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CENTRE EMILE BERNHEIM
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NATACHA KAHAN

WHEN DOING GOOD FEELS WRONG: CAUSE-RELATED MARKETING CAN GENERATE MORAL TENSION

Cause-related marketing (CM) —defined as an offer from the firm to contribute a specific amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges — is generally assumed to make consumption easier to justify by linking a purchase to a prosocial outcome. We examine when CM instead creates moral tension rather than alleviating it. Drawing on the Three Moral Motives Framework (Goenka, Sen & Thomas, 2025), we argue that CM activates a moral-beneficence motive (buying to support the cause) that can come into direct conflict with a moral-duty motive to restrain unnecessary consumption. We propose that this tension depends jointly on consumers' anti-consumption orientation and the perceived necessity of the purchase. Through a first online experiment with UK participants, a moderated moderation analysis reveals a significant three-way interaction: CM increases moral tension among consumers with a strong anti-consumption orientation when purchase necessity is low, but not when the purchase is perceived as necessary. We discuss how this tension can shape consumer responses to CM campaigns and outline boundary conditions for future studies. The findings contribute to sustainable consumption and cause-related marketing research by showing that CM does not invariably resolve the moral discomfort associated with consumption; under certain conditions, it can activate a competing moral duty and intensify it instead.

ULB Solvay Brussels School Economics & Management

Fondat° Bernheim