

# Consumer Attitude Towards Cause-related Advertising: An Eye-tracking Experiment

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## Abstract

Application of eye-tracking methods to understand consumer behaviour and consumer preferences has gained research attention in the last few years. Marketers' basic intent is to tweak their advertising content or product design to meet consumer preferences. This paper examines changes in consumers' attention to the message, attention to the brand and purchase intention when looking at a cause related advert against a typical advert. The findings show that women pay more attention to cause-related adverts and their intention to buy the product is higher. Yet, there is no difference among age groups. The eye-tracking output shows that consumers pay attention to the text compared to any other object on an advert and do not spend time looking at vague claims.

**Keywords:** Advertising, Eye-tracking, Cause-related marketing, Consumer behaviour

## Introduction

There are hundreds of examples where companies promote their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives with innovative and catchy advertisements. Nowadays, CSR is not only about building stronger relationships with all stakeholders; in the end it defines the organization's survival through a challenging corporate strategy (Palazzi and Starcher 1997). Balancing the various interests of all stakeholders (consumers, communities, employees, suppliers, shareholders etc.) creates a social corporate image, which can be boosted with an appropriate advert. This social image shows that it is both the financial and social aspect that influences the company.

Academics define cause-related marketing (CRM) as the promotion of a cause that is not necessarily related to the product (Barone et al., 2007). A cause-related advertisement does not promote any of the products' characteristics (Brønn and Vrioni, 2001). It is purely focused on promoting the charity and linking the product to the advertised charitable trust. Brown and Dacin (1997) note that organisations choose to sponsor charities that are unrelated to the advertised product. The notion of cause-related marketing is about promoting a charity through increasing sales (Grewal et al., 2004). The rise of CRM strategies demonstrates the organisations' attempt to integrate CSR into all their corporate activities (Barone et al. 2007). Lastly, an advertisement with a somehow negative aura or feeling creates empathy, which increases the possibility of helping others (Bagozzi and Moore 1994; Vitaglione and Barnetti 2003).

A systematic review of CRM persuasion research by Pelozo and Shang (2011) has taken a broader approach by investigating CRM within a CSR context. There are numerous studies that have found a positive effect of CRM on the cause (Basil and Herr, 2003; Samu and Wymer, 2009, 2014; Lafferty and Edmondson, 2009). Similarly, there are studies about consumers' willingness to pay for brands that engage in CRM (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012; Strahilevitz, 1999), consumers' brand evaluations (Nan and Heo, 2007), brand choice (Winterich and Barone, 2011), and consumers' preferences for the promotion type (Chang, 2012a).

There is a number of studies around CRM persuasion that use scenario descriptions as experimental stimuli and laboratory experiments with advertising stimuli (Barone et al., 2007; Ellen et al., 2006; Kim and Johnson 2013; Vanhamme et al. 2012), but we found none that employs an eye-tracking methodology. There is, however, rich eye-tracking research in marketing in general. For example, Harwood and Jones (2013) used eye-tracking to investigate consumers' attention in retail environments. Li (2014) also used eye-tracking and Areas Of Interest (AOI) analysis in retail marketing when they tried to analyse brand motions (in Horsley et al., 2014). Piqueras-Fiszman et al. (2013) used an eye tracker to measure consumer reactions towards different jam jars. Georgakarakou et al. (2020) tracked the appeal of organic cheese and olive oil packages with the use of an eye tracker and found that people pay attention to the text and the eco-label more than any pictures or graphic designs. Wedel and Pieters (2000) used eye trackers to test what elements of successful magazine ads lead to memory retention for the advertised brands and found that people who paid attention to the picture were able to recall the brand at a later stage, juxtaposed those who paid attention to the text.

In summary, there is indeed literature around marketing and advertising analysis with the use of neuromarketing tools, such as eye trackers, however there is a gap around neuromarketing techniques and cause-related marketing initiatives.

## Methodology

Marketing researchers widely employ either quantitative (i.e. surveys), or qualitative (i.e. interviews) research methods to analyse consumer behaviour. Experimental research, more precisely lab experiments with neuromarketing tools, has only recently gained researchers' attention in the field of marketing. In this study a hybrid methodology has been employed to ensure the results' validity and reliability: a lab experiment with an eye tracker combined with two surveys. Eye-tracking is a human-computer interaction mechanism to analyse subjects' eye movement when looking at an advertisement (Duchowski 2007). Eye-tracking methodologies are favoured in cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary studies because they assemble exceptionally detailed results (Wade and Tatler, 2011) and help marketers understand the consumers' internal processes and then tailor the information to change some aspects of their message (Georgakarakou et al. 2020; Duchowski 2007).

Eye-tracking outputs consist of gaze plots, heat maps and fixation analyses. The latter enables scientists to examine the framework of attention and distraction in various visual examples (Yfantidou 2022; Horsley et al., 2014). On the other hand, gaze investigation serves as a new approach to understand eye movements. Although eye movement is both fast and dubious, eye tracker can generate reliable data through algorithms and significance analysis (Wade and Tatler, 2011). This study emphasizes on the Area Of Interest (AOI) analysis which is the most common investigation in social and marketing applications (Yfantidou, 2022; Horsley et al. 2014; Duchowski 2007). AOI analysis involves the use of eye-tracking software to discover fixation time, frequency and return among the diverse items or parts (i.e. pictures, text, brand logo, etc.). The study consists of two parts: firstly, the viewers' reaction to the cause-related advertisement against the typical advert is analysed using an eye tracker; second, viewers' response to two short surveys about purchase intention and attention to the ad is measured.

In accordance with bibliography, a cause-related ad was created by MMS Advertising Agency based in Thessaloniki, Greece. The advertised product is a low cost, unknown consumer hand sanitizer. Hygiene products appear in ethical advertising very often which lends realism to the research (Iyer and Banerjee 1993). Also, a hand sanitiser is a product that university students are familiar with and probable to purchase. The team decided not to choose an already popular hand sanitiser, rather design an imaginary brand and product to avoid subjects' involvement with the product, as it is believed that increased involvement increases the perceived price of the product (Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius, 1995). Regarding the product's name, since it is found that uncommon names are considered more exciting and atypical product names stimulate elaboration (Molaviya and Meyers-Levy 1998; Miller and Khan 2002), it was decided to select an unusual name. Hence, the hand sanitizer is named '*Aloe Vera Gel*' which is an ambiguous name that, nevertheless, illustrates the products' organic attributes. Regarding packaging and labelling, a typical pocket size transparent bottle hand sanitizer with a label quoting '*Fruit of the Earth*' is selected. There are also some more details on the labelling: '*100% PURE GEL*', '*No colour added*', '*Contains no alcohol*'.

### Apparatus and Experiment set-up

The lab experiment took place at the Digital Marketing Lab of the Department of Journalism and Media at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. A quiet soundproof room under standard illumination conditions was used for the experiments. The participants were asked to sit in a chair while there was a Tobii Pro screen-based eye tracker on the desk in front of them, which was used to monitor eye movements. The screen size is 22 inches with a 16:9 Aspect Ratio. Regarding data analysis, Tobii Pro Studio version 3.4.5 is used. Infrared (940nm) video-based technology is used by the system to monitor true gaze position on a display despite head motion. Eye positions are sampled at 120 Hz which means that the Tobii eye tracker tracks where the participants look 120 times per second, therefore providing detailed research into the timing and duration of fixation.

The lab experiment begins with providing information about the research in general, directions to guide the participants and pass up mistakes, and the reading of a statement about access to data, anonymity, and confidentiality as per Malhorta and Birks (2007). The respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time should they feel uncomfortable with the process.

### Stimuli

The cause-related advert that was designed for the purpose of this study is purely focused on promoting the charity and linking the product to the advertised charitable trust. Following the literature, the manipulated ad displays no product characteristics. The product is situated on the right-hand side while on the left-hand side there is a black girl smiling. The copy at the top is in Greek and translates to '*5% of sales will support UNICEF*' to make clear the connection between UNICEF and the advertised product (Figure 1). There is an additional text in capital letters and bigger font size which works as a headline, saying '*Grant a smile*'. UNICEF's logo is also presented next to the product. The picture is derived from an original ad of Pampers' in a collaboration with UNICEF.

Then, a neutral advertisement was also designed for this study, without promoting a cause or charity (Figure 2). It is a typical advert where the product's characteristics are promoted in a clear way. An image of natural environment is selected as it is believed that it leads to significant advertising effects (Hartmann and Ibanez, 2009). Then, on the right-hand side there is the Aloe Vera hand sanitizer and five different eco-labels that accompany the product. The first eco-label is related to hypoallergenic attributes; the second is about the parabens free certification; the third shows the pH balance certification; the fourth is a general organic products eco-label; and the last one is the European Union's formal eco-label (Figure 2). On the left-hand side there is a short text which highlights the product's characteristics and pro environmental facts. The text is in Greek and translates as '*100% natural product with Aloe Vera. Dermatologically tested with neutral pH. Kills 99.99% of bacteria. Softly flavoured without alcohol or parabens*' (Figure 2). The text is in line with the product's characteristics and the eco-labels that are promoted.



Figure 1: Cause-related manipulated ad



Figure 2: Promotion of the product's characteristics in ad manipulation

## Participants

A review of similar academic articles shows that an appropriate sample size is between fifteen to seventy people. For example, Georgakarakou et al. (2020) recruited sixty-nine people to examine the attitude towards different packages; Scott et al. (2019) found that sample size is ranging from twelve to eighty-four participants in eye-tracking marketing research; Li (2014) recruited nineteen women to perform a mobile eye-tracking experiment to test lighting within retail stores in the UK (Li in Horsley et al. 2014).

In this study fifty-six university students of all ages, from different academic fields and educational levels are recruited. Regarding the recruiting process, an advertisement was placed in various Facebook university pages with an Eventsbride link for the students to book their place by selecting their preferred date and time. Attendance was incentivised with a 30€ H&M voucher prize draw. Subjects were told in advance that the duration of experiment would be around ten minutes. The lab experiment took place within three weeks.

Participants were asked to view two different advertisements for the same product for a period of six seconds each. It is suggested consumers normally spend six seconds or less on viewing an advert (Boerman et al., 2012a). After viewing each of the two advertisements participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire at their own pace. The survey was automatically displayed on the screen after each advert. There was no time restriction in completing the two short surveys. The questionnaires were incorporated into the eye tracker so that participants did not switch screens. Eye-tracking data show that the entire task took approximately seven minutes for each participant.

## Questionnaire Design

To measure the participants' purchase intention, Moon et al.'s (2008) scale is used which includes the following four items: 1) I will purchase this product, 2) Given a choice, my friends will choose this product, 3) There is a strong likelihood that I will buy this product, 4) I would like to recommend this product to my friends. The items were measured on a seven-point frequency scale from 1-Do not agree at all to 7-Agree completely. To measure the subjects' attitude towards the ad we used Biel and Bridgewater's scale (1990) which consists of the following five items: 1) I find this ad convincing, 2) I find this ad intelligent, 3) I believe this ad shows the product's qualities, 4) This ad is pleasant to look at, 5) This ad is informative. A five-point Likert type scale was provided ranging from 1-Very likely to 5-Very unlikely. Literature supports that ad likeability and attention to the ad are two concepts that represent the same construct (DeCock and DePelsmacker, 2000; Zhao and Shen, 1995; Du Plessis and Foster, 2000).

## Hypotheses

Tajfel and Turner (1985) suggest that values and ethical stance is associated with gender. Carroll (1979) found that social responsibility and philanthropy are viewed more favourably by women than men. Robert's study (2003) provides evidence that firms which give money to charities make a greater impression on women compared to men. Smith et al. (2001) report that women become more sensitive in ethical behaviour because they often experience gender discrimination or injustice in their life. Consequently, we hypothesize that the cause-related advert will have a greater appeal on women compared to men. In the same vein, women will report higher purchase intention when looking at the cause-related ad compared to the typical advertisement.

*Hypothesis 1a (H1a): The cause-related advertisement will have a greater appeal on women.*

*Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Women will report higher purchase intention for the advertised product when looking at the cause-related advertisement.*

Regarding age, Knight (2006) found that young people are more interested in CSR, green lifestyle or working for a responsible company. Dobrowolski et al. (2022) report that younger people, and Generation Z in specific, value an ethical way of living and care about sustainable development more than the older generation. Therefore, we hypothesize that the cause-related advertisement will have a greater appeal on young people who will also report higher purchase intention.

*Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Young people will report higher attention towards the cause-related advertisement.*

*Hypothesis 2b (H2b): Young people will report higher purchase intention for the advertised product when looking at the cause-related advertisement.*

## Findings

Regarding demographic, 69% of respondents are women and 31% are men. 50% of the subjects are between 18-30 years old, 27.6% are from 31 to 45 years old and 22.4% are over 45 years of age.

To compare the scores of men and women on one variable (advert appeal) we performed an independent samples *t*-test (Foster, 1998). There is a statistically significant difference between the means of the two sets of scores, as  $p < .05$ . The mean on cause-related ad appeal for men ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = .855$ ) is significantly different than the mean for women ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = .737$ );  $t(56) = -4.176$ ,  $p = .001$ . Both means indicate a positive attitude towards the cause-related ad, but the mean for women is much higher, thus we accept hypothesis 1a.

Group Statistics for the Cause-related Ad					
	Gender	N	Mean	St. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Cause-related Ad (Ad2)	Men	18	3.17	.855	.201
	Women	40	4.08	.737	.117

Table 1: Group Statistics for the Cause-related Ad

Independent Samples <i>t</i> -test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Cause-related Ad (Ad2)	Equal variances assumed	1.103	.298	-4.176	56	.001	-.918	-.220	-1.359	-.478
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.946	28.873	.001	-.918	-.233	-1.394	-.442

Table 2: Independent Samples *t*-test for the Cause-related Ad by Gender

Hypothesis 1b predicts that women will report higher purchase intention for the advertised product when looking at the cause-related advertisement compared to the typical advert. Two independent samples *t*-tests are performed to compare the purchase intention of men and women for the two advertisements. The results indicate that purchase intention is higher for women when being exposed to the cause-related advert ( $M = 2.68$ ,  $SD = .605$ ),  $t(56) = 3.551$ ,  $p = .001$ , compared to the other ad ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.122$ ) (Table 3);  $t(56) = 2.597$ ,  $p = .012$ . Consequently, H1b is accepted.

Descriptive Statistics				
	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Typical advert (Ad1)	Men	4.33	1.383	18
	Women	3.44	1.122	40
Cause-related advert (Ad2)	Men	3.74	1.677	18
	Women	2.68	.605	40

Table 7: T-test for Purchase Intention by Gender

Independent Samples *t*-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Typical advert (Ad1)	Equal variances assumed	1.516	.223	2.597	56	.012	.890	.343	.2013	1.576
	Equal variances not assumed			2.398	27.507	.024	.890	.371	.129	1.650
Cause-related Advert (Ad2)	Equal variances assumed	25.422	.001	3.551	56	.001	1.061	.299	.462	1.660
	Equal variances not assumed			2.609	19.021	.017	1.061	.407	.210	1.912

Table 8: Independent Samples *t*-test for Purchase Intention by Gender

A one-way between groups ANOVA is used to test both H2a and H2b. There is no evidence to support that younger people report higher attention towards the cause-related advertisement, as  $p > .05$ . Equally, there is no statistical significance to support that younger people are keener towards buying the product when looking at the cause-related advert, as  $p > .$  Therefore, both H2a and H2b are rejected.

#### Eye-tracking results

AOIs were set before the experiment. Each of the objects is set as a different AOI (one sentence is set as AOI1, the product is set as AOI2, a picture is set as AOI3, etc.). There are twenty-two words and seven objects in the typical advert; twelve words and three objects in the cause-related advert.

Two different analyses are performed relative to the amount of time participants looked at each AOI. Crosstabs of what area participants looked at first are provided to understand what was the very first thing that caught the subjects' attention. Then, the amount of time that is devoted to each region is computed and then the mean score for the fixation duration at each AOI is calculated. The data from these two measures provide reasonably consistent results. In addition to the amount of time spent in an AOI, the number of fixations in a region is analysed.

#### First fixation

The first advertisement communicates the product's characteristics with the use of various eco-labels. The data demonstrate that a large percentage of the participants (72.4%) first looked at the text (Figure 3). Whereas, for the cause-related advert, most participants (94.8%) first looked at the girl's face (Figure 4).



Figure 3: First point of fixation for Ad 1



Figure 4: First point of fixation for Ad 2

#### Fixation duration

The second part of the eye-tracking data analysis is related to the fixation duration (in seconds) at each AOI of each ad. Similar to previous results, participants' mean fixation duration is higher for the text area (Figure 5) in the typical ad (4.18 sec), whereas the remaining three areas report numbers much less than a second each. Interestingly, the text area is the only one that was viewed by all participants despite the landscape picture covering 3/4s of the whole ad. The heatmap indicates that viewers paid no attention to the eco-labels as there is no activity at that area. Regarding the cause-related

advert, the data illustrates that participants' higher mean fixation duration is on the text (1.34 sec) and the girl's face (1.30 sec) (Figure 6), but both numbers are very low. Unexpectedly, it is only the headline that was viewed by all participants.



Figure 5: Mean fixation duration for Ad 1 (in sec)



Figure 6: Mean fixation duration for Ad 2 (in sec)

## Conclusions

Investigating attention to the ad and purchase intention is a continuing concern within the advertising literature. Evidence suggests that purchase intention is influenced by consumers' attention to specific advertising appeals (Biel and Bridgwater 1990).

The findings regarding attention towards the advert (H1a) reflect those of Smith et al. (2001) who also found that there is indeed gender difference on CSR and responsible lifestyle. In the same vein, this study has found that women report higher purchase intention for the advertised product when looking at the cause-related ad compared to the typical advertisements (H1b). This result might be explained by Roberts' (2003) previous findings that women are more likely to donate to charities compared to men. Even though a donation and a purchase are different, there is, however, the similarity of spending money on a cause.

On the other hand, we found no evidence that young people report higher attention towards the cause-related ad and higher purchase intention and higher purchase intention when looking at it. A possible explanation for this probably comes from past research by Roberts (2003) and Smith et al. (2001) who both found that parents, especially mothers, are more sensitive towards charities' advertising appeals of poor children, and it is reasonable to presume that young people neither are parents nor is there a plan to become parents soon, consequently they do not struggle with those sorts of concerns yet. Marketers understand that an advert must appeal to the intended consumer for that consumer to get interested in the advertised product, view that product in a positive manner, and, eventually, increase the consumer desire to buy that product (Royne et al. 2012). Probably, the cause-related advert did not relate to the younger audience of our sample.

The findings of this study are of interest to advertising agencies and marketing practitioners in terms of framing the advertising message and imagery according to their target audience. Also, the eye tracking data provide some great practical suggestions for advertisers: firstly, viewers pay attention to the text, so copy should be well prepared and tested; secondly, it looks like central items are more appealing to viewers, so advertisers need to place their strongest selling point close to the centre of the ad; thirdly, icons should be explained with text to work, otherwise they puzzle the viewers. On a side note, it is obvious that viewers don't pay attention to vague claims (i.e. the eco-labels) as they see no interest in looking at areas that are difficult to understand.

## Limitations and future research

Although the findings shed some light into cause-related advertising, there are some limitations. For example, the laboratory setting, the forced exposure to the ad, and the immediate response measures limit the generalizability of this study. Another limitation is the amount of time exposed to the ads (six seconds for each advert) which affects the average fixations duration on the advertisements. Previous studies have found that the size of the advertisement influences participants' looking times (Rayner et al., 2001). Another concern is the study's sample synthesis. University students are recruited given that they have a flexible schedule, availability during the day and they are easy to lure into participation. However, students are a very specific group of people, with a particular socioeconomic background and mainly of young age. Therefore, they tend to be a non-representative sample, so the findings cannot be generalised. Future research should conduct experiments with a larger and more diverse sample, for example a group of people that is representative of the overall population. This study is limited by the lack of information on product price. Purchase intention results might differ when product price is added to the advertisement. A possible caveat is the fictitious nature of the product. Although this method is deliberately used in order to avoid product awareness, it might be the case that brand or product familiarity may affect participant perceptions. Therefore, future research could use an eye-tracking technique to test a real-life product from a well-known brand.

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