

The Role of Demographic Variables in Shaping Skepticism toward Cause-related Marketing, Pitfalls of Skepticism, and a Way to Tackle it

ATTIYA ASHRAF

PhD, Scholar, Institute of Management Sciences, University of Haripur.

Email: Attiyaashraf145@gmail.com

Dr. TARIQ IQBAL KHAN

Asitant Professor, Institute of Management Sciences, University of Haripur.

Email: Tariqfirst@gmail.com

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Abstract

Over the past years, companies faced immense competition and it became difficult to remain competitive by just focusing on their positioning on product differentiation. To remain competitive, businesses try to address societal challenges and compassionately promote their brand. Engaging in cause-related marketing is one aspect of corporate social responsibility. However, consumers do not always show trust in the intentions of businesses involved in cause-related campaigns and develop skepticism regarding such campaigns. This study investigates the influence of demographics in this skepticism regarding cause-related marketing campaigns performed by companies and the impact of this skepticism on various outcomes such as negative word of mouth and patronage intention. In addition, the current study addresses the moderating impact of attitude toward a brand image on the relationship between skepticism and its outcomes. The conceptual framework aimed to find out the impact of cause-related marketing on consumers' conceptual and behavioral outcomes. To achieve the objectives of the present study, a quantitative methodology was utilized, gathering data from 409 respondents. The findings of the present study reveal that women and younger age groups tend to be more skeptical than men and older age groups. There is a positive relationship between skepticism toward cause-related marketing and its outcomes as proposed by the study. Moreover, the findings stated that attitude toward brand image moderates the relationship between skepticism and its negative outcomes by weakening the relationship by expanding our knowledge of the fundamental effects of cause-related marketing, this study adds to the body of knowledge in the marketing field. It also provides insights into cause-related marketing outcomes for marketers and business managers, enabling them to understand better how customer skepticism affects the campaign's outcomes.

Keywords: *Cause-Related Marketing, Attitude Toward Brand Image, Skepticism Toward Cause-Related Marketing, Negative Word of Mouth, Patronage Intention.*

Introduction

In today's era of high economic and social uncertainties, it has become essential for businesses to follow social responsibility and sustainability. Therefore, companies' focus shifted from traditional profit maximization motives to social welfare for corporate survival. (Homssi et al., 2023). As competition increases after the 1990s, acquiring market dominance becomes progressively challenging when product

distinction relies solely on strategic business approaches. So, marketers have undertaken innovative business strategies, emphasizing social initiatives, as advocated by Porter and Kramer in 2002. This trend has led companies to align with environmental and social causes due to heightened public consciousness surrounding these matters (Chang and Cheng, 2015; Lafferty, Lueth, and McCafferty, 2016).

To support social initiatives, one of the practical approaches is customer involvement in cause-related marketing (CRM). Cause-related marketing incorporates organizational social initiatives through which customers are encouraged to participate in making purchases which will have its contribution towards any noble cause of community welfare. A certain portion of customers' purchases is directed towards nonprofits or social groups helping in certain causes. Monetary donations or in-kind support are types of such type of support (Kotler and Lee, 2005). A mutually beneficial relationship is created for both parties which includes businesses and causes by enhancing the goodwill of businesses and maximizing profit (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988). Cause-related marketing is usually beneficial to well-established companies with product differentiation (Bae, 2019). Cause-related marketing has having structured approach with a distinctive framework for social initiatives having the active participation of consumers. Cause-related marketing is having its focuses on all stakeholders within the organization. (Lafferty, Lueth, and McCafferty, 2016).

Alwitt and Prabhaker (1992) and Shavitt et al. (1998) have found in their research that consumers normally show a lack of trust in promotional campaigns despite huge spending on marketing campaigns. Skepticism towards marketing refers to a tendency to develop feelings of doubt in marketing communications (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). It is commonly observed that consumers tend to develop doubts to some degree regarding the claims presented in advertising. While claims related to price information and product quality are often accepted, information economics theory suggests that consumers tend to maintain skepticism when it comes to experiential or credence-based claims (such as quality, durability, or performance) as explained by Darby & Karni, (1973).

Skepticism in marketing communications is commonly associated with a heightened level of consumer mistrust. Mistrust fosters contempt toward marketers' motives. (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994), consequently, skepticism is deemed a crucial element of consumer persuasion proficiency and a broad comprehension of market dynamics (Duncan, 1990; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Bae, 2019).

Inversely, cause-related marketing that aims to increase consumer behavioral intentions may cause distrust and decrease their desire to purchase (Anuar and Mohamad, 2012). Audiences' behavioral intentions suffer when they begin to distrust and lose confidence in a cause-related marketing endeavor (Shree et al., 2017). Most studies on cause-related marketing have predominantly focused on how companies design and implement various social initiatives (La Ferle et al., 2013; Folse et al., 2010).

While customer skepticism is an important area, there is currently a lack of comprehensive research examining its causes and consequences (Klever, Florack, and Chladek, 2016; Bae, 2018). Given the limited research on skepticism towards cause-related marketing in developing economies, there is a need for further exploration. This research aims to provide managers with insight into strategies that will be able to address pitfalls of skepticism along with theoretical guidance and insights to further study this area.

A conceptual framework is developed on the stimulus-organism-response model, by incorporating demographics variables as stimulus (input variables), and negative word-of-mouth and patronage intentions as responses (outcome variables) with skepticism towards cause-related-marketing as organism state.

Research Significance

Historical research on the area of Skepticism usually relied on attribution theory to understand it. However, attribution theory has certain limitations as its focus was predominantly on environmental claims in an area

of corporate social responsibility, as suggested by Amawate and Deb (2021). Attribution theory explains the way an individual attributes various causes to different events and regarding perceptions developments which in turn affects their behavior. There are broader situations and contexts in which attribution theory is applied and hence the need exists for a more specific strategy of marketing to explain the skepticism toward cause-related marketing phenomena as pointed out by Bae (2018).

Therefore, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework that is based on the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) framework to study the phenomena of skepticism regarding cause-related marketing within the domain of marketing. According to Hussain et al., (2023), the S-O-R model holds that distinct features of external environmental elements (S) will have had impact on consumers' internal state which is an organism that directs them to respond in certain ways.

Existing studies (Bae, 2018; Amawate and Deb, 2021) considered cause-related marketing in general terms. This study will be focused on an empirical base by testing relationships between causes of skepticism and its responses by incorporating various elements that are lacking in existing studies.

Previous research conducted by Jamil, Qayyum, and Lodhi (2022) indicates the presence of contextual factors influencing the relationship between individuals and their responses. Within this framework, it has been proposed that attitudes toward brand image could mitigate the adverse effects of skepticism and foster favorable behaviors.

Most of the studies in skepticism are in developed economies, however, this study is focused on developing economies, especially in the Pakistani context.

Research objectives

The following are the objectives of the research.

- To examine how attitudes and behaviors toward cause-related marketing are influenced by skepticism towards cause-related marketing.
- To investigate the relationship between demographic characteristics and skepticism towards cause-related marketing.
- To investigate how attitude toward a brand image affects the connection between skepticism about cause-related marketing and its results.

Research Questions

This study addresses research questions based on the research objectives.

Question 1: What is the role of demographics (age and gender) in skepticism toward cause-related marketing?

Question 2: What are the outcomes of skepticism toward cause-related marketing?

Question 3: What is the role of the moderating variable (attitude toward brand image) while investigating the consequences of skepticism towards cause-related marketing?

Research Hypotheses

H1. There is a significant and positive relationship between age and skepticism toward cause-related marketing.

H2. Women tend to be less skeptical than men towards cause-related marketing.

- H3: There is a significant and positive relationship between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth.
- H4: There is a significant and negative relationship between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and Patronage Intention.
- H5: The relationship between Skepticism toward cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth is moderate by attitude toward brand image by weakening the strength of this relationship.
- H6: The relationship between Skepticism toward cause-related marketing and patronage intentions is moderate by attitude toward brand image by weakening the negative impact of skepticism on patronage intention.

Literature Review

Demographics' Role in Skepticism towards Cause-related Marketing

Age: A person's age affects how much they care about and respond to cause-related marketing (CRM) efforts, as highlighted by Youn and Kim (2008). They argue that age affects how consumers feel, think, and act toward cause-related marketing (CRM). Cui et al (2003) further investigated the response of Generation Y customers regarding social initiatives of companies and the way they liked cause-related marketing campaigns. Younger consumers responded more positively to the cause-related campaigns as reported by Youn and Kim (2008). Contrasting results were reported by Galan Ladero et al. (2015) which found that based on age, no significant differences exist between consumer responses to cause-related marketing.

Gender: To remain competitive as explained by the resource advantage theory, valuable resources are of great importance as studied by Galan et al. (2013), the prosocial behavior of consumers stands out as a different market segment that can gain from cause-related marketing (CRM). Ross, Stutts, and Patterson (1991) research concluded that a more positive response towards cause-related campaigns and their intentions to make purchases. Research suggests that gender is an important variable, and it is only a socioeconomic variable that affects how various consumers respond to cause-related marketing programs (Galan et al., 2015).

Prosocial theory explains gender differences in their attitudes towards charity programs. Women are more likely than males to donate to charities with higher generosity according to research (Harvey, 1990; Jones and Posnett, 1991). In general, women are kind having high moral beliefs and a tendency to be helpful to others. They are having high generosity levels (Eagly and Crowley, 1986; Kashdan et al., 2009).

Therefore, women usually hold a more positive view towards cause-related marketing programs, and they are associated with promoting social change and assisting those in need (Newman, 2000). Previous research found that compared to men, women tend to be more enthusiastic towards cause-related campaigns (Kropp et al., 1998; Nelson and Vilela, 2007).

Outcomes of Skepticism towards Cause-related Marketing

To enhance the image of businesses and their positioning, one of the most widely used strategies is cause-related marketing strategy (Wymer, 2014; La Ferle, Kuber, and Edwards, 2013). However, consumers usually show mistrust of companies' motives for associating with cause and show skepticism towards companies' motivation for cause support (Bae, 2018; Foreh and Grier, 2003; Anuar and Mohamad, 2013). According to Jamil et al. (2023), and many researchers as indicated before, skepticism can have impacts on the behavior of individuals and even to poor health issues as well. A study conducted by Homssi, A., et al. (2023) provides a better understanding of various outcomes associated with cause-related campaigns through an empirical study conducted in Lebanon.

The following are the negative outcomes supported by literature once skepticism is generated.

Negative Word of Mouth: When someone shares unfavorable opinions about green products during personal conversations, it's referred to as negative word-of-mouth (WOM), which can degrade the product being discussed (Laczniak et al., 2001). Consumers often engage in product-related discussions to share their experiences and facilitate informed decision-making processes (De Matos and Rossi, 2008).

Unfavorable product evaluations often prompt customers to share negative information about the product in social situations (Herr et al., 1991). Interestingly, people who have unfavorable opinions about a product are more likely to spread word-of-mouth (WOM) than people who have favorable product associations (Anderson, 1998). This tendency results from the fact consumers tend to see bad news as more helpful and important. It helps them figure out which products are good and which ones aren't as good. (Herr et al., 1991). Furthermore, Customers can express their unhappiness and ask for help with their problems by telling their friends and people they know about their concerns. (Chan and Wan, 2008).

Patronage Intention: Numerous research studies have looked at the connection between patronage intention and consumers' perceptions of socially conscious enterprises (Mohr et al, 2005; Walker et al, 2010). These studies show that how customers feel about a business affects their overall opinion of a product and how they judge it. According to Zeithaml et al (1996), patronage intention is a signal that indicates whether customers will stick with one company or go to another. The aspects of patronage intention that have been researched the most are purchase intention, repeat purchase intent, and customer loyalty. (Webb & Mohr, 1998; Zeithaml et al., 1996).

Importantly, Webb and Mohr (1998) found that consumers' suspicion and doubt regarding cause-related marketing is a major source of cynicism towards cause-related initiatives. Previous research suggests that consumers who are more skeptical react worse to cause-related advertising than less skeptical people (Mohr et al., 1998; Webb & Mohr, 1998). Youn and Kim (2008) found, however, that more skeptical people are more likely to believe that a firm is genuinely committed to charitable activities for social concerns.

Moderating the Role of Attitude toward Brand Image

The extent to which an individual holds a favorable or unfavorable opinion is termed as their attitude (Ajzen, 1991). Advertisements incorporating socially appealing messages are more likely to achieve success and foster enduring commitment when they contribute to the creation of a positive company image, as argued by scholars such as Drumwright (1996) and Brink et al. (2006). Previous research on cause-related marketing indicates that these types of promotions can positively influence consumers' perceptions of advertisers (Ross et al., 1992). The impact of commercials featuring a robust brand image on consumer responses and evaluations is, in fact, more pronounced than that of traditional advertisements.

Hajjat (2003) specifically examined the impact of cause-related marketing on customer sentiments and found that individuals generally responded positively to advertisements incorporating cause-related marketing offers or messages. Several studies (Ferle et al., 2013; Krishnamurthy and Sujana, 1999; Holbrook and Batra, 1987) have reported similar findings. Lafferty and Goldsmith (2005) highlighted that consumer evaluations of brand attitudes are influenced by cause brand partnerships. Furthermore, research indicates that consumers hold more positive opinions of brands and businesses that engage in cause-related marketing (Kim et al., 2020). Therefore, whether by enhancing the company's public image (i.e., brand) or fostering favorable associations associated with cause-related marketing, the effective utilization of cause-related marketing can lead to more favorable attitudes towards cause-related marketing advertisements or offers.

Based on literature studied the following framework is developed.

Conceptual Framework

The following diagram no 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study.

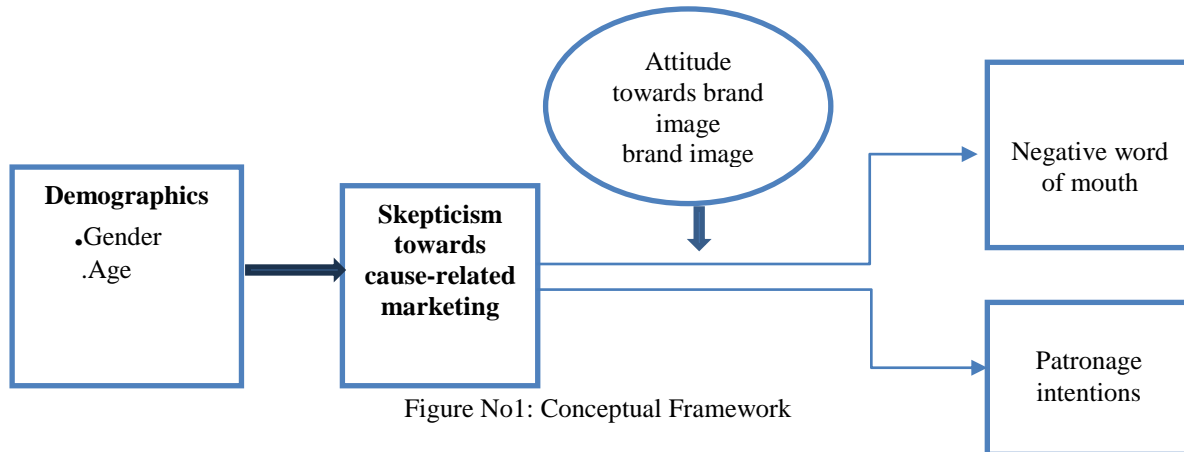


Figure No1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This part gives detailed information about various aspects, like who participated in the study, how they were chosen, their characteristics, how many people were involved, what method was used to collect data, what types of products were studied, how long data was gathered, and any preliminary testing done before collecting data.

Population and sampling strategy

Prior studies have suggested that students represent the most pertinent data source for investigating the effects of marketing campaigns. For example, students were relied on for data collection by Hongyoun Hahn and Kim, (2009); Lee, Kim, and Peng (2013). In line with a scientific approach, the sample size for the present study was determined using the Raosoft calculator (2021). Based on this approach, a sample size of 409 respondents from business schools in Rawalpindi and Islamabad was identified. To account for non-response, incomplete, or inappropriate responses, a total of 450 questionnaires were initially distributed. The study specifically targeted university graduate students selected randomly for data collection ensuring the fulfillment of the study's objectives.

Measures: To address the inquiries, participants were prompted to recall any cause-related campaigns they had encountered. Through self-report measures, responses to each component were obtained. Data were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale, where one denoted "strongly disagree," two indicated "disagree," three represented "neutral," four signified "agree," and five denoted "strongly agree."

Table No 1: Measures

Measure	Principal Author and Source
skepticism towards cause-related marketing	Instrument Author: Bronn and Vrionni, 2001 Source : Amavete and Deb,2 021
Negative word of mouth	Instrument Author: Gregoire et al, 2009 Source: Delzen, 2014
Patronage Intention	Instrument Author: Westberg, (2012) Source: Amawate and Deb, 201
Attitude toward the Brand Image	Instrument Author: Walker et al, 2010 Source: Amawate and Deb, 2019

Data Analysis and results

After collecting data, the next step in the research process is to analyze it using appropriate tools to test the hypotheses. In this study, IBM SPSS Statistics 21 and Smart PLS 3.3.3 were used for data analysis. Smart PLS was specifically used to evaluate both the measurement and structural models. The Partial Least Squares (PLS) algorithm within Smart PLS was utilized to assess the measurement model and conduct various evaluations.

Hypothesis testing was conducted using the measurement model in the PLS software. Subsequently, the evaluation of the structural model determined whether each hypothesis was confirmed or disproved. The outcomes of the study will be presented in the following section.

Demographics

Frequency analysis was conducted to compute the frequencies for age and gender variables.

Table 2: Gender

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Male	277	67.7
	Female	132	32.3
	Total	409	100

The results of the gender distribution analysis indicate that more than 67 percent of the respondents were male, while females comprised approximately 33 percent of the sample. These proportions highlight the relatively lower representation of females in higher education institutes in Pakistan, confirming the existing gender enrollment disparity.

Table 3: Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18.00	7	1.7	1.7	1.7
	19.00	16	3.9	3.9	5.6
	20.00	28	6.8	6.8	12.5
	21.00	30	7.3	7.3	19.8
	22.00	103	25.2	25.2	45.0
	23.00	90	22.0	22.0	67.0
	24.00	59	14.4	14.4	81.4
	25.00	34	8.3	8.3	89.7
	26.00	18	4.4	4.4	94.1
	27.00	12	2.9	2.9	97.1
	28.00	9	2.2	2.2	99.3
	29.00	1	.2	.2	99.5
	36.00	1	.2	.2	99.8
	40.00	1	.2	.2	100.0
Total	409	100.0	100.0		

Among the four hundred and nine respondents, the age range varied from 18 years to 40 years. Most respondents fell within the younger age groups. Specifically, the highest number of respondents (103) were aged 22, followed by 90 respondents aged 23, and 59 respondents aged 24. It is worth noting that there was only one respondent with the highest age of 40. Since the target population of the study was university

students, it is expected that a larger participation would come from the younger age groups, reflecting the demographic composition of the population.

Measurement Model: The PLS (Partial Least Squares) algorithm was utilized to assess the measurement model and perform various assessments in the study. The following assessments were used for the measurement model.

1: Assessment of Factor Loadings

Factor loading is a statistical measure that reflects how well an item represents the construct. Typically, a factor loading of 0.70 or higher is considered acceptable in social science research (Vinzi, Chin, Henseler, & Wang, 2010). All the values were lying in the accepted range.

2: Construct Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's alpha was employed to assess the internal consistency reliability of the measurement items. All variables yielded values exceeding 0.70, indicating excellent internal consistency. Convergent validity was evaluated using two metrics: Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR). All constructs exhibited composite reliability (CR) values ranging from 0.92 to 0.96, which are deemed satisfactory and indicate good reliability. However, the observed AVE values, ranging from 0.53 to 0.76, do not meet the required threshold of 0.5, though they suggest adequate convergent validity.

3: Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity, as described by Hair et al. (2019), refers to the extent to which a construct can be empirically distinguished from other components within the structural model. Fornell and Larcker (1981) in their research analyzed the discriminant validity and according to them, it incorporates in comparison inter-construct correlations squared with each construct average variance extracted (AVE). For good discriminant validity, there is a significant difference between the the square-rooted AVE values and diagonal correlation values.

4: HTMT

Along with the AVE-based method, another approach for assessing discriminant validity is the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations as proposed by Hair et al. (2019). According to Hair Jr. et al. (2021), using the HTMT ratio is more authentic and is a more reliable and robust approach for assessing discriminant validity. According to Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2016), a threshold value is 0.90 for conceptually similar constructs, and a slight difference exists between conceptually different constructs with a low threshold value of 0.85. Furthermore, Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015) found that for establishing discriminant validity any value less than 1.00 is considered appropriate.

In the current study, all the observed values of HTMT were found to be below the specified threshold limits and therefore showed satisfactory discriminant validity. indicating satisfactory discriminant validity. It means all the constructs are different from one another in and therefore support discriminant validity.

5: Variance Inflation Factor

To measure the collinearity among indicators, one of the measures is the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) which is used commonly. VIF scores of five or more are considered to have issues with the collinearity between the indicators of formatively assessed components. According to Becker, Ringle, Sarstedt, and Völckner (2015), even at a lower value of 3, collinearity issues can still arise. Therefore, VIF scores of three or lower are preferred to minimize collinearity concerns.

In the present study, all observed VIF scores were below 3, indicating no significant collinearity concerns, supporting the reliability and validity of the constructs being measured.

Structural Model Assessment: To test the hypotheses, the PLS algorithm was used to analyze the structure model. When formative constructs are incorporated in the structural model, PLS-SEM is the preferable method as suggested Hair et al. (2019).

Hypotheses Testing

Table 4: Path coefficients

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
Age -> CSKEP	0.025	0.026	0.029	0.891	0.373
ABI -> nWOM	-0.483	-0.486	0.058	8.341	0
ABI -> PI	0.429	0.429	0.054	7.981	0
CSKEP	-0.075	-0.072	0.03	2.503	0.013
Moderating Effect 1 -> nWOM	0.168	0.164	0.039	4.31	0
Moderating Effect 2 -> PI	-0.353	-0.35	0.039	8.976	0
CSKEP -> nWOM	0.336	0.335	0.06	5.639	0
CSKEP -> PI	-0.362	-0.364	0.052	6.965	0

Table 4 shows summarize the direct hypotheses testing between causes of skepticism towards cause-related marketing.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that “There is a positive and significant relationship between age and skepticism towards cause-related marketing”. Results indicate insignificant ($P > 0.1$ and $t = 0.891$) relationship exists between these two variables. Thus, younger people are more skeptical towards cause-related campaigns resulting in the rejection of hypothesis 1. It was discovered that people of different ages responded to cause-related marketing campaigns in a variety of different ways (Youn and Kim 2008), most studies showed the positive impact of age and contribution to charitable events. However, Younger customers, due to the abundance of information they are exposed to, tend to exhibit more rational behavior and are generally more forgiving towards CRM campaigns.

The second hypothesis states that "Women tend to be less skeptical towards cause-related marketing than men," the results support the second hypothesis by showing a significant and positive connection ($P < 0.1$ and $t = 3.052$). Previous research yielded similar findings. These results are consistent with the idea that perceived gender roles-in which women are typically viewed as more nurturing and focused on life-preserving activities, have an impact on prosocial behavior. (Schaffer 1981; Smith and Midlarsky 1985). It is reasonable to expect that women will exhibit a more positive response to CRM programs and display higher intentions to make purchases (Ross, Stutts, and Patterson, 1991).

Hypothesis 3 proposed that “There is a positive and significant relationship between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth”. Results indicate significance ($P < 0.1$ and $t = 3.68$) and a positive relationship exists between these two variables. A positive relationship exists between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth resulting in the acceptance of hypothesis 3. According to the study, customers characterized by high levels of skepticism are less prone to reacting positively to cause-related marketing compared to those with low skepticism levels. Skeptical customers are less easily swayed by the company and its CRM offerings, leading to a diminished understanding of the presented message. Negative evaluation of advertisements can occur with perceptual blocking. Accordingly, skepticism in consumers' minds can emerge when they are unfamiliar with the company's dedication to cause-related campaigns (Chang, 2012).

According to Hypothesis 4, “There is a negative and significant relationship between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and patronage intention”. According to the findings, significant relationships occur between these two variables ($P < 0.1$ and $t = 3.68$). Findings suggest the negative impact of skepticism on patronage intentions and hence accepting hypothesis 4. Previous research conducted by Mohr et al. (1998) showed similar results and strengthened the negative influence of skepticism on behavior.

The study's findings suggest that customers who exhibit a high degree of skepticism are less likely to react favorably to cause-related marketing campaigns. Nonetheless, customers tend to view a business as more credible when they are aware of its socially conscious efforts. As a result, there is a greater desire to use the company's services and a greater chance that word-of-mouth advertising will occur (Chang, 2011; David et al., 2005).

The results from H3, and H4 are supported by this overarching theory since they comprise attitudes and behaviors (nWOM and patronage intentions) as a response to organism states (Walker & Kent, 2013).

Moderating relationships

Table 5: Moderation Analysis

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
Age -> nWOM	0.009	0.009	0.01	0.869	0.385
Age -> PI	-0.009	-0.009	0.01	0.895	0.371
Age -> CSKEP					
ABI -> NWOM					
ABI -> PI					
Gender -> Nwom	-0.025	-0.024	0.011	2.214	0.027
Gender -> PI	0.027	0.026	0.011	2.421	0.016
Gender -> CSKEP					
Moderating Effect 1 -> NWOM					
Moderating Effect 2 -> PI					

In this study, the moderating variable that influences the strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is termed a contingent effect. According to research, attitude toward brand image is identified as the moderating factor. It is proposed that attitude toward brand image plays a moderating role in the association between outcomes of skepticism towards cause-related marketing (negative word of mouth and patronage intention) and skepticism and skepticism towards cause-related marketing.

Firstly, it was posited in the study that the association between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth will be moderated by attitude towards brand image as proposed in the hypothesis “Attitude towards brand image moderates the relationship between Skepticism toward cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth by weakening this relationship.

The findings suggest that the relationship between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and negative word-of-mouth is mitigated by attitude towards brand image, as indicated by the results ($t = 4.31$ and $p < 0.1$). Numerous scholars, including Drumwright (1996), argue that due to humans' inherent social nature and desire for acceptance and approval, advertisements featuring socially conscious themes are more likely to be effective and elicit long-term commitment. Consistent with earlier studies on CRM, such promotions may positively influence consumers' perceptions of advertisers (Ross et al., 1992).

The link between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and the intention to patronize becomes more robust when considering brand image. By cultivating a positive attitude towards the brand, it becomes possible to alleviate the negative effects of word-of-mouth and ultimately validate the acceptance of H5 and H6. A parallel outcome was observed in the research conducted by Hajjat (2003). In his exploration of the impact of CRM on customer sentiments, he found that when a commercial incorporates a CRM offer or message, consumers tend to view it favorably. Several studies (Krishnamurthy and Sujun, 1999; Holbrook and Batra, 1987) have yielded similar findings. According to Lafferty and Goldsmith (2005), cause brand partnerships significantly influence consumers' perceptions of a brand.

Diagrammatic presentation of moderation analysis

Figure 2 shows the interaction plot of skepticism towards cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth moderated by attitude towards the brand image.

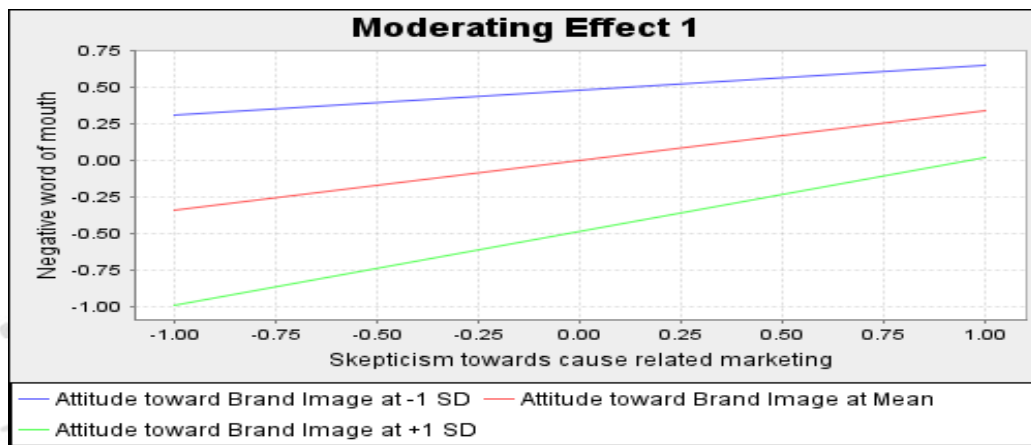


Figure 2: Interaction plot between CSKEP and NWOM

As indicated in hypothesis 5 of the study, which posits that "Attitude toward brand image moderates the relationship between Skepticism toward cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth by weakening this relationship," the study suggests that the association between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth will be influenced by this attitude.

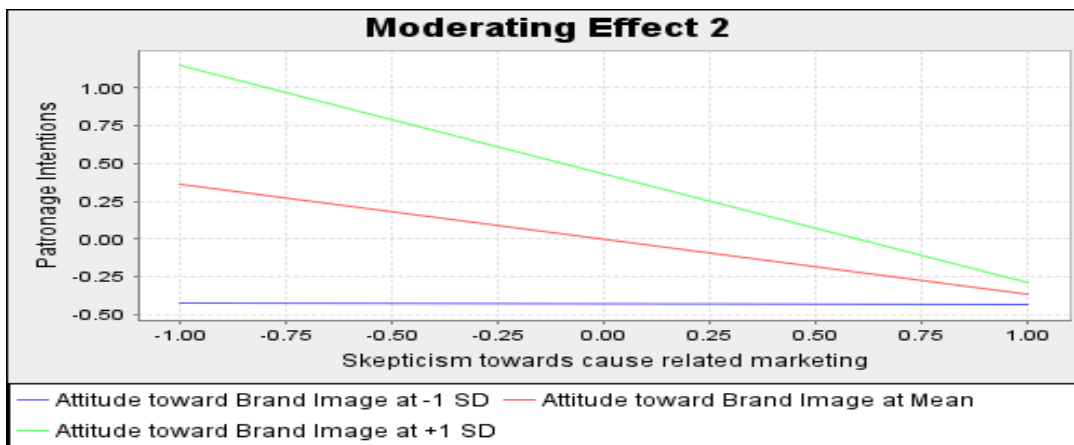


Figure 3: Interaction plot between CSKEP and PI moderated by attitude toward brand image.

The results indicate that the relationship between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and patronage intention is attenuated by attitude towards brand image, as evidenced by the statistical analysis ($t = 8.976$ and $p < 0.1$). Cultivating a positive attitude towards brand image can mitigate the adverse effects of cynicism towards cause-related marketing on the intention to patronize. Therefore, hypothesis 6 is confirmed.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the skepticism towards cause-related marketing and its various contributing factors and outcomes. Specifically, it examined the influence of age and gender demographics on skepticism. Two key outcomes of skepticism towards cause-related marketing were the intention to patronize and negative word-of-mouth behavior.

Following the research questions outlined in section 1, the discussion section of the study is divided into three main parts. Firstly, it examines the various factors influencing individuals' skepticism towards cause-related marketing, followed by an analysis of two resulting consequences. Subsequently, the discussion delves into the contextual role of the moderating variable.

First research question

The first research question aimed to answer, “What is the role of demographics (age and gender) in skepticism toward cause-related marketing?”.

Two hypotheses (H1 to H2) were formulated to address this inquiry. H1 proposed that skepticism towards cause-related marketing is significantly and positively influenced by age. However, the study's findings revealed that age had the contrary effect on skepticism towards cause-related campaigns. The second hypothesis, suggesting that females are less likely than males to be skeptical of cause-related marketing, was supported by the data.

Second research question

The second research question was “What are the outcomes of skepticism toward cause-related marketing?” Two hypotheses (H3 to H4) were formulated to address this topic.

H3 proposed that negative word-of-mouth behavior is significantly and positively influenced by skepticism toward cause-related marketing. H4 suggested that the intention to patronize is significantly and negatively influenced by skepticism toward cause-related marketing. Based on the research data, both hypotheses were supported and accepted.

Third research question

The third research question was “What is the role of the moderating variable (attitude toward brand image) while investigating the consequences of skepticism towards cause-related marketing?” To answer this question, two hypotheses were formulated (H5-H6).

According to hypothesis H5, attitude towards brand image moderates the relationship between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and negative word of mouth by attenuating this association.

Secondly, hypothesis H6 proposed that attitude towards brand image moderates the relationship between skepticism towards cause-related marketing and patronage intention by strengthening this association. Both hypotheses are supported and accepted based on the results of the study.

Theoretical and practical Implications: In recent years, there has been a significant emphasis and attention from numerous scholars on the topic of skepticism towards cause-related marketing. This study addresses a significant gap in research and holds implications for both academic study and practical application. Drawing on suggestions from Ducoffe (1996) and Goi, Kalidas, and Yunus (2018), the research focuses on two controllable factors that marketers can influence: age and gender. This research contributes to the existing literature by investigating these factors, and also emphasizing the need to consider other factors as contributing factors in the light of the SOR model. Further, response states in this model were patronage intentions and negative word-of-mouth to the organism states which are positive and negative outcomes as recommended by Bae (2018) and Klever, Florack, and Chladek (2016). In the area of cause-related marketing, this is a novel contribution with the need to study more outcome variables and input variables to have a better understanding of the phenomena.

Brand image elements and alignment of these elements with the functional attributes can be analyzed by the marketing professionals so the findings of the study provide useful insights to managers who want to build more consumer involvement by encouraging corporate social initiatives activities. The research outcomes offer actionable guidance for mitigating the adverse effects of skepticism toward cause-related marketing. By acknowledging the impact of demographics on cause-related marketing and making appropriate adaptations, managers and online advertisers can adeptly tackle skepticism and foster a favorable perception of cause-related marketing initiatives.

The study's implications extend to both marketers and academicians. Marketers can gain insights into factors that influence skepticism about CRM programs, enabling them to devise appropriate strategies. Academicians, on the other hand, can benefit from understanding the direct and moderated relationships among the variables examined. This study, being the first of its kind in the Pakistani context, holds particular significance for academicians, offering a unique perspective on skepticism toward cause-related marketing.

Limitations

While this study contributes to both theoretical and practical implications, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Primarily, the study had a narrow focus on demographic factors, particularly gender. In the context of cause-related marketing (CRM), considering additional demographic factors such as income and education would be beneficial, especially within the Pakistani context.

The data collection process exclusively involved university students. While previous studies have justified this sampling approach, it raises questions about the generalizability of the findings. Incorporating data from diverse populations could have offered a broader range of perspectives and insights.

In conclusion, future research endeavors should delve into supplementary factors that could affect skepticism and its repercussions on customers' attitudes toward brands and their intentions to patronize. The current study examined only a restricted set of variables, and exploring other possible factors would enrich the comprehension of skepticism regarding cause-related marketing initiatives.

By addressing these limitations and incorporating a broader range of variables and diverse populations, future research can further enhance our understanding of skepticism and its implications for brand attitudes and consumer behavior.

Future Direction

The intriguing findings of this study have provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of skepticism toward cause-related marketing. Despite its numerous valuable contributions, the study's results

warrant further research to address the unresolved challenges. Here are some potential avenues for future investigation.

- First, future research could extend the SOR model utilized in this study. Additional antecedent and consequence factors may be incorporated into this model, expanding on the same paradigm, to provide a more comprehensive and enhanced explanation of the phenomenon of skepticism towards cause-related marketing.
- To enhance the generalizability of this study, future research could replicate the study across diverse contexts and situations.
- The current study has identified one moderator, but there may be other variables that influence consumers' distrust of cause-related marketing and its adverse effects. Further research can be done to investigate other moderating factors such as remedial factors like religiosity.

Conclusion

Negative doubts and feelings towards advertisements focused on cause-related marketing are a big challenge nowadays for marketers these days. To address this issue requires the allocation of financial resources and constraints in the form of time as well. The focus of this research is to find out the possible outcomes of skepticism and to develop a strategy to deal with the adverse effects of skepticism toward cause-related marketing.

The base framework for this study is the SOR model which is known as the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model which was developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). The SOR model explains how various stimuli impact the organism's state. In this study, stimuli factors are demographic factors (age and gender) that influence consumers' emotional and cognitive domains of organism state. Skepticism will emerge as negative feelings or doubts towards cause-related marketing. Skepticism once generated will lead to certain reactions like patronage intentions and negative word-of-mouth. According to findings younger individuals will exhibit a higher level of skepticism than older ones and women comparatively will be more skeptical than men.

Marketers need to consider these two attributes of their target market while designing any type of campaign. Considering these attributes of target markets, marketers will be able to assess how sensitive their target market is and the degree of susceptibility. Attitude toward brand image serves as a remedial purpose for minimizing the adverse effect of skepticism and enhancing positive attitude towards brand image can manage the adverse effects of skepticism towards cause-related marketing. Consumers who develop a positive attitude towards the brand will exhibit a low level of cause-related marketing efforts. Academics and practitioners both will benefit from the findings of the study thus having significant contributions for future insights and in effective decision-making processes.

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