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Framing effective cause-related marketing message online

The purpose of this study is to examine the interaction effect between online Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) advertisements and brand reputation on consumers' brand evaluation in the hotel industry. Two experimental studies were conducted: (1) a survey-based experiment that demonstrates the moderating role of brand reputation, and (2) a laboratory experiment using psychophysiological measurements of emotional reactions that additionally examines the impact of consumers' emotional responses to CRM advertisements on hotel's pro-social initiatives, thereby complementing Study I's findings.

Key words: cause-related marketing; advertising; reputation; hotel brand evaluation; emotional response; biometric research

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Introduction

Cause-Related Marketing (CRM), which directly links product sales to the support of a charity, is one of the effective marketing tools for implementing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Barone et al., 2007). It has been suggested that when making purchasing decisions consumers are influenced not only by tangible attributes (e.g., price, quality), but also by intangible characteristics (e.g., brand image, reputation) (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). Therefore, hotels have focused on social responsibility, especially in environmental-related issues (Shang et al., 2010), in an attempt to improve brand image and reputation, and thus to affect consumers' purchase intention. Although CRM can generate positive impacts on businesses, such as improved public reputation and word-of-mouth (Inoue & Kent, 2014) and increased customers' willingness to pay (Leszczyc & Rothkopf, 2010), it can also lead to negative outcomes when consumers perceive that the company is using it mainly to maximize profit (Forehand & Grier, 2003). Hence, in order for CRM messages to elicit positive response, it is critical to convey the company's social motivation.

Studies examining how to communicate CRM effectively in order to enhance consumers' positive responses are still lacking in hospitality literature. This research addresses this gap by explaining the dynamic relationship between advertisement message framing, brand reputation, and brand evaluation in the context of online CRM in the hotel industry. It relies on Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) to explain how online CRM messages can be designed around two motivational orientations (Higgins et al., 1997): promotion-framed and prevention-framed messages (Baek & Reid, 2013). Hence, this study will investigate the effectiveness of different types of message appeals in online charity advertising for social causes by hotels. As emotional arousal or engagement with advertisements has been proven to be an effective tool for social initiatives (Bennett, 2015),

this study will assess consumers' emotional responses to the different types of CRM advertisements.

Furthermore, it is suggested that consumers will become suspicious of a company's involvement in social causes if the company has a poor reputation (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). That is, consumers will attribute more self-serving motives to CRM campaigns of less reputable hotels, suspecting that the hotels use the initiatives largely as a tactic to improve their reputation (Skard & Thorbjørnsen, 2014). Therefore, this research will examine whether brand reputation has a moderating role in the relationship between advertising message framing and consumers' brand evaluation in the context of hotel's CRM campaigns.

Conceptual Framework

Advertising has long been used as a communication tool to tackle social problems and found to directly affect consumers' evaluations of a brand (Chattopadhyay & Basu, 1990). Advertising messages in CRM are constructed to highlight a charity incentive by representing a cause, with the product taking a lesser role in the advertising copy (Lafferty & Edmondson, 2009). Since consumers are often persuaded more by altruistic social motives, CRM messages can influence consumers to participate in socially responsible behaviour, such as donating to a charity (Kim et al., 2012). However, CRM advertisements can arouse consumers' suspicion that the company is driven more by profit motives than social ones (Forehand & Grier, 2003). Hence, it is very important to highlight the company's true motivation on CRM messages to elicit consumers' positive response.

Individual's behaviour is motivated by the desire to achieve positive outcomes or to avoid negative outcomes. Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT), which distinguishes between goals with two basic motivational orientations: promotion-focus or prevention-focus (Higgins et al., 1997), has been widely used in advertising persuasion research as a theoretical

framework called "regulatory focus framing (RFF)" (Baek & Reid, 2013). While promotion-framed messages emphasize what consumers will gain from taking the initiative, prevention-framed messages point out the importance of preventing potential losses.

Furthermore, consumers' pre-evaluations of a brand can influence how they respond to campaign messages from the brand (Dahlén & Lange 2005). Companies with a poor reputation may not be able to communicate their CRM message effectively due to consumers questioning their true motives, seeing the initiatives only as a tactic for improving their reputation (Skard & Thorbjørnsen, 2014). Based on these foundations, a conceptual framework (See Fig 1) was developed to assess the effectiveness of CRM advertising messages, by examining the interaction effects between a brand's reputation and CRM advertisement message framing on brand evaluation.
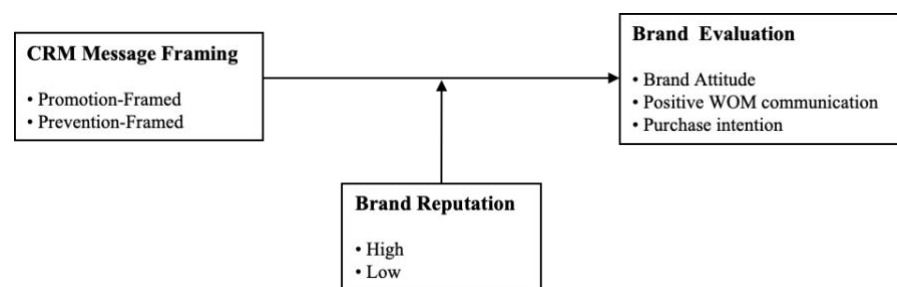

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

Methodology

Study I. Study I examined the interaction effects of CRM message framing and brand reputation on brand evaluation using a 2 (message framing: promotion- vs. prevention-framed) x 2 (brand reputation: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Two conditions for reputation were manipulated by a short introduction to a fictitious hotel. The participants were randomly exposed to one of the hotel's CRM advertising campaigns. Except for the two message framing manipulations, all other aspects of the advertisement were invariant. The

experiment was executed online, including 248 UK-based participants. Of these, 42% were male and 54.8% were aged between 25 and 54 years old.

Study II. As a complement for Study I, Study II was conducted to assess the participants' psychophysiological reactions to the advertising campaigns. The measurements were conducted in a laboratory using biosensor equipment: eye-tracker (Tobii X2-30), facial expression coding (Affectiva AFFDEX), and galvanic skin responses (Shimmer3 GSR+). The data collection and analysis were facilitated by the *iMotions* software platform for real-time synchronization of all complementary sensors. This study used the same stimuli and randomization procedure as in Study I. A total 67 UK-based respondents were involved; 23 of them were male, and 34 were aged between 25 and 34 years old.

Preliminary Results

The results support that there was an interaction effect between message framing and brand reputation on customers' brand evaluation. For a high-reputation brand, consumers perceived a company with promotion-framed message (vs. prevention-framed message) as more trustworthy, which led to more positive overall evaluations of the brand. This indicates that a reputable company is perceived be more able to commit to promoting the social cause. In contrast, for a low-reputation brand, the prevention-framed message led to less negative responses from consumers and thus was more effective than promotion-framed message. While consumers will likely question a less reputable company's motives and ability to promote a social cause, a call to prevent negative things from happening (prevention-framed message) will resonate better with consumers as they may recognise the company attempting to fulfil a shared social responsibility. These results were supported by the findings in the psychophysiological study. Respondents had a longer fixation time (i.e. visual attention) on

the manipulated parts (than the identical parts) of the advertisements, and demonstrated a higher level of negative valence for an advertisement portraying a prevention-framed message for a brand with low reputation, and vice versa.

Discussion and implication

By conducting two complementary studies, this research provides a better understanding that the effectiveness of CRM communication may depend on whether the brand has a high or low reputation. Our findings suggest that brands with low reputation should avoid using promotion-framed message as it might sensitise consumers to suspect their persuasive attempts. Furthermore, advertisement messages should be congruent with the reputation and trustworthiness of the firm.

The main contributions of this research are two-fold. First, this study is one of the first to examine the relationship between CRM advertising message framing and brand reputation in online charity advertising by hotels, suggesting an appropriate theoretical framing to understand this under-explored but important area. Second, investigating consumers' emotional responses toward CRM advertising provides meaningful findings to further highlight different viewpoints to enhance the effectiveness of message framing in hotel's pro-social initiatives. While the current study tested only online advertising as one type of communication channel, future research should test other communication techniques and platforms, such as social media, printed newspapers, and events.

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