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# Cause Related Marketing among Millennial Consumers: The Role of Trust and Loyalty in the Food Industry

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**Abstract:** The current study investigates the willingness of Millennial consumers towards several corporate social responsibility initiatives carried out by food companies. More specifically, it explores four cause related marketing campaigns implemented by food companies to spread corporate social responsibility. The analysis was carried out in Italy by administering a structured questionnaire to 308 consumers. The willingness of participants to switch a chocolate snack of their favourite brand to another with similar characteristics but produced by a company supporting different social and environmental causes was assessed in four different scenarios. The study uncovered the effects of both loyalty towards the brand and trust in cause related marketing on consumers' willingness to support different corporate social responsibility initiatives. The findings unveiled the willingness of Millennials to support companies' social and environmental initiatives. Both trust and loyalty played a key role in affecting consumers' willingness to support corporate social responsibility initiatives of food companies. Social and environmental concerns as well as socio-demographics aspects are also significant in supporting cause related marketing campaigns. The study has shed light on the preference of consumers towards corporate social responsibility and cause related marketing. Specifically, it provides marketing insights on the initiatives most preferred by consumers to which companies should address their efforts.

**Keywords:** CRM; CSR; young consumers; awareness; environmental concern; social concern

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## 1. Introduction

The recent decades have seen the arising of public concerns due to the impacts of business operations on the environment and society [1,2]. As for the agri-food sector, food companies are often referred as accountable for: i) impacting negatively the environment and depleting natural resources and biodiversity [3–6]; ii) affecting society and communities in which they operate as well as people' health and life [7,8]; iii) applying unfair business practices, exerting a considerable bargaining power on the actors involved in the supply chain [8–10].

In line with these concerns, at the beginning of the 21st century, the European Commission publishing the Green Paper (2001) [11] on corporate social responsibility (CSR) opens the debate on the growing role played by companies. Specifically, it outlined new perspectives for companies in which, to promote a more sustainable economic growth, they have to go beyond the mere economic sphere by embracing social and ethical concerns. The European Commission (2011) [12] (p.6), indeed, defines corporate social responsibility as the voluntary implementation of "...process to integrate social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders." Accordingly, all company's

stakeholders should commit to undertake conscious and responsible behaviours [13]. Likewise, the current academic debate points out the need to strengthen the relation between all actors involved in the supply chain (e.g. companies, suppliers, consumers) by sharing common values [14,15]. Further, scholars have emphasized the importance of sharing both the benefits of corporate social responsibility and the resulting costs [16,17]. Thus, to ensue wider adoption of socially responsible practices all actors involved in the supply chain have to do their part. For instance, companies have to adopt more sustainable production process, respectful of the environment and people involved, while consumers have to reward companies CSR initiatives purchasing their products and recognizing a premium price [13,18].

Cause related marketing (CRM) campaigns meet companies and consumers' duties. CRM identifies campaigns in which companies engage in social and ethical initiatives donating a portion of their income to a specific cause in response to consumer purchase [19,20]. CRM assumes the participation of both actors of the economic system: companies that have to implement social and ethical initiatives, consumers have to purchase products associated to these initiatives. They are carried out, often along with other organizations (e.g. charities), on a specific product and for a limited period of time [21].

Literature widely acknowledges the effects of corporate social responsibility and cause related marketing on both companies and consumers. CSR affects positively the level of satisfaction and retention of company's employees [22,23]. It also enhances company reputation [24–27] leading tangible results in terms of brands and products [28–30]. The response of consumer to CSR is also positive [31–33]. Indeed, they result more loyal and satisfied [34–37]. However, the relationship between companies' involvement in CSR and consumers' loyalty is largely unexplored [38,39], as well as, it is still unclear whether consumers are willing to switch their favourite brand to another supporting CSR initiatives.

Since CRM is a tool to give voice to company involvement in corporate social responsibility, it further strengthens the CSR benefits highlighted. Previous studies, in fact, uncovered the role of CRM in bolster brand equity and the relationships with internal and external stakeholders [40]. However, while on one hand CRM support company social and ethical conduct, on the other it can arise consumers' scepticism towards the motives underlying its CSR initiatives [41]. Trust in corporate donations and CRM may result central in lessen consumers' scepticism [42].

The current paper adds to the literature by focusing on the role of cause related marketing in addressing consumers' purchasing decisions. More specifically, it investigates four different CRM campaigns and the effect of trust in CRM, brand loyalty, environmental and social concerns in prompting young consumers (i.e. Millennials) to switch a product of their favourite brand to another with similar characteristics but supporting a specific CSR initiative. The study assessed the role of trust in CRM and loyalty towards the brand as mediating variables. The product considered in the study was a chocolate snack, while the CSR initiatives investigated covered the social, environmental and community dimension. Further, the latter (i.e. community) was distinguished, on the basis of the proximity, in local and non-local.

The study aims are three folds: i) to explore Millennials response to corporate social responsibility and cause related marketing; ii) to assess the role of trust in CRM in affecting Millennials' willingness to support CSR initiatives; iii) to uncover the influence of CSR in prompting consumers to switch their favourite brand.

The next section outlines the relevant literature on cause related marketing and consumers, while data collection, questionnaire structure and statistical analysis are outlined in the "research methodology" section. Then, the study findings are presented and fully discussed in the third section of the manuscript (i.e. "results and discussions"). The last section of the paper draws the conclusions and implications of the study.

## 2. Literature Review

In a socio-economic and cultural context characterized by an ever-growing attention to environmental issues, the scope of corporate responsibilities has widened and, thence, the boundaries

of companies' accountability. Nowadays, society expects from companies not only performance but also ethical and sustainable conduct [17]. In light of the new social demands, companies, especially in the food sector, have started to adopt practices aimed at satisfying these unprecedented requests and reviewing the entire corporate strategy in favour of a new managerial philosophy. Part of this context is cause related marketing, a marketing operation that aims to integrate business objectives and solidarity objectives, through a partnership, validated by a formal agreement, between a for profit organization and a non-profit organization. CRM represents, therefore, a marketing and communication strategy that companies adopt to show their direct involvement in social policies but, at the same time, to improve the corporate image, differentiate the products marketed and, hence, increase profits. It establishes a win-win relationship which benefits both the sponsoring company and the non-profit organization. In fact, on the one hand, the company improves its competitive and economic results in the short, medium or long term, as the goods produced and/or the services provided acquire a greater value for citizens-consumers, who are increasingly sensitive to ethical and social values; on the other hand, non-profit organizations receive support for the pursuit of their institutional goals. The for profit and non-profit world meet and integrate precisely to respond to the immaterial needs of the citizen-consumers who increasingly make their purchase choices on the basis of ethical evaluations. Today, the value of a brand or a company is actually the synthesis of a set of new factors, among which ethics, social commitment and attention to the environment.

The growth of the interest of the business towards CRM is reflected in the studies dedicated to this theme during the last twenty years. The literature identifies two main streams of research in the debate on CRM. The first is focused on the definition, conceptualization and specification of the CRM domain [41–46]. The second investigates consumer behaviour towards CRM [19,47–52]. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that, despite the growing interest in the theoretical debate, the causal relationships between consumption behaviours and CRM are still not fully explored, since the studies are mainly of a theoretical-descriptive nature.

In sum, the issue of CRM has been analysed in the literature considering a series of different factors or variables that should be considered by companies in order to maximize the benefits deriving from the internalization of such practices in business strategies. Particular importance was given to the analysis of the factors that influence the attitudes of consumers towards cause related marketing. A recent study reveals that the perception of CRM depends on various factors such as gender, age, living area, education and economic condition of the citizen-consumers but also on their system of values and culture, as well as on their degree of trust in the company [53]. The study shows that, in general, consumers have a positive attitude towards CRM programs and that this strategy is particularly followed in the food and baby food sector, which have still inspired few contributions in the literature. Other studies also support the thesis that the attitudes of consumers towards CRM are influenced by socio-demographic characteristics, while the sensitivity of the citizen-consumer to interpersonal issues influences the importance attributed to ethical-social values and, therefore, to CRM practices [54]. In this context, the gender differences become quite significant. Gender, being a male or a female, can potentially influence consumers' decision to buy products related to a social cause. Studies carried out by Ross [55], Nelson and Vilela [56] show that men and women differ in behaviour, values and attitudes. Considering their response to CRM campaigns is indeed interesting to examine their different "prosocial" behaviour, defined as "voluntary behaviour that is carried out to benefit another without anticipation of external rewards and is performed under two circumstances: the behaviour is done for its own end and the behaviour is done as an act of restitution" [57]. In the context of CRM, empathy plays a fundamental role in pro-social behaviour. Considering the different empathic attitudes, in fact, many studies have shown that women have stronger empathic sensations than men and tend [58], therefore, to respond more positively to CRM campaigns.

Nevertheless, several contributions have also identified how the Generation Y is the one most likely to support CRM campaigns [59,60]. Generation Y, (i.e. also known as Millennial Generation, are those born between 1977 and 1999) [61] is of particular interest for marketers for its significant purchasing power [60] and because it expresses socially responsible behaviour with respect to

previous generations [62]. Cui et al. [60] show that members of Generation Y are generally more optimistic, socially engaged and present a civic awareness that extends into their daily activities. Baby Boomers generation (i.e. those born between 1946 and 1964) is also optimistic and respectful towards authority [63], while Generation X (i.e. those born between 1965 and 1976) results to be more pessimistic, individualist and sceptical about authority [64]. Further, the three generation cohorts differ in terms of loyalty towards brands and organizations. Specifically, Millennials and the Generation X are less loyal than the Baby Boomers generation [65]. Millennials are the so-called children of Internet who are always willing to be informed about news and new developments [66]. Their level of commitment to support humanitarian causes and their willingness to choose brands that support social causes mean that this generation is the most important target for cause related marketing campaigns. University-age consumers of the Generation Y have a generally positive attitude towards CRM campaigns and are engaged in a new “ethical consumerism” [67]. Therefore, Millennials should be treated as a kind of sub-market that differ in their levels of awareness of ethical issues and are willing to engage in ethical purchases at different levels. Since Millennials represent the leaders, influencers and buyers of the near future, the studies conducted in this field are particularly important as they can provide food practitioners and decision makers with useful information for the definition of targeted policies.

This is relevant also because CRM is interpreted today as a strategic tool to achieve objectives such as increasing sales and market share, improving corporate reputation and brand loyalty. With regard to the latter aspect, Brink et al. [68] confirmed that CRM, especially long-term CRM, can increase consumer loyalty to the brand. In particular, the authors show that CRM campaigns do not have an impact on brand loyalty, on the part of the consumer, if the campaign is linked to a product for which the consumer already shows a high level of involvement. In contrast, long-term CRM campaigns influence consumer loyalty to the brand for low-involvement products. But CRM is also an important communication tool for building/improving a company’s reputation [69]. The results of CRM activities are, in fact, closely linked to the communication strategies used in the campaigns to promote social initiatives supported by the company or the brand. Therefore, we must also consider all the communication and information tools that, at the time of purchase, attract attention and promote the product, such as packaging, information brochures and advertising. Marketing communication can, through a careful choice of methods, mediate and guide the consumer’s decision to purchase especially when there are no strong personal preferences towards a specific brand. The results of the studies conducted by Baghi [70] show that citizens-consumers prefer to purchase socially responsible products that explain the cause of the donation in a clear, tangible and emotionally engaging way because the perception of corporate credibility also changes in relation to the methods used to describe the charity initiatives. One of the fundamental elements for the success of these operations is the perception of reliability that consumers have towards the company’s commitment [71,72]. In general, having a pro-social agenda means having a powerful marketing tool that can build and shape the reputation of a company and help create a competitive advantage. The expected change in the image of a company following CRM campaigns seems to depend largely on both the way in which citizens-consumers, in particular Millennials, who are significantly sensitive to such practices, perceive the reasons for the involvement of a company in related programs and on the amount of help provided to the cause through the involvement of a company [41].

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### *3.1. Data Collection and Questionnaire*

To address the study aims an empirical analysis was carried out interviewing Millennials consumers. Data gathering took one month (January 2018) by administering a web-based structured questionnaire. To reach a wider number of participants in the population target (i.e. Millennials), the questionnaire was conveyed through different messaging and communication platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, email). To avoid potential bias due to social desirability, the questionnaire was anonymous. Further, to facilitate questionnaire completion, respondents were

allowed to interrupt the questionnaire at any time and resume it at a later time. Lastly, the suitability of questionnaire language was tested performing a pilot test with twenty participants belonging to the same population target of the study. The pilot test did not detect any misinterpretation of the questions or critical issues, supporting the choice of the languages used. Overall, 308 young consumers took part at the study.

The questionnaire consists of four sections, lasting on average 15 minutes. The first section of the questionnaire investigated the awareness of consumers about the term corporate social responsibility as well as the source of information respondents use most to keep up about CSR. Then, in section two, interviewed were asked to express how often they personally purchase a chocolate snack on a five-points semantic scale for frequency (1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Always) [73]. The section also detects the effects of cause related marketing in addressing consumers' purchasing decisions. To illustrate, four scenarios were presented to interviewed describing different CSR initiatives. Respondents had to rate the willingness to switch a chocolate snack of their favourite brand to another with similar characteristics but supporting a specific CSR initiative. The willingness was measured in terms of likelihood on an eleven-points semantic scale ranging from 0= extremely unlikely to 10= extremely likely. The product investigated (i.e. chocolate snack) was chosen considering the food habits of the population target as well as the likelihood to purchase it by their own. The initiatives investigated cover the social, environmental and community dimension of CSR. As for the social dimension, it focuses on the actors involved in the supply chains such as suppliers and workers, underling the commitment of company to devolve a portion of sales proceeds in economic incentives for workers or guaranteeing a minimum price to the suppliers. In the environmental one, instead, companies commit to support initiatives limiting the impacts on the environmental of the production process. The initiatives for the community were distinguished in those in favour of community in which the interviewed live (e.g. scholarships, training courses) and those for people living in developing countries (e.g. support for education, health). To uncover consumers' characteristics able to affect their likely to make the switch, three constructs adapted from previous researches were implemented in the study (Table 1). More specifically, the trust in CRM were derived by Hartmann and colleagues (2015) and consist of three items, that is, "I perceive CRM to be meaningful." Loyalty towards the brand is composed by four items also adapted by Hartmann et al. [42], that is, "I consider myself to be loyal to the chocolate snack of my favourite brand." The concern about sustainability issues, instead, was assessed adapting the fourteen-item scale from Grunert et al. [74], that is, "The use of child labour in food production." Respondents expressed their level of agreement for all these measurements by using a seven-point semantic scales with end-points (1=totally disagree and 7=totally agree for trust in CRM and brand loyalty; 1= only slightly worried, 7= extremely worried for concern about sustainability issues). Lastly, consumers' socio-demographics characteristics (i.e. age, gender, household size, education level, occupation, family income, living area) were collected in the fourth section of the questionnaire.

**Table 1.** Measurement implemented and sources.

Construct	Item Description	Source and Scale of Items
Concern about sustainability issues	The use of child labour in food production	Grunert et al., 2014 Scale: 1= only slightly worried, 7= extremely worried
	Deforestation of the rain forest	
	Starvation and malnutrition in the world population	
	The use of pesticides used in food production	
	Poor treatment of animals in food production	
	Environmental damage caused by human use of land and water	
	The amount of food that is wasted	
	Using too much of the world's natural resources for food production	

	Poor working conditions and wages for food producers	
	Packaging that is not recyclable	
	The amount of packaging used on products	
	Carbon emissions caused by food production	
	The amount of energy used when transporting food products	
	The amount of energy used when cooking food products	
Trust in CRM	I perceive CRM to be meaningful	
	I perceive CRM to be good	
	CRM strengthens my trust in a company	
Brand loyalty	I intend to buy products from X in the future	
	X is always my first choice	
	I consider myself to be loyal to X	
	I would recommend products from X to others	

Hartmann et al., 2015  
Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree

### 3.2. Statistical methodology and statistical analysis

The statistical analyses of data were performed using the software for statistics and data science (STATA 14). An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed to examine the three constructs implemented in the study: trust in CRM, Brand loyalty [42], concern about sustainability issues [74].

Exploratory factor analysis using orthogonal (Varimax) rotation was carried out to determine the most appropriate factor solution. Factor analysis, in the sense of EFA, is a statistical tool for data reduction. It reduces the number of variables in an analysis by describing linear combinations of the items containing most of the information.

Then, the resulting factor scores enter as explanatory variables in an econometric model to uncover the influence of CSR in prompting consumers to switch their favourite brand. The dependent variable expresses consumers' willingness to support a specific CSR initiative. It represents (in percentage terms) the willingness to switch a chocolate snack of their favourite brand to another with similar characteristics but supporting a specific CSR initiative.

Four linear equations were set up for the four CSR dimensions investigated: environmental, social, local community, no-local community. Since in our regression equations the dependent variable assumes a value in an interval ranging from 0 to 10, the modelling approach implemented in the study is the Tobit estimator.

$$CSR\_dimension_i = \alpha + \beta env\_conc_i + \gamma soc\_conc_i + \eta loyalty_i + \lambda trust_i + \nu socio\_dem + \varepsilon_i, i=1,2,\dots,308 \quad (1)$$

where for each of the four equations, the *CSR\_dimension* corresponds to one of the four CSR dimensions investigated (i.e. environmental, social, local community, no-local community), while  $\alpha$  is the intercept of the equations. *Env\_conc* and *soc\_conc* mean consumers' environmental and social concerns respectively; *loyalty* is the respondents' brand loyalty, while *trust* means the consumers' trust in cause related marketing campaigns. A vector summarizing consumers' socio-demographic characteristics (*socio\_dem*) (i.e. gender, family income and living area) is included in the model. Lastly,  $\varepsilon$  is the error term of the model.

## 4. Results and Discussions

The sample is roughly equally distributed among gender (52% of the sample are females) (Table 2), the average age is 22 years ( $\pm 3.30$ ) whereof 52 percent stated to be aware or have heard about CSR. 73 percent of respondents perceive to have an average family income, while with regard to the living area, the majority of respondents (57% of the sample) live in urban area. Based on the frequency of

personal purchase, 33% of Millennials interviewed stated to purchase “often” and “always” chocolate snack by their own, falling into the “supercore” group. As for the CSR dimensions investigated (i.e. environmental, social, local community, no-local community) consumers showed, on average, similar preferences for the environmental and local community dimension (7.99,  $\pm 2.45$ ; 7.98,  $\pm 2.37$  respectively), followed by the no-local community (7.78,  $\pm 2.55$ ) and the social dimension (7.14,  $\pm 2.76$ ).

**Table 2.** Sample descriptive statistics.

	Variable Description	Mean (%)	Std. dev.	Min	Max
CSR dimensions	Environmental	7.99	2.45	0	10
	Local community	7.98	2.37	0	10
	No-local community	7.78	2.55	0	10
	Social	7.14	2.76	0	10
Awareness	1 if aware; 0 if not aware	0.52	0.50	0	1
Frequency of personal purchase					
	Supercore	0.33	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Core	0.31	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Marginal	0.36	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Age		23	3.30	19	38
Gender	1 if female; 0 if male	0.52	0.50	0	1
Household	Household size	4.15	1.05	1	13
Occupation					
	Employed	8%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Self-employed	5%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Student	82%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Housewife/Husband	0%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Unemployed	3%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Others	2%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Education					
	Primary school	0%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Secondary school	6%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	High school	75%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	University degree	16%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Above university degree	3%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Family income					
	Average income	73%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Below average income	15%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
	Above average income	12%	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Living area	1 if urban area; 0 if rural area	0.57	0.49	0	1

N.A. not applicable

The set of linear coefficients - also known as factor loadings - are shown in the first four columns of the following table (Table 3), while the last one summarizes the percentage of variance for the variable not explained by the common factors (uniqueness). Items responses are aggregated in four main factors, namely environmental concern, social concern, brand loyalty and trust. They express consumers' environmental and social concerns as well as their trust in CRM and brand loyalty.

In our analysis, environmental concern is characterized by eight items embracing consumers' concern toward environmental issues. A consumer with a high score in this domain, generally, is mainly worried about recycling and the energy consumption, as showed by the statements “Packaging that is not recyclable” (0.81) and “The amount of energy used when transporting food products” (0.79). The second extracted factor, instead, expresses consumers' social concern through six items. The two items mostly affecting this factor are “Starvation and malnutrition in the world population” (0.78) and “The use of child labour in food production” (0.77). Brand loyalty (i.e. third

factor) is synthesized by four items, capturing consumers' loyalty for their favourite brand of chocolate snack. This factor is in accordance with the findings of Hartmann and co-authors (2015). High scores in this domain support the statements "I intend to buy products from my favourite chocolate brand in the future" (0.87) and "The chocolate snack of my favourite brand is always my first choice" (0.86). Lastly, the fourth factor, trust in CRM campaigns, has three items in which the statement "I perceive CRM to be meaningful" (0.82) is the highly scored.

**Table 3.** Factor Analysis using orthogonal (Varimax) rotation: Factor Loading <sup>a</sup> Matrix of Coefficients.

Item	Factors				Uniqueness
	F1	F2	F3	F4	
The use of child labour in food production		0.7688			0.2116
Deforestation of the rain forest	0.6828				0.2234
Starvation and malnutrition in the world population		0.7856			0.1715
The use of pesticides used in food production	0.5027	0.5291			0.3612
Poor treatment of animals in food production		0.6277			0.3889
Environmental damage caused by human use of land and water	0.6322	0.5556			0.1762
The amount of food that is wasted	0.5524	0.6054			0.2748
Using too much of the world's natural resources for food production	0.6800				0.2810
Poor working conditions and wages for food producers		0.5932			0.3539
Packaging that is not recyclable	0.8122				0.2163
The amount of packaging used on products	0.7830				0.2419
Carbon emissions caused by food production	0.7170				0.2342
The amount of energy used when transporting food products	0.7897				0.2085
The amount of energy used when cooking food products	0.6480				0.3365
I perceive CRM to be meaningful				0.8256	0.2330
I perceive CRM to be good				0.8089	0.2338
CRM strengthens my trust in a company				0.7359	0.3541
I intend to buy products from my favourite chocolate brand in the future			0.8713		0.2002
The chocolate snack of my favourite brand is always my first choice			0.8607		0.2269
I consider myself to be loyal to the chocolate snack of my favourite brand			0.8424		0.2474
I would recommend the chocolate snack of my favourite brand to others			0.8481		0.2310

<sup>a</sup> Factor loading show the correlation between each item and the factors.

Table 4 reports the estimates resulting from the four Tobit regressions. The four models summarize the direction of the statistical associations between consumers' willingness to switch a chocolate snack of their favourite brand and, brand loyalty, trust in CRM campaigns, concerns about sustainability issues.

**Table 4.** Results of the Tobit Model (Robust Estimation, Left and Right Truncated).

	CSR Environmental	CSR Social	CSR Local Community	CSR No-Local Community
Supercore	0.12	0.17	-0.07	0.55
Marginal	-0.16	-0.22	-0.51	-0.22
Loyalty	-0.45**	-0.53**	-0.50**	-0.63**
Trust	1.23***	1.02***	1.36***	1.14***
Environmental concern	1.34***	0.57**	0.59**	0.45**

Social concern	-0.34	-0.26	-0.15	0.48**
Gender	0.79**	0.52	0.29	0.78*
Living area	0.33	1.06**	0.91**	0.80*
Below average income	-0.35	0.45	0.62	0.90
Above average income	-0.72	-1.17*	-0.80	-0.01
Cons	8.45***	6.83***	8.38***	7.47***
Sigma	3.16	3.41	3.154	3.35
Log pseudo-likelihood	-567.82	-661.60	-575.24	-603.09
Left-censored obs. (at 0)	9	16	8	11
Uncensored obs.	183	216	186	192
Right-censored obs. (at 100)	116	76	114	105
Tot number of obs.	308	308	308	308

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

The empirical results show that Millennials' willingness to switch the chocolate snack of their favourite brand to another with similar characteristics but supporting a specific CSR initiative is related to trust in CRM, brand loyalty and environmental concern. More deeply, the factor scores assigned to trust in cause related marketing campaigns, brand loyalty and environmental concern present the same sign for all CSR dimensions investigated. Accordingly, the model did not identify a specific CSR dimension for which young consumers are more willing to switch their chocolate snack of their favourite brand. This finding is in contrast with previous studies in which consumers exhibit a clear preference for specific CSR initiatives [16,75].

However, while trust in CRM and environmental concern positively affect consumers' willingness to support all CSR dimensions investigated, brand loyalty has a negative effect on consumer decision making. Prior studies support this finding revealing that trust in cause-related marketing campaigns is crucial for encouraging company's CSR initiatives. Indeed, if consumers do not trust company's commitment in CRM, they will react negatively to their CSR initiatives [42,76,77]. Further, when company reputation is questioned, consumers may become sceptical to cause-related marketing campaigns [78,79]. The latter are deemed more reliable when companies state the precise amount of money they donate to the cause [80]. Unlike previous findings in which environmental concern is positively related to purchase environmentally friendly products [81–83], the study results uncovered that the environmental concern is a driver for supporting pro-environmental, social and community (both for local and no-local communities) initiatives. The reason may rely on Millennials' concern about the environment and their consequences on society (e.g. food insecurity, lower or non-stable income, human health) [84,85].

The negative effect of brand loyalty on cause related marketing campaigns reveals a considerable loyalty of interviewed toward their favourite brand. Thus, none of the CSR dimensions investigated is able to prompt Millennials to switch the chocolate snack of their favourite brand to another supported by CRM campaigns. This result is in accordance with previous findings [56,80]. Specifically, CRM campaigns seem to affect non-brand loyal consumers in their purchase intentions rather than the loyal ones [56]. However, literature highlight that companies' involvement in corporate social responsibility and cause related marketing, strengthen their relationship with consumers in terms of brand loyalty [41,42,86,87].

The study findings also showed that the social concerns factor positively affect initiatives in favour of no-local communities. In other words, young consumers more sensitive to social issues such as social justice, quality of life, mutual respect, fair salaries and prices are more incline to support CRM campaigns in no-local communities. This finding may be related to the product investigated in the study (i.e. chocolate snack). Indeed, the cultivation of cocoa - that is one of the main ingredients of chocolate snack - is widespread in developing countries where most often poor working conditions and child labour are reported [88]. To this extend, since unsustainable working conditions and child labour are among the main challenges of cocoa supply chain [89], consumers may feel more involved in arising their life condition by supporting specific CSR initiatives.

As for the considered socio-demographic characteristics, consistency was observed for gender, living area and family income. Researchers have posed great attention about the effect of socio-demographics characteristics (e.g. gender, family income and living area) on consumers' attitudes toward CRM campaigns [54,55,90–95].

The study revealed that among interviewed, females are more willing to support CSR initiatives than males. This result is in contrast with the study of Kropp and colleagues [47] that does not underline any significant effect. Conversely, the study findings are in line with previous researches in which females tend to be more likely to support CRM campaigns than males [55,90,92]. Males unwillingness may be due to their scepticism about company donations [55]. Further, the results showed the willingness of females to support pro-environmental activities and no-local communities. It is widely acknowledged that female consumers care more about social and environmental issues than males [90] and they are more prone to help people in need [96]. As a result, females interviewed may feel the need to support people living in no-local communities that are also those involved in the cacao supply chain.

Interviewed living in the urban area are more willing to support social and community CSR initiatives than environmental ones. Unlike this result, scholars have found that living in an urban area significantly increase the probability of buying environmentally sustainable products such as organic food [97]. However, Öberseder and Schlegelmilch [98] argue that personal concern is a core driver for buying CSR products. Lerro and colleagues [75] identified that young consumers are more concerned about social and community issues than the environmental ones. Accordingly, Millennials interviewed living in urban area may have a stronger sense of community neglecting the environmental concerns.

Family income level has a significant effect on the social CSR dimension. Results revealed that interviewed consumers living in a family with a monthly income above the average are less willing to support social CSR initiatives. This result is in contrast with previous literature in which high family income increases the likelihood of buying products sponsored by CRM campaigns [54,99]. However, there is the need of further investigation to confirm the study result.

## 5. Conclusions

The paper focused on the role of cause related marketing in addressing consumers' purchasing decisions. It investigated four different CRM campaigns (i.e. environmental, social, local community and no-local community) and the effect of trust in CRM, brand loyalty, environmental and social concerns in prompting young consumers (i.e. Millennials) to switch a chocolate snack of their favourite brand to another with similar characteristics but supporting a specific CSR initiative.

The study findings showed that consumers' willingness to switch the product of their favourite brand is similar for all the CSR dimensions investigated. Accordingly, the results uncovered a general preference towards CSR. Moreover, trust in CRM, brand loyalty, environmental and social concerns have an effect on Millennials' willingness to switch the chocolate snack of their favourite brand. While trust in CRM campaigns and environmental concern positively influence consumers' willingness to support all CSR dimensions, brand loyalty, instead, may result a constraint. Lastly, social concern is a driver for supporting the no-local community dimension of CSR. The research also revealed that: i) females are willing to support pro-environmental activities and no-local communities; ii) people living in urban area are more prone towards social issues than the environmental one; iii) consumers with a monthly family income above the average are less willing to support the social dimension of CSR.

Even though findings may not be generalized, the current study offers several implications for business managers on how to properly execute cause related marketing and encourage the adoption of CSR. Firstly, it unveiled that Millennials consumers are not disinterested to CSR. The latter is noteworthy for companies that are devoting massive resources to CSR initiatives as well as for the critical role this population segment is going to have in the future. As for the trust in CRM, it is crucial to pursue successfully CRM campaigns. Indeed, the study highlighted that without trust, consumers are not willing to engage an active behaviour, namely support CSR initiatives. Accordingly, business

managers should strengthen consumers' trust, increasing transparency in their social and environmental initiatives. Brand loyalty results also provide useful insights. Consumers, in fact, are not willing to switch their favourite brand for another sponsoring CSR initiatives. The resulting implications are twofold: i) brand is stronger than CSR in drawing consumers' interest; ii) CSR may be a decisive characteristic when no brand loyal consumers make their purchasing decisions. Lastly, the study gives suggestions for company CSR communication as well. Indeed, the findings uncovered either that consumers more concerned about the environment or females are more prone to support specific initiatives. As a consequence, marketers may stress, in their communication, companies' efforts for the environment or, focus their product offer to a female target.

Although the study offers several implications, there are also some core limitations that may be addressed in future research. Since the questionnaire was conveyed through different messaging and communication platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, email), the study may suffer of sample bias also known as auto selection bias. Future studies may extend the number of platforms used for conveying the questionnaire or carry out face-to-face interview. Further, the study should be widened to other segment of population to compare the response of different generation cohorts to CRM and CSR initiatives. In addition, even though the pilot test did not identify any misinterpretation of the questions, some semantic scale implemented in the study may result deceptive for participants. Thus, a useful recommendation is to use more distinguishable scale points. Finally, respondents' behaviour may be overly influenced by the many issues affecting the cocoa production process (i.e. the main ingredient of chocolate snack). Accordingly, scholars should investigate other food products to confirm the study results.

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