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The impact of perceived manipulation, motives, and ethicality in cause-related marketing: a CRM+ model

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ABSTRACT

We developed a CRM+ Model using experimentation and structural equation modeling analysis. CRM+ demonstrates previously unexplored interrelationships among consumer-perceived manipulation, brand motives, perceived ethicality of the Cause-related Marketing, and brand attitude. CRM+ reveals that perceived ethicality of the CRM has a significant positive effect on brand attitude, though it is not as pronounced as the effect of perceived altruistic motives. Egoistic motives decrease ethicality perceptions, but has no direct effect on brand attitude. Altruistic motive perceptions diminish egoistic motive perceptions. CRM+ suggests marketing managers should prioritize emphasizing altruistic motives and ethicality of the partnership over downplaying egoistic motives.

Introduction

More than ever before, corporations engage in social causes that are important to their community. Often this engagement takes the form of cause-related marketing (CRM), where a firm contributes to a cause of interest proportional to sales, such as a fast-food company donating every 1,000th meal to a homeless shelter, or an e-commerce company donating 5% of sales to a children's hospital.

When a firm engages in CRM, their motives for doing so matter to consumers and affects their attitude toward the brand sponsoring the CRM (Barone et al., 2007; La Ferle et al., 2013). This seems to also be true of other types of corporate social responsibility (Woisetschläger et al., 2017). However, CRM may be particularly sensitive to perceived motivations, because unlike similar efforts such as a brand's direct donation to a cause, CRM directly benefits the firm in a manner clearly visible to the consumer. CRM has the potential to signal that a firm has self-serving or even unethical reasons for doing "the right thing." Whether justified or not, anecdotes in social media and interpersonal contexts often criticize various CRM partnerships as simply an unethical tool to increase sales or manipulate brand image (e.g. Strahilevitz, 2003).

While extant research has examined some CRM factors in isolation, it has not yet examined ethicality, or produced a model that specifies all interrelationships.

Nor has it revealed the *relative* effects of brand cause fit, ad visceralness, perceived manipulative intent, motives, and the ethicality of a partnership. A more complete model of how perceived manipulation, motives, and partnership ethicality together affect brand attitude has the potential to improve CRM design and execution. Thus, the purpose of this research was to develop and evaluate a conceptual CRM model that includes brand-cause fit, ad visceralness, perceived manipulation intent, motives, and partnership ethicality in structural relationships with brand attitude. Moreover, we include pre- and post- measures and control for general consumer skepticism, to ensure the effects seen are more clearly the result of the intended manipulation.

This article first examines the most relevant published literature on CRM, manipulative intent, motives, and perceived ethicality, develops hypotheses for a proposed holistic model, which we refer to as the CRM+ Model. Results of a quasi-experimental evaluative survey are reported that provide insights and further refine the CRM+ Model. Interrelationships among the constructs and how these variables affect brand attitude and the theoretical and managerial implications are discussed. This research uniquely adds to CRM research by expanding on extant CRM conceptualizations and identifying the relative impact of different motive and ethicality perceptions on brand attitude.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

To provide context for our model development, we review and build on the most relevant research on CRM, altruistic and egoistic motivations, perceived ethicality in marketing, and inferred manipulative intent.

Cause-related marketing

CRM has been 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 consumers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives” (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). CRM is a subset of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity, which broadly refers to all corporate activities designed for positive social impact.

CRM is an increasingly important component of marketing strategy (Lafferty et al., 2016; Patel et al., 2017) and it relates to stakeholders outside the firm and the need satisfy them for long run growth (Freeman, 2010). Marketers’ interest in CRM is driven by consumer demand for CSR, which is higher than ever. As many as 90% of customers want to see corporations contributing to social causes (Coleman et al., 2020) and 66% of recently surveyed US consumers believing that companies should take a stand on social and political issues (Gilbert, 2020). About 97% of marketing executives consider CRM a valid business strategy, with about two-thirds of major brands actively engaged in CRM (Manuel et al., 2014).

Consumer reactions to CRM appear to be mixed. One qualitative study found that some consumers expressed negative attitudes about CRM, cynicism about the firm’s motives for engaging in CRM, or some combination of the two (Webb & Mohr, 1998). A small minority of respondents were so skeptical of CRM campaigns that they tuned them out completely (Webb & Mohr, 1998). Nevertheless, research has supported that CRM generally increases brand attitude and, ultimately, profits (Ballings et al., 2018; Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2012; Choi & Seo, 2019; Lafferty et al., 2016).

CRM’s effect on brand attitude has often been framed via attribution theory and biases (Chang et al., 2018; S. Thomas et al., 2019). Central to this framing is attribution theory’s proposition that when people see a behavior in an unknown person, they tend to attribute the cause of that behavior to the person’s inherent dispositions (Ross, 1977). Since CRM describes a brand’s ostensibly positive behavior, at first glance it may seem reasonable to infer that consumer will attribute positive motives to that brand by default.

However, consumer evaluations of CRM are not information-free exercises – brands are never completely unknown entities. Consumers typically have preexisting attitudes toward the brand represented. They also have a general understanding about how businesses operate and opinions about advertising generally, and they interpret features of the CRM advertisement itself. This information is significant within the attribution theory lens, which states that to the extent that available information generates suspicion, people will not immediately infer positive motives (Chang et al., 2018). Before determining motives, they tend to give deeper consideration and elaborate as to possible manipulative intent and hidden motives, such as altruism or egoism (Marín et al., 2016). This tendency to elaborate may be a particular problem for CRM, since even compared to other forms of CSR (e.g. direct philanthropy), CRM is more vulnerable to suspicions about the firms’ participation (Barone et al., 2007).

Perceived manipulative intent in advertising

In some cases, advertising practices are seen by consumers as manipulative. Research into perceived manipulative intent has long been a topic of interest in psychology (e.g. Christensen, 1977; Goldberg, 1965; Masling, 1966) and marketing communication, including endorsements (Gräve et al., 2021), native ads (S. An et al., 2019), and retail atmospherics (Lunardo & Mbengue, 2013; Lunardo & Roux, 2015). In the advertising domain, perceived manipulative intent has been defined as “consumer inferences that the advertiser is attempting to persuade by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means” (Campbell, 1995, p. 228). Perceived manipulative intent seems to be negatively correlated with trust in advertising (Campbell, 1995) and credibility in advertising (Cotte et al., 2005).

In CRM research, perceived manipulation has similarly been shown to erode a firm’s ability to influence consumer behavior in a variety of contexts (Campbell, 1995; Ellen et al., 2000; Kang et al., 2018; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). It is apparent that perceived manipulation plays an important role in CRM consumption, but how those perceptions drive attitude toward the brand is less clear, as is what variables create perceptions of manipulation in a CRM.

The CRM+ model: brand-cause fit

While there may be many variables that increase or decrease perceived manipulation, we suggest that fit between a cause and a brand seems a likely candidate. A partnership exhibits high *brand-cause fit* when they

match in some significant ways, such as in their slogans, missions, targets, promotions, or geography (Huertas-García et al., 2017; Rego & Hamilton, 2021). For instance, a hand sanitizer brand and a hospital have strong fit because they similarly focus on and promote health outcomes, whereas an electronics manufacturer would not similarly match a hospital in focus nor in mission. Conversely, studies have shown that the lack of cause-brand fit can result in lower perceived credibility (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

Some prior research has indicated that better fit can improve consumers' evaluation of the CRM campaign (Chang et al., 2018; Pracejus et al., 2020; Zasuwa, 2017). Still, other research has produced mixed results, such as stating fit does positively impact attitude toward the brand but does not impact purchase intent (Rego & Hamilton, 2021).

We propose that consumers may perceive manipulation when fit between the cause and brand is low. Attribution theory posits that greater elaboration is given when available evidence is suspicious, and low fit between the cause and brand may give reason for consumers to question why the partnership exists, potentially leading to an inference of manipulative intent.

On the other hand, when fit is strong, there is less reason for a consumer to elaborate. Attribution theory posits that a person's natural disposition in this case is to presume that a behavior stems from an entity's inherent character or disposition. With strong brand-cause fit, we may expect to see a propensity among consumers to presume a brand's inherent goodness as a reason for engaging in an ethical CRM partnership.

H1. A strong brand-cause fit will decrease the perception of manipulative intent.

The CRM+ Model: perceived ethicality in cause-related marketing

Consumer-perceived *ethicality* has been defined as the level of ethical perceptions that consumers hold about a firm or product (Brunk, 2012). These are perceptions of the moral equity, fairness, and acceptability of a behavior in question, as judged by the consumer. These judgments of right and wrong are presumed to stem from fundamental values learned from core life experiences such as family training or spiritual encounters (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990). The beliefs from these core experiences are thought to shape what people consider to be objectionable in marketing contexts (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). Given that a CRM inherently addresses social causes that could challenge a consumer's fundamental values, its perceived ethicality

seems likely to be important to the consumer. A thorough literature review found no published peer reviewed papers investigating consumer-perceived ethicality of a CRM.

There is, however, some empirical support in related research for the notion that perceived ethicality of a brand alone is correlated with brand perceptions, brand affect, brand loyalty, and perceived altruistic motives (Amoako et al., 2021; Das et al., 2019; Eryandra et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2012; Strahilevitz, 2003). Related research has generally examined ethicality perceptions of a specific product or brand, and for good reason. Seele et al. (2021) and Matos-Wood (2020) note that increasing emphasis is being placed on ethicality because consumers consider ethical and social behaviors of the brand in addition to quality and price when making purchasing decisions. Brands are therefore incentivized to portray themselves as green, ethical, clean, or socially responsible (Matos-Wood, 2020). Some evidence suggests that advertising can affect this perception of ethicality. For instance, Sundar and Kellaris (2017) found that exposing consumers to retailer logos with eco-friendly coloring can make an ethically ambiguous practice appear to be more ethical, while a non-eco-friendly colored logo could make the same practice appear less ethical.

Maxfield (2008) noted that some consumers look for brands that reflect their own feelings and ethical concerns. This values-matching exercise certainly seems to occur for specific brands or products, but for similar reasons we propose it is likely to also occur for a CRM partnership. Consumers may implicitly or explicitly consider how well the CRM partnership reflects their core beliefs about what is acceptable and good (more ethical) or doesn't match their ideals (less ethical).

Where CRM ethicality fits in among the various assessments consumers make is a major consideration of the CRM+ Model. We first propose that brand-cause fit increases ethicality perceptions, again considering attribution theory. With strong brand-cause fit, there is little reason for consumers to elaborate, and high ethicality is likely a default presumption.

H2. A strong brand-cause fit will increase positive perceptions of the ethicality of the CRM partnership.

The CRM+ model: ad visceralness

The CRM+ Model will also show how perceived manipulative intent indirectly influences ethicality perceptions. First, we propose one more variable that may increase perceptions of manipulation – ad visceralness. We use *visceralness* to refer to the raw emotional response an advertisement elicits from a consumer. Nonprofit

marketing research shows that imagery can elicit more or less emotion based on the pictures used in an ad (Allred & Amos, 2018; Baek & Yoon, 2020; Burt & Strongman, 2005; Jordan et al., 2019; Zemack-Rugar & Klucarova-Travani, 2018). For example, an ad that depicts an underfed, unkempt, sad child standing alone will elicit a more visceral response than an ad with a well-groomed child sitting in school. In previous CRM literature, we found no papers that explicitly discussed visceralness, but many that looked at how explicit imagery was used to motivate consumers to react (Baek & Yoon, 2020).

No research was found on how ad visceralness affects a consumer's sense of being manipulated. One CRM study examined ad images designed to evoke strong arousal and valence but found no direct effect of this kind of visceralness on perceived egoistic motives of the brand (Chung & Lee, 2019). There is no evidence of research about ad visceralness and consumer perceived manipulation intent. Nevertheless, we believed that many consumers may consider visceral ad images to be a manipulative marketing tool, and that varying visceralness may therefore add variance to perceived manipulative intent.

H3. Greater visceralness of an ad depicting the cause will increase the perception of manipulative intent.

What happens when elaboration does happen, and manipulation is perceived, whether because of visceralness, low fit, or any other reason? As noted earlier, perceived manipulation clearly impacts CRM consumer behavior in a variety of contexts (Campbell, 1995; Ellen et al., 2000; Kang et al., 2018; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). For instance, Folse et al. (2010) reported that higher CRM corporate donations resulted in consumers being more likely to participate in the promotion, yet this relationship was mediated by inferences of manipulative intent. Other research has noted that CRM print ads that used "sad" images to represent the cause generated higher inferred manipulative intent among consumers than the same ads with more neutral or happy images (Kang et al., 2018). Given the apparent behavioral impacts, it seems likely that perceived manipulative intent likely also affects consumer attitudes in CRM ventures, but how it does this is not clear. One possibility which this study proposes is that it adjusts perceived motives of the brand, thereby impacting ethicality and attitudes.

The CRM+model: egoistic and altruistic motivations

Prior research has identified a causal link between perceived motives for engaging in CRM and attitude toward the brand. These motivations have been classified as

egoistic (self-serving) or altruistic (other-serving). Research into perceived altruistic and egoistic motivation is common in the domains of personality and psychology (Hao & Du, 2021; Siem & Stürmer, 2019; Tamborini et al., 2021), and marketing (Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2012; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013; Myers & Kwon, 2013). Additionally, some researchers have examined how ego involvement plays a role in a consumers' response to cause marketing (McDermott & Lachlan, 2020; Pittman, 2020), and how perceived authenticity impacts a consumers' perception of cause marketing relationships (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015).

We suggest that because of the involvement of a charitable cause, CRM may be particularly susceptible to perceptions of manipulative intent. This is because the consumer perceives that if he or she does not engage with the CRM, a charitable cause will miss out. A consumer is unlikely to view a firm missing out on revenue as a negative outcome, but is more likely to see a cause missing out on revenue as a negative. Attribution theory suggests that consumers will tend to attribute this negative potential outcome to variables external to themselves – in the case of CRM, the sponsoring brand is the easiest target among the parties involved. Related research has observed a similar tendency to assign blame to the firm – when an advertisement uses guilt as a persuasion tactic, consumers sometimes neutralize that guilt by presuming manipulative intent (Cotte et al., 2005).

To the extent that consumers determine an ad is manipulative, attribution theory further suggests that consumers are likely to infer that the brand's inherent traits are the reason for that manipulation. We therefore anticipate that as perceptions of manipulation increase, consumers will adjust their assessments of the brand's underlying motives.

H4. Increased perception of the manipulative intent of an ad will decrease the perception of a brand's altruistic motives.

H5. Increased perception of the manipulative intent of an ad will increase the perception of a brand's egoistic motives.

Prior research makes a clear connection between perceived altruistic motives for engaging in CRM and a positive attitude toward the brand. Some research on CSR has found that information indicating egoistic motives either decreases or has no effect on a CSR's otherwise positive impact on brand attitude (Zasuwa, 2019). Other research has noted that perceived altruistic motives may improve attitude toward the brand (La Ferle et al., 2013; Myers & Kwon, 2013). We further explore these likely connections here through the lens of attribution theory.

As noted earlier, CRM may be particularly susceptible to suspicion about motives (Barone et al., 2007). A relatively high default level of suspicion means that when consumers consider a CRM, they are more likely to elaborate and consider in depth whether the brand's motives are altruistic or egoistic (Barone et al., 2007). This natural proclivity toward elaboration actually has potential benefit for a brand, since elaboration on the CRM does not confirm the suspicions. This is because in the absence of negative information, the tendency is to infer altruistic motives. Perceiving motives that match consumers' desired brand characteristics should improve their attitude toward the brand.

H6. Perception that a brand's motivation for partnering with a cause is altruistic will increase positive attitude toward the brand.

However, promoting CRM activity can also be seen as being self-serving, which generally has a negative connotation. Though likely to be less prominent, egoistic motives can be perceived simultaneously with altruistic motives. To the extent that consumers' elaboration leads them to infer egoistic motives for engaging in the CRM partnership, we hypothesize that consumers may presume they stem from inherent character flaws with the brand, thereby diminishing brand attitude.

H7. Perception that a brand's motivation for partnering with a cause is egoistic will decrease positive attitude toward the brand.

At first glance, altruistic and egoistic motivations may seem to be polar opposites of a single dimension. Closer inspection reveals that consumers perceive both altruistic and egoistic motives simultaneously (Webb & Mohr, 1998). Empirical evidence suggests that most consumers presume companies engage in CSR for both self-serving and altruistic reasons (Yoon et al., 2006). With this understanding, most CRM research now considers and models both altruistic and egoistic motivations as separate, independent constructs (Choi et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2019). One study (Myers & Kwon, 2013) even analyzed these perceived motivations simultaneously, which minimizes double-counting shared variance. While separating altruistic and egoistic motives into two separate constructs is more conceptually accurate than using a unidimensional scale, the presumption of complete independence is not likely correct. We suggest that an increase of one may have an effect on the other, because of the commonly observed *confirmation bias*, or the human tendency to discount or ignore evidence that contradicts his or her own opinion. If consumers are disposed to see

altruistic motives, we should expect them to ignore or discount egoistic motives, and vice versa. Though this relationship likely goes both ways, we suggest that because information available to the consumer has a level of ambiguity (i.e. the consumer recognizes their general attitudes toward advertising or business may or may not apply) or suggests positive motives (i.e. the advertisement selects and frames a positive message) consumers will be most likely to assume altruistic motives and discount evidence suggesting egoistic motives.

Further, deception detection research shows that most people have a natural bias toward assigning truth to claims whose veracity is questioned (Levine et al., 1999). Thus, unless past experience or strong opinion is involved, the information on which consumers have to elaborate should usually lead to a more positive than negative evaluation of the brand's true motives.

While CRM research has been quick to separate egoistic and altruistic motivations into two separate constructs, treating the motivations as though they are independent of one another may have swung the pendulum too far. No CRM studies we found cited reasoning for presuming one type of motivation has no effect on the other. Though prior research does not predict a relationship between altruistic and egoistic motives, we considered that unless these motives are fully independent of one another, a model that assumes no relationship between the two perceptions risks mischaracterizing their relative effects. Thus, we propose that when consumers evaluate whether a CRM is motivated by altruism, the most common effect is that the perception of altruistic motives diminishes the perception of egoistic motives.

H8. Perception of a brand's altruistic motives decreases the perception of egoistic motives.

Now that we have proposed relationships between perceived manipulative intent and motives, we will explain how these motive perceptions in turn lead to changes in perceived ethicality. Myers and Kwon (2013) found initial support for a model in which the effect of perceived motivations on attitude is mediated by consumers' perceived general attitude toward the CRM partnership, which suggested an interesting possibility for similarly modeling partnership ethicality.

This model seems to fit within the attribution theory lens – we can expect that whether positive or negative, the results of consumers' assessment of motives will lead to inferences about the underlying characteristics of CRM partnership, including its ethicality. Perceptions of the ethicality of the CRM partnership should be influenced when consumers perceive altruistic or egoistic motives of the firm. Perceptions of ethicality should

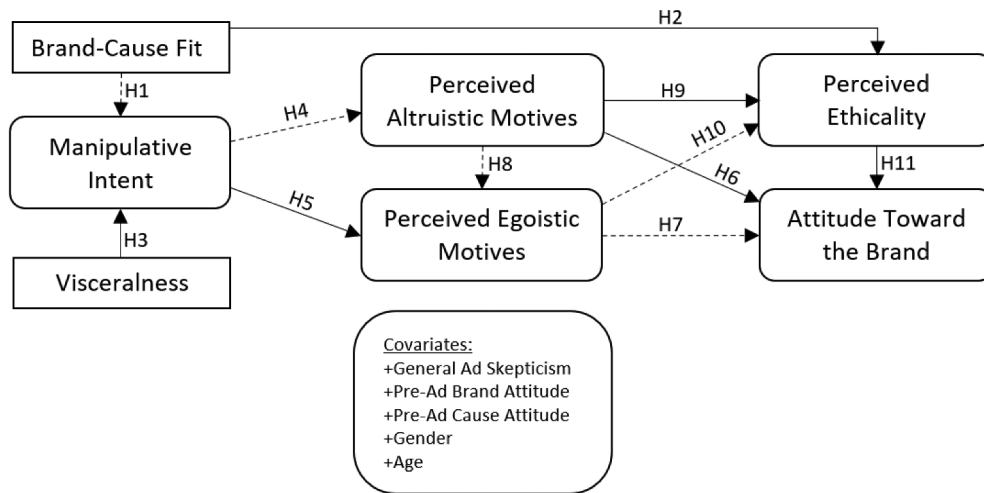


Figure 1. Proposed CRM+ model (Dashed lines represent negative effects).

therefore increase or decrease to the extent perceived motives reflect the values held by the consumer. Presuming typical consumers value altruistic motives and devalue egoistic motives, motive perceptions should impact their perceived ethicality of the CRM.

H9. Perception that a brand's motivation for partnering with a cause is altruistic will increase perceptions of the ethicality of the CRM partnership.

H10. Perception that a brand's motivation for partnering with a cause is egoistic will decrease perceptions of the ethicality of the CRM partnership.

From the consumer's perspective, CRM marketing communications tie together the brand and cause involved. This tight coupling naturally allows for transference of attitudes about the CRM to attitudes toward the brand involved. Inasmuch as CRM ethicality perceptions are attributed to the brand, brand ethicality perceptions change in concert with CRM ethicality perceptions. Brand ethicality perceptions have previously been shown to significantly influence general brand attitude (Kang & Choi, 2016; Schmalz & Orth, 2012).

H11. Positive perception of the ethicality of the CRM partnership will increase positive attitude toward the brand.

In summary, manipulative intent and perceived motivations have been shown or suggested to influence positive brand attitudes in CRM. Yet little is known about the interplay of these constructs and their relative impact on brand attitude. The ethicality of a CRM partnership has not directly been examined, but may potentially be an

important factor in CRM. Therefore, this research proposes and empirically evaluates an integrative model – one that examines ethicality's impact on brand attitude and does so simultaneously with perceived manipulation intent and motivations. Building on the previous research noted, we propose a model (depicted in Figure 1) wherein perceived manipulative intent, motives and CRM partnership ethicality play a central role in CRM brand attitude. We refer to this as the CRM+ Model to emphasize its integration and scope. The CRM+ Model has potential to yield a more holistic and useful understanding of CRM for both theory and management.

Methods

An online survey was administered, in which respondents were shown one of 12 mock advertisements promoting a brand-cause partnership, such as Purell providing a percentage of sales to St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital. Participants' general advertising skepticism and attitudes toward the brand and the cause were measured prior to viewing the ad. Participants viewed the ad and then completed a survey that measured perceived manipulative intent, motives, and attitudes. Four of the ads reflected strong brand-cause fit (e.g. hand sanitizer with a children's hospital cause) while others reflected minimal or neutral fit (e.g. moisturizing lotion with disaster response fund) or poor fit (e.g. USB drives with a children's hospital cause). To vary visceralness, half of the ads used only logos to represent the cause, while the other half used images of people actively being aided by the cause (i.e. a nonprofit organization). Examples of advertisements used in the study are shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Sample images used in the survey (Brand logos were removed for this publication so as not to infringe copyright).

Participants

Participants from within the United States were recruited from the Mechanical Turk platform, which can be used to collect survey-based data in online environments in November of 2019. Because they are dispersed and diverse, Mechanical Turk users tend to have a more representative diversity compared to users recruited from a single institution (Buhrmester et al., 2016). All respondents had completed a variety of Mechanical Turk tasks in the past and had earned the distinction of being an MTurk Master (Clickhappier, 2016) and thus, were familiar with the platform.

The survey resulted in 304 completed responses. Participants' median age was 37 years old (min = 22, max = 73, sd = 11), and 50% were women. This was after removing participants that were not real (i.e. bots) or not

passing attention checks (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020). Neither bots nor consumers who do not see the CRM advertisement are representative of target CRM consumers, and including them would diminish the generalizability of the results.

Measures

Measures used were scales in extant literature, adapted to the current context, with the exception of brand-cause fit and visceralness, which were dummy variables coded per the advertisement manipulations. Consumer Skepticism was measured using the scale first created by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998), which has since been used several times (Foreh & Grier, 2003; Hardesty et al., 2002; Obermiller et al., 2005). Measures for both egoistic and

altruistic motivations were adapted from Ellen et al. (2006). The ethicality measure looked specifically at the perceived ethicality of the brand-cause partnership. It was adapted from a measure originally published by Reidenbach and Robin (1990), which was later adapted by LaTour and Henthorne (1994) for print advertisements. The measure for attitude toward the brand was originally published in Sengupta and Johar (2002), while attitude toward the cause was adapted from Dean (2002). Full details on measures are provided in the Appendix.

Manipulation checks

As a manipulation check, respondents were asked to rate the brand-cause fit of the advertisement they saw. Ratings for the poor-fit ($M = 3.68$; $sd = 1.52$), neutral-fit ($M = 4.66$; $sd = 1.33$), and good-fit ($M = 5.12$; $sd = 1.58$) ads were significantly correlated with the intended fit for each ad ($p < .001$) and were significantly different from one another. A similar manipulation check for visceralness produced ratings for lower-viscerality ads ($M = 4.45$; $sd = 1.56$) that were significantly lower ($p < .001$) than the ratings for the higher-viscerality ads ($M = 5.20$; $sd = 1.27$).

Results

For model analysis, we used covariance-based structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM allows for little in the way of assumptions testing, but Breusch-Pagan tests on separate linear regression models for Partnership Attitude and Values Motives each revealed statistically significant heteroskedasticity. Standard errors in the SEM model were therefore estimated using robust maximum likelihood.

Reliability and confirmatory factor analysis

A few measurement items significantly lowered reliability metrics or diminished model fit. After removing these items per common SEM practice (Jarvis et al., 2003), see the appendix for a complete list. All constructs reflected good

reliability per published guidelines for Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability scores (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Reliability metrics are reported in Table 1.

A confirmatory factor analysis produced fit indices within the expected parameters for good or acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.91$; CFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.05; PCLOSE = 0.06; SRMR = 0.05). We tested for common-method variance using a common latent factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Factor loadings on the common latent factor were all below a .2 threshold, suggesting little if any common-method variance. All AVEs were greater than .5, supporting convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was assessed via heterotrait-monotrait ratios, which are all below the recommended .9 threshold, with one exception (see Table 2). This test flagged possible discriminant validity concerns between the two measurements of brand attitude: before and after seeing the ad.

However, it is understandable that these two variables (before and after seeing the ad) would be very highly correlated and thus difficult to discriminate, since a single ad exposure is not expected to have a large effect on an established brand attitude. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that the measures used may not fully discriminate between these two constructs. A post hoc SEM model was fit using the same specifications, except with pre-ad brand attitude removed. This model produced very similar results (see Appendix), with the two practically significant differences being increased effect sizes between altruistic motives and CRM ethicality and between brand-cause fit and perceived manipulation. To the extent discriminant validity might be a problem with the data, precision in the estimated strength of these two relationships may be affected.

Model testing

The proposed model similarly reflected good or acceptable fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 1.95$; CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.05; PCLOSE = 0.47; SRMR = 0.05). Model results are shown in Figure 3. The fit of the same model with nonsignificant paths removed was not significantly different

Table 1. Reliability and validity metrics and bivariate correlations of latent variables.

	Construct	CA	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	General Ad Skepticism	.97	.97	.80	1.00							
2	Perceived Values Motives	.91	.91	.73	.57	1.00						
3	Perceived Egoistic Motives	.80	.82	.61	-.34	-.72	1.00					
4	Brand Attitude (Pre-Ad)	.91	.91	.77	.41	.75	-.46	1.00				
5	Brand Attitude (Post-Ad)	.92	.92	.80	.51	.90	-.60	.92	1.00			
6	Cause Attitude (Pre-Ad)	.94	.94	.83	.20	.53	-.40	.37	.51	1.00		
7	Perceived Manipulation	.93	.93	.81	-.17	-.62	.82	-.38	-.56	-.44	1.00	
8	Partnership Ethicality	.96	.96	.82	.23	.63	-.54	.46	.63	.56	-.70	1.00

Table 2. Heterotrait-monotrait ratios.

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 General Ad Skepticism							
2 Perceived Altruistic Motives	0.572						
3 Perceived Egoistic Motives	0.342	0.719					
4 Brand Attitude (Pre-Ad)	0.405	0.753	0.461				
5 Brand Attitude (Post-Ad)	0.509	0.898	0.604	0.917			
6 Cause Attitude (Pre-Ad)	0.204	0.535	0.398	0.372	0.508		
7 Perceived Manipulation	0.175	0.619	0.822	0.383	0.561	0.436	
8 Partnership Ethicality	0.228	0.630	0.544	0.460	0.627	0.558	0.705

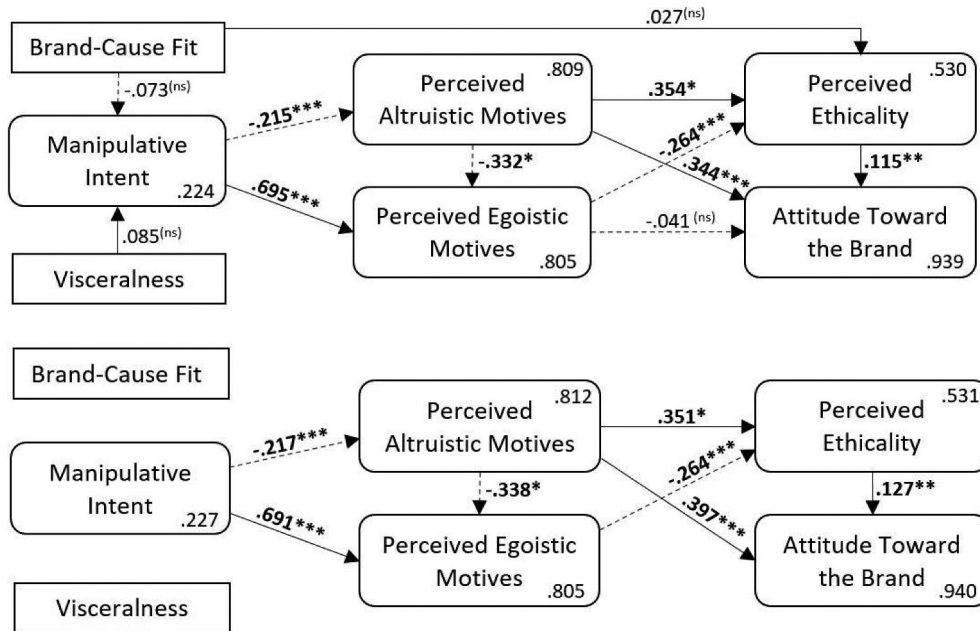


Figure 3. Standardized path estimates and R² values for the initial and the restricted model.

Table 3. Summary of results.

Hypothesis	Results
H1: A strong brand-cause fit will reduce the perception of manipulative intent.	Not supported
H2: A strong brand-cause fit will increase positive perceptions of the ethicality of the CRM partnership.	Not supported
H3: Greater visceralness of an ad depicting the cause will increase the perception of manipulative intent.	Not supported
H4: Increased perception of the manipulative intent of an ad will decrease the perception of a brand's altruistic motives.	Supported
H5: Increased perception of the manipulative intent of an ad will increase the perception of a brand's egoistic motives.	Supported
H6: Perception that a brand's motivation for partnering with a cause is altruistic will increase positive attitude toward the brand.	Supported
H7: Perception that a brand's motivation for partnering with a cause is egoistic will decrease positive attitude toward the brand.	Not supported
H8: Perception of a brand's altruistic motives decreases the perception of egoistic motives.	Supported
H9: Perception that a brand's motivation for partnering with a cause is altruistic will increase perceptions of the ethicality of the CRM.	Supported
H10: Perception that a brand's motivation for partnering with a cause is egoistic will decrease perceptions of the ethicality of the CRM.	Supported
H11: Positive perception of the ethicality of the CRM will increase the positive attitude toward the brand.	Supported

Note. All of these findings control for preexisting brand attitude, which means the findings should be generalizable regardless of *a priori* opinion levels.

($\Delta\chi^2 = 6.02$) from this model ($p = 0.74$). This restricted model is also displayed in Figure 3. For simplicity of presentation, control variables are not displayed, although the estimates in the figure account for the effect of all control variables.

Discussion

The overarching objective of developing and evaluating the CRM+ Model was to expand understanding of how manipulation and motives impact brand attitude, while introducing perceived ethicality of the CRM. Including all

of these constructs in a single analysis adds to existing research by making inferences about the relative impact of altruistic and egoistic motives. Our results suggest that perceived manipulative intent has a greater direct impact on perceived egoistic motives than altruistic motives, and that perceived altruistic motives diminish the perception of egoistic motives. In turn, perceived motives strongly influence ethicality perceptions, and ethicality has a positive effect on attitude toward the brand. However, the impacts of egoistic motives appear to be relatively less important to brand attitude, because altruistic motivations influence brand attitudes more strongly and more directly. Table 3 contains a summary of hypothesis support found.

CRM ethicality matters

Modern business increasingly emphasizes ethicality. In CRM, sales and the firm's social cause are tied together, making it easy for consumers to perceive the CRM may be motivated by revenue rather than ethics. The CRM+ Model introduces the concept of CRM ethicality, and results reveal that ethicality in the CRM does in fact matter. As a consumer perceives more CRM ethicality, brand attitude increases and with reduced perceived ethicality, brand attitude decreases.

What leads to perceptions of greater ethicality? Perceived altruistic motives lead to greater perceived CRM ethicality in addition to increasing brand attitude. Inversely, when consumers perceive the motives of the firm are more egoistic, they see the CRM as less ethical. This observation matches predictions of attribution theory (Ross, 1977), suggesting consumers perceive the ethicality of the CRM to be a function of the brand's inherent motivations. Evaluation of the CRM+ Model did not reveal any impact of perceived brand-cause fit. While brand-cause fit has been found to effect positive brand attitude (Pracejus et al., 2020) in some situations and not in others (Rego & Hamilton, 2021), the greater ease of processing brand-cause fit did not affect perceived motives and ethicality. The mixed results of previous studies regarding the significance of fit may stem from misattributing variance by not controlling for factors such as pre-ad attitude. Alternatively, it may be simply a byproduct of methodological differences. For instance, it may be that as an individual thinks more about the fit, the brand-cause fit did not lead the individual to infer about perceived motives. Seemingly, mismatched brands and causes may not be seen as an ethical concern, at least in the United States, where this study was conducted. Another possible reason for the insignificant results is that the sheer number of variables in the model meant that it was less possible for other factors to be contributing to the changes in motives or ethicality, leading to a more robust system where there

was less chance for misattributed variance than in models that look solely at fit and a dependent variable. In either case, more work needs to investigate brand-cause fit, to better understand its role in cause marketing outcomes.

Altruistic motives matter most

Ethicality and altruism are similar but conceptually distinct (Leban et al., 2021). For example, a CRM program that emphasizes how it is culturally aware and fair is focusing on ethicality, while a CRM that emphasizes the brand's moral obligations to help is focusing on altruism. Our results reveal perceptions of ethicality do not impact brand attitude as strongly as perceived altruism. In fact, the CRM+ Model reveals that perceived altruism is the most important factor in determining brand attitude. It has a significant impact on brand attitude in the model, where egoistic motives, somewhat surprisingly, have no direct impact. While this research did not directly examine the reasons why brand attitude wasn't impacted by egoistic motives, general habituation is one possibility. Consumers implicitly expect virtually all brands to be motivated primarily by profit, possibly making explicitly perceived egoistic motives not a significantly differentiating factor. Conversely, the power of altruism may be found in its variability among brands. That it is especially impactful in CRM may reflect *customer delight*, a term that typically refers to receiving unrelated or additional services beyond expectations (Barnes & Krallman, 2019): CRM provides a way for the consumer to both get a product or service they desire, and gives an additional benefit of supporting an altruistic cause.

Altruistic motives decrease egoistic motives

Perceived egoistic motives are not unimportant. Our results reveal egoism reduces perceptions of ethicality. Nevertheless, perception of altruistic motives significantly decreases perception of egoistic motives. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has identified this relationship, and it reflects what might be expected from confirmation bias where an individual will look for evidence to confirm a bias previously held (Deighton, 1984). Regardless of the mechanism, acknowledging some level of interdependency appears to be an improvement on an orthogonal representation, which was itself an improvement on early unidimensional representations of the two types of motives.

Genuineness matters

Manipulative intent as perceived by the consumer has a significant effect on motives attributed to the firm, with the strongest impact being an increase in perceived egoistic motives. When there is less perceived manipulative intent,

the consumer attributes more altruism and less egoistic motives to the firm. Conversely, when there is more perceived manipulative intent, the consumer attributes less altruism and more egoism to the firm. The CRM+ Model evaluation suggests that ad visceralness and brand-cause fit are not significant influencers. This is important because a great deal of attention has been given to brand-cause fit and while more recent studies support the importance of fit (Kuo & Rice, 2015; Melero & Montaner, 2016) some studies have found that fit is detrimental to the brand metrics (Drumwright, 1996; Ellen et al., 2006). Thus, not finding support for the importance of fit is not exceptionally surprising and more work should be done to clarify the role of fit in CRM. Ad visceralness has not been heavily researched, yet other types of imagery in cause marketing have shown mixed results. For instance, D. An et al. (2020) has shown grotesque imagery helps to persuade customers when considering luxury brands, while another study showed that death imagery strengthened consumer commitment to antipoaching advertisements (D. An et al., 2020; Baek & Yoon, 2020).

Theoretical contributions

Our study develops a theoretical model for CRM with marketing implications. Based on attribution theory we combine constructs that have been tested before with new relationships for a more comprehensive understanding of how CRM impacts consumer attitudes. The first theoretical implication is the value of understanding the relative impact of variables studied and used in CRM communication. While we the study of motives (Barone et al., 2007; La Ferle et al., 2013) and ethicality (Amoako et al., 2021; Das et al., 2019; Eryandra et al., 2018) have been done, we provide antecedents to consumer perception of ethicality and brand attitude in CRM. We explain the relative impact of brand-cause fit, visceralness, perceived motives on ethicality and brand attitude. As best we know, these constructs have not been empirically examined together in CRM.

A second implication is the unexpected finding of the relative lack of influence of brand-cause fit (Chang et al., 2018; Pracejus et al., 2020; Zasuwa, 2017) and viscerality (Baek & Yoon, 2020; Jordan et al., 2019) of a CRM ad on perceived firm motivations. While brand-cause fit may be less matched this does not necessarily lead to the determination that the firm is egoistic or ethical. A third theoretical contribution is this research reveals the effect of perceived motives on ethicality. As a firm is perceived to have more altruistic motives they are seen as more ethical and there is a more positive attitude toward the brand. While the relationships between a few of these constructs have been investigated, this is the first study of its kind to integrate all of these variables

into a single model to reveal altruistic and egoistic motives on ethicality. The CRM+ Model provides a new framework from which to evaluate the impact of CRM marketing on consumers.

Managerial contributions

Consumers are exposed to increasing CRM and firms desire to improve brand attitude. Understanding the relationship between perceived motives (altruistic or egoistic) and ethicality attributed to the firm is fundamental in creating cause marketing campaigns that have the potential to persuade customers and drive brand value. This research illustrates the need for managers to understand that viscerality of an ad has relatively low effect on brand attitude. Thus, using a cause's logo or less visceral imagery may be just as effective as stronger images in attempting to reach customers. Conveying genuine altruism appears to have a much larger impact on brand attitude than emphasizing the ethicality of the CRM or even combatting a perception of egoism. Practitioners can use these findings as evidence that emphasizing the brand's altruism in a CRM campaign may provide better results than alternative tactics such as participating in efforts to validate the cause or using highly emotional imagery to generate consumer emotions. For example, it may be beneficial to pre-test ads for perceived altruistic motives. It may also help to highlight the specific benefit to the cause for consumers who choose to engage with the CRM campaign. Social media may be a tool to mitigate perceptions of egoistic motives and increase the firm's altruistic motives through frequent credible posting of altruistic outcomes from the CRM. For instance, highlighting the progression of a cause-brand relationship may be beneficial. One example of this is a firm who is partnering with a cause to build a rural school. In this case, frequent social media ads highlighting the progression of the build, the arrival of desks, and the first day for students, would be a way to track progress and build credibility for the brand supporting the efforts. Yet another tactic may be using customer reviews and employee testimonials to help bolster the perceived altruistic motives of the firm. Additionally, using a consumer panel to periodically evaluate the overall perceived ethicality and motivations (altruistic vs egoistic) of a brand's CRM may be an effective way to ensure that campaigns are well received by consumers.

Ethicality is important to creating a positive brand attitude and is independent of the direct effects of the perceived motivations for engaging in the partnership. While egoistic motivations have little or no direct influence on brand attitude, egoistic motivations influence ethicality. This suggests there is value to designing CRM partnerships that mitigate the perception of profit-

driven motivations. This boils down to the practical implication that consumers do not want to support firms that are participating in these CRM relationships for the profits, rather for the societal benefit the cause can provide.

The CRM+ Model developed in this research provides practical guidance for marketers. While many of the managerial implications of this study were discussed above, [Table 4](#) provides a concise summary of the unique theoretical contributions, and practical implications also outlined.

Limitations and future research

This study is a more comprehensive and unique investigation of motives in CRM than previous studies. Perceived egoistic and altruistic motives were examined and analyzed simultaneously with perceived manipulative intent and ethicality. In addition, this study used a more robust sample than the typical college student sample. Yet, even with these improvements, there are a variety of variables that may provide an even deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Though the CRM+ Model explains and predicts general trends, certain consumer personalities or personas may buck the norm. For instance, if a certain customer type is predisposed to see all CRM in a negative light, it is possible that egoistic motives and ethicality may play a larger role. An exploration of consumer constructs could provide deeper insight and significant practical benefit. Additionally, future research should account for the interrelationship between egoistic and altruistic motives.

This research took attitude measurements for the brand and the cause both before and after respondents' exposure to the stimulus advertisement, resulting in one possible discriminant validity concern. Before-and-after measurements were taken within a survey window of less than 15 minutes. Future research may be able to increase the time between measurements to more strongly differentiate between pre-stimulus and post-stimulus attitudes. Because pre-existing attitudes strongly influence post-ad attitudes and are correlated with other variables of interest, methodological improvements are preferable to leaving pre-ad brand attitudes out of the analysis. Additionally, further investigation could uncover the underlying process of why poor brand-cause fit does not lead to perceptions of motivations or ethicality. This study used a convenience sample of self-selecting respondents that live across the United States. This online sampling technique is used across numerous studies and found to provide more valid results than a typical pool of student respondents (Buhrmester et al., 2016), and has been used in some prior studies that have evaluated some of the constructs in this model (de Kerviler et al., 2021; V. L. Thomas et al., 2013; Pittman, 2020). Nevertheless, results may not be representative of global consumers, especially those with significant cultural diversions from our sample. Further, the sample size is borderline small for an SEM analysis, which precludes obtaining the highest possible accuracy in effect size estimates.

While we hypothesized that CRM ethicality would be influenced by brand-cause fit, our research did not support that assumption. Future research can investigate alternative

Table 4. Key theoretical and practical contributions of the CRM+ model.

Unique Theoretical Contributions
Where past research has discovered important relationships in isolation, the CRM+ model combines these relationships into a more comprehensive theoretical model. We used propositions of attribution theory and confirmation bias to more comprehensively explain aspects unique to the CRM experience.
CRM+ also contributes new insights not found in prior research:
CRM+ uniquely proposes, explains, and finds support for perceived manipulation (or lack thereof) as a driver of perceived motives in CRM consumption.
CRM+ uniquely proposes, explains, and finds support for the impact of altruistic on egoistic motives. This better reflects their relationship compared to prior research and allows for more accurate estimates of their relative impact.
CRM+ uniquely proposes, explains, and finds support for perceived CRM ethicality as a driver of brand attitude in CRM, independent of perceived motives. It also demonstrates how much the different motives affect the perceived ethicality of the CRM.
Most past CRM research has evaluated different relationships independently, which precludes direct comparison of relative impact (i.e. effect sizes). CRM+ provides unique insight into relative impact, such as:
Altruistic motives have a larger impact on ethicality than egoistic motives.
While ethicality certainly impacts brand attitude, its impact is smaller than that of altruistic motives.
Manipulative intent increases perceptions of egoistic motives more than it diminishes perceptions of altruistic motives.
CRM+ provides evidence that egoistic motives had minimal impact on brand attitude, providing support to a prior study which demonstrated a similar finding. CRM+ uniquely demonstrates an indirect effect of egoistic motives via ethicality perceptions.
CRM+ controls for general advertising skepticism and brand attitude prior to ad exposure, which has rarely been done in prior work and not at all for a model of this complexity.
Unique Practical Implications:
This research reveals the relative impacts of consumer-perceived manipulation, motives, and ethicality of the CRM firm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRM+ provides professionals a template prioritizing consumers' various perceptions in CRM advertising (e.g. altruistic motives are more impactful than ethicality perceptions). • We uniquely reveal that perceived ethicality of the CRM influences brand attitude and should be a consideration in CRM marketing. • This research uniquely reveals that CRM campaigns should emphasize altruistic motives and the ethicality of the partnership. • Egoistic motives have no direct effect on brand attitude, and thus should not usually be of primary concern to the CRM campaign.
CRM+ uniquely shows that even when egoistic motives are a concern, focusing on altruistic motive perceptions effectively diminishes egoistic motives.

variables that influence the perceived ethicality of a CRM. Perhaps the type of product plays a role. For instance, perhaps a partnership with a luxury brand would be perceived as less ethical than a partnership with a more utilitarian product, such as the products used in this study. Also, with the number of corporations linking themselves to the COVID-19 global pandemic with ads that feature lines like “We are all in this together” or “Stay safe at home,” do consumers believe that such messaging increases the ethicality of the brand, or is it viewed more in the light of pandering?

Additionally, while brand-cause fit and visceralness did not prove to be significant predictors of manipulative intent in the CRM+ Model, these constructs were examined only as single-dimension variables. Future research can explore various dimensions of brand-cause fit such as distinctiveness (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015) for more nuanced insight. Future studies could look more closely at visceralness by choosing stimuli that evoke a variety of distinct cognitive and emotional dimensions, such as eye tracking and EEG metrics, to see how each variable impacts perceived manipulation. Future research could also investigate alternative antecedents to perceived manipulative intent that were not considered in this study.

Conclusion

Though ethicality is of increasing importance in modern business the perception of altruistic motives appears to have the strongest impact on brand attitude. This research developed a CRM+ Model that brought together numerous constructs and revealed the interrelationships among consumer-perceived manipulation, brand motives, perceived ethicality of the CRM (Cause-related Marketing), and brand attitude that had been previously presented in isolation.

Through an experiment and SEM this CRM+ Model provides better understanding of constructs in CRM that affect perceived ethicality and brand attitude. This work will enable communication in a way that will increase the effectiveness of the CRM partnership, and lead to greater value for the cause, which is the altruistic goal of all CRM.

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Appendix

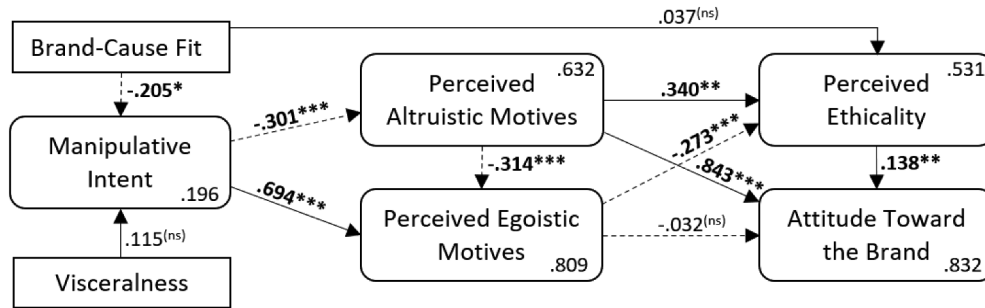
Survey Measures.

Measure	CFA Item Loading
<i>General Ad Skepticism: Adapted from Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998)</i>	
1	We can depend on getting the truth in most advertising. .943
2	Advertising's aim is to inform the customer. .795
3 (removed)	I believe advertising is informative. .784
4	Advertising is generally truthful. .904
5	Advertising is a reliable source of information about the quality and performance of products. .916
6	Advertising is truth well told. .901
7	In general, advertising presents a true picture of the product being advertised. .910
8	I feel I've been accurately informed after viewing most advertisements. .914
9 (removed)	Most advertising provides consumers with essential information. .823
<i>Brand Attitude: Adapted from Sengupta and Johar (2002)</i>	
1	I think that [Purell/Cetaphil/Patriot] is a very good brand. .901
2	I think that [Purell/Cetaphil/Patriot] is a very useful brand. .879
3	My opinion of [Purell/Cetaphil/Patriot] is very favorable. .898
<i>Cause Attitude: Adapted from Dean (2002)</i>	
1	I admire [the Red Cross/the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital]. .892
2	I respect [the Red Cross/the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital]. .934
3	[The Red Cross/St. Jude Children's Research Hospital] is a worthy cause. .909
<i>Perceived CRM Ethicality: Adapted from LaTour and Henthorne (1994)</i>	
<i>How do you feel about this partnership between [Brand] and [Cause] as depicted in this advertisement?</i>	
1	Unjust::: Just .924
2	Unacceptable to my family::: Acceptable to my family .920
3	Unfair::: Fair .939
4	Not morally right::: Morally right .891
5	Culturally unacceptable::: Culturally acceptable .866
6	Traditionally unacceptable::: Traditionally acceptable .885
<i>Values Motives: Adapted from Ellen et al. (2006)</i>	
1 (removed)	[Purell/Cetaphil/Patriot] feels morally obligated to help. .673
2	[Purell/Cetaphil/Patriot] has a long-term interest in the community. .864
3	[Purell/Cetaphil/Patriot] owners or employees believe in this cause. .846
4	[Purell/Cetaphil/Patriot] wants to make it easier for consumers who care about the cause to support it. .830
5	[Purell/Cetaphil/Patriot] is trying to give something back to the community. .877
<i>Egoistic Motives: Adapted from Ellen et al. (2006)</i>	
1	Purell is taking advantage of the nonprofit organization to help their own business. .822
2	Purell is taking advantage of the cause to help their own business. .830
3	Purell wants this as a tax write-off or similar financial benefit. .689
4 (removed)	Purell wants to get publicity. .443
<i>Manipulative Intent: Adapted from Campbell (1995)</i>	
1	The way this advertisement tries to persuade people seems wrong to me. .939
2	The advertisement tries to manipulate those who see it in ways I think are wrong. .926
3	The advertisement seems to be trying to persuade the consumer using inappropriate methods. .836
4 (removed)	The advertisement is persuasive without being excessively manipulative. -.649

As noted in the Survey Measures table above, Items with loadings less than .7 were dropped, with the exception of the third item for Egoistic Motives, which was preserved because it was very close to .7 and allowed us to retain the ideal three items for that scale. Following typical SEM practices, two items in General Skepticism were dropped because they significantly diminished overall model fit. Both of these reference the informative nature of advertising. It is possible that, contrary to its original intent, the measure for General Ad Skepticism is multidimensional. If so, those additional dimension(s) of ad skepticism may not be fully accounted for in the final analysis. This may or may not be a limitation, depending on whether those other dimension(s) are significant influencers in a CRM model. Future research is needed to further examine the dimensionality of this scale.

SEM Results with Pre-Ad Brand Attitude Removed as a Covariate

The HTMT test flagged Pre-Ad Brand Attitude as a possible concern for discriminant validity. We expected a high correlation between Brand Attitude prior to viewing the ad and Brand Attitude after viewing the ad, so this result was unsurprising. Nevertheless, the same model was specified, except with Pre-Ad Brand Attitude removed. The results of this model were very similar to the initial model, with the following notable differences: First, the estimated effect of Perceived Altruistic Motives on Brand Attitude increases from .334 to .843. Second, the estimated effect of Brand-Cause Fit on Manipulative Intent changes from $-.073$ to $-.205$ and becomes statistically significant.



Though this model does not exhibit the possible discriminant validity problem that the original model has, it introduces a more problematic issue in that it ignores an important control variable – the existing brand attitude prior to ad exposure. Nevertheless, a comparison of the results of the two models reveals some insight into the robustness of the results in the original model.