Praise For Blame: Consumer Inferences Following Cause Marketing

Brandon Reich, University of Oregon, USA
Troy Campbell, University of Oregon, USA
Robert Madrigal, California State University at Chico, USA

Consumers may infer implicit blame in response to cause-related marketing (CRM). The extent to which these inferences of implicit blame fit consumers’ own blame for the issue determine praise for the company. A pilot study and three follow-up studies show these effects across two CRM contexts.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1023827/volumes/v45/NA-45

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Praise for Blame: Consumer Inferences following Cause Marketing
Brandon Reich, University of Oregon, USA
Troy Campbell, University of Oregon, USA
Robert Madrigal, California State University at Chico, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Companies often engage in cause marketing (CM), defined here as any corporate communication of a company’s prosocial activities. A substantial literature is dedicated to exploring how CM produces positive consumer outcomes (see Pelzoa and Shang 2011), with recent focus on consumers’ inferences of the company’s motives (Reich and Armstrong Soule 2016; Sen, Du, and Bhattacharya 2016). We diverge from extant research in this regard, examining consumer inferences around blame. We propose and show that CM may be implicitly communicating blame for several blame targets around the issue. Crucially, the extent to which consumers perceive this blame may benefit or harm to the company depending on how well it fits with consumers’ own blame for the same issue (i.e., consumer-company “blame fit”).

In establishing these effects, we contribute to several relevant literatures. First, we reconceptualize and apply blame in novel ways. Specifically, we show that blame may be communicated through CM and inferred by consumers, irrespective of a company’s intent to blame. Second, we introduce a novel construct, blame fit, and establish its positive relationship with praise for the company. To our knowledge, this is the first demonstration of blame as a praiseworthy action. Last, we extend the scope of theoretical models of blame (e.g., Alicke 2000; Folkes, 1984; Klein and Dawar 2004; Malle, Guglielmo, and Monroe 2014), showing that an observer (e.g., consumer) may infer blame from another blame agent (e.g., company).

In a pilot study (N=75 undergraduate business students; M_age=21.24, SD_age=2.34, 33.3% female), participants viewed an ad for an environmentally-friendly Toyota model, and reported whether they thought Toyota was blaming someone or something for environmental problems (0=No; 1=Yes). More than half of the sample (n=45, 60.0%, t(74)=1.756, p=.083) responded affirmatively. The company did not explicitly blame anything, but the ad led a substantial proportion of consumers to infer blame.

Study 1A (N=200 MTurk workers; M_age=38.99, SD_age=13.06; 58.0% female) tested the blame fit hypothesis, i.e., that greater fit between inferred blame and consumers’ own blame increases praise for the company. Participants viewed a fictional Ben & Jerry’s ad depicting their cow mascot holding a sign with a twisted gun and reading “Stop the Violence.” On nine-point semantic differential scales, they rated (1) perceptions that Ben & Jerry’s was blaming four separate targets (violent media, the NRA, Congress, and violent individuals) for gun violence, (2) their own blame for these four targets, and (3) their praise for the company. Measured covariates were pre-existing attitudes toward Ben & Jerry’s, urge to help, issue seriousness, and political orientation.

We first tested interactions between inferred company blame and corresponding consumer blame for the four blame targets, with praise as the dependent variable. Results supported the blame fit hypothesis via significant interactions on praise when treating the NRA (b=.07, SE=.02, p<.001), Congress (b=.09, SE=.02, p<.001), and violent individuals (b=.07, SE=.04, p=.060) as the blame target (see the figure, panel A), but not when violent media was the blame target (p=.581). As an alternative test, we created an index of overall blame fit by calculating the absolute value of the difference between inferred blame and consumer blame for each target, and averaging these four difference scores (α=.653) such that lower scores represented greater fit. Regressing praise on blame fit showed the predicted negative relationship (b=-.69, SE=.10, p<.001), which remained significant (p<.001) when controlling for the covariates. These results suggest that inferred blame may determine praise for the company depending on how well it fits consumers’ own blame judgments.

Study 1B (N=92 MTurk workers; M_age=36.70, SD_age=12.60; 47.8% female) was identical to study 1A, except that blame measures were dichotomized (0=Congress, 1=Violent Individuals). We tested an inferred blame × consumer blame interaction on praise, and results further supported the blame fit hypothesis (b=2.22, SE=1.23, p=.074; see the figure, panel B). We also created a new blame fit variable, coded as 1 when participants selected the same target for both blame questions, and 0 when they did not. As expected, praise was greater among those who perceived blame fit (n=53, M=6.47, SD=2.73) than among those who did not (n=39, M=4.77, SD=2.78, t(90)=2.935, p=.004). This relationship held (p=.014) while controlling for the covariates.

Study 1C (N=185 MTurk workers; M_age=33.01, SD_age=8.61; 42.2% female) used a manipulation of explicit blame, testing whether blame fit effects would manifest similarly as in cases of inferred blame. The procedure was similar to studies 1A and 1B, except the ad included an additional block of text reading either “Unregulated sale of guns harms us all” (blame Congress condition) or “Gang violence harms us all” (blame violent individuals condition). Perceived blame (as manipulation checks) and consumer blame for these two targets were measured as in study 1A. Supporting the effectiveness of the manipulation, those in the blame Congress (individuals) condition perceived greater company blame for Congress (violent individuals; p<.001). Moreover, a condition × consumer blame interaction on praise was observed when treating consumer blame for Congress as the moderator (b=.21, SE=.11, p=.057; see the figure, panel C), but not when consumer blame for individuals was the moderator (p=.844). This study demonstrated that inferred blame may function as though it were explicit blame from the company, and that blame fit affects praise similarly in both cases.

A pilot study established the existence of inferred blame in response to CM, and three follow-up studies showed that the relationship between blame fit and praise appears robust. Pragmatically, this implies that CM may be communicating more than intended. Rather than leaving blame perceptions to consumers’ inferences, companies may benefit from explicitly blaming one target or another, depending on the target audience. This research also expands blame theory to include novel constructs (“inferred blame” and “blame fit”), outcomes (blame as a praiseworthy action), and perspectives (beliefs about another agent’s blame). Additional research may build on the present findings by examining boundary conditions to the observed effects. For instance, the presence or absence of a possible causal agent (Malle et al. 2014) may determine whether any blame is inferred.

REFERENCES


