



It's the thought that counts: The effects of construal level priming and donation proximity on consumer response to donation framing



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ABSTRACT

This research demonstrates that consumers react differently to donations emphasizing a company's effort invested in charitable actions, as opposed to those highlighting its ability to carry out those actions. Our results show that consumers rate the brands that adopt an effort-oriented donation strategy more favorably than those that use an ability-oriented strategy (study 1). Further, this effect is moderated by consumers' perceived psychological distance (made salient by construal level priming or donation proximity). The findings converge to show that congruency between donation framing and primed psychological distance leads to more favorable brand evaluations and greater purchase intentions. Findings of this research contribute to the corporate social responsibility literature and have important marketing research and managerial implications.

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Continuous effort - not strength or intelligence - is the key to unlocking our potential.

Winston Churchill

During the past decade, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become the fastest-growing category of corporate expenditure worldwide, and there has been an unprecedented surge in corporate donations. For example, the total estimated charitable giving by Americans increased by 7.1% to an all-time record of \$358.38 billion in 2014 (Giving USA Foundation, 2015). Interestingly, there has been a parallel movement in the international marketplace, where global companies have implemented CSR campaigns that link them to various social causes. For instance, Coca-Cola, in 2014 alone, contributed nearly \$22 million to support nutrition and physical activity programs in 40 countries to support organized sports or increasing activity by encouraging people to ride bikes or walk more throughout the day. Yoplait, a portfolio brand of the U.S. food conglomerate General Mills, was known for their nearly two-decade-old "Save Lids to Save Lives" breast cancer awareness campaigns. In 2016, Yoplait has pledged to make a total donation of \$350,000 to be divided between charity foundations such as

Bright Pink, Living Beyond Breast Cancer and Susan G. Komen foundations.

All these marketing efforts, domestic and abroad, are largely driven by the well-documented theoretical linkages between CSR and financial performance, reflected in outcomes such as increased loyalty (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007) willingness to pay premium prices (e.g., Creyer, 1997), and product evaluations (Chernev & Blair, 2015). Prior work also documents the effects of donation type (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Garretson & Stacy, 2005), donation amount (Dahl & Lavack, 1995; Koschate-Fischer, Stefan, & Hoyer, 2012; Polonsky & Speed, 2001), donation proximity (Grau & Folse, 2007), choice of cause (Robinson, Irmak, & Jayachandran, 2012), and donation framing (Chang, 2008; Pracejus, Olsen, & Brown, 2003; Tangari, Folse, Burton, & Kees, 2010) on consumer perceptions. While the findings of these informative studies have provided meaningful guidance to marketing practice, they nevertheless impose a "pick and choose" dilemma to marketing researchers and managers, as they have to narrow a multitude of donation strategies down to a few to incorporate into their research or practice and ignore the contributions from others. Thus, there is a dire need for a more parsimonious theoretical framework that unifies these scholarly efforts and offers easy-to-follow managerial insights.

To this end, the current research calls upon the Achievement Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985), and distinguishes between two fundamentally different ways for companies to frame their donations, *i.e.* ability versus effort. Whereas an ability-oriented donation entails a company's competence and resources in carrying out the CSR program

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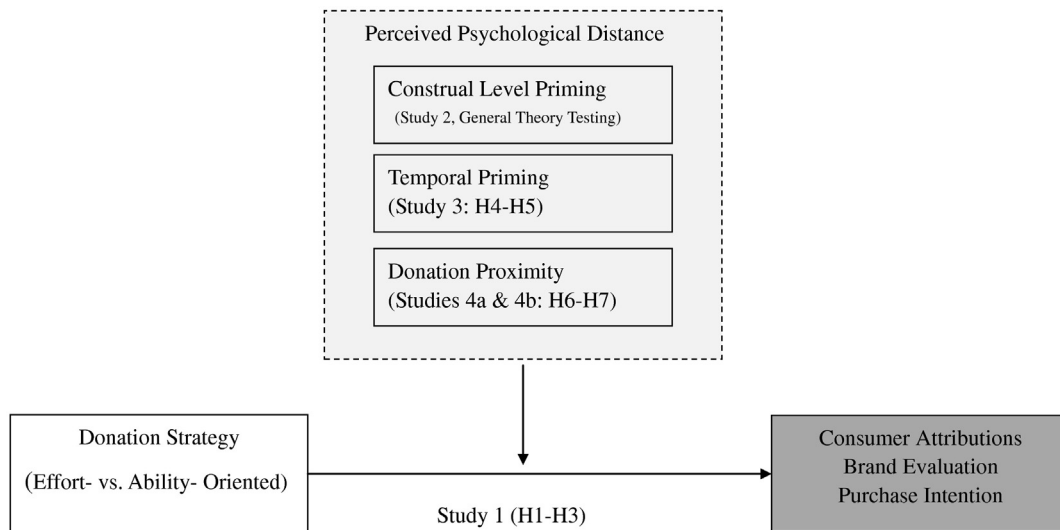


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

(e.g., The \$22 million that Coca-Cola contributed to healthy living programs worldwide signals its ability and competence), an effort-oriented donation reflects its commitment and willpower to engage in socially responsible activities (e.g., The numerous breast cancer awareness campaigns launched by Yoplait over nearly two decades demonstrate their effort and commitment to the cause.) Therefore, the current research contributes to the existing CSR literature by presenting ability- versus effort-oriented donation strategies as a theoretically novel moderator to the relationship between corporate CSR actions and consumers' evaluation of the corporation or the brand. Furthermore, the current research integrates multiple moderators of donation strategies identified in prior literature under a general theoretical framework of consumers' perceived psychological distance (made salient by construal level priming, temporal priming, or donation proximity). The current research also contributes to the construal level and psychological distance literatures by identifying the effects of psychological distance and construal level in the domain of donation and CSR strategy (Fig. 1).

In the next sections we first review the CSR literature and then introduce ability- versus effort-oriented donation framing to formulate our hypotheses. We then present the results of five studies designed to test our hypotheses.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Corporate donation

The topic of corporate donations to charities is part of a larger concept, *i.e.*, corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR has been defined as a company's commitment to minimizing any harmful effects on society and maximizing its long-term beneficial impact (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001; Petkus & Woodruff, 1992). Among many possible CSR initiatives, corporate donation to charities is one common way for a company to engage in social responsibility and contribute to its community. A substantial body of research in this area has shown that corporate donations can positively influence consumers' attitudes and purchase behavior (Arora & Henderson, 2007; Chang, 2008; Nan & Heo, 2007; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Pracejus et al., 2003) through dissemination of donation information, cause-brand fit, and consumers' involvement. Prior work also documents the effects of donation framing (Bolton & Mattila, 2015; Chang, 2008; Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012; Pracejus et al., 2003) on consumer perceptions.

To illustrate, prior studies demonstrate that a donation strategy that signals a company's overall corporate ability or resources, e.g., a larger donation amount as opposed to a smaller amount, leads to more

positive consumer evaluations (Chang, 2008; Folse, Niedrich, & Grau, 2010; Pracejus et al., 2003). Folse et al. (2010) further shows that, as long as the donation is not outside the normally accepted or expected donation range stored in persuasion knowledge, greater corporate donation levels should yield more favorable consumer responses as greater donation amounts will elicit consumer inferences that the firm is altruistic and socially responsible. Other studies, however, advocate an alternative donation-framing strategy that emphasizes a corporation's effort in implementing a CSR campaign (Ellen et al., 2000). This proposition is based on the reasoning that successful corporate philanthropy should be carried out as a long-term effort, as opposed to a short-term campaign (Porter & Kramer, 2002), and the more effort that a firm invests in a CSR campaign, the more it will be perceived as being generous and caring (Ellen et al., 2000). Supporting this notion, Ellen et al. (2000) finds that consumer evaluations are more positive for product donations (*i.e.* donation of tangible products organized by corporations) relative to cash donations (*i.e.* monetary donations by corporations), as product donations are perceived as requiring significantly more retailer efforts and logistical expenses than cash donations.

Within the CSR context, both strategies to frame donations (ability- versus effort-oriented) hold promise for enhancing the effectiveness of a CSR campaign designed to improve consumer attitudes and behaviors. It is, therefore, imperative to compare these two donation-framing strategies and identify the boundary conditions under which their effectiveness becomes more pronounced. We now continue by reviewing the theoretical underpinnings of these two donation strategies.

1.2. Donation framing: ability versus effort

In order to investigate the relative effectiveness of ability versus effort donation-framing strategies, consumers' attribution of the company's intended actions needs to be considered. According to Achievement Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985), there are two main personal internal causes for an individual's goal attainment: ability and effort. The first one reflects the resources that an individual allocates to a goal; the more one spends, the more important the goal is to the individual (Naylor & Ilgen, 1984). The second one indicates that an individual works hard and persistently on the goal, never giving up, even when facing adversities and difficulties (Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988). Along a similar vein, Holloway (1988) defines effort as pushing on, persisting, not giving up. While ability communicates "can do," effort expresses "want to do." Patrick and Hagtvedt (2012) finds that "I can't do X" denotes an external focus on impediments or resource limitation, while "I don't do X" suggests a firmly entrenched attitude to emphasize

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