

WHEN CAUSES MEET BRANDS: CROSS-PERSPECTIVE INSIGHTS INTO PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS IN CAUSE-RELATED MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to understand how consumers perceive Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) campaigns and the factors influencing their behavioral intentions. An exploratory qualitative study was conducted using a triangulation of three data collection techniques: netnography and projective techniques with fifteen consumers to capture their implicit perceptions and connections with the cause, and twelve semi-structured interviews with experts to explore their reactions to brand-cause links. Thematic analysis, conducted with QDA Miner, identified six main themes: perceived alignment between the cause and the brand, altruistic motivations, emotional connection with the cause, trust in CRM, behavioral intentions, as well as ethical perception and purchase barriers. These themes, complemented by sub-themes, highlight the cognitive, affective, and ethical determinants of purchase intentions.

Keywords: Cause-Related Marketing (CRM); Behavioral Intention; Qualitative study.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the context of growing social and environmental concerns, consumers are adopting “responsible” consumption practices, profoundly transforming their purchasing habits (Shetty et al., 2021; Roux & Nabec, 2016). In the United States, 87% of consumers favor companies engaged in social initiatives (Cone communication¹ Report, Lee & Johnson, 2019), prompting organizations to adapt their marketing strategies to meet consumer expectations, enhance competitiveness, and strengthen their brand image (Khattak et al., 2021).

Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) constitutes a specific form of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and has emerged as a key strategy (He et al., 2019; Bhatti et al., 2023). It relies on partnerships between companies and social causes, with donations contingent on consumer

¹ Cone Communication: A public relations and marketing agency located in Boston and part of Diversified Agency Services, it offers extensive experience in planning and implementing comprehensive media relations, community relations, and public information programs. Focusing on key areas such as corporate social responsibility, cause marketing, and brand communications, the agency helps its clients achieve both business and societal results.

participation through purchases (Nelson & Vilela, 2017; Chu et al., 2023). Widely adopted in the United States, CRM is exemplified by Pampers' partnership with UNICEF to combat childhood diseases, or Estée Lauder's collaboration with the Breast Cancer Research Foundation to support breast cancer research. U.S. corporate spending on social causes reached \$2.23 billion in 2019, representing a 66.41% increase compared to 2006 (IEG Report 2020, cited in Schamp et al., 2023).

Despite its popularity, CRM remains a concept with no clear consensus and is underexplored qualitatively. Bhatti et al. (2023) highlight the lack of exploratory studies, while Gupta and Handa (2024) define CRM as "a marketing activity in which an organization supports a social cause contingent on consumer action, generating benefits for the company, non-profit organizations, and consumers" (Barnes, 2015). This approach emphasizes the interactions among the three stakeholders and underscores the importance of studying factors influencing consumer behavioral intentions regarding cause-consumer-brand links.

Some studies have examined antecedents motivating the purchase of cause-related products (Goldsmith, 2014; Lafferty et al., 2016; Nelson & Vilela, 2017; Kim et al., 2017; Duarte & e Silva, 2020; Fan et al., 2020; e Silva et al., 2021; Saha et al., 2023), while others have focused on the impact of CRM campaigns on brand image (Vanhamme et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017; Guzman & David, 2017). However, very few studies have simultaneously analyzed the links between cause, consumer, and brand. Existing research remains limited, fragmented, and mostly centered on developed countries (Schramm-Klein et al., 2016; Bhatti et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019; Vrontis et al., 2020; Chaabouni et al., 2021), neglecting developing countries such as Tunisia (Natarajan et al., 2016).

In Tunisia, CRM was introduced through initiatives such as Délice in 2016, linking yogurt purchases to contributions for the restoration of schools in underprivileged areas (Chaabouni et al., 2021). Consumer reactions in Tunisia remain ambiguous and warrant further investigation (Terblanche et al., 2023; Ben Mabrouk & Najjar, 2019).

This study therefore aims to deepen the understanding of factors influencing consumer behavior in CRM by simultaneously exploring consumers' perceptions of cause-consumer links and experts' perspectives on cause-brand links. It represents a significant contribution to the literature, particularly in developing countries like Tunisia, where research on this topic remains scarce.

The paper is structured into three parts: the first presents a literature review on cause-related marketing and its interactions with the three stakeholders; the second describes the methodology employed, combining netnography and semi-structured interviews; and the third presents the results concerning the factors influencing behavioral intentions in CRM, followed by their interpretation, study limitations, and directions for future research.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CRM: Theoretical Framework

Several terms such as "cause marketing," "promotion-partage," "cause marketing strategies," or "brand-cause partnerships" are used by researchers to describe marketing activities in which

a company collaborates with a non-profit organization (Van der Brink et al., 2006). The earliest and most cited definition in the literature is that of Varadarajan and Menon (1988), which corresponds to “the formulation and implementation of marketing practices in such a way that the company supports a specific cause through revenue generation from a specific purchase activity where the company, the non-profit organization, and the consumer mutually benefit.” This definition provides a comprehensive conceptualization of cause-related marketing.

Although CRM definitions are not recent, it is important to note that their recurrence is justified by their continued relevance in the literature and in contemporary contexts, as highlighted by Chu et al., 2023 and Vrontis et al., 2020. In fact, cause-related marketing (CRM) involves the association of a brand with a cause by engaging consumers: the brand’s support for the cause is conditional on consumers purchasing the brand’s products. It is a type of corporate social responsibility initiative, a fundraising innovation, and an interactive corporate mechanism. It also involves contributing a portion of revenue to a social cause (Kotler & Lee, 2005).

Beyond financial objectives, recent research such as Bergkvist and Zhou (2019), e Silva et al. (2021), Sindhu (2022), Saha et al. (2023), and Gupta & Handa (2024) has highlighted non-financial objectives. These studies describe CRM as a strategy aimed at strengthening product positioning, enhancing community initiatives (Alavi & Zeynali, 2013), serving as a brand differentiation lever (Langen et al., 2013), promoting a positive corporate image, and providing a competitive advantage (Natarajan et al., 2016).

Table 1 summarizes the definitions proposed by researchers for the concept of CRM.

Table 1: Definitions of the CRM Concept Proposed by Researchers

Authors	Definitions
Varadarajan and Menon (1988), Kotler and Lee, (2005), Cui, et al. (2003), Fromherz (2006); Onuoha and Nnenanya (2017), Nelson and Vilela (2017), Fan et al., (2020), Bhatti et al., (2023)	<i>CRM, an allocation of a portion of profits to non-profit organizations (NGOs)</i>
Adkins (1999); Pringle and Thompson (1999); Cui et al., (2003); Fromherz (2006); Onuoha and Nnenanya (2017), e Silva et al., (2020), Mora et al. (2021), Chaabouni et al., 2021 ; Bhatti et al. (2023).	<i>Partnership between the company and the charitable organization</i>
Gupta and Pirsch (2006), Robert (2009), Williams (1986), Davidson (1997), Pandey et al., (2022)	<i>CRM is a differentiation strategy CRM is a response to the competitive environment</i>
Robert (2009), Williams (1986), Adkins (1999); Barone et al., (2000); Samu and Wymer (2001); Endacott (2004); Onuoha and Nnenanya (2017), e Silva et al., (2020); Chaabouni et al., (2021)	<i>CRM is a new form of sales promotion</i>

Robert (2009), Williams (1986), Davidson (1997)	<i>CRM stipulates the sustainability and persistence of the company in the market</i>
Strahilevitz and Myers (1998), Onuoha and Nnenanya (2017), Nelson and Vilela (2017)	<i>CRM is a feeling of satisfaction, self-esteem, and well-being</i>
Adkins (1999); Pringle and Thompson (1999), Pringle and Thompson, 2001, Samu and Wymer (2001) Onuoha and Nnenanya (2017) et Nelson and Vilela (2017)	<i>A mutual benefit for the stakeholders, while ensuring their alignment</i>
Varadarajan and Menon, (1988), Kotler and Lee (2005)	<i>CRM is a voluntary aspect</i>
Menon and Kahn (2003) ; Rifon et al., 2004 Robert (2009), Williams (1986), Davidson (1997)	<i>CRM has an impact on brand reputation, credibility, and awareness</i>

Adopted by authors

A range of cause-related marketing definitions has been provided by marketing scholars. Several concepts have reached a degree of consensus, although definitions differ from one author to another due to differences in context and perspective. However, despite the evolution of this concept in recent years, the systematic review by Bhatti et al. (2023) highlights that a clear consensus is still lacking and that an in-depth exploration is needed to provide more comprehensive studies.

2.2 CRM: A New Triadic Investigation

Cause-related marketing (CRM) aims to achieve objectives attributed to the three stakeholders involved in the initiative: the company, the cause or NGO, and the consumer.

Firstly, the company is expected to act ethically and responsibly by supporting social causes. CRM offers companies various economic, marketing, and business benefits (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2019). This strategy not only enhances brand awareness and image but also strengthens consumer loyalty and purchase intention (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988; Vanhamme et al., 2012). Moreover, CRM can serve as a lever to introduce new brands or increase sales of existing ones (Markwick & Fill, 1997), while creating lasting brand equity and added value for the company (Mullen, 1997; Grolleau et al., 2004). Despite these advantages, participation in CRM programs entails risks, including financial, organizational, or consumer perception risks regarding the company's sincerity (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Smith & Stodghill, 1994). To mitigate these risks, it is essential that companies carefully select social causes and evaluate potential partnerships.

Secondly, the association or social cause benefits from new funding sources through CRM (Caesar, 1986; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). These partnerships enable NGOs to diversify their financial resources while enhancing their visibility and social impact (Grolleau et al., 2004; Hawkins, 2012). However, CRM also carries risks for nonprofit organizations, such as negative publicity, dependence on corporate funds, perception of overly commercialized image, or decreased individual donations (Andreasson, 1986; Garrison, 1990; Kirchner et al.,

2007). To minimize these risks, NGOs must carefully select their partners and not rely solely on corporate funding.

Thirdly, the consumer plays an active role by contributing to the cause, either through product purchases or non-financial participation (Gupta & Handa, 2024). CRM campaigns allow consumers to fulfil altruistic needs, enhance self-esteem, and reduce cognitive dissonance associated with their purchases (Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998; Polonsky & Wood, 2001; Bougherara et al., 2005). Research shows that consumers generally perceive CRM campaigns positively, which can strengthen their gratitude and engagement with the cause while influencing purchasing behaviors (Barone et al., 2000; De Vries & Duque, 2018). However, risks remain, especially if campaigns are perceived as insincere or if there is a mismatch between the cause and the brand, which can damage trust and the image of the company or NGO (Polonsky & Wood, 2001).

Thus, all definitions and studies on CRM emphasize the interaction among these three actors, yet few prior exploratory studies have addressed these dimensions in an integrated and simultaneous manner. This tripartite approach allows for understanding not only the advantages and risks for each actor but also the complex dynamics of the relationships between the company, consumer, and social cause.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection

We employed a triangulation of three qualitative methods: netnography, projective techniques, and semi-structured interviews. The objective of the netnography was to explore consumer reactions in a natural context regarding cause-consumer links. Netnography is based on observing a virtual community on social media, primarily on Facebook. This choice is justified by the specific characteristics of this platform, which “offers a high level of interactivity, a large number of communicators, and heterogeneous participants” (Kozinets, 2009). The objectives of this method, as well as the selection criteria, are presented in Table 2 and Box 1

Table 2: Objectives and Research Questions of the Netnography

Objectives	Research Questions
Understand the phenomenon of cause-related marketing in Tunisia.	What is cause-related marketing?
Explain how consumers perceive cause-related marketing.	What does this concept mean to consumers?
Identify consumers' behavioral intentions.	What are consumers' behavioral intentions?

Box 1: Selection Criteria According to Kozinets (2009)

User comments, considered as detailed exchanges and discourses, enrich the analysis and allow

1. Filter the most relevant groups in relation to the research question.
2. Communities that maintain a regular flow of information.
3. Communities that include several active members and provide the richest data relevant to the research problem.
4. Communities that offer a high level of interactivity.
5. Communities with a large number of communicators and heterogeneous

for a deeper investigation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This approach has been referred to as “Facenography” (Bebey, 2017). Within this framework, two Facebook pages were selected as research units: the association “Darna” and the association “Universelle.” The first was chosen for sharing a stream of relevant information related to the research objectives, while the second was selected following its appearance on a television program on the “Attesiaa TV” channel. A detailed presentation of these communities is provided in Annexes 1 and 2. To ensure methodological rigor, we followed the steps recommended by Kozinets (2002–2009). In total, sixty comments were collected and analyzed over a five-month period.

Additionally, projective techniques were applied to 15 consumers, consisting of completing incomplete sentences (see Annex 3). The aim of this method was to access their deepest thoughts and perceptions, which are difficult to express directly or are often unconscious (Qazi et al., 2022). The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 3.

Table3. Demographic overview of projective techniques

Participants	Profession / Occupation	Age (ans)	Gender	Time to Complete (min)
P1	Student	23	F	15
P2	Student	25	M	12
P3	Employee	32	F	14
P4	Employee	29	M	13
P5	Freelancer	35	F	16
P6	Freelancer	30	M	15
P7	Student	22	F	14
P8	Employee	28	M	12
P9	Employee	31	F	15
P10	Freelancer	33	M	14
P11	Student	24	F	13
P12	Employee	27	M	12
P13	Freelancer	36	F	16
P14	Student	21	M	15
P15	Employee	34	F	14

At a later stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the analysis. The objective was to explore experts’ reactions regarding the cause–brand links and to provide clarifications on the themes identified through Netnography and projective techniques. The 12 participants were recruited using a combination of two sampling methods: the a priori judgment method, which involves selecting individuals engaged in a nonprofit organization collaborating with brands to promote social well-being and who could address the research question

(Giannelloni & Vernet, 2012, p.285), ensuring the validity and reliability of the qualitative study (Curtis et al., 2000); and the snowball method, naturally adopted based on recommendations from members initially selected through a priori judgment.

Theoretical saturation was used to determine the minimum sample size and ensure the validity of the results (Allard-Poesi et al., 2004). The sample is relatively balanced according to several criteria, detailed in Table 4, thus respecting the theoretical representativeness recommended for qualitative samples (Miles & Huberman, 2003).

Table 4: Profile of Interviewed Participants

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Profession	Marital Status	Interview Duration
Interviewee 1	Female	28	Engineer	Single	30 minutes
Interviewee 2	Female	40	Teacher	Married	45 minutes
Interviewee 3	Male	36	Engineer	Married	43 minutes
Interviewee 4	Male	28	Businessman	Single	35 minutes
Interviewee 5	Female	35	HR Manager	Married	1h 15 minutes
Interviewee 6	Female	32	Teacher	Married	55 minutes
Interviewee 7	Female	25	PhD Student	Single	40 minutes
Interviewee 8	Female	45	Homemaker	Married	47 minutes
Interviewee 9	Male	34	Project Manager	Married	58 minutes
Interviewee 10	Female	40	Administrative Manager	Married	1h 5 minutes
Interviewee 11	Female	48	Marketing Teacher	Married	47 minutes
Interviewee 12	Male	52	Farmer	Married	32 minutes

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

The collected comments, responses from the projective techniques, and interviews were transcribed and translated into French. The analysis was conducted using QDA Miner following an inductive approach, involving multiple readings of the transcripts to extract specific codes, in accordance with the principles of content analysis (Brandtzæg et al., 2010).

To ensure the reliability of the results, the corpus underwent double coding, carried out with another researcher (Mathet, 2013; Touzani, 2013; Masmoudi & Aoud, 2021). The coding comparisons yielded satisfactory results, confirming the reliability of the categories and the analysis. These verifications were supported by Scott's Pi coefficient (Scott, 1955) and Krippendorff's alpha (Mathet, 2013), both integrated within QDA Miner.

4.1 Interpretation and Discussion of Results

The thematic analysis derived from the netnography and interviews identified six main themes: (1) perceived congruence between the cause and the brand, (2) perception of altruistic motivations, (3) emotional connection with the cause, (4) trust in the CRM campaign, (5) consumers' behavioral intentions, and (6) ethical perception and purchase barriers. Each theme encompasses several sub-themes, helping to identify the factors influencing consumers' behavioral intentions in the context of CRM (see Appendix 4).

Perceived congruence between the cause and the brand. Participants highlighted the importance of congruence between the cause and the brand in reinforcing adherence to CRM initiatives. This theme accounted for 24.8% of the analyzed responses. Fleck and Maille (2011)

define this concept as “the fact that two (or more) entities go well together.” In over 30 comments, consumers encouraged brands when they perceived a clear alignment between the supported cause and the brand’s identity and values. This perception fosters a logical connection, making the CRM action more engaging: “I love this initiative by Mustella helping babies in need” (Mustella, Baby Care Products). These findings align with previous research (Rego & Hamilton, 2022; Saha et al., 2023). Projective techniques further confirmed the centrality of perceived alignment. When participants were asked to complete sentences such as, “I believe this brand supports this cause because... this cause truly aligns with its long-standing values and identity” (sentence completion #1, Consumer 14), they spontaneously and implicitly justified their adherence when brand and cause values seemed naturally compatible. This method revealed deep associations, sometimes unexpressed in direct discourse, indicating that perceived congruence relies as much on an implicit sense of “going well together” as on rational evaluation.

These results reinforce the idea that symbolic and moral congruence between the brand and the cause is a crucial trigger for participation in CRM initiatives. During interviews, respondents also explained that a partnership, such as between Pampers and UNICEF, is justified and perceived as coherent, fostering positive attitudes (Duarte & e Silva, 2020; Zdravkovic et al., 2010). Some participants viewed congruence as an alignment of core values between the cause and the brand identity: “The brand must align with the cause. They should share the same purpose, the same category; for example, Pampers, a brand for children, should support a cause related to babies” (Interviewee 1, Female, 28 years old). Others highlighted that when the brand and the cause share values and objectives, it enhances the credibility of the CRM action in consumers’ eyes. This perception of sincerity further motivates engagement: “A congruent campaign strengthens brand credibility and motivates consumers to participate” (Interviewee 4, Male, 28 years old). Thus, a well-aligned CRM initiative can achieve greater reach and ensure success.

Perception of Altruistic Motivations. The attribution of altruistic motivations has been defined as “the perceived sincerity or authenticity of corporate social responsibility actions” (Ndasi & Ackay, 2020). This notion appeared both in consumers’ comments and in interviewees’ statements, representing 11.70% of the analyzed responses. The results indicate that the attribution of altruistic motivations plays a central role in consumers’ perception of CRM campaigns. Many comments revealed that consumers value actions they perceive as sincere, authentic, and coherent: “I have always believed in your brand for its genuine commitment. Keep it up!” (Chamalo, Chocolatier).

Projective techniques also implicitly highlighted the centrality of these perceived altruistic motivations. When consumers were asked to complete sentences such as, “The reason I find this action sincere is...,” they spontaneously mentioned cues of sincerity, genuine intent to help, or absence of opportunism. For example, some wrote: “...because I feel they truly want to support the cause and not just do marketing” (sentence completion#2, Consumer 4), while others emphasized: “...because you can feel a real willingness to help, not just profit behind it” (sentence completion #2, Consumer 8).

The interviews further reinforced this observation. Interviewees reflected on the motives driving the company or brand to support a social cause, stating that they are willing to purchase

the product if they believe the company's intentions are altruistic. Some considered marketing motives, noting that the company may benefit from CRM practices to increase sales: "It's the use of marketing to retain customers and increase sales" (Interviewee 6, Female, 32 years old). Others highlighted the societal impact, acknowledging that CRM can have beneficial effects for the wider community: "I hope these companies continue to make a profit through these actions while developing social engagement" (Interviewee 8, Female, 45 years old). Some perceived a reciprocal benefit, describing a win-win relationship: "I encourage these actions and believe they have a mutual impact; it's a win-win relationship" (Interviewee 9, Male, 34 years old). Additionally, participants revealed that the perception of congruence between the cause and the brand enhances the perceived altruism of the company's actions: "The alignment between the cause and the brand is essential. It shows us that the company's motivations are not purely commercial but also directed toward the well-being of all stakeholders" (Interviewee 12, Male, 52 years old).

Emotional Connection with the Cause. This factor also appears to be highly significant, representing 15.20% of the analyzed responses. In the literature, this theme has been defined by e Silva et al. (2021) as "consumer identification with the cause," which can be described as "the degree of overlap between the consumer's self-concept and the perception of the cause."

Although this concept remains relatively unexplored, it has recently begun to attract increasing interest in research. Several consumer comments illustrate the importance of this emotional connection: "When a campaign aligns with what I feel, it really motivates me" (Tape à l'œil, Children's Ready-to-Wear), "It gives us so much hope for a better world" (T-shirt, Essed). These testimonies highlight that when consumers feel an emotional and personal affinity with the values and objectives of a specific cause, they are more likely to actively support it.

Projective techniques further revealed consumers' spontaneous feelings of personal affinity, emotional resonance, and self-enhancement. For example, one participant stated: "...closer to the brand, as if it truly understands what is important to me" (sentence completion #3, Consumer 7), while another noted: "...motivated to contribute because I feel personally involved" (sentence completion #3, Consumer 2).

The interviews also corroborate this observation. Brands and companies that successfully foster an emotional connection with the causes they support can benefit from stronger backing and long-term engagement from Tunisian consumers: "For me, it is very important to feel the action, that is, there must be a kind of shared values for me to be more involved and motivated" (Interviewee 3, Male, 36 years old), "I feel that my values and goals are being met; I feel that it is an opportunity to participate in this action" (Interviewee 4, Male, 28 years old).

Trust in the CRM Campaign. The thematic analysis clearly shows that trust in cause-related marketing campaigns plays a crucial role in consumer engagement (12.1%). Consumers express increased support when the sincerity and authenticity of the company's intentions are perceived as reliable: "Congratulations on this initiative; it is reassuring to see brands invest in such important causes" (Tape à l'œil, Children's Ready-to-Wear), "A great cause and a trustworthy brand, keep it up!" (Chamalo, Chocolaterie). Interviewees also confirmed the importance of this factor as a key lever to strengthen the relationship between perceived altruistic motives and consumer attitudes. Indeed, when consumers are assured that the

company's intentions are genuine, clear, and sincere, and not merely exploiting the cause for commercial purposes, this positively influences their attitudes and intentions.

This relationship is further reinforced when consumers already trust cause-marketing partnerships and believe that the company acts ethically and is genuinely committed to making a positive societal impact. As expressed by some interviewees: "[...] sometimes I don't see a clear link between Épi d'or and helping children without family support, but because I trust this association and the CRM campaign so much, I will have a positive attitude; thus, this trust can change my attitude" (Interviewee 11), "[...] what truly makes the difference for me is trust. It played a crucial role in enhancing and reinforcing my attitude toward CRM. When trust is established, it strengthens our perception of the company's actions as authentic and altruistic, leading to a positive attitude toward CRM" (Interviewee 5).

Projective techniques also highlighted the centrality of trust implicitly. When completing the sentence: "What reassures me about this campaign is..." (sentence completion #4), consumers spontaneously expressed elements reflecting their deeper expectations regarding transparency and perceived reliability. For example: "...the fact that the brand clearly shows where the aid goes gives me confidence" (Consumer 4); "...you really feel that nothing is hidden behind it, it's honest" (Consumer 9). These projective responses indicate that the sense of trust relies not only on rational judgments (transparency, coherence, clear explanation of the partnership) but also on implicit affective impressions, often not verbalized in direct interviews. Returning to the CRM literature, trust has always been studied as an antecedent of behavioral intentions (Hartmann et al., 2015; e Silva et al., 2019; Eker Iscioglu & Borak, 2020).

However, our results reveal the indispensable role of trust in strengthening the relationship between the company's altruistic motives and consumer behavioral intentions. This finding aligns with Li et al. (2021) and Wang et al. (2022), who examined the role of trust in green marketing, a field closely related to cause-related marketing. These studies showed that when consumers trust a company's environmental practices and believe in its genuine motivation for the environment, their intention to purchase green products is strengthened. Although cause-related marketing and green marketing focus on specific domains, they share common values such as social and environmental responsibility, awareness, consumer engagement, corporate reputation, and positive societal impact (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Consumer Behavioral Intentions. This theme highlighted several key behaviors expressed by consumers. Behavioral intentions can be defined as "the planning of future behavior" (Howard, 1994). Through comments, consumers expressed a strong willingness to purchase products associated with social causes, provided that the campaign is perceived as sincere and authentic: "Where can I buy them? I want to contribute to this initiative." (Farm Trust, online organic fruits and vegetables company), "When I see that a brand acts with altruistic goals, it pushes me to buy to support this kind of action." (Interviewee 7, Female, 25 years old). This purchase intention is also reinforced when the causes strongly resonate with consumers' personal values: "When I feel a connection with the cause, I don't think too much before buying. It becomes almost instinctive." (Interviewee 5, Female, 35 years old). Other interviewees stated that they would recommend the product or brand supporting a social cause: "Where can I buy them? I want to tell my friends." (Oppo Tunisia). This aligns with dimensions

presented in the literature, such as “willingness to recommend a brand, positive word-of-mouth, and repurchase intentions” (Oliver, 1997; Bigné et al., 2001).

Projective techniques further enriched this understanding. When completing the sentence: “If I were to buy a product related to this campaign, I would do so because...” (sentence completion #5), consumers spontaneously expressed the deeper motivations guiding their purchase intentions. For example: “...I feel that my contribution will really serve something concrete.” (Consumer 3); “...this cause touches me personally, so buying becomes a way to act.” (Consumer 6); “...I trust this brand; they wouldn’t do this just to look good.” (Consumer 10). These projective responses reveal that purchase intentions rely both on rational judgments (perceived effectiveness of the action, transparency, real benefit for the cause) and implicit affective dynamics (personal connection, sense of usefulness, pre-existing trust). Thus, the results demonstrate a strong convergence between high purchase intention, willingness to recommend the brand, and broader engagement when the CRM campaign is perceived as authentic, coherent, and aligned with the consumer’s values.

Ethical Perception and Purchase Barriers. This sixth theme encompasses ethical perceptions and obstacles that may hinder consumer engagement or purchase within cause-related marketing campaigns. The findings indicate that these aspects were highlighted across the three qualitative methods employed: netnography, semi-structured interviews, and projective techniques. Consumers sometimes express doubts about the sincerity or real intentions of brands. This scepticism appeared in social media comments, interviews, and through sentence completion in the projective techniques.

As one interviewee noted: “There are many brands that use causes just for publicity, and that makes me wary.” (Interviewee 9, Male, 34 years old). Projective techniques also revealed implicit scepticism when participants completed sentences such as: “What makes me doubt this campaign is...,” for example: “...I doubt that all the money really goes to the beneficiaries; I need to be sure.” (Consumer 9); “...sometimes I feel it’s just to improve the brand’s image and not for the cause.” (Consumer 12), showing that ethical perception is a key factor in deciding whether to support a cause. These results confirm the convergence observed between purchase intention and brand recommendation for campaigns perceived as authentic and coherent, and mistrust for those perceived as opportunistic and purely commercially motivated.

Additionally, some participants considered that engagement requires too much financial or time investment. This barrier was mentioned in netnography comments, interviews, and projective sentence completion: “I would participate if it didn’t require too much effort or money...” (Consumer 7). The results show that perception of high cost can reduce engagement, even when the cause is deemed legitimate and aligned with consumer values. Finally, the results revealed marketing saturation and CRM fatigue. Participants expressed a certain saturation toward overly frequent or promotional campaigns, leading to consumer fatigue: “We see too many campaigns like this; sometimes it gets boring and we stop reacting.” (Tape à l’œil, children’s apparel brand). Interviews and projective sentence completions confirmed that excessive solicitations can reduce CRM effectiveness, even when campaigns are perceived as ethical and sincere: “When there are too many messages about the same cause, I tend to distance myself.” (Sentence completion, Consumer 5).

These findings align with the literature: scepticism toward company motives is a known barrier in CRM initiatives (Nair et al., 2020), and campaign effectiveness may vary depending on cultural context and product type (Ferraris et al., 2019; Galán-Ladero et al., 2013). Moreover, structural elements of campaigns influence consumer perception, even if the direct link between purchase and campaign is sometimes tenuous (Eikenberry et al., 2013). Recent studies highlight that understanding CRM requires a multi-perspective approach integrating contextual sociocultural factors (Vrontis et al., 2020). Ultimately, when ethical principles are respected, CRM can be an effective marketing tool that promotes both company interests and social causes, reinforcing consumer trust and engagement.

By cross-analyzing the statements of consumers and experts, we were able to conclude that there is a relationship between cause-brand congruence and the attribution of altruistic motivations, which can influence consumer responses. This allowed us to observe that congruence represents an important predictive factor, enabling consumers to believe that a company engaging in CRM is primarily motivated by altruistic rather than self-interested reasons. Furthermore, the interviewees’ discourse highlighted the role of trust in strengthening the relationship between companies’ altruistic motivations and consumer behavioral intentions. These findings allow us to propose the following theoretical scheme:

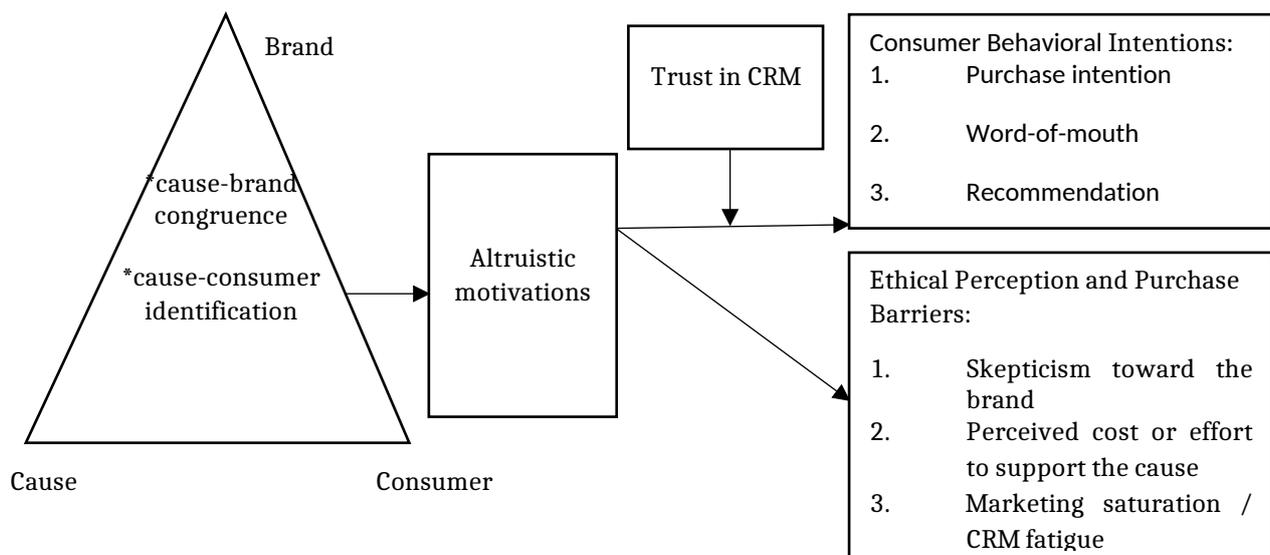


Figure 1: Proposal for a theoretical scheme

5.0 CONCLUSION

Building on the findings from the qualitative analysis, it is evident that the perceptions of consumers and experts converge to highlight key factors influencing behavioral intentions in CRM campaigns. The study identifies how cause-brand congruence, perceived altruistic motivations, emotional connections, trust, ethical perceptions, and barriers interact to shape consumer responses. These insights provide a comprehensive understanding of the cognitive, affective, and ethical determinants of engagement, forming the basis for the next sections,

where we discuss the theoretical and managerial contributions of this research, followed by its limitations and directions for future studies.

Theoretical Contributions. The results of our study deepen the understanding of the key factors driving consumer behavioral intentions in the context of CRM campaigns. By providing a detailed perspective on this context, this research goes beyond previous studies and enriches the CRM literature. Indeed, most research in this field has relied on quantitative methodologies, leaving the domain without a clear consensus (Bhatti et al., 2023; Gupta & Handa, 2024). In this regard, our exploratory qualitative approach, combining netnography, semi-structured interviews, and projective techniques, proves essential for expanding the understanding of the factors influencing consumer behavioral intentions. In particular, projective techniques revealed implicit perceptions, deep motivations, and emotions that are often unspoken, complementing and confirming the insights obtained through the other two methods. Furthermore, this study provides a solid foundation for future research on CRM in Tunisia, a field still neglected and underexplored in developing countries.

Managerial Contributions. The findings offer valuable insights for marketing managers aiming to develop effective CRM strategies. By identifying the key factors influencing consumer behavioral intentions, managers should clearly and consistently communicate the altruistic objectives of the company, whether through advertising messages, social media, or other communication channels. Moreover, the company must make its motivations salient in the consumer's mind by highlighting the congruence and coherence between the cause and the brand. Transparent communication about altruistic motives, detailing the company's engagement, emphasizing sincerity and authenticity, and showing alignment of social actions with corporate values is essential. To maximize engagement, it is crucial to select a cause that strongly resonates with the values and concerns of the target audience, fostering emotional and personal identification. The cause should be relevant both to the consumer and the company. By emphasizing the outcomes rather than just the means, companies can strengthen consumers' emotional attachment, improve purchase intention, word-of-mouth, and recommendations while reducing scepticism. Additionally, managers must anticipate and manage purchase barriers, such as perceived cost or effort to support the cause, campaign saturation, or doubts about the company's ethics and sincerity. Transparent communication about fund allocation, tangible results, and ethical coherence of the campaign helps overcome these barriers, build trust, and encourage engagement. Finally, companies should actively work on establishing trust in their CRM campaigns, ensuring transparency, consistency, and genuine contribution to the social cause. Providing concrete evidence, regularly communicating progress, and demonstrating authenticity of action helps create strong consumer relationships and promotes positive purchase intentions while genuinely contributing to social well-being.

Limitations and Future Research Directions. This study presents certain limitations, notably the inability to generalize the results. Due to its qualitative nature, the findings are subjective and not generalizable. Additionally, the selection of experts for the semi-structured interviews, limited to a single non-profit organization, constitutes another limitation. Future research could broaden the scope by including experts from other organizations and types of associations. Rather than focusing solely on consumer responses, future studies could also examine the perspectives of the other two stakeholders (cause and brand), exploring the views of marketing managers and non-profit organizations regarding their strategies, motivations, challenges, and

outcomes of CRM campaigns. This would enrich the understanding of CRM and its impacts at multiple levels. Such an approach could provide deeper insights into the key factors for successful cause-related marketing in Tunisia. However, these propositions remain hypothetical and require empirical research in the future to test and validate them.

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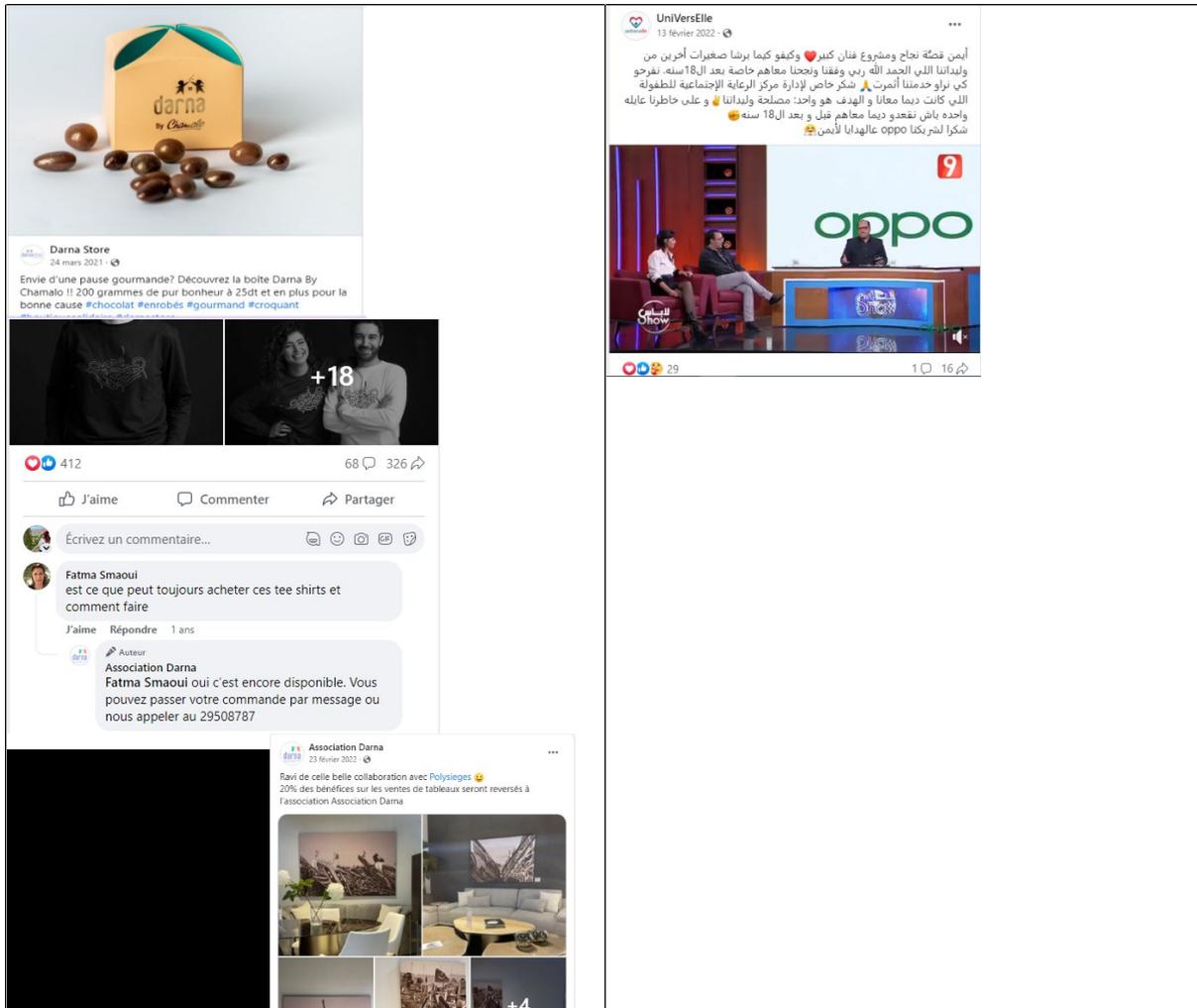
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Presentation of Virtual Communities

	Darna Association	Universelle Association
Activity	Tunisian non-profit association helping children without family support. "Support the Darna Association and improve the lives of our children"	UniVersElle is a Tunisian non-profit association. "SDF_Nos_Amis"
Address	Rue des Entrepreneurs - ZI Charguia 2, Ariana, Tunisia	Menzah 9 next to Centre Makni (L'Altro Pizzeria), Tunis, Tunisia
Collaboration with the following brands	Pilax Studio, Tape à l'œil, Plac'Art, UIB, via_venus_official, The Dreamer, eL Seed, The Inkman, Mustella Tunisia, Polysieges, FarmTrust, L'Epi d'or	Zgolli Freres, Yassir Express, Gourmandise, Eric Keiser, Monoprix, Oppo
Objective	Collaborate with brands to raise funds to help children without family support	Collaborate with brands to raise funds to help homeless people



Appendix 3. Incomplete sentences

1. I believe this brand supports this cause because...
2. The reason I feel this action is sincere is...
3. When I see this campaign, it makes me feel...
4. What reassures me about this campaign is...
5. If I were to buy a product linked to this campaign, I would do it because...
6. What makes me doubt or question this campaign is...
7. I feel overwhelmed or tired of campaigns like this when...

Appendix 4: Emergence of Factors Influencing Consumers’ Behavioral Intentions in the Context of CRM

Themes	Sub-themes	Data Collection Type			Identified in Literature	Emerging from Qualitative Study
		Netnography	Individual Interviews	Sentence Completion (Projective Technique)		

Perceived congruence between cause and brand	Alignment of cause and brand values	X	X	X	X	X
	Harmony with brand positioning		X			X
	Relevance of the association	X	X			X
Perception of altruistic motivations	Social engagement	X	X			X
	Interconnected relationship		X		X	X
	W i n - w i n relationship		X		X	X
	Marketing tool		X		X	X
	Authenticity	X	X	X		X
Emotional connection between cause and consumer	Affective connection	X	X	X	X	X
	Personal representation		X		X	X
	Social involvement		X	X		X
Trust in CRM action	Clarity of CRM objective	X	X			X
	Credibility of action		X	X		X
Behavioral intentions	Purchase intention	X	X		X	X
	Recommendation		X			X
	Word of mouth		X	X		X
Ethical perception and purchase barriers	Skepticism toward the brand		X	X		X
	Perceived cost or effort to support the cause	X		X		X
	Marketing saturation / CRM fatigue			X		