

The Pandemic's Impact on Cause-Related Marketing Purchases

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ABSTRACT

Cause-related marketing (CRM) is a frequently employed strategy for companies to market products and establish brands. Many supporters of CRM view the connection of companies to causes as not only acceptable, but quite effective, and perhaps even essential for business. Because of technology, today's consumers are more informed and aware of societal issues. This, accompanied by younger generations' changing views about societal issues, presents opportunities to connect with these consumers.

This article examines the influence and impact of cause marketing during the Covid-19 Pandemic. It compares data collected from a pilot study pre-pandemic to data collected during the pandemic. Both studies investigated the impact of cause marketing on college students' purchases. Most of these consumers fall into Millennial and/or Gen. Z generations. Because their values and purchasing power are constantly evolving, understanding what helps them reach a purchase decision to support a cause is important to companies wanting to use cause-marketing and can be critical to the company and cause's collaboration success. The questions posed are: What impacts their CRM purchase decisions? Have college students' purchase behavior toward CRM products changed from the pandemic?

INTRODUCTION

Cause-related marketing (CRM) allows businesses and charities or causes to form a partnership with each other for mutual benefit (Chaabane & Parguel, 2016). Corporations and nonprofit organizations find a mutual interest and evolve the partnership to create a win-win situation.

CRM has seen both expansion and improved effectiveness over time. Significant amounts of marketing budgets are now spent to support social issues, typically charities, rather than putting those funds into traditional advertising methods such as television, radio, and print advertising. There are many different versions of cause-related marketing, with some of the most popular being product sales plus purchase, the licensing of a nonprofit's logo, co-branded events and programs, and social or public service marketing programs (Chaabane & Parguel, 2016).

This shift from traditional media has been accompanied by the improved accessibility to and use of the Internet. Consumers' increasing uses of technology and social media have created opportunities for companies and causes, providing changeable, fluid, and trackable benefits, which traditional media did not. CRM has proved to reach very broad ranges of consumers, but with the ability to have a narrowly defined platform when necessary (Maceli, Horner, Fogliasso, & Zafuta, 2020).

This study explores what factors may impact the purchase of cause-related products by young consumers. In particular, it compares college students' opinions and behaviors regarding cause-related purchases pre-pandemic to pandemic. This target market was chosen as it is comprised mostly of Millennials and Generation Z's. (Please note: different sources use different dates to segment generations.) The importance of these generations' values and purchasing power is currently evolving and of significance to any company or cause hoping to connect with them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Like many other marketing strategies, some of cause-related marketing's purposes are to attain and retain customers and, ultimately, earn more profit. This is accomplished by understanding what customers value. Cause-related marketing strategies are often based on feelings of obligation to help other people less fortunate. Some consumers feel less price sensitive when they are driven to make a purchase because of moral implications. Also, they are often inclined to donate their time if they feel passionate about a cause.

Albert (2014) stated that if a cause pulls at the heartstrings of a person, it comes directly from what they value most. "Statistics have shown that if companies properly explain how the sale of their good would be positively contributing back to the community, then customers' willingness to pay would increase generations of consumers," (p.2).

Barbaro (2016) found that consumer buying behavior is significantly influenced by a company's alignment to causes, with 75% of women and 55% of men being more inclined to

purchase brands that support a charity. Additionally, younger consumers have greater expectations of companies now than previous generations. Young consumers are prone to follow companies and brands, and often drive what information they receive, which impacts the benefit of having a relationship with a company. Young consumers have grown up with purchasing power other generations did not.

Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, many retailers had to adjust their marketing and cause-marketing efforts. During this time of uncertainty and opportunity, many companies utilized traditional media, such as television to promote their messages. Consumers were shown strong images and messages. However, even more began reaching out to consumers digitally and in customized communication, as consumers became easier to reach from a digital standpoint. Consumers were being exposed to considerably more messages than ever before.

“As of 2020, more than 4.5 billion people are already using the Internet and, from that, 3.8 billion people are using some form of social media according to the research in the Digital 2020 (datareportal.com, 2020) reports, which also found that almost 60% of the Earth's population is online and by the middle of the year more than half of its population will be using social media in some form (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, TikTok, etc.).”

Millennials and Gen Zs—Their Values and Behaviors

According to Weber (2017), “Millennials are defined as individuals born between 1980 and 2000,” (p. 517). There are currently about 80 million people falling into this category.

Millennials were the first generation to grow up using the Internet. As such, they have had more access to information than previous generations throughout their lives. Millennials are also more ethnically diverse than previous generations, and, subsequently, more ethnically tolerant. Overall, their behavior is more impulsive than past generations, and they are focused on experiences and living in the moment. They are waiting to get married and have children, are willing to spend a significant amount of their disposable income on experiences, and are not as concerned as previous generations about owning a home and saving for retirement (Solomon, Marshall, Stuart, 2018).

According to Hwang and Griffiths (2017), “Millennials tend to be empathetic toward social and communal causes and pragmatic about the environmental impact of their consumption choices” (p. 132). Because Millennials comprise about 30% of the population and have values and behaviors different than previous generations, it is critical to understand what motivates them to make a purchase. This “free-spending” group is highly attractive (Solomon, et al.). They currently have more purchasing power than Baby Boomers; and, they are coming into their prime spending years (Buxton, 2017). Millennials tend to be less inhibited and openly discuss personal matters; they want to express themselves, and even expect to be listened to (Espinoza, 2012). They are focused on the present, often more than the future.

Millennials see themselves as active participants, though not necessarily do not as fans, which differentiates them from their parents (Acton, 2017). “They are players and see themselves as owners of the things they choose to engage with” (Acton). As such, not only do they seek and expect information, but they also feel empowered to become engaged, make

decisions, and, ultimately, have an impact.

Their behaviors regarding shopping are different than past generations as well. Roughly 58% of Millennials say they “love to shop” compared to 40% of adults overall; they spend 8% more on apparel than those aged 35-44 and Millennial women are 83% more likely to enjoy clothes shopping than other groups (Buxton, 2017). Especially relevant to CRM, Millennials understand marketing. According to Acton (2017), “They grew up with it. They’re savvy, smart and know a lot of the old marketing tricks. And they don’t like it. They’re attuned to it and weary of it. You must respect their intelligence.”

Generation Z

Most sources describe Gen Zs as being born between 1995 and 2009. “Generation Z members have grown up with instant global connectivity, facilitated by smartphones, tablets, wearable devices, social media platforms and so forth. [Technology] is an integral part of their lives along with Internet connectivity even more so than the older Gen Y individuals have. Secondly, Gen Z members are content creators” (Vitelar, 2017).

Social media immersion is a defining aspect of this generation. “Gen Zs spend nearly nine hours a day listening to media, looking at a screen or on a device. Including time spent multitasking; they are exposed to over 13 hours of media a day on average” (IPSOS MORI, 2018, p.78). However, this generation has faced negative impacts from media saturation as well. This includes shorter attention spans, a constant need for entertainment, anxiety, peer pressure, and lower self-esteem” (Vitelar, 2017). Nevertheless, they are highly creative, constantly adaptive, and have a highly marketable digital mindset (Accenture, 2017).

According to a McKinsey & Company report, there are several fundamental Gen Z behaviors which are based on the generation’s continuous search for the truth (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). These behaviors include highly valued individual expression, inclusivity and self-centeredness. And, their decision-making process is highly analytical and pragmatic. “This means that the younger people place a greater emphasis on their role in the world as part of a larger ecosystem and their responsibility to help improve it, as they mobilize themselves for a variety of causes” (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

It is natural for these digital natives to be able to contact anyone at any time and that most of their friends are online. They share their social life constantly with the public and personal freedom is very important to them. They are not afraid of the transition from “traditional” to “digital” either because they were born into it. They are the world’s first global generation (Karacsony, 2019). This means that members of this generation, although living in different parts of the world as a result of globalization, are affected by the same events and trends. They watch the same movies, listen to the same music, and, perhaps most importantly, they connect with each other through the Internet and social networking sites (McCrinkle and Wolfinger, 2010). Also, they have similar online purchase behaviors (Nikodemska-Wolowik et al., 2019; Victor et al., 2019).

The digital world and social media are often a way of life for these young consumers. As such, Millennials and Gen Zs are often setting the tone and pace of increasing digital market trends, which represents many opportunities. As of 2020, over 60% of the world's population was using social media, though that percentage is higher in younger age groups (datareportal.com, 2020). And as they become a larger part of the workforce, their impact is evident on many digital platforms, such as LinkedIn. In 2020, LinkedIn became a leader in gaining traction and viewing. There was a 55% increase in conversations, 60% increase in content creation, and a 437% increase in livestream videos. During this time, consumers increased their online video consumption by 90% and the average person was spending about 100 minutes a day watching videos. (*5 Huge Digital Marketing Trends to Watch in 2022*, January 19, 2022).

The Impact of Cause-Related Marketing on Branding

CRM creates an opportunity for companies to develop their brand by connecting with customers and causes because it can tap into consumers' morals and their desire to do good. It can promote ethical values and encourage social responsibility (Albert, 2014). Consumers today want to be well-informed and are increasingly getting their news from social media (Maceli & Wachter, 2016). Because consumers expect companies to be good citizens, CRM and social media are viable platforms to create credibility as a caring, responsible, organization. The social responsibility activity of cause-related marketing attracts significant attention, as well as billions of dollars each year, because of the types of causes and the positive effect it has on consumers.

It makes sense that the pandemic could have varying impacts on consumers from different groups—including economic, age, geographic, etc. It is critical for companies to understand what their consumers value, how they live, and how/why they make decisions, if they are going to connect with them. According to Widiyari (2023), consumerism and materialism are somewhat dictated but also comforted by one's existing economic system. As such, branding needs can change due to the characteristics of these groups.

Young consumers expect more from companies and causes—mainly in the scope of causes and the subsequent transparency of impact. It is critical that the company's internal values be consistent with the supported cause to have a positive impact on the brand and cause. Motives must appear genuine with a credible link to the company's values if they are to resonate with consumers. According to Langen, Grebitus, and Hartmann (2010):

Credibility is vital for the success of a CRM campaign. If consumers mistrust the altruistic motives of the firm such a campaign can have a negative influence on the firm's and brand's reputation and might lead to a decline in sales. Especially, if the gap between the sum consumers expect to be contributed and the amount actually spent by the companies is too large this could lead to mistrust among consumers once they become aware of this. In the long run, this might decrease their willingness to pay for those products in general. Also, firms' reputation could be harmed (p. 367).

THE STUDY

This study includes results from a pilot study and a follow-up study. The first sample was collected and analyzed in 2019, pre-pandemic. The second sample was collected in 2020-2021, during the pandemic, and subsequently analyzed.

In 2019, focus groups and classroom discussions were conducted among college students to better understand how they felt about cause marketing. Then, a search for current research papers regarding consumer behavior and social cause marketing was done. The results were combined to come up with a survey to be administered to college students. The survey included close-ended questions regarding their purchase behaviors and open-ended questions regarding what causes they would support.

The goal of the pilot study was to determine if and how cause-related marketing impacted college students' purchases. The hypotheses to be explored in the study were:

H1: College students are aware of products associated with social causes.

H2: Social cause products can impact college students' purchase behavior, and they are willing to make purchases to support causes.

H3: College students' purchases of social cause products can impact brand loyalty.

The pre-pandemic sample included 154 students from a Mid-Western university with an annual enrollment of approximately 7,000. Surveys were administered in upper-level classes in the College of Business. The sample included 87 males (56.2%) and 67 females (43.8%).

Students were asked about their feelings and behaviors regarding cause-related products. A five-point Likert scale was used for the following responses: *1: Never, 2: Not very often, 3: Sometimes, 4: Very often, and 5: Always*. Analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. Correlations were run on the data to determine the strength and direction of relationship variables had on purchasing habits of the college students. The relationships of making a purchase, why they made a purchase, and how they felt about the purchase were explored. They were also asked to list companies or causes they would be likely to support and why.

Frequency analyses indicated that 58.2% of the students purchase cause-related products "Sometimes." Another 31% indicated that they would purchase cause-related products "Not very often." Eight students indicated that they purchase the products "Very often" or "Always," while only seven indicated "Never."

The relationship of "I purchase products that are related to some selected social cause" to the following variables was investigated using a Pearson correlation coefficient:

- *I feel happy when I buy a social cause-related product.*
- *I am impulsive sometimes in buying social cause-related products.*
- *Marketing of a product with a social cause helps to remember that product*
- *It is difficult for another brand to replace a social cause related product/brand.*

- *The brands I purchase reflect my personality.*
- *With different brands of the same price and quality, it is more likely that I will choose the brand that I know is related to a social cause.*
- *I have strong emotions for the brand if it is related to a social cause.*
- *I am very loyal to a brand through good or bad times.*

Statistically significant correlations existed between *I buy cause-related products* and all of the variables except “*The brands I purchase reflect my personality.*” (See Table 1. Pearson Product- Moment Correlations for Purchasing Cause-Related Products.) This particular result is different than expected, as this age group does seem concerned with others’ perception of them. The significant correlations, however, indicated rejection of the null hypotheses. College students are aware of products associated with social causes. And, they are willing to make purchases to support social causes.

These purchases make them happy and help them develop a relationship with a brand. Results indicated that *Happiness* is found “*Very Often*” or “*Sometimes*” by most of the sample. Their feelings impact their behaviors. Students also indicated loyalty to brands, even in good times and bad. It is difficult to get them to replace the brand with another once this relationship is formed, which creates an opportunity for many companies and brands. Connect with them, on their terms, with a cause they care about, and they are likely to loyally support the cause.

The Follow-Up Study

The survey was then given to students during the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020-2021. The sample included 216 students in upper-level classes in the same College of Business, with 117 males (54.2%) and 99 females (43.8%). The 2019 sample was compared to the 2021/2022 sample on different measures—means analyses and correlations. Several additional questions were added as well:

- *I am more aware of brands that donate to causes now than before the pandemic.*
- *I am more particular about what causes I support now.*
- *I am too worried about money to contribute to causes right now.*

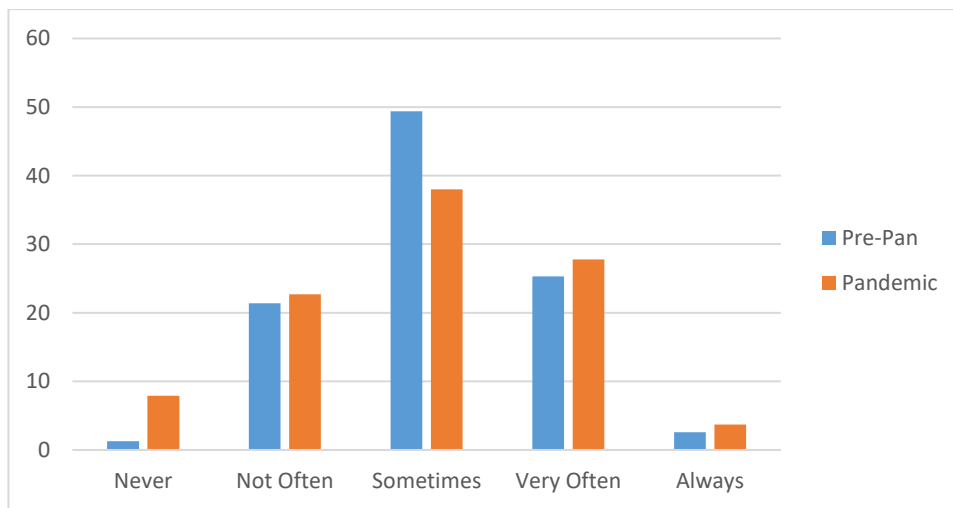
It was expected that students would become more aware of social causes during the pandemic and, subsequently, want to support more causes. However, it was expected that concerns over money might impact what causes could currently be supported. Also, students were seeing more cause-related messages than ever before, which may desensitize them to the information.

The two groups were compared on all previous variables using an Independent Samples Test analysis. Of the nine variables tested in both studies, only two variables showed significant differences. Frequencies were then analyzed on these variables. Notably, the difference of the variables was in a negative direction which indicated a decline from 2019 to 2020-2021:

- *I purchase products that are related to some selected social cause: $t(368)=2.015, p<.05$*
- *I am impulsive when I purchase cause-related product: $t(368)=2.376, p<.05$.*

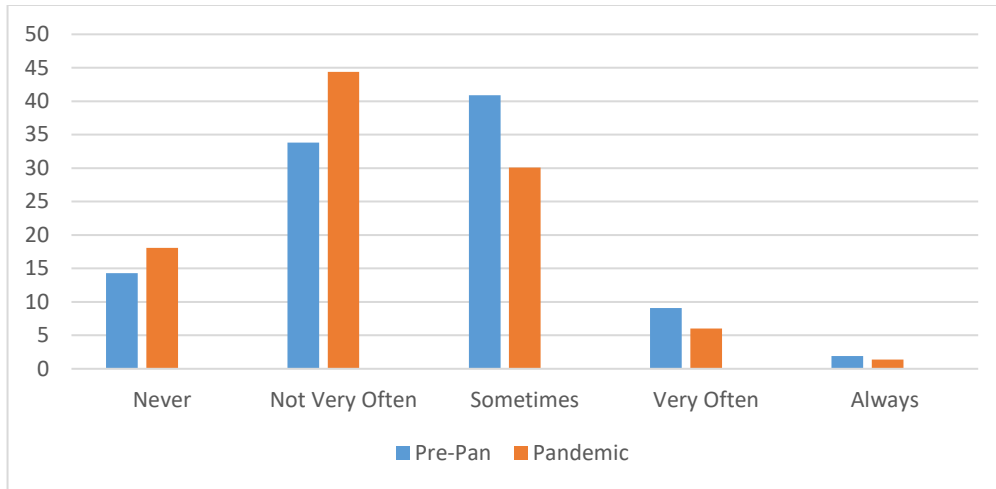
Regarding “How Often I Purchase Cause-Related Products”, there was a significant shift toward less giving. (See Figure 1.) These results indicate that, while empathetic, college students were less likely during the pandemic to give to causes than in the past. This finding is not surprising considering the severity of the pandemic. In particular, the category of “Sometimes” decreased significantly, which seemed to have the greatest impact. The categories of “Very Often” and “Always” increased slightly during the pandemic, though not enough to mitigate the group of “Sometimes”. This is in addition to the increased responses of “Never” and “Not Often” during the pandemic.

Figure 1
How Often I Purchase Cause-Related Products



The group surveyed during the pandemic were also less likely to make impulsive purchases regarding cause-related purchases. (See Figure 2.) The responses of “Never” and “Not Very Often” increased significantly. This would seem to indicate that not only were they less willing/able to give to causes while enduring the pandemic, but also were less impulsive which would possibly indicate a concern for themselves and their future due to the uncertain environment. Given the severity of the pandemic, this potential decrease of impulsive cause-related purchases is not surprising.

Figure 2
Frequencies of Impulsive Purchases for Cause-Related Products



In the correlation analyses, results were similar, though not exact. (See Table 1.) In both analyses, all variables were significantly correlated to the purchase of cause-related products except for “*The brands I purchase reflect my personality.*” This lack of purchase significance to personality result is different than expected due to the age group. However, in the second sample, there was a significant correlation with the variable: “*With different brands of the same price and quality, it is more likely that I will choose the brand that I know is related to social cause.*” This would confirm that they do care about causes and would support them if they liked the product or there was not a price difference.

Table 1
Pearson Product-Moment Correlations for Purchasing Social Cause Products Pre-Pandemic and during the Pandemic

	Strength of Relationship Pre-Pandemic	Significance Pre-Pandemic	Strength of Relationship During Pandemic	Significance During Pandemic	Significance Difference between studies
I feel happy when I buy a social cause-related product.	.494	.000 **	.399	.000**	.045*
I am impulsive sometimes when buying social cause-related products.	.486	.000**	.519	.000**	.018*
Marketing of a product with a social cause helps to remember that product	.432	.000**	.457	.000**	.270
I have strong emotions for the brand if it is related to a social cause.	.341	.000**	.333	.000**	.460
It is very difficult for another brand to replace a social cause-related product/brand.	.277	.001**	.232	.001**	.225
I am very loyal to a brand through good times and bad.	.272	.001**	.152	.026*	.845
I will not switch to another brand if the brand I use supports a nonprofit organization.	.205	.013*	.271	.000**	.166

With different brands of the same price and quality, it is more likely that I will choose the brand that I know is related to social cause.	.204	.013*	.277	.000**	.992
The brands I purchase reflect my personality.	.123	.138	.477	.052	.640

**p<.01 (2-tailed) *p<.05 (2-tailed)

Once again, the second study indicated rejection of the null hypotheses. Students continued to be aware of brands associated with social causes. Causes did impact their purchasing behavior, though to a lesser extent and they were less impulsive in their purchases. In both samples, the strongest correlations existed in reference to cause-related purchases bringing happiness, being impulsive purchases, and causes helping to remember a product.

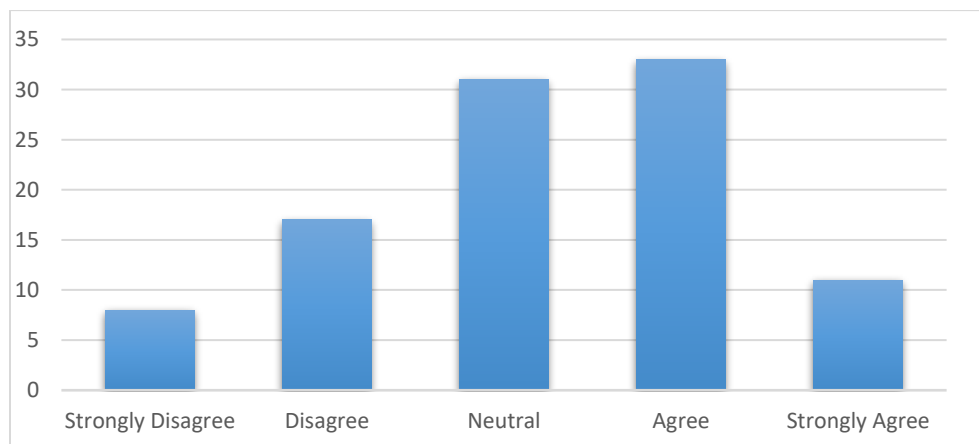
The results of the additional questions to the survey confirmed that students are now more aware of brands that donate to causes (Figure. 3), are more particular about the causes they give to (Figure. 4), and have some concerns regarding money (Figure. 5).

Students being more aware of brands represents opportunities for companies, even if their potential target market may be more selective in choosing what to support. It indicates that students either felt a connection to the cause since they remembered it, or were exposed to it enough times that it made an impact. “On average, it takes five to seven impressions for someone to remember your brand, likely more with the amount of additional digital content people have consumed in 2020 and 2021 during Covid. Realistically, it’s highly unlikely a consumer will buy from you after the first interaction with your brand. Activity in this stage of the marketing funnel should aim to build brand impressions amongst people in your target audience to reach seven (or more) impressions” (Pier Marketing, 2021).



Figure 3

I Am More Aware of Brands That Donate



By students becoming aware of causes during the pandemic, it is possible/probable that they will support these causes in the future. In the open-ended questions of the survey, many students mentioned supporting causes that were important to them. They were often causes that

had a personal connection to them and/or their family and friends. The students indicated that their perception of a brand could become more positive due to its cause-related marketing. Their responses also confirmed literature review findings that value of the brand connects to the value of the cause. Many indicated having brand loyalty to some brands because of the causes. While more students indicated concerns regarding having the money to give than those who did not, some students expressed an interest in becoming involved in causes that matter to them, not just donating money.

Figure 4
I Am More Particular About the Causes I Give To

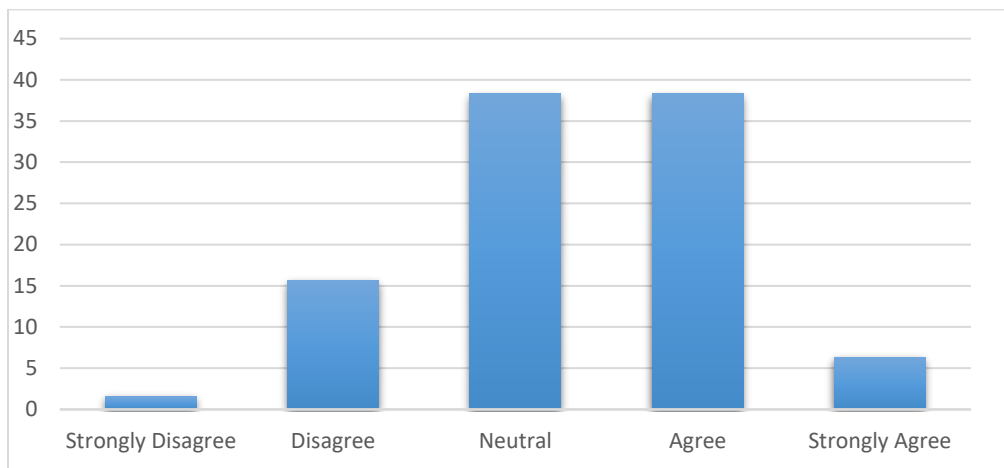
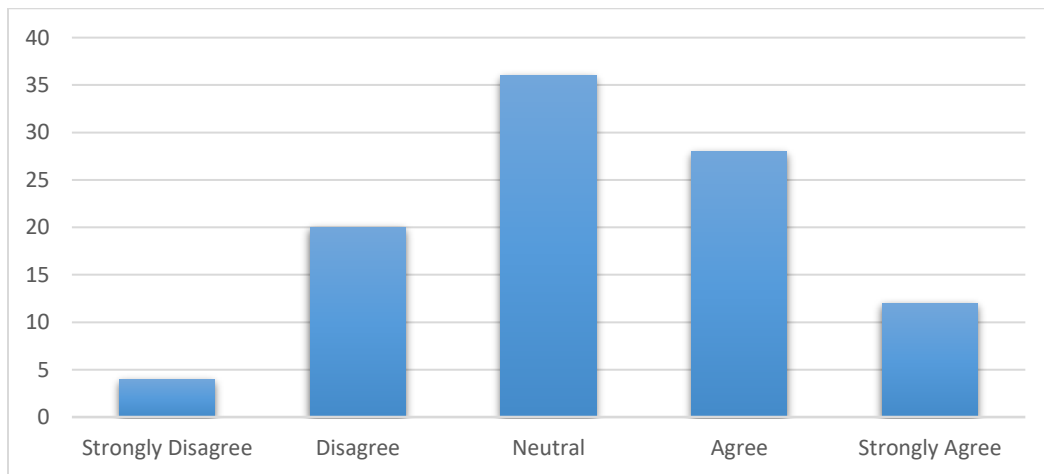


Figure 5
I Am Too Worried About Money to Give



LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The potential of cause-related marketing, especially to younger generations, is still waiting for marketers to explore. They are willing to engage with companies and willing to engage in causes. Companies need to rethink their strategies for these consumers. They can no longer reach customers through just the use of advertising, coupons, mass emails, and punch cards. They must engage, interact, and customize some aspect of their relationship with them. The purchasing power of young generations cannot be ignored. The values, behaviors, and social media use of these consumers are already impacting the marketplace. By understanding and aligning what products they want along with what causes they value, companies could gain more customer loyalty from this demographic. But, these efforts must be genuine for the company and the cause. Companies and causes should embrace technology when possible, as it gives them an opportunity to identify these consumers and tailor messages to them. Millennials and Gen Zs care about their public personas and social responsibility, which makes them good candidates to support causes.

One limitation to this study was that not all of the sample currently gave to causes. Though many expressed an interest to support causes in the future, this lack of experience could impact how they responded to the questions. Another limitation to this study was the somewhat narrow age range of the sample. Because Millennials span different decades, it is challenging to make implications about the entire generation. Society's technology and values have changed rapidly throughout their lives, perhaps even more so than with previous generations. It is difficult to know how this generation may continue to differ from previous as they get older and their values and lifestyles possibly change. Lastly, a limitation was the use of a convenience sample. The sample was pre-dominantly from the Mid-West and may have different values than other geographical regions.

In conclusion, cause-related marketing should be a strategic goal with careful planning and execution. Young consumers today are savvy and are best reached through authentic, consistent measures by the company and the cause. The company's credibility, the cause and the means of communicating the cause all matter.

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