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Research Questions

Companies are increasingly investing in cause-related marketing (CM) campaigns. As part of their investments in CM, appeals to consumer emotions, such as guilt, are frequently used. Despite their pervasiveness, evidence on the efficacy of CM campaigns leveraging guilt appeals is still sparse. In particular, the role of guilt appeal *intensity* has been overlooked in prior research. Further, knowledge on the psychological mechanisms through which guilt appeals in CM campaigns influence consumer perceptions of the brand is scarce.

Understanding how guilt appeal intensity in CM advertising campaigns influences customer perceptions is, however, crucial for companies investing in CM. Drawing upon social identity and attribution theories, the present study attempts to answer the following three key research questions:

- (1) how guilt appeals of different intensity levels evoked by CM campaigns influence consumer perceptions of corporate image?
- (2) what are the psychological processes through which guilt appeals in CM campaigns influence consumer perceptions of corporate image, and specifically, whether consumer-company identification and inferred motive mediate the relationship between guilt appeal intensity and corporate image?
- (3) what is the impact of corporate image on consumer purchase intentions?

Method and Data used

The study employed a between-subjects experiment with randomization. Guilt appeal intensity was manipulated at high and low levels. Based on a pre-test, three social causes and real brands were selected - H&M, Samsung and Subway. Data were collected employing a self-completion questionnaire using tablet PC devices. Participants were presented with an ad clip containing information about the brand and its engagement in supporting social causes, and the manipulation of guilt appeal intensity. Next, they answered questions related to customer-company identification (CCI), corporate image (CI), inferred motive (IM) and purchase intentions (PI). Data were analyzed employing the Partial Least Squares approach to Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

Summary of Findings

Guilt appeal intensity in CM campaigns is found to differentially influence consumer perceptions of corporate image. Guilt appeals of high intensity lower consumer positive perceptions about corporate image. In turn, corporate image positively impacts purchase intentions. Two alternative mechanisms, namely inferred motive and consumer-company identification, are relevant to explaining consumer perceptions of corporate image following exposure to CM campaigns evoking guilt. Consumers exposed to high intensity guilt appeals lower their positive perceptions of corporate image as they infer that guilt appeals are used for instrumental reasons (i.e. making profits), not as a genuine attempt to support social causes. Alternatively, high intensity guilt appeals lower positive perceptions about corporate image by means of decreasing customer identification with the company. In other words, consumers exposed to CM campaigns do not identify with the company's values conveyed through the campaign, leading to negative perceptions about the company.

Key Contributions

The present study makes several theoretical contributions to research on CM and persuasion in advertising. Firstly, the study, for the first time, provides empirical evidence on how guilt appeals function in CM advertising campaigns. It demonstrates that the effectiveness of guilt appeals depends on appeal intensity. Highly intense appeals have a detrimental effect on the company image, and can backfire. Secondly, the study contributes to persuasion literature by

providing evidence that guilt appeals should not be measured as a dichotomy (existing versus absent appeal), rather the features of guilt appeal should be taken into consideration. The study demonstrates the relevance of guilt appeal *intensity* in CM advertising campaigns. Thirdly, the study is the first to establish the role of CCI and IM as mediators in the relationship between guilt appeal and corporate image. It introduces a novel perspective in persuasion and CM literature streams that considers CCI and IM as alternative and fundamental psychological mechanisms underlying consumer responses to guilt appeals in CM campaigns. Fourthly, the study ascertains the relevance of social identity and attribution theories as theoretical frameworks in explaining how consumers respond to guilt appeals evoked by CM advertising campaigns.