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# Cause-related marketing, brand loyalty and corporate social responsibility

## A cross-country analysis of Italian and Japanese consumers

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate consumer's attitude towards cause-related marketing (CRM). In detail, it aims to assess the relationship between CRM and consumer's brand loyalty, and whether this relationship is moderated by consumer's perception of corporate social behaviours. Moreover, the research looks for differences in the above relationship on two samples of consumers born and living in different countries and therefore with different cultural backgrounds.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research adopts a quantitative methodology using a survey conducted among Italian and Japanese consumers. Ordinary least square regressions models are developed to test the hypotheses.

**Findings** – The findings of this paper indicate a positive relationship between the consumers' perception of CRM and their brand loyalty perception, regardless the country of origin. Accordingly, the authors found a similar pattern of CRM perception among Italian and Japanese consumers. In addition, the authors found that CRM and the consumers' perception of corporate social behaviours are not complementary, in the sense their joint effect does not affect consumer's brand loyalty.

**Originality/value** – This is one of the first studies addressing the issue concerning the CRM perception of people with in different cultures. In this regard, this study suggests that CRM impacts on brand loyalty regardless the country of origin (Italy and Japan), and consumers' characteristics such as age, gender, background. In addition, the study indicates that the perceived corporate social responsibility does not increase the effect of CRM on brand loyalty.

**Keywords** Corporate social responsibility, Brand loyalty, Cause-related marketing

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

This research finds its pillars within the context of cause-related marketing (CRM) and the consumption approach that has been shifting in current years (Christofi *et al.*, 2013; Scuotto, Del Giudice, Della Peruta and Tarba, 2017). This shifting is due to information that is globally available and the growing importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) that is modifying the way of doing business, as well as consumers' behaviours (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988; Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Christofi *et al.*, 2014; Singh *et al.*, 2019). In this context, CRM activities are considered to be a new type of corporate philanthropy that helps organizations to make a profit and provides a pragmatic contribution to social problems (Howie *et al.*, 2018). From another perspective, these factors also affect customers' decisions about purchases and products choices (Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Vrontis *et al.*, 2009; Franceschelli *et al.*, 2018), creating a new generation of ethical and socially responsible consumers. Accordingly, ethical consumers are those who are socially responsible in their buying decisions and who are driven by the "feel good factor" (Bonetto, 2014). These are consumers who feel better when they purchase something that is ethically correct and in line with the principles of sustainability that are more and more strongly





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### Hypotheses

As stated, CRM campaigns offer several benefits to companies (Barone *et al.*, 2000; Chéron *et al.*, 2012). Overall, as anticipated in the previous section, studies have shown that CRM campaigns are generally perceived favourably by consumers and ultimately offer benefits for the brand, including more favourable brand attitudes and increased purchase intentions, brand choice and loyalty (Barone *et al.*, 2000).

The purchase intention variable is a pivotal and popular construct that has been routinely used by advertising scholars and practitioners to measure the intent of buying (Spears and Singh, 2004), including in CRM studies (Hajjat, 2003; Lafferty, 2009; Bigné-Alcañiz *et al.*, 2012). Purchase intention is an antecedent of buying behaviour. It refers to customers' intention to conduct a purchase or a commitment by customers to respond in a certain way, that is, a tendency or likelihood to buy (or not to buy) products (Vrontis *et al.*, 2006), in this case sponsored by CRM programmes.

In the CRM context, consumers' intent and buying behaviour are more likely to occur when there is a CRM-linked offering (Grau and Folse, 2007; Boenigk and Schuchardt, 2013). Past studies report that consumers are more inclined or have the intent to buy products from companies that are considered to be good corporate citizens (i.e. aligned with a cause; i.e. Kropp *et al.*, 1999; Boenigk and Schuchardt, 2013; Vilela and Nelson, 2016). Additionally, some scholars (i.e. Youn and Kim, 2008; Wymer and Samu, 2009) showed increased purchase intentions for products associated with CRM, especially when consumers think that the cause is relevant to their lives. Indeed, CRM campaigns can positively influence consumers' buying decisions and behaviours (Chéron *et al.*, 2012; Galan Ladero *et al.*, 2015), ultimately increasing the loyalty to a brand.

Following the above discussion, we can propose the baseline hypothesis:

*H1.* CRM perceived by consumers has a positive effect on consumer's brand loyalty.

As anticipated, it has been suggested that, in some cases, initiatives by an organization to connect socially responsible projects to their products might have negative side effects, for example, when the product contributes to pollution or when the organization does not respect human rights (Grolleau *et al.*, 2016). In fact, it has been observed that consumers could replace the products and services of the brands and retailers who are not socially responsible with the ones they find socially responsible (Smith and Alcorn, 1991; Barone *et al.*, 2007; Tully and Winer, 2014). The positive effect of the donation can be negated, for example, by the environmental degradation that may result from an excessive purchase of the cause-related product, and by a reduction in global donations (Bresciani and Oliveira, 2007). Indeed, because of cognitive and behavioural biases, consumers can behave in ways that can lead to counter-intuitive results. Moreover, in some cases and for a subset of products, cause-related products can lead to adverse and unanticipated effects. Accordingly, while the positive effects of CRM have been confirmed by the literature (Berglund and Nakata, 2005; Basil *et al.*, 2008), there has been less well-documented cases of CRM having adverse effects. For example, Stole (2008) argues that CRM practices are mainly "window dressing, a way to improve public image while detracting attention from a business's own role in undermining the public safety net".

Departing from the popular viewpoint that cause-related products are a win-to-win strategy, as anticipated, they can lead to counter-productive results when the product has a socially irresponsible feature (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2017). Environmental degradation (or other detrimental effects) may occur, along with a decrease in the efficiency of non-profit organizations because of lower funds. These outcomes can be due to various combinations of several effects, namely, increase in the consumption of the entire product category, crowding-out of direct donations and labelling of cause-related products that confuse consumers and create an inflated perception of the donation (Grolleau *et al.*, 2016). In this regard,

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Vaidyanathan and Aggarwal (2005) found that US consumers who are actively committed to an environmental cause have a higher willingness to buy a product linked to that cause.

Accordingly, our view is that companies find benefit in establishing CRM strategies when they also are careful about socially responsible initiatives and are aware of current social and environmental problems. For example, we expect a non-significant effect of CRM on brand loyalty for companies that are not ethically and socially respectful of their employees (in terms of rights, work conditions, etc.), and environmental issues such as pollution (Singh *et al.*, 2011).

For these reasons, it is reasonable to infer that consumers' brand loyalty is affected by their CRM perception and moderated by consumers' CSR perception. Therefore, we can hypothesize that:

- H2.* CRM has a positive effect on consumer's brand loyalty, when there is a high level of corporate social behaviours perceived by the consumer.

## **Methodology**

### *Data, sample and variables*

We chose a quantitative methodology involving a survey approach to test our research hypotheses. It is important to specify that we have developed two general hypotheses and that they are equal for both samples. In this regard, we have chosen one individualist country, Italy, and one collectivist country, Japan, in order to highlight the differences between two culturally distant countries (Hofstede and Fink, 2007; Vaidyanathan *et al.*, 2013). It has been suggested that people in individualist cultures (such as in USA and UK) are more likely to hold a self-view implying the "inherent separateness of distinct persons", where 'the normative imperative is [...] to become independent from others and to discover and express one's unique attributes' (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, p. 226). By contrast, collectivist countries are those in which family and group work are emphasized more than individual needs or desires (e.g. Japan, China, Korea). Moreover, Italy and Japan are considered appropriate for this study because they represent two distant cultures regarding consumption, religion, activities and mannerisms (Hofstede, 2001), and therefore they provide an opportunity to understand CRM approach of consumers in different countries, following the call of Choi *et al.* (2016).

Data were collected using an online platform because it is easy to use and makes it possible to reach distant respondents living in Japan, given that the author responsible for sending the questionnaire is located in Europe. Before sending the questionnaire, a pre-test in Italy with a random sample of ten people who accepted to participate in such a test was done. The same thing was done in Japan, which was organized and developed by one of the authors who physically went to Japan. Accordingly, the questionnaire was amended to make all the questions clearer. However, it is important to note that all the questions and variables were taken from the literature (Table A1). Then, the questionnaire was sent via e-mail and through social media to different areas of the countries in order to find a heterogeneous sample.

In total, we received 154 responses from Italian consumers and 116 responses from Japanese consumers between April 2018 and June 2018. The questionnaire was developed in Italian for Italian respondents and in two languages (Japanese and English) for Japanese respondents. Japanese respondents were able to choose the preferred language for giving responses. The Japanese questionnaires were translated by a professional proof reader who knows Japanese and English before sending. Moreover, responses in Japanese were then translated into English. We therefore employed the translation-back translation procedure suggested by Van de Vijver *et al.* (1997) to ensure consistency between the English and Japanese versions.

In the questionnaire, we asked respondents to provide general personal information such as age, gender and educational background. Then we asked specific questions related to CRM, with scales taken from the study of Koschate-Fischer *et al.* (2012). In detail, we asked participants to evaluate the following two statements through a seven-point Likert scale: I

would feel good if I bought charity-linked product; I would “spread it around” if I bought a charity-linked product. For the variable CSR customer’s perception, we adapted scales used by Brown and Dacin (1997) in the context of product to a context of whole firm, by asking: I prefer products sold by socially responsible firms; I usually buy products from firms that are more socially responsible than others. Brand loyalty is adapted from scales of the variables brand loyalty and attitudinal loyalty used by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), with the following items: I usually keep purchasing the same brand; I am usually committed to a brand; I would usually be willing to pay a higher price for a brand that I like.

We explained that responses had to be provided regarding the everyday buy decision concerning all products such as food, clothes and fast-moving consumer goods in general.

Finally, we included several control variables, such as respondents’ age, gender and educational background, which were taken from the literature (Balabanis and Siamagka, 2017). Table I describes the variables of the study.

It is noteworthy that we developed two different analyses with two different samples, one for each country, in order to highlight potential differences. However, the structure of the regressions models is the same, with a dependent variable (brand loyalty), an independent variable (CRM), a moderating variable (CSR) and several control variables (age, gender, educational background) (Figure 1).

We then implemented OLS models to test the hypotheses (Khlif and Guidara, 2018; Papa *et al.*, 2018). Various methodological approaches have been employed by previous studies in the CRM context. We opted for OLS regression models because they are effective for testing moderating effects (Dawson, 2014; Ferraris *et al.*, 2018).

Before testing the hypotheses, it is important to note that the samples are very similar in terms of age, gender and educational background distribution (Tables III and V), leading to a more accurate analysis.

#### *Preliminary assessments of scales for the Italian sample*

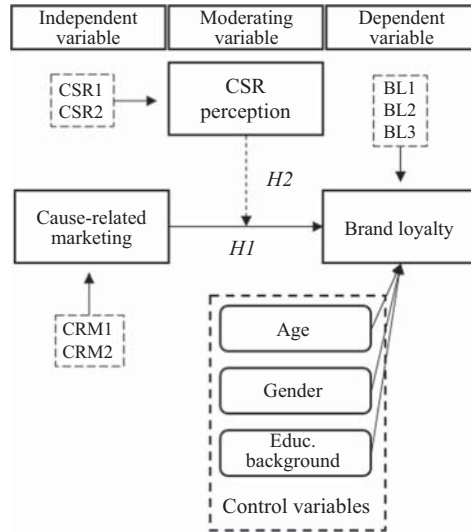
It is highly desirable for any scale to possess high levels of measurement invariance, in order to allow findings based on the measures to be compared across nations. Accordingly, the items were assessed for validity via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using SPSS software.

For all the variables, we used a one to seven Likert scale for consistency with other variables of our model. We ran a CFA using principal component extraction with varimax rotation. For the variable CRM, the CFA generated one factor with the items CRM1 and CRM2, explaining a total of 71.949 per cent of the observed variance. Consequently, we calculated a composite measure of the CRM variable by averaging the scores. Moreover, we assessed the correlation matrix through the KMO, and Bartlett’s test resulted in an acceptable level of KMO statistic (0.600); additionally, a significant *p*-value was obtained for Bartlett’s test of the construct. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.709. The CFA for the variable CSR generated one factor with the items CSR1 and CSR2, explaining a total of 89.341 per cent of

Variable	Explanation	Reference
CRM	2 items/7-point Likert scale	Koschate-Fischer <i>et al.</i> (2012)
CSR	2 items/7-point Likert scale	Brown and Dacin (1997)
BL	3 items/7-point Likert scale	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001)
Age	0 if the age is between 1 and 18; 1 if the age is between 19 and 26; 2 if the age is between 27 and 35; 3 if the age is between 36 and 50; 4 if the age is more than 50	Balabanis and Siamagka (2017)
Gender	0 if female; 1 if male	Balabanis and Siamagka (2017)
Educational background	0 if he/she is not graduated; 1 if he/she is graduated or has a doctorate	Balabanis and Siamagka (2017)

**Table I.**  
Variables





**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual model

the observed variance. Again, we calculated a composite measure of the CSR variable by averaging the scores. Moreover, we assessed the correlation matrix through the KMO, and Bartlett's test resulted in an acceptable level of KMO statistic (0.620); additionally, a significant  $p$ -value was obtained for Bartlett's test of the construct. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.880. Finally, the CFA for the variable brand loyalty generated one factor with all the items BL1, BL2 and BL3, explaining a total of 79.108 per cent of the observed variance. Consequently, we calculated a composite measure of the BL variable by averaging the scores. Moreover, we assessed the correlation matrix through the KMO, and Bartlett's test resulted in an acceptable level of KMO statistic (0.735); additionally, a significant  $p$ -value was obtained for Bartlett's test of the construct. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.868 (Tables II and III).

	CRM	CSR	BL	Age	Gender	Educational background
CRM	1	0.684**	0.694**	0.147	-0.094	0.011
CSR	0.684**	1	0.772**	0.215**	-0.075	-0.018
BL	0.694**	0.772**	1	0.104	0.044	0.077
Age	0.147	0.215**	0.104	1	-0.081	-0.177*
Gender	-0.094	-0.075	0.044	-0.081	1	0.021
Educational background	0.011	-0.018	0.077	-0.177*	0.021	1

**Table II.**  
Correlation matrix for  
the Italian sample

**Notes:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$   
**Source:** Own elaboration

	$n$	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
CRM	154	1.00	7.00	3.9156	1.52303
CSR	154	1.00	7.00	4.5261	1.70987
BL	154	1.00	7.00	4.4423	1.60401
Age	154	0	4	1.99	1.085
Gender	154	0	1	0.42	0.495
Educational background	154	0	1	0.58	0.495

**Table III.**  
Descriptive statistics  
for the Italian sample







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CRM differ significantly across countries. One possible explanation could be that we consider different countries compared to the study of Lavack and Kropp (2003), namely Italy and Japan. Another possible explanation is that today's consumers live more and more in a globalized world where consumption patterns and products are more and more similar globally (Thrassou *et al.*, 2018).

Second, our findings suggest that CRM and consumers' perceptions of corporate social and environmental behaviours are not really complementary, in the sense that their joint effect does not affect consumers' brand loyalty, for both collectivist and individualist countries (Italy and Japan). Therefore, we are not able to confirm what was suggested by Grolleau *et al.* (2016), who stated that under some plausible circumstances, initiatives by firms to connect socially responsible projects to their products might have negative side effects when the product has a socially irresponsible aspect. Nevertheless, it is important to add that the effect suggested by our results is such on the dependent variable "brand loyalty". This does not mean that CSR is not important for building and delivering competitive advantage which, of course, have different positive impacts on business management and performance (Santoro, Ferraris and Vrontis, 2018; González-Masip *et al.*, 2019).

#### *Managerial implications*

Our findings help us to propose some managerial implications, especially for marketing managers. First, our findings confirm that CRM policies do have an impact on brand loyalty and thus consumers' attitudes towards charity-linked products are positive. Therefore, it is recommended, especially for companies producing products linked to valuable and recognized brands, to increase CRM budgets and to establish CRM strategies for companies that have not yet done so. Since there are various alternatives in the markets, which are becoming more and more competitive and globalized, it is very hard to make consumers loyal to a brand, given their increased bargain power. Companies should first nurture relationships with their consumers and should gain their trust through being successful and creating powerful brands. In this way, valuable and recognized brands can increase consumers' brand loyalty by leveraging CRM initiatives. However, these strategies must be linked to an effective communication campaign to let consumers know about what the company is doing for charitable organizations. In this context, firms must be more and more aware of the social needs of local and global communities, linking the strategies at different levels to social dynamics. Second, our findings show that CRM are well perceived by consumers in Italy and Japan, regardless of the individual facets such as age, gender and educational background. This has implications for marketing strategies, with particular regard to the segmentation strategy, suggesting that CRM strategies can be addressed to the mass and not to specific geographical and demographic segments. This means that CRM initiatives can be followed by consistent mass marketing campaigns in different countries, such as Italy and Japan, and this would in turn decrease the overall costs of marketing, advertising and promotion. With ongoing digitalization, consumers around the world are getting closer and closer thanks to the use of social media, the spread of news around the world and the ease of travelling around the world.

Third, despite there being a non-significant effect of the interaction term of CRM and CSR on brand loyalty, our findings indicate that CSR has a positive effect on brand loyalty, meaning that more and more consumers are aware of social and environmental issues. This suggests that companies will have to get to know their consumers more and more and come closer to their expectations. Also, CSR perception is high, according to descriptive statistics. Therefore, more and more consumers are willing to buy products from socially responsible firms. Managers at many levels must recognize this factor, and should re-design activities and processes towards sustainability.

Overall, despite some limitations, it can be stated that CRM strategies and initiatives may be effective in all countries, both collectivist and individualist.

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### *Limitations and future research directions*

This research should be considered in the light of several limitations, which leave room for future research opportunities. Although the findings among Italian and Japanese consumers appear to very similar, it is noteworthy to state that, for the sample of Japanese consumers, the effect of CRM on brand loyalty seems to decrease when the variable CSR is added into Model 3. This means that *H1* is confirmed for Italian consumers, while it should be carefully considered for Japanese ones. Another limitation of the study regards the subjectivity of the responses given by the surveyed consumers. Despite the anonymity of the responses, some respondents might have answered following cognitive paths and not real personal feelings. Third, since each CRM initiative is different and each company operates in a different manner, it could be interesting to conduct qualitative case studies of large corporations in trying to understand more deeply the relationship between CRM and CSR. Finally, most of the survey participants are under 35. This certainly has an impact on the analyses. In fact, young people live in a very open environment where consumption patterns and products are increasingly globalized. Future research could compare different age groups.

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**Appendix****Cause-related  
marketing**

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Key constructs	Variable code	Questions	References
Cause-related marketing	CRM1	I would feel good if I bought charity-linked product	Koschate-Fischer <i>et al.</i> (2012)
	CRM2	I would “spread it around” if I bought a charity-linked product	Koschate-Fischer <i>et al.</i> (2012)
CSR perception	CSR1	I prefer products sold by socially responsible firms	Brown and Dacin (1997)
	CSR2	I usually buy products from firms that are more socially responsible than others	Brown and Dacin (1997)
Brand loyalty	BL1	I usually keep purchasing the same brand	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001)
	BL2	I am usually committed to a brand	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001)
	BL3	I would usually be willing to pay a higher price for a brand that I like	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001)

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**Table A1.**  
Constructs and questions**Corresponding author**Gabriele Santoro can be contacted at: [gabriele.santoro@unito.it](mailto:gabriele.santoro@unito.it)

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