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You decide, we donate: Strengthening consumer–brand relationships through digitally co-created social responsibility[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Brands increasingly use digital platforms to co-create social responsibility initiatives with consumers. The present research explores the branding implications of an emerging form of such co-created social responsibility, cause-related marketing (CM) with choice, in which the consumer, not the brand, chooses the charitable cause to which the brand will donate in response to the consumer's purchase. Study 1 shows that CM with choice strengthens brand attachment, an effect that is (1) stronger with unrestricted (i.e., choose any cause) than restricted (i.e., select from a list) choice and (2) serially mediated by consumer empowerment and engagement. Study 2 replicates these effects and extends them to brand attitudes while showing that expanding the number of cause options to as many as 48 increases decision difficulty but does not alter brand attachment or attitudes—a case of scope neglect prevailing instead of choice overload. Study 3 reveals that positive CM-with-choice effects are not universal. While introducing a conventional CM campaign improves brand outcomes (attachment, attitudes, and purchase intentions) regardless of brand image (negative, neutral, or positive), adding consumer cause choice to the campaign benefits brands as much as (or more than) introducing the campaign itself does, but only when brand image is neutral or positive. When brand image is negative, adding consumer cause choice fails to improve brand outcomes and can even backfire, as consumers prefer to keep their distance.

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1. Introduction

The marketing discipline in general and consumer–brand relationships in particular are undergoing fundamental transformations. For brands, the digitalization and convergence of communication and media technologies have proven to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they increase consumer access to information that stimulates brand and price comparisons while eroding brand loyalty (e.g., [Accenture, 2012](#); [Kapferer, 2005](#)). On the other hand, they offer opportunities for brands by facilitating the initiation and strengthening of brands' relationships with consumers. Particularly promising, and increasingly expected by consumers, are co-creation initiatives that give consumers control over decisions conventionally made by brands (e.g., [Atakan, Bagozzi, & Yoon, 2014](#); [Fuchs, Prandelli, Schreier, & Dahl, 2013](#); [Hoyer, Chandy, Dorotic, Krafft, & Singh, 2010](#); [Mochon, Norton, & Ariely, 2012](#); [O'Hern & Rindfleisch, 2010](#); [Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004](#)).

Brands (e.g., Mazda, Starbucks) have recently begun extending co-creation from product design to corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts that include cause-related marketing (CM) campaigns, in which a brand donates money to a charitable cause in response to a consumer's purchase ([Varadarajan & Menon, 1988](#)). In North America, cause sponsorship spending has increased greatly, from \$120 million in 1990 to \$1.85 billion in 2014 ([Cause Marketing Forum, 2015](#)), with 91% of U.S. consumers continuing to want more of the brands they purchase to support causes ([Cone Communications, 2013](#)). The co-creative element recently added to CM lets consumers determine the charity or cause to which the CM donation will be sent. Such CM with choice is an emerging form of co-created social responsibility ([Robinson, Irmak, & Jayachandran, 2012](#); [Sankarnarayanan, 2013](#)), whose implementation is increasingly feasible thanks to the proliferation of social media and other digital communication channels. Providers in the growing CM-with-choice segment range from online retail partners (e.g., Shop2Care) and white label platforms (e.g., Kula) to social media apps (e.g., CafeGive) and crowdfunding sites (e.g., [DonorsChoose.org](#)) often used as partners in CM-with-choice campaigns (e.g., J.Crew, Loews Hotels, MSNBC). In addition, brands are starting to develop their own CM-with-choice platforms. Since late 2013, Amazon has

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donated a percentage of the price of most product purchases on its AmazonSmile platform to the cause of the buyer's choice. In May 2014, Gucci Parfums launched a U.S. CM-with-choice campaign that had previously run in Italy and the United Kingdom. For a limited time, five designated Gucci fragrances came with a unique code that buyers could redeem on Gucci's own Chime for Change platform to allocate a \$5 donation to the cause of their choice.

Although CM with choice has become popular with brands and consumers alike (Do Well Do Good, 2012; Haid & Tabvuma, 2013), academic research has lagged. Shared consumer control ranges from being *restricted* (i.e., select a cause from a list whose length may vary) to *unrestricted* (i.e., choose any cause), so important theoretical and managerial questions remain. To what extent does a consumer's sense of empowerment depend on the type and degree of control shared by the brand? How do consumer empowerment perceptions affect consumer–brand relationships? And are the effects moderated by the image of the control-sharing brand? We address these questions first by developing a conceptual framework that identifies relevant constructs and their likely effects to explain whether, when, and why letting consumers (vs. the brand) choose the donation recipient in CM strengthens consumer–brand relationships. We then subject this framework to empirical tests across three studies that support our theorizing.

As marketing continues to transition from a transaction to a relationship orientation (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006), the present research contributes by informing marketing theory and practice in several ways. First, it bridges the gap between CSR activities and brand relationships by contributing to previous conceptual work in this area (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009; Sen, Du, & Bhattacharya, 2009) and supporting the resulting predictions empirically. Despite a growing consensus that CM increases sales (Andrews, Luo, Fang, & Aspara, 2014), research has yet to determine whether and how CM campaigns affect brand attachment (see Pelozo & Shang, 2011). Second, we identify consumer empowerment and engagement as drivers of brand attachment, thereby responding to calls for more research that explores antecedents of strong consumer–brand relationships (e.g., MacInnis, 2012). Third, we provide empirical evidence for Wathieu et al.'s (2002) conceptualization of empowerment as determined more by one's control over a choice set than by the size of a choice set. Building on Arora and Henderson's (2007) and Robinson et al.'s (2012) pioneering research, we find that letting consumers choose any cause strengthens brand attachment by elevating empowerment and engagement, but increasing the number of cause options does not. Fourth, whereas prior research has found that consumers induced to feel empowered are more likely to switch brands (Jiang, Zhan, & Rucker, 2014), we show that when the power-sharing source is the brand itself, the opposite occurs: Consumer–brand ties grow stronger in the process. Fifth, we enrich co-creation research and join recent efforts to overcome existing biases toward studying only nonnegative brand relationships (e.g., Fournier & Alvarez, 2013; Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013). Specifically, we identify negative brand image as a boundary condition in which the otherwise positive effects of prosocial co-creation disappear or, in line with reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), even backfire, as consumers prefer to keep their distance.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Increasingly sophisticated customer relationship management (CRM) software facilitates the optimization of customer segmentation, database marketing, and loyalty programs. Although aiding in the assessment of at least short-term profitability, such technological advances risk fostering a one-directional, static, and economics-driven approach to CRM rather than a two- or multidirectional, dynamic, and relational approach. The former tends to overlook the complexity and diversity of consumer–brand relationships and, in turn, the significant potential of initiating and nurturing them (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Consequently, relationship marketing theory's original vision appears to have been lost (Boulding, Staelin, Ehret, & Johnston, 2005; Fournier, 2009)—the vision of consumers as people with relational needs who collaborate with brands as partners in the making of meaning and creation of value. Seeking to revitalize and ultimately contribute to fulfilling this vision, the present research explores the role of consumer empowerment in strengthening brand attachment. Brand attachment is a proxy for consumer–brand relationship strength (Thomson, 2006), a primary path to brand loyalty and long-term profits (Ahluwalia & Kaikati, 2010; Keller, 2013), and our focal dependent variable across all three studies. We eventually supplement it with more cognitive evaluations (brand attitude; Studies 2 and 3) and downstream consequences for the brand (purchase intention; Study 3).

To that end, we develop a conceptual framework that explains how giving consumers control over a brand's meaningful decision (operationalized here by letting consumers choose a CM campaign's cause beneficiary) strengthens consumer–brand relationships (see Fig. 1). The framework is based on five fundamental features: (1) a conceptual distinction between objective power and a subjective sense of empowerment, (2) the meaning of and consumer control over a brand's activities as two drivers of consumer empowerment, (3) the differential effects of choice procedures that vary in consumer decision freedom, (4) the mediating role of empowerment and resulting engagement, and (5) the moderating role of brand image. In the remainder of this section, we discuss each of these framework elements and their predicted relationships.

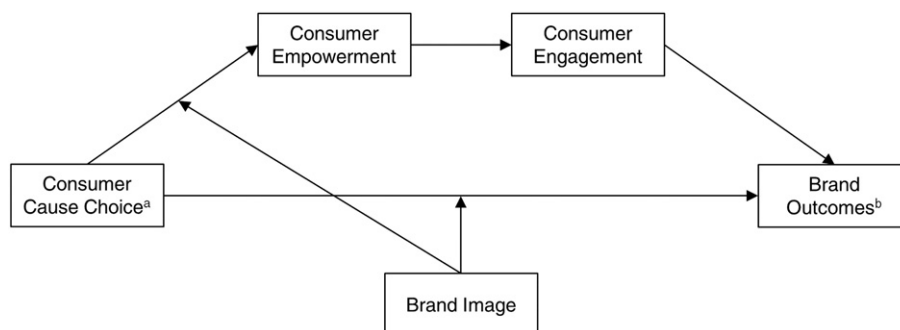


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework. ^aOperationalized as *type of cause choice* (CM with no, restricted, or unrestricted choice; Studies 1 and 2) and as *CM-with-choice component* (introducing CM campaign vs. adding unrestricted cause choice to existing CM campaign; Study 3). ^bBrand attachment (Studies 1–3), brand attitude (Studies 2 and 3), and purchase intention (Study 3).

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