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Article

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MARKETING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effect of skepticism and message abstractness on cause-related marketing campaign evaluation: The mediating role of message engagement

Mikyeung Bae^{1*}

Abstract: Cause-related marketing (CRM) skepticism significantly affects consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions. Thus, this study draws from construal-level theory to identify how the mediating role of message engagement curbs CRM skepticism. An online experiment indicated that matching skeptical consumers' high-level mindset with abstract CRM messaging mitigates the negative effects of CRM skepticism on consumer responses. The resulting construal mindset congruency strengthens the favorability of consumer responses by increasing message engagement. Insight into skeptical consumers' construal mindset adaptation is important because it provides a guide for the construction of advertising messages that engage skeptical consumers at the appropriate construal level to enhance message evaluation and behavior intention.

Subjects: Marketing Research; Internet / Digital Marketing / e-Marketing; Marketing Communications; Marketing; Cause-related marketing

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mikyeung Bae is an assistant professor in the School of Media and Strategic Communications at Oklahoma State University. Her research interests include cause-related marketing and consumer psychology. She has published articles in a number of journals such as *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, etc.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study draws from construal-level theory to identify how skepticism surrounding cause-related marketing can be curbed. This study makes a significant contribution to the literature because even though identifying the most effective way to encourage high-skepticism consumers to evaluate campaigns favorably is a significant concern among marketers, the conflicting results of the existing literature suggest a gap regarding the relationship between skepticism, information contents consumers rely on when processing an advertisement, and level of message engagement. Thus, the novelty of this study is demonstrated in its analysis of the validity of the interactive dispositional cause-related marketing skepticism, which is the effect of the construal mindset congruency on cause-related marketing message effectiveness. Moreover, this study is evidently among the first to provide insight into whether differences in construal mindsets result in perceptual differences, thus necessitating the use of different cause-related strategies for different individuals.

| **Keywords:** cause-related marketing; construal level theory; message abstractness

1. Introduction

Cause-related marketing (CRM) is a firm's support for a specific cause or charity; it is linked to consumers' engagement in revenue-generating trade with the firm (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Studies have demonstrated that the emphasis on communicating a commitment to support a social cause not only positively influence consumers' perceptions of a company but also reflects directly on the products that are linked to the cause (Andrews et al., 2014; Barone et al., 2007; Mohr & Webb, 2005).

Although consumers have favorable attitudes toward companies that support a social cause, they have become more skeptical, as CRM has gradually become a prevalent marketing tool in practicing corporate social responsibility (CSR; Manuel et al., 2014; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). A recent study confirms this pervasive skepticism among global consumers, finding that 56% believe too many brands use societal issues as a marketing play to sell more products (Edelman.com, 2020). That is, consumers tend to see CRM communications as "business as usual" (Menon & Kahn, 2003). Accordingly, message engagement seems to be less with high skepticism since consumers strongly believe that the motivation of for-profit companies is self-serving; thus, CRM is just a promotional trick by which firms manipulate consumers (Fassin & Buelens, 2011; Webb & Mohr, 1998).

Message engagement (i.e., the extent to which a person is involved, occupied, interested, and attentive to a message (Higgins, 2006)) is a crucial determinant in enhancing brand choice (Goodrich, 2011; Ketelaar et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2010) and behavioral intention in ways consistent with the message's claim (Green & Brock, 2000; Ophir et al., 2019). If consumers do not believe and, thus, do not engage in the message (i.e., supporting the company will result in the social benefits), the efforts in developing societal communications will be futile. Moreover, skeptical consumers will likely not buy the respective products (Paco & Reis, 2012). Thus, this skepticism, which presents challenges for planning and executing CRM and other forms of marketing communication, may diminish marketplace efficiency (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017). Highly skeptical consumers may be the key to the future effectiveness of CRM campaigns. Therefore, identifying the most effective way in which the information within a CRM campaign is presented to encourage high-skepticism consumers to evaluate favorably and participate in the campaign is a significant concern among advertisers.

Consumers' enduring level of CRM skepticism governs the degree to which they develop defensive processing against detailed information of a company's support of a social cause (Bae, 2019; Obermiller et al., 2005). Thus, this skepticism-induced low-level motivation leads consumers to adopt a heuristic processing, such that they rely more on peripheral cues such as emotional contents (Bae, 2019; Murphy et al., 2013) and the number of Likes and followers on a Facebook brand page (Bae, 2019). Due to consumers' general distrust of the information claims in CRM advertising, highly-skeptical people rely more strongly on heuristic processing via simple decision cues instead of relying on effortful information processing (Bae, 2019; Obermiller et al., 2005).

Even so, somewhat in contrast to this perspective, some studies have found that skeptical consumers are likely to elaborate on the message when presented with messages describing a firm's social involvement. For example, Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) found that social initiative messages elicited high levels of message elaboration. Connors et al. (2017) found that skepticism led people to seek out and attend to more concrete and detailed information necessary to evaluate the validity of an advertisement claim. Thus, highly-skeptical consumers preferentially attend to messages that highlight concrete rather than abstract information (Hansen & Wanke, 2010). Kirmani and Zhu (2007) demonstrated that there was no difference in the levels of message engagement between a skeptical group and nonskeptical groups. These conflicting outcomes

suggest a research gap regarding the relationship between skepticism, information contents consumers rely on when processing an advertisement, and level of message engagement.

Studies on the construal level offer a starting point for addressing this issue. Construal level theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010) posits that individuals construe stimuli differently regarding abstract and generalized features (high-level construals) or concrete and contextualized features (low-level construals). When processing information in an advertisement, individuals with a high-level mindset who focus on central and primary features are guided by their broader and desirable values. Meanwhile, those with a low-level mindset who focus on peripheral and subordinate features consider circumstantial, specific, and feasible information (Ledgerwood et al., 2010).

This study is based on the premise that the persuasive impact of a message featuring a high or low-level construal depends on the levels of mental construals of skeptical consumers. This study posits that consumers with high CRM skepticism are likely to construe information at a high level, whereas those with low CRM skepticism are inclined to construe information at a low level.

Given that consumers are more willing to adopt a framed message when the frame fits with their mental states and representations (Lee & Aaker, 2004), it was hypothesized that when there is a correspondence between consumers' construal mindset and the level at which the message is construed, the evaluation of the CRM message is more favorable than when such correspondence is absent. These outcomes occur because a match between consumers' skeptical mindset (high-level construal) and the level at which the goal pursuit is construed stimulates message engagement. Thus, given a persuasive message, message engagement intensifies content processing and, hence, positive reactions to it (Lee et al., 2010; Wang, 2006).

This study demonstrates that highly-skeptical consumers adopt a high-level construal mindset, through which they engage in abstract statements when processing CRM information. Thus, leveraging this high-level construal mindset, this study shows that abstract CRM messages can be used to increase message engagement, resulting in a favorable attitude toward CRM claims and intentions to take part in a campaign.

The main contribution of this study lies in its analysis of the validity of the interactive dispositional CRM skepticism; that is, the construal mindset congruency effects on CRM message effectiveness. Currently, this study is evidently among the first to provide insight into whether differences in construal mindsets result in perceptual differences, thus necessitating the use of different CRM strategies for different individuals (i.e., highly skeptical vs. less skeptical).

2. Conceptual background

2.1. CRM Skepticism and construal mindset

CRM skepticism is a consumer's tendency to distrust cause-marketing action or message (Bae, 2019; Webb & Mohr, 1998). Thus, skepticism is a personality trait and an ongoing state of disbelief (Forehand & Grier, 2003). Previous exposures to (or negative experiences with) exaggerated and misleading CRM advertising can create skeptical sentiments toward CRM advertising (Ford et al., 1990). Besides the contradiction between the nature of a for-profit company (which strives to increase profits) and the nature of CRM (which voluntarily commits to creating a better society) sparks skepticism (Szykman et al., 2004). Moreover, the fact that the relationship between the consumer and the charity in CRM is indirect (i.e., the company benefits first before any obligation to donate ensues) precipitates consumers' skepticism (Dean, 2004). Further, consumers have an inherent tendency to try to determine the locus of causality for an event (Kelley, 1971). For instance, consumers make intrinsic (or selfless) motives or extrinsic (or self-interested) attributions of why a company commits to helping society's welfare (Ellen et al., 2006; Parguel et al., 2011; Vlachos et al., 2013). This causal inference, in turn, intensifies the consumer's overall propensity to doubt the company's socially responsible actions (Leonidou & Skarmas, 2017).

The extant literature has made significant efforts to understand how negative consequences can be reduced in situations in which marketers have given consumers a reason to be skeptical (e.g., Elving, 2013; Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017; Singh et al., 2009; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). However, studies rarely explore the CRM communications of companies regarding how the skeptical consumer conceptualizes it.

CLT (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding how skepticism affects consumer perceptions. According to CLT, the construal level is the degree of abstraction represented in the cognitive hierarchy of individual minds (Lee et al., 2010; Liberman & Trope, 1998). CLT further asserts that an individual's psychological distance toward an object or event influences how the individual construes it (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Psychological distance is defined as "a subjective experience that something is closer or far away from the self, here, and now" (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 440). Specifically, individuals tend to conceptualize psychologically distant events (e.g., distant future events, spatially distant events, or events related to others) in an abstract way (high-level construal) that focuses more on general, abstract, superordinate, and core features of events. In contrast, they tend to perceive psychologically proximal events (e.g., near-future events, spatially proximal events, or events related to self) in a concrete way (low-level construal) that emphasizes subordinate, detailed, and contextualized representations of events (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003). Thus, the degree of psychological distance and construal level that one applies to a situation ultimately influences his or her evaluation, attitude, and behavior (Trope et al., 2007).

Action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987) supports a similar distinction. According to this theory, the identities of an action can be arranged in a cognitive hierarchy, from low-level identities specifying how one acts, which corresponds to feasibility considerations, to high-level identities, specifying why one acts, which corresponds to desirability considerations (Baskin et al., 2014; Liberman & Trope, 1998). Illustrative of this, Eyal et al. (2009) found that individuals who construed a high-level mindset were influenced by their broader values, whereas those who construed a low-level mindset were influenced by feasible means used to reach the end state (see also Rabinovich et al., 2010).

From the perspective of CLT and action identification theory, skepticism as a collection of abstract beliefs about CRM communications, its causes, consequences, and the value of the end state of the CRM action can be considered as a high-level construal. Given that skeptical consumers show a tendency to stereotype (where stereotype refers to a set of beliefs regarding characteristics, attributes, or behavior of a certain type of stimuli (Hilton & Hippiel, 1996)), they may adopt a high-level abstract construal mindset to increase stereotypic judgments relative to a concrete construal mindset (Wakslak, Naussbaum et al., 2008).

Similarly, the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) suggests that predispositional skepticism provides a means for thinking about future messages, thereby activating a schematic information process that encourages consumers to rely on broader and more inclusive categorization (Pratto & Bargh, 1991). Accordingly, Sher and Lee (2009) also provided additional evidence that skeptical consumers employed intrinsic shortcuts (which are based on beliefs and generalization to evaluate information instead of using extrinsic shortcuts, which are based on detailed contextual factors), indicating that their high-level abstract mindset guides judgements and decision making.

Contrary to this proposition, several studies suggested that skepticism induces people to attend to more concrete and detailed information in response to social initiative messages. For example, Connors et al. (2017) suggested that the nature of CSR information required consumers to elaborate on detailed contextualized representations that require the adoption of a low-level mindset. Their reason was based on previous findings that social initiative messages elicited high levels of message elaboration (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006), and skeptical consumers favorably attend to messages that highlight concrete as opposed to abstract information (Hansen &

Wanke, 2010). However, one important aspect of this study makes it challenging to draw a firm conclusion about skeptical consumers' adaptation of a low-level construal mindset. Although they found that skeptical consumers were more favorable in response to concrete (versus abstract) CSR messages, they did not test whether skeptical individuals adopted a low-level construal. Moreover, they assigned participants one of the two manipulated conditions (i.e., high-skepticism domain: CSR message vs. low-skepticism domain: a company's ability in manufacturing in manufacturing) rather than assessing participants' levels of skepticism. They seemed to focus on context-induced situational skepticism. To date, no study tests the relationship between trait-based CRM skepticism and levels of construal. Given that skeptical consumers construe stimuli regarding their belief, value, and general features such as stereotypical features that are the results of abstraction and generalization about the object, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H1: Individuals with a high CRM skepticism will exhibit a higher level of construal, as compared to those with a low CRM skepticism.

2.2. Mindset congruency effect

Many studies agree that a match of message frames with consumers' mindset leads to greater fluency, which ultimately leads to positive outcomes (Connors et al., 2017; Freitas et al., 2004; Fujita et al., 2006; White et al., 2011). Therefore, matching highly-skeptical consumers' high-level mindset with abstract, high construal-level messaging results in a mindset congruency effect, where claims are perceived as more persuasive, and greater attitude change occurs (Fujita et al., 2006; Trope et al., 2007).

As discussed above, a high-level abstract mindset induces people to construe a situation more abstractly by focusing on its high-level aims and central and primary features. However, a low-level concrete mindset induces a more concrete representation of the details and peripheral aspects of the situation (Fujita et al., 2006). Extending this notion to the case of CRM actions of a company and skepticism, this study suggests that CRM skepticism induces consumers to adopt a more distant (abstract) mindset that relies on central, primary features guided by their broader values. Thus, messages that focus on high-level aims will be more persuasive (e.g., "We are committed to enhancing children's health and safety;" "We are committed to society's well-being"). In contrast, for consumers with low skepticism, a company's CRM actions could be construed in concrete ways. Thus, messages that focus on low-level aspects of the actions would be more effective (e.g., "We will donate 1 USD to a non-profit company for every bottle of water purchased").

High-level construals focus on the desirability of an activity; that is, why certain things are done (Freitas et al., 2004; Fujita et al., 2006). In contrast, low-level construals focus on the feasibility of an activity; that is, how certain things are done (Trope et al., 2007). Therefore, for consumers with high skepticism, CRM campaign claims that focus on desirability by emphasizing desirable consequences will be more persuasive (e.g., "Your donation will help ensure children's health and safety"). Alternatively, for less skeptical consumers, messages that focus on feasibility by addressing that it will be easy to take part in the campaign will be more convincing (e.g., "Just buying a bottle of water can help a child in need"). Therefore, for highly-skeptical consumers, abstract messages, which emphasize high-level aims, desirable consequences, and why aspects of an action would be more persuasive than concrete messages. Alternatively, for less skeptical consumers, concrete messages that focus on low-level specific means, feasible aspects, and how aspects of an action would be more effective than abstract messages.

The following hypotheses were thus proposed.

H2: The use of abstract messages versus concrete messages will produce greater (a) campaign attitude and (b) participation intentions for consumers with high CRM skepticism, as compared with those with a low CRM skepticism.

2.3. Message engagement

The fit from the construal hypothesis suggests that the fit between consumers' mindset and the high or low construal-level messaging creates a subjective experience of engagement that intensifies reactions (Higgins, 2006). When people experience strong engagement with messages, they are involved, occupied, interested, and attentive to it (Higgins, 2006). A fit message may offer a feel-right experience for the message recipient that enhances engagement (Lee et al., 2010). That is, the use of abstract framing should result in a mindset congruency effect because this mindset-congruent information may prevent skeptics from activating their defensive mechanism. This outcome is thought to occur because engaged message recipients who care about (are interested in) the message reduces the motivation and cognitive resources available for questioning and resisting the arguments presented in the CRM campaign, given that the engagement with a message involves both attentional and emotional elements (Slater & Rouner, 2002).

This proposition is somewhat in contrast to the previous findings that skepticism induces a low level of motivation and allows consumers to adopt heuristic processing (Bae, 2019; Murphy et al., 2013; Obermiller et al., 2005). Given that skeptical consumers share a high-level abstract mindset to focus on central and primary features guided by their broader values, their information processing seems to reflect effortful central processing, thus resulting in greater message engagement. It means that extracting the general meaning and invariant characteristics of CRM performance may not be necessarily more or less effortful than fleshing out the details of the performance (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Two studies suggest this line of perspective. For example, Fujita et al. (2008) found that high-level construal led individuals are more sensitive to argument strength, which is considered a primary characteristic of central processing. Ledgerwood (2008) also found that the collection thoughts was unaffected by high-level construal or temporal distance in forming respondents' attitudes towards messages.

Thus, if skepticism toward CRM leads consumers to adopt a high-level construal mindset, their evaluation of the claim should be more positive when this mindset is assembled with information that matches this level of construal by engaging the CRM claims. Therefore, combining a CRM skepticism-induced high-level construal mindset with high-level abstract CRM messages will reduce the undesirable effects of CRM skepticism on consumer responses through message engagement.

Further, engagement with a message leads to behavioral intentions consistent with the message's claims (Green & Brock, 2000). When people show strong engagement with the message claims, they are more likely to exert greater effort on a subsequent task (Hong & Lee, 2010; Lee et al., 2010). Further, previous studies have demonstrated a mediating role of message engagement in persuasive communication contexts. For example, Ophir et al. (2019) found that emotional and attentional engagement mediated the association between vividness and intention to reduce smoking.

Additional studies confirm the mediating role of message engagement (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984; Laczniak et al., 1999; Wang, 2006). For example, consumers who are more engaged in processing advertising messages consider the message to be more believable (Wang, 2006). In social media contexts, message engagement was found to prompt greater credibility perception (Westerman et al., 2014). Bae (2019) also found that once consumers became involved with the CRM message, they were more likely to consider the claim to be more credible, which in turn generated greater purchase intentions. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H3: Message engagement will mediate the relationship between (a) CRM skepticism \times message-type and campaign attitude and (b) participation intentions.

3. Methods

3.1. Study design

This study examined if skepticism toward CRM leads consumers to adopt a high-level construal mindset; their response to the claim should be more positive when the mindset is connected with information that matches this level of construal.

A 2 (CRM message: abstract vs. concrete) \times 2 (skepticism: high vs. low) between-subjects design was tested on campaign attitude and campaign participation intention. CRM skepticism was not manipulated but was determined post hoc as a two-category variable to analyze its effect on a construal level.

3.2. Sampling

A total of 234 participants (66.2 percent male) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 65, and the average age was 38.49 (SD = 11.44). The majority was white (72%), followed by African Americans (15%) and Hispanic (13%). Participants' education levels varied from below high school (1.6 percent), high school (10.7 percent), two-year college (9.8 percent), four-year college (54.3 percent), and graduate degree (23.6 percent). Participants' demographic characteristics were not significant confounds in the main analysis.

3.3. Stimuli development

Several important factors are considered while developing the stimulus to be used in this study. They include (1) the product and company, (2) the cause, and (3) the non-profit organization. Bottled water was a relevant product for the sample population, based on its usage rate and frequency of purchase (Lafferty, 2007). A fictitious company was created as the CRM sponsor to eliminate respondents' biases toward existing companies. Fifty participants (not part of the main study) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in return for monetary incentives. They assessed the perceived congruence of the name of the company with the bottled water product. CASCATA was rated as the most compatible name with the bottled water company ($F(2,48) = 38.32, p < 0.01$) among three names (e.g., WATERBLUE and DEEPS).

According to the World Health Organization [WHO], 2019, 2.2 billion people worldwide lack access to safely-managed drinking water services, and five children die every year from causes related to contaminated water. A clean water campaign was launched for a fictitious charity organization called *Hand in Hand*.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the brand webpage was created. A brand website is the most frequent medium used to engage in CRM communication; 98% of Fortune 500 companies refer to social cause issues on their websites (Smith & Alexander, 2013). Moreover, 82% of consumers visit company websites before deciding to buy a product or service (Forbes.com, 2016). Therefore, a brand's website can target the best consumers and influence their attitudes and intention to take part in the advertised CRM campaign, given the richness of its argumentation and opportunities for interactivity with consumers (Biloslavo & Tranavčević, 2009).

It presented a home page with a slogan and some brief information about the social cause. Multiple operationalizations of the successfully employed constructs were initiated (Trope et al., 2007). Specifically, the construal level (high [abstract message] vs. low [concrete message]) varied by doing the following: (a) using a headline that focused either on the high-level goal of participating in the campaign by purchasing a product ("Buy a bottle of CASCATA = help ensure children's health and safety") or the low-level means by which actions are accomplished ("Buy a bottle of CASCATA = donate 30¢ to Hand in Hand"); (b) using a body text to describe either high-level abstract description of the end states of actions ("why do we need your donation?") or low-level of specific description of the means by which donations are implemented ("how do we use your donation?"); (c) varying spatial distance by addressing either the high-level signal of spatial

distance (“we will donate 30¢ to Hand in Hand Africa) or low-level proximal distance (“we will donate 30¢ to Hand in Hand USA); and (d) varying temporal distance by describing either high-level distance (“for every bottle of CASCATA water purchased from 1 July 2021 to 31 December 2021) or proximal distance (from today to 31 December 2020) (see Appendix A).

3.4. Procedure

The participants were subjects in the online experiment. They were first required to complete a questionnaire to measure their level of construal using the behavioral identification form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). The BIF consists of 25 questions assessing the level at which individuals construe certain activities. For each question, participants read a statement of action (e.g., making a list), followed by two options describing the action regarding either why it is performed, which is consistent with higher-level construals (e.g., getting things organized), or how it is performed, which is consistent with lower-level construals (e.g., writing something down). Participants were required to choose the description that better captured their view of the activity. Their responses to the 25-item BIF were summed to form a composite measure of construal mindset. A higher score on this measure indicates a more abstract mindset and, therefore, greater psychological distance from the task. Next, participants were assessed regarding their dispositional CRM skepticism before being exposed to the stimulus. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of two CRM campaigns (high-level construal: abstract message vs. low-level construal: concrete message). They then responded to questions regarding their campaign participation intentions. Manipulation checks for the high- and low-level construal was conducted subsequently, followed by confound check items and demographic questions.

3.5. Measures

All measures used seven-point scales. Dispositional CRM skepticism was measured using four items that were adopted from Mohr et al. (1998). The items include the following: “Most statements made by companies in advertising or product labels about supporting non-profit organizations are not true,” “Most statement made by companies in advertising about supporting non-profit organizations are intended to mislead rather than inform the consumer,” “Because most statements made by companies that they support non-profit organizations are exaggerated, consumers would be better off if such statements were eliminated from advertising,” and “I do not believe most CRM statements regarding support of non-profit organizations made by companies in advertising ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.36$, $\alpha = .86$).

Message engagement was measured using four items. These items include the following: “How much attention you paid to process the campaign,” “How engaging it was for you to process the campaign,” “How involving it was for you to process the campaign,” and “What was the overall attention you had with the campaign?” ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.32$, $\alpha = .78$) (Laczniak et al., 1999). Campaign attitude was measured with three items (bad/good, dislike/like, negative/positive) ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.17$, $\alpha = .83$) (Schlosser, 2003). Campaign participation intentions were assessed with three items. These items include the following: “I would be willing to participate in this CRM campaign,” “I would consider purchasing this product to provide help to the cause,” and “I would likely contribute to this cause by getting involved in this CRM campaign” ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.35$, $\alpha = .88$) (Grau & Folse, 2007).

Measures for potential confounds included issue involvement (unimportant/important, irrelevant/relevant, of no concern/of concern, means nothing/means a lot, does not matter/matters a great deal to me) ($\alpha = .90$) (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990) and company/non-profit organization familiarity (not at all/very much), which were not found as a significant covariate for main analyses.

Manipulation checks were tested using perceived message construal (i.e., abstractness)—not descriptive/descriptive, abstract/concrete, stressing desirable implications/stressing feasible implications of the campaign ($\alpha = .83$; Chui, 2010; T. J. Brown & Dacin, 1997). Additional questions were

used to check the manipulation of spatial distance—the outcomes of this campaign would be associated with areas that are far from here/that are near here—and temporal distance—this campaign is likely to happen in the near future/in the distant future (Lieberman et al., 2002). Africa might be considered to be socially distant from the study participants because all participants were living in the USA. Thus, social distance was also measured using one question—donation is likely to have an impact on people in developing countries/people in the United States/people in developing countries (Spence et al., 2011).

4. Results

4.1. Manipulation checks

A series of t-tests was performed to check the level of the manipulation of construal-level message (i.e., abstractness vs. concreteness). Compared to those exposed to the concrete message condition, participants in the abstract message condition perceived the campaign to be more abstract ($M_{\text{abstract}} = 5.67$, $SD = 1.01$; $M_{\text{concrete}} = 5.05$, $SD = 1.31$, $t(232) = 4.21$, $p < .001$). Participants assigned to the abstract condition perceived the campaign claim to be more geographically distant ($M_{\text{spatial distance}} = 5.48$, $SD = 1.11$) than those assigned to the special proximal ($M_{\text{spatial proximal}} = 3.69$, $SD = 1.61$, $t(232) = 9.89$, $p < .001$), temporally distant ($M_{\text{temporal distance}} = 5.30$, $SD = 1.38$) than those assigned to the temporal proximal ($M_{\text{temporal proximal}} = 3.83$, $SD = 1.16$, $t(232) = 7.38$, $p < .001$), and socially distant ($M_{\text{social distance}} = 5.85$, $SD = 1.15$) than those assigned to the social proximal ($M_{\text{social proximal}} = 4.50$, $SD = 1.81$, $t(232) = 6.85$, $p < .001$). Participants assigned to the concrete condition perceived the message to be more geographically proximal ($M_{\text{spatial proximal}} = 4.95$, $SD = 1.59$) than those assigned to the special distance ($M_{\text{spatial distance}} = 3.57$, $SD = 1.81$, $t(232) = 6.18$, $p < .001$), temporally proximal ($M_{\text{temporal proximal}} = 5.50$, $SD = 1.16$) than their counterpart ($M_{\text{temporal distance}} = 4.20$, $SD = 1.84$, $t(232) = 5.97$, $p < .001$), and socially proximal ($M_{\text{social proximal}} = 5.22$, $SD = 1.48$) than those assigned to the social distance ($M_{\text{social distance}} = 3.50$, $SD = 1.79$, $t(232) = 8.04$, $p < .001$). The results suggest that the abstractness (high-level construal) and concreteness (low-level construal) manipulation was successful.

4.2. Hypothesis test

4.2.1. Relationship between CRM skepticism and levels of construal mindset

This study measured participants' construal levels to ensure that skeptical consumers adopt a high-level mindset while less skeptical consumers adopt a low-level mindset. High and low skepticism was distinguished on the resultant measure from the top and bottom thirds of the distribution of scores. Identifying and comparing the top and bottom groups while eliminating participants positioned near the median value more clearly indicates the differences between the high skepticism and low skepticism groups (Gangestad & Snyder, 1991). The independent samples t-test supports the prediction that participants with high skepticism showed significantly higher construal levels than those with low skepticism ($M_{\text{high skepticism, } n = 84} = 43.70$, $SD = 4.95$, $M_{\text{low skepticism, } n = 71} = 34.96$, $SD = 5.66$, $t(153) = 10.25$, $p < .001$) (see Table 1). Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

4.2.2. Mindset congruency effect

To test hypotheses 2 and 3, moderating analysis using a PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) model 1 was performed. This model was tested via bootstrapping, which is the least vulnerable technique

Table 1. Levels of construal between high vs. low skepticism

	High	Low	
	$N = 136$	$N = 98$	
	$M (SD)$	$M (SD)$	$t(232)$
Construal	42.74 (5.04)	35.61 (5.64)	10.14***

*** $p < .001$.

to Type 1 errors. Moreover, bootstrapping does not assume normal distributions for any variable (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The results revealed a significant interaction effect between skepticism and message-type on campaign attitude ($\beta = .64, SE = .12, t(230) = 6.419, p < .001$). A significant main effect of message-type was found (coded 1 for low construal [concrete] message and 2 for high construal [abstract] message; $\beta = .531, SE = .14, t(230) = 2.19, p < .05$). CRM skepticism was not significant ($\beta = -.07, SE = .05, t(230) = -1.44, p > .05$). A bootstrap analysis with a 10,000 sample and a 95 % confidence interval (CI) showed a significant conditional effect. If a CI does not include zero, it indicates conditional effect. The highly- skeptical group showed greater campaign attitude in response to a high-level abstract message ($M = 5.92$) than a low level concrete message ($M = 4.01$) ($\beta = 1.19, SE = 0.20, t(230) = 5.94, p < .001, CI: 0.79$ to 1.59), and the less skeptical group showed greater campaign attitude in response to a low level concrete message ($M = 5.45$) than a high level abstract message ($M = 4.78$) ($\beta = -.64, SE = 0.24, t(230) = -3.08, p < 0.01, CI: -1.05$ to -0.23)

Regarding the campaign participation intention, a significant interaction effect between skepticism and message-type was also found ($\beta = .76, SE = .11, t(230) = 6.39, p < .001$). A bootstrap analysis showed a significant conditional effect. Highly-skeptical consumers showed greater campaign participation intentions in response to a high-level abstract message ($M = 6.45$) than concrete message ($M = 3.93$) ($\beta = 1.54, SE = 0.23, t(230) = 6.74, p < .001, CI: 1.71$ to 1.99). The less skeptical group showed greater participation intention in response to a low-level concrete message ($M = 5.51$) than a high-level abstract message ($M = 4.99$) ($\beta = -.62, SE = 0.23, t(230) = -2.62, p < 0.01, CI: -1.10$ to -0.15) (see Figure 1). Thus, H2 was supported.

4.2.3. Moderated mediation effect of engagement

To examine whether message engagement mediated the interactive effect of CRM skepticism and message-type on attitudes toward the campaign and campaign participation intention, the moderated mediation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018), model 7. The effects of each antecedent variable on the subsequent variable was significant (message-type \times CRM skepticism and \rightarrow message engagement: $\beta = .74, t(230) = 6.93, p < .001$; message engagement \rightarrow campaign attitude: $\beta = .70, t(230) = 16.96, p < .001$). A bootstrap analysis with a 10,000 sample and a 95 % CI showed a significant indirect effect between message-types and campaign attitude among consumers with high and low skepticism ($\beta_{high\ skepticism} = .90, CI: 0.58$ to 1.18 ;

Figure 1. Interaction of construal message by CRM skepticism.

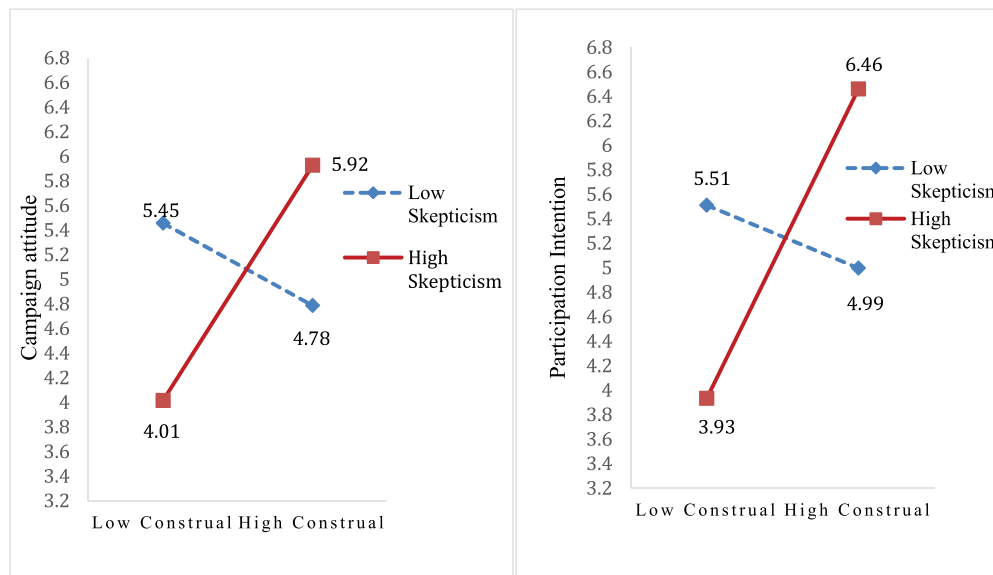
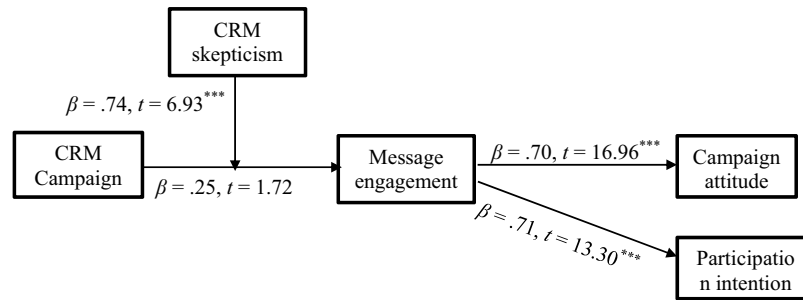


Figure 2. Moderated mediation effect of message engagement.



$\beta_{low\ skepticism} = -.60$, CI: -0.94 to -0.31). The results also supported a mediation role of message engagement in the interactive effect of message-types and skepticism on campaign participation intention (message-type \times CRM skepticism and \rightarrow message engagement: $\beta = .74$, $t(230) = 6.93$, $p < .001$; message engagement \rightarrow participation intention: $\beta = .71$, $t(230) = 13.30$, $p < .001$). A bootstrap analysis showed a significant indirect effect between message-types and participation intention among high and low skeptical consumers ($\beta_{high\ skepticism} = .91$, CI 95 percent: 0.61 to 1.21 ; $\beta_{low\ skepticism} = -.61$, CI: -0.96 to -0.30). That is, both highly skeptical consumers and less skeptical consumers were more likely to undergo message engagement in evaluating CRM campaigns and forming campaign participation intention, thus supporting H3 (see Figure 2).

5. Discussion

In contrast to the previous findings that suggest skepticism elicits a low-level construal mindset (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Connors et al., 2017; C. L. Brown & Krishna, 2004), this study found that highly-skeptical consumers adopt a high-level construal mindset. As the CLT suggests, skeptical consumers tend to share a high-level abstract mindset to focus on central, primary features guided by their broader values and assign greater weight to abstract-desirability concerns (Wakslak, Trope et al., 2006).

Accordingly, in line with this finding, this study also found a mindset congruency effect. As previous studies agree (Connors et al., 2017; Freitas et al., 2004; Fujita et al., 2006; White et al., 2011), a match of message frames with consumers' mindset (i.e., matching an abstract message to a high-level construal mindset or matching a concrete message to a low-level construal mindset) led to positive outcomes. That is, this study shows that the negative effect of the inherent CRM skepticism on consumer evaluations—including attitudes and campaign participation intention—can be mitigated by presenting CRM information in an abstract mode.

It is noteworthy that this finding is somewhat in contrast to the previous suggestions that consumers' trait-based CRM skepticism induced a defensive mechanism, thus resulting in adopting heuristic processing, such that they rely more on peripheral cues (Bae, 2019; Murphy et al., 2013; Obermiller et al., 2005). This study found that skeptical consumers who use more abstract mental models relied more on central and primary features of CRM messages, while less skeptical consumers who use more concrete mental models focused on more peripheral features of CRM messages. That is, the study finding is against the idea that skepticism driven high-level construal necessarily reflects effortless, heuristic processing. A likely explanation is that CRM skepticism may encourage consumers to develop defensive processing against low-level concrete information of a company's support of a social cause. However, once they encounter high-level abstract information focusing on high-level aims of CRM performance, they are more likely to be motivated to engage in processing information and experience feel good about it (Lee et al., 2010; Torelli et al., 2012).

Moreover, this study further explored the mechanism that leads to increased persuasion. This mindset congruency effects on campaign attitude and campaign participation intention was found to occur through message engagement. Once consumers engaged in message contents that are framed as either high or low construals (e.g., abstract or concrete message), they might feel good about it (Lee et al., 2010) rather than questioning or resisting the arguments presented in the CRM campaign (Slater & Rouner, 2002).

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical implication

This study provides an important contribution to the CRM advertisement literature. This study's contribution lies in the finding that when consumers are inherently skeptical towards CRM, processing any CRM-related ads leads to the adoption of a high-level construal mindset, as skeptical consumers seek a more general understanding of CRM campaigns such as high-level values and desirable aims of the CRM performance. Thus, communicating CRM initiatives to consumers in an abstract mode results in a mindset congruency, thereby buffering against the negative effects of CRM skepticism. Prior studies on CRM advertising has failed to consider the skeptical consumers' cognitive representation of the CRM performances as a valid factor in predicting how skeptical consumers represent CRM campaign, what processing mode they adopt, and what information they consider when making judgments and decision. By suggesting that the persuasive impact of a message featuring a high or low-level construal depends on the consumers level of skepticism, this study broaden the application of CLT to the CRM communications domain.

Moreover, this study provides a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind this mindset congruency effect. It is not simply the presentation of abstract information that renders positive consumer evaluations. Rather, the underlying process and its interaction with the levels of construal mindset of CRM skepticism is important. The perception of greater message abstractness results in more message engagement for individuals whose skeptical mindsets cause them to adopt a high-level construal mindset. The matching of the message presentation with the skeptical consumers' mindset leads to reduced negative outcomes and increases message engagement. In turn, this message–mindset congruence translates into more favorable consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions. It is important to highlight that the shift toward higher-level construals with increasing distance does not necessarily reflect a shift toward low-effort heuristic processing (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Extracting the high-level aim of the CRM performance provokes skeptical consumers to pay attention to the central message along with new meaning deduced from their stored knowledge (Liberman et al., 2011), which in turn generates greater persuasion effect.

6.2. Practical implication

Along with its theoretical implications, this study has important managerial implications. A key contribution of this research is that it identifies an actionable strategy for companies to improve the effectiveness of their communications in a CRM domain mired in skepticism. More specifically, advertisers can mitigate the negative impact that inherent CRM skepticism has on consumers' attitudes and responses via abstract messaging when communicating CRM information. Conveying CRM information in a high-level abstract mode increases consumers' evaluations, as it is congruent with the high-level construal mindset that results from viewing CRM advertising skeptically. This mindset congruency increases the attitudes toward the campaign and campaign participation intention by decreasing the extent to which consumers think skeptically about the company's CRM activity and increasing message engagement.

A serious obstacles advertisers often face while developing CRM campaigns is that consumers devalue and avoid the advertised contents. Consumers believe CRM communication is a promotional tactic and marketing ploy to manipulate consumers and sell more products. Thus, message engagement is less with high-skepticism consumers. However, advertisers can produce

the greatest persuasive effect by increasing construal levels, which in turn heighten message engagement and enhance brand evaluation. This study confirms that the construal mindset congruency responsible for the effect emerges when psychological distance is used as a means of presenting CRM information at a high construal level. Advertisers can increase the construal level in CRM messages by basing their claims on *why* aspects of CRM campaign, thereby emphasizing desirable consequences of CRM performance. Thus, to target less skeptical consumers, advertisers can decrease the construal level in CRM messages by basing their claims on *how* aspects of CRM performance, thus emphasizing more specific and incidental information.

To some extent, the fact that consumers are skeptical reflects the disrespect with which they have been treated and the pervasive noise in contemporary markets. If advertisers want consumers to listen and believe in their CRM initiatives, there are several actions they can take. First, companies can implement CRM initiatives more effectively by having a desirable impact on social welfare and better integrating their CRM programs into their overall business operations. Given the findings, advertisers can better understand how consumers represent CRM advertisements mentally and what information they consider when evaluating the advertisements. Thus, advertisers can enact practical guidelines for creating more effective CRM campaigns targeting highly-skeptical consumers.

7. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study focused primarily on how skeptical consumers conceptualize different kinds of CRM messages. Thus, the mindset congruency effect was assessed based on consumers' levels of skepticism rather directly examining the interaction effect between different message-types and consumer levels of construal. Future studies should explore the three-way interaction effect among consumers' levels of skepticism, levels of construal, and message-types. It would deepen the understanding of advertisers and researchers regarding the underlying mechanism of the mindset congruency effects.

Second, participants' levels of construal were assessed using a BIF measurement scale. Even though previous studies have demonstrated that different ways of measurement induced similar levels of construal, future studies should employ alternative methods to measure construal levels, such as the breadth of categories (see Liberman et al., 2002). When individuals have a higher level of construal, they tend to classify items broadly into fewer numbers of groups, indicating that they construe objects in more abstract and comprehensive ways. Hence, conceptualizing the abstractness of categories gives scope for effective exploration.

This study attempted to improve internal validity via manipulated stimuli (i.e., the company CRM campaign on the company's website). However, the robustness of the theoretical model could be tested with stimuli that mirror other forms of company messaging. Moreover, to improve ecological validity, various respondent pools should be used. This study was also limited to only one product category and one social cause; various products and alternative social causes are necessary to improve the generalizability of the findings.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to explore the conditions that might exist when negative or positive information (message valence) at varying levels of construal is introduced to skeptical consumers.

8. Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of developing insights regarding the construal mindset adaptation of skeptical consumers. Knowledge of this mindset provides a guide for the construction of advertising messages that engage skeptical consumers at the appropriate level of construal to enhance message evaluation and behavioral intention.

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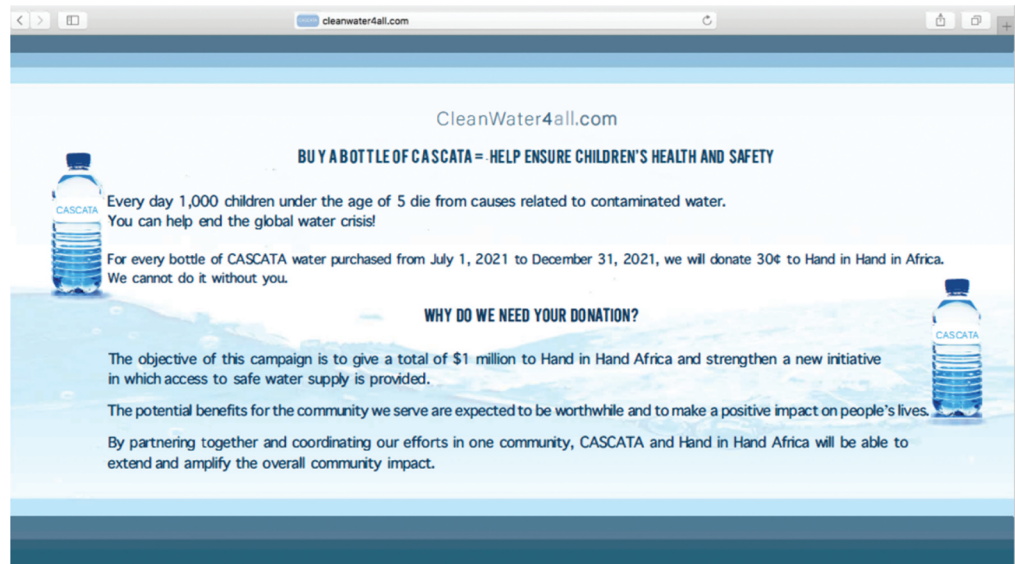
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Appendix A

High construal (abstract message)



CleanWater4all.com

BUY A BOTTLE OF CASCATA = HELP ENSURE CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND SAFETY

Every day 1,000 children under the age of 5 die from causes related to contaminated water.
You can help end the global water crisis!

For every bottle of CASCATA water purchased from July 1, 2021 to December 31, 2021, we will donate 30¢ to Hand in Hand in Africa.
We cannot do it without you.

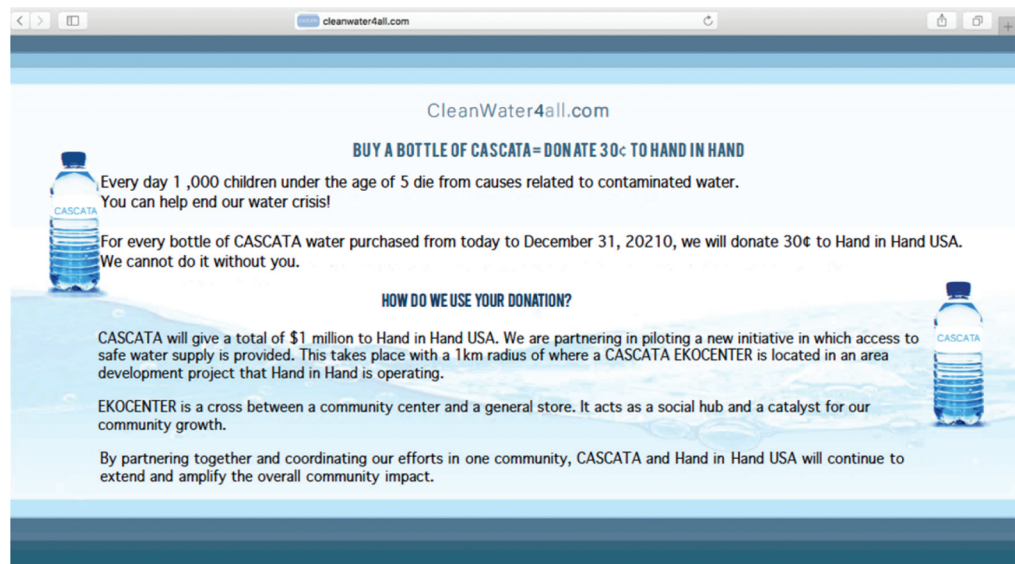
WHY DO WE NEED YOUR DONATION?

The objective of this campaign is to give a total of \$1 million to Hand in Hand Africa and strengthen a new initiative in which access to safe water supply is provided.

The potential benefits for the community we serve are expected to be worthwhile and to make a positive impact on people's lives.

By partnering together and coordinating our efforts in one community, CASCATA and Hand in Hand Africa will be able to extend and amplify the overall community impact.

Low construal (concrete message)



CleanWater4all.com

BUY A BOTTLE OF CASCATA = DONATE 30¢ TO HAND IN HAND

Every day 1,000 children under the age of 5 die from causes related to contaminated water.
You can help end our water crisis!

For every bottle of CASCATA water purchased from today to December 31, 2021, we will donate 30¢ to Hand in Hand USA.
We cannot do it without you.

HOW DO WE USE YOUR DONATION?

CASCATA will give a total of \$1 million to Hand in Hand USA. We are partnering in piloting a new initiative in which access to safe water supply is provided. This takes place with a 1km radius of where a CASCATA EKOCENTER is located in an area development project that Hand in Hand is operating.

EKOCENTER is a cross between a community center and a general store. It acts as a social hub and a catalyst for our community growth.

By partnering together and coordinating our efforts in one community, CASCATA and Hand in Hand USA will continue to extend and amplify the overall community impact.



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