Regarding corporate attitudes, companies increasingly employ cause-related marketing to enhance consumer goodwill and corporate image (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012). Rifon et al. (2004) demonstrated that higher enterprise-cause fit positively influences consumer trust and attitudes toward sponsoring companies. Investment in corporate social responsibility resembles building a reservoir of goodwill, requiring a long-term strategic perspective. Social responsibility investments in these brands may translate into long-term positive outcomes such as loyalty and supportive behaviors (Torelli, Monga, & Kaikati, 2012). McWilliams and Siegel (2001) argued that cause-related marketing helps companies establish trustworthy images and enhance perceived product quality. Aligning corporate social responsibility with marketing strategy to improve corporate and brand acceptance and reputation exemplifies cause-related marketing practice (Baghi et al., 2009).

Cause-related marketing not only provides basic product utility but also fosters positive self-perceptions among consumers. Consequently, it generally produces positive effects on consumer attitudes. In the short term, this manifests as increased purchase intentions. In the long term, consumers develop more positive attitudes toward companies implementing cause-related marketing, thereby enhancing corporate reputation and image.

**2.2.2 Negative Effects on Consumer Attitudes** Contrary to common win-win perspectives, cause-related marketing can sometimes produce opposite, unintended consequences (Grolleau, Ibanez, & Lavoie, 2016). From the consumer perspective, improper implementation can severely damage both consumer attitudes and corporate interests. This paper systematically reviews these negative effects through consumer skepticism, purchase intentions, and corporate attitudes.

In cause-related marketing campaigns, consumer skepticism typically relates to perceived corporate motives (Barone et al., 2000; 2007; Chang & Cheng, 2015). Prior negative corporate reputation and low enterprise-cause fit also engender skepticism about corporate motives (Elving, 2013). When consumers cannot easily verify cause-related marketing claims, skepticism toward advertising increases (Singh et al., 2009). Chang and Cheng (2015) explained skepticism toward cause-related marketing advertising from a psychological trait perspective, finding that higher pragmatic orientation and individualistic thinking increase such skepticism.

Improper implementation may negatively affect purchase intentions. Skepticism about corporate motives negatively impacts purchase intentions (Elving, 2013). When companies possess negative corporate social responsibility reputations, low-level donations produce more negative effects on purchase intentions than no donations at all (Müller, Fries, & Gedenk, 2014). Consumers with higher individualistic thinking exhibit greater skepticism toward cause-related advertising, leading to reduced purchase intentions (Chang & Cheng, 2015).

Furthermore, consumers may develop negative attitudes toward companies implementing cause-related marketing, damaging market reputation. When consumers attribute cause-related marketing to self-serving motives (such as profit enhancement or reputation building), they tend to distrust companies and develop unfavorable attitudes toward sponsors (Rifon et al., 2004). Perceived self-interested motives negatively affect brand evaluation (Barone et al., 2000; 2007), and when consumers perceive insincere corporate motives, brand image and consumer loyalty decline (Pharr & Lough, 2012).

In summary, under conditions of negative corporate reputation, difficulty verifying claims, low enterprise-cause fit, and perceived self-interested motives, cause-related marketing produces negative effects on consumer attitudes. These effects manifest as increased skepticism, reduced purchase intentions, and negative corporate attitudes.

In conclusion, cause-related marketing represents a double-edged sword for businesses. While most companies aim to leverage consumer goodwill toward social causes to positively influence attitudes, and while cause-related marketing generally increases purchase intentions and corporate evaluations, this approach is not universally effective. Inappropriate implementation or targeting unsuitable consumer segments can produce severe negative consequences. Companies cannot arbitrarily implement cause-related marketing campaigns but must comprehensively consider factors influencing consumer attitudes, integrating specific circumstances related to the enterprise, consumers, products, and social causes to design campaigns that benefit all three parties.

### 3. Theoretical Mechanisms Explaining Cause-Related Marketing Effects on Consumer Attitudes: Different Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical contributions explaining how cause-related marketing influences consumer attitudes have advanced the field while increasing knowledge complexity. To deepen academic understanding and systematically present the current research landscape, this paper, for the first time, adopts a social psychology perspective, using attribution theory, SOR theory, self-signaling theory, and balance theory to articulate the explanatory mechanisms and construct a theoretical framework (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]).

**3.1 Attribution Theory** When participating in cause-related marketing activities, consumers frequently attribute corporate behavior to internal motives (such as genuinely supporting a cause to help others) or external motives (such as improving performance), rather than attributing them to dual motives (Mohr et al., 2001). Perceived corporate motives influence brand evaluation, with altruistic motives positively affecting responses to sponsoring brands, while perceived self-serving motives produce unexpected harm (Baron et al., 2000; 2007). Perceptions of insincere corporate motives reduce brand image and loyalty (Pharr & Lough, 2012). However, when consumers perceive altruistic motives, they are more likely to support the cause, thereby increasing corporate sales (Youn & Kim, 2018). For example, high enterprise-cause fit leads consumers to attribute altruistic motives to companies, strengthening positive attitudes (Rifon et al., 2004). In cause-related marketing, donation amounts positively influence perceptions of corporate motives, affecting participation intentions and brand attitudes (Folse, Niedrich, & Grau, 2010). In summary, attribution theory suggests that consumers attribute corporate behaviors and motives in cause-related marketing contexts. Perceived altruistic motives produce positive effects on consumer attitudes, whereas perceived self-serving motives generate negative effects.

**3.2 SOR Theory** SOR theory (Stimulus-Organism-Response) posits that external stimuli influence psychological states, prompting responses (Namkung & Jang, 2010). Following a series of psychological processes, recipients exhibit internal or external behavioral reactions, with internal responses typically referring to attitudes and behavioral responses referring to approach or avoidance behaviors (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2003). SOR theory has been widely applied in consumer behavior research, such as demonstrating that guilt feelings during hedonic choices can complicate purchase decisions (Winterich & Barone, 2011). In cause-related marketing research, Guerreiro et al. (2015) noted that purchasing cause-related products constitutes a special stimulus affecting subsequent attitudes and choices. Social causes can generate positive emotions (Andrews et al., 2014), which in turn lead to positive responses to cause-related products (Kim & Johnson, 2013). SOR theory suggests that in cause-related marketing, attitude-influencing factors primarily stem from consumers passively receiving external stimuli, which they then process to generate relevant emotions, ultimately producing corresponding attitudes and behaviors.

**3.3 Self-Signaling Theory** Recent scholarship suggests that consumers can derive value beyond consumption from their choices (Gneezy, Gneezy, Riener, & Nelson, 2012). Some donation behaviors relate to social signals released through donating, as Lacetera and Macis (2010) demonstrated that publicly recognizing blood donors increases donation frequency. Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van (2010) found that people willingly make consumption sacrifices to elevate their status within relevant groups. Helping behaviors promote prosocial reputations, signaling trustworthiness (Barclay, 2006). Savary et al. (2015) focused on private signaling motives, examining how choice contexts affect self-signaling connected to prosocial behavior, finding that when hedonic products are involved, choosing not to donate signals greater selfishness, and this self-signaling transmission can increase donation intentions. Hanks et al. (2016) compared two donation methods in cause-related marketing—self-service technology versus donating in front of others—and found that consumers are more likely to donate when others are present, as public donations allow them to display their behavior as a means of elevating social status. Self-signaling theory posits that consumer participation in cause-related marketing consciously releases positive signals to oneself or others, facilitating the acquisition of relevant benefits.

Traditionally, motivations for charitable participation have been categorized as either internal or external (Savary et al., 2015). Self-signaling theory suggests that consumers' desire to obtain external motivations such as social reputation or status constitutes a key mechanism through which cause-related marketing influences attitudes. However, this theory inadequately explains situations where consumers participate purely to help others without expecting any returns, such as "empathetic altruistic motives."

**3.4 Balance Theory** Balance theory examines relationships among three parties from an individual perspective, positing that people constantly seek balance in interpersonal relationships and their attitudes toward these relationships. This balance encompasses not only relationships between people but also relationships between things (Heider, 1958). Relationships between people are termed sentiments, while relationships between things are termed unit relationships (Heider, 1958). Cause-related marketing represents a union between enterprises and social causes, with the relationship between companies and charities constituting a unit relationship. Balance among consumers, enterprises, and charities positively influences responses to cause-related marketing. Specifically, Basil and Herr (2006) argued that perceived fit between enterprises and charities affects attitudes toward cause-related marketing, with this relationship partially mediated by perceived relationship strength. Consumers' prior attitudes toward both enterprises and charities also influence attitudes toward cause-related marketing. When prior attitudes are balanced and positive, attitudes toward cause-related marketing become more positive; conversely, when prior attitudes are negative, attitudes toward cause-related marketing become more negative (Basil & Herr, 2006). Overall, balance theory suggests that mutual relationships among consumers and other actors, such as enterprises and

charities, significantly affect consumer attitudes in cause-related marketing contexts.

**3.5 Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives** In summary, the influence mechanisms of cause-related marketing on consumer attitudes can be explained through attribution theory, SOR theory, self-signaling theory, and balance theory. While all four theories can explain these effects, each possesses distinct characteristics. This paper classifies and organizes these theories across three dimensions—theoretical explanation, theoretical features, and theoretical limitations—to inform future research.

First, attribution theory suggests that cause-related marketing effects primarily result from consumers' attributions of corporate behaviors. Attributions to altruistic motives produce positive attitudes, while attributions to self-serving motives produce negative attitudes. This theory effectively explains both positive and negative effects. However, it simplistically dichotomizes motives into altruistic and self-serving categories. When cause-related marketing involves numerous corporate behaviors, consumers may attribute some behaviors to altruistic motives and others to self-serving motives, making it difficult for attribution theory to clearly explain effects in complex situations. Moreover, in cause-related marketing contexts, consumer responses may depend more on salient cues or prior experiences than on rational judgment, limiting the theory's applicability.

Second, from the SOR theory perspective, cause-related marketing's charitable nature means that exposure to such campaigns constitutes an external stimulus that generates positive emotions such as happiness, leading to positive responses. SOR theory emphasizes emotional mechanisms, suggesting that consumers rely more on contextual cues or prior experiences to make intuitive judgments. However, consumer behavior is often goal-directed, with consumers holding expectations about behavioral outcomes. In SOR theory, consumers passively receive external stimuli and respond mechanically, overlooking their purposefulness and agency.

Third, self-signaling theory suggests that cause-related marketing helps consumers consciously release positive signals to themselves or others, facilitating benefits such as positive self-feelings, social reputation, and status. This theory posits that consumers hold expectations about their own behavior, better reflecting their agency and purposefulness, thereby compensating for SOR theory's limitations. However, self-signaling theory assumes that consumers participate to satisfy self-interest, failing to explain cases where consumers simply want to help others without expecting returns.

Fourth, balance theory has a relatively narrow application scope but plays an important role in analyzing how relationships among three parties affect consumer attitudes. It suggests that balance in consumers' attitudes toward enterprises and charitable institutions influences attitudes toward cause-related marketing activities. However, the theory cannot precisely measure the strength of atti-

tudinal relationships, and in cause-related marketing contexts where consumers may face multiple actors, balancing attitudes toward different pairs of actors may differentially affect consumer attitudes.

Although these theories exhibit clear distinctions, they also demonstrate interconnections. Attribution theory primarily applies when consumers make rational judgments, but when consumers rely on salient cues or prior experiences, SOR theory can compensate for attribution theory's limitations. Conversely, SOR theory's portrayal of passive consumers overlooks agency and purposefulness, which self-signaling theory addresses. In certain contexts, balance theory can more clearly articulate the theoretical mechanisms, providing important supplementary explanations to the other three theories.

#### 4. Future Research Directions and Prospects

Based on this literature review and analysis, this paper identifies that despite significant progress in research on cause-related marketing's influence on consumer attitudes, several unresolved issues remain. This section discusses future research directions regarding influencing factors, effects, and theoretical explanations.

**4.1 Factors Influencing Consumer Attitudes in Cause-Related Marketing** First, future research should examine how the number of cause-related marketing campaigns and their interrelationships affect consumer attitudes. Previous studies have investigated how cause importance, urgency, and geographic proximity influence attitudes (Hou et al., 2008; Vanhamme et al., 2012; Grau & Folse, 2007). However, most research has focused on single campaigns, neglecting how campaign quantity and relatedness affect attitudes. In practice, should companies pursuing strategic cause-related marketing concentrate on individual campaigns long-term or diversify across multiple campaigns? When implementing multiple campaigns, how should they coordinate to maximize positive consumer attitudes? Existing research has not adequately addressed these questions. Future studies should therefore explore the effects of multiple cause-related marketing campaigns and their interrelationships on consumer attitudes.

Second, research should further investigate how consumer differences affect brand evaluation in cause-related marketing contexts. Consumer gender, individualistic thinking, and moral identity significantly influence attitudes (Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2010; Chang & Cheng, 2015; Aquino et al., 2009). This paper suggests that consumers' social responsibility expectations toward companies also affect attitudes. Compared to ethical expectations, consumers with higher economic expectations may develop more positive attitudes. Future research should examine how consumer personality traits and internal motivations for participating in cause-related marketing affect related attitudes, helping companies design more appropriate campaigns for different market segments.

Third, studies should analyze how brand characteristics influence consumer attitudes in cause-related marketing. In related advertising, brand-cause fit elicits effective consumer responses and generates purchase intentions (Huertas-García et al., 2017). Social responsibility constitutes an independent dimension of brand personality (Madrigal & Boush, 2008). Therefore, examining how brand personality-cause fit affects consumer attitudes holds significant importance. This paper suggests that investigating the interactive effects of brand positioning and consumer social responsibility expectations on consumer attitudes represents a promising future research direction.

Fourth, research should examine cause-related marketing effects from the beneficiary perspective. Compared to traditional promotions, cause-related marketing's greatest feature is providing consumers with opportunities to participate in philanthropy. Consequently, consumers focus more on the charitable aspect and the beneficiaries during participation. Investigating beneficiary effects on consumer attitudes is therefore meaningful. Future studies could explore what attitudes consumers develop when beneficiaries have closer social distance to consumers and what underlying mechanisms drive these effects.

Fifth, research should analyze influencing factors from a value co-creation perspective. In recent years, Alibaba Group launched the "Ant Forest" campaign, providing an online platform where consumers can interact with friends through activities such as watering each other's trees, collecting energy, and team planting. These approaches may enhance consumer engagement and experiential value in cause-related marketing, thereby positively affecting attitudes. Future research could adopt a value co-creation perspective, integrating recent case studies to analyze factors influencing consumer attitudes and enrich related theories.

#### **4.2 Effects of Cause-Related Marketing on Consumer Attitudes**

First, future research should investigate whether attitudes toward campaign brands can extend to other related brands. Previous studies have demonstrated that cause-related marketing affects consumer attitudes (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012; Baghi et al., 2009), but these effects have primarily focused on the brand implementing the campaign, neglecting perceptions of related brands. Grohmann and Bodur (2015) suggested that brand-cause alliances can transfer positive emotions from supporting causes to brands. Large enterprises often own multiple brands, making it necessary to examine whether aligning one brand with a cause affects other brands and how consumers evaluate these related brands. Future research could investigate how cause-related marketing by parent (or sub-) brands affects attitudes toward sub- (or parent) brands and determine which brand level (premium, mid-range, or low-end) maximizes overall corporate brand image when resources are limited, thereby guiding multi-brand companies in optimally allocating resources.

Second, research should further analyze long-term effects on consumer attitudes. Most existing studies (e.g., Huertas-García et al., 2017; Koschate-Fischer et al.,

2012) have focused on purchase intentions as the primary outcome variable. However, companies need to view social responsibility as a long-term strategic investment (Torelli et al., 2012). Future research should examine long-term effects such as corporate reputation, perceived moral capital, and consumer loyalty as dependent variables to more thoroughly analyze the sustained impact of cause-related marketing on consumer attitudes.

Third, studies should deeply investigate the reasons for negative effects on consumer attitudes. In some cases, cause-related marketing produces opposite, unexpected consequences (Grolleau et al., 2016). Recently, companies investing heavily in social responsibility have paradoxically been perceived as hypocritical, contradicting their original intentions, while existing theories cannot fully explain this phenomenon (骆紫薇, 黄晓霞, 陈斯允, 卫海英, 杨德峰, 2017). Subsequent research should adopt a consumer perspective to further analyze why consumers develop negative brand evaluations and perceive corporate hypocrisy in cause-related marketing, enabling companies to better avoid potential negative effects and encouraging them to actively fulfill social responsibility while enhancing profits and social welfare.

### 4.3 Theoretical Explanations for Cause-Related Marketing Effects

This paper's analysis indicates that existing theoretical explanations have made important contributions but inevitably possess certain limitations. Most theories (e.g., SOR theory, balance theory) suggest that attitude changes result primarily from elements within cause-related marketing campaigns, portraying consumers as passively receiving stimuli and responding mechanically. This fails to adequately reflect consumer agency and purposefulness. To address these limitations and expand research, future scholars could employ alternative theories such as self-determination theory and social exchange theory to analyze the underlying mechanisms.

First, self-determination theory could better reflect consumer agency and altruism in cause-related marketing. This theory examines motivational processes underlying self-determined behavior, which represents freely chosen actions based on full awareness of needs and environmental information (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In cause-related marketing contexts, when consumers experience empathy toward beneficiaries, they may develop purely altruistic internal motivations without expecting returns. Future research could use self-determination theory to examine what campaign elements and consumer needs facilitate the development of internal motivations for participation, thereby compensating for self-signaling theory's limitations.

Second, social exchange theory could deepen understanding of how self-serving motivations affect consumer attitudes. This theory posits that exchange behaviors reflect reciprocity under fairness principles, where one party's actions benefit the other and beneficial behaviors are mutual (Blau, 1964). According to social exchange theory, consumers in cause-related marketing may hope to benefit others or society while simultaneously obtaining personal benefits such as self-

satisfaction, self-enhancement, and recognition from others. This anticipated benefit may drive positive attitudes toward cause-related marketing. Future scholars could apply social exchange theory to more deeply explore theoretical explanations for cause-related marketing effects on consumer attitudes.

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