It's the thought that counts: The effects of construal level priming and donation proximity on consumer response to donation framing

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ABSTRACT

This research demonstrates that consumers react differently to donations emphasizing a company's effort invested in charitable actions, as opposed to those highlighting its ability to carry out those actions. Our results show that consumers rate the brands that adopt an effort-oriented donation strategy more favorably than those that use an ability-oriented strategy (study 1). Further, this effect is moderated by consumers' perceived psychological distance (made salient by construal level priming or donation proximity). The findings converge to show that congruency between donation framing and primed psychological distance leads to more favorable brand evaluations and greater purchase intentions. Findings of this research contribute to the corporate social responsibility literature and have important marketing research and managerial implications.

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Continuous effort - not strength or intelligence - is the key to unlocking our potential.

Winston Churchill

During the past decade, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become the fastest-growing category of corporate expenditure worldwide, and there has been an unprecedented surge in corporate donations. For example, the total estimated charitable giving by Americans increased by 7.1% to an all-time record of $358.38 billion in 2014 (Giving USA Foundation, 2015). Interestingly, there has been a parallel movement in the international marketplace, where global companies have implemented CSR campaigns that link them to various social causes. For instance, Coca-Cola, in 2014 alone, contributed nearly $22 million to support nutrition and physical activity programs in 40 countries to support organized sports or increasing activity by encouraging people to ride bikes or walk more throughout the day. Yoplait, a portfolio brand of the U.S. food conglomerate General Mills, was known for their nearly two-decade-old "Save Lids to Save Lives" breast cancer awareness campaigns. In 2016, Yoplait has pledged to make a total donation of $350,000 to be divided between charity foundations such as Bright Pink, Living Beyond Breast Cancer and Susan G. Komen foundations.

All these marketing efforts, domestic and abroad, are largely driven by the well-documented theoretical linkages between CSR and financial performance, reflected in outcomes such as increased loyalty (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007) willingness to pay premium prices (*e.g.*, Creyer, 1997), and product evaluations (Chernev & Blair, 2015). Prior work also documents the effects of donation type (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Garretson & Stacy, 2005), donation amount (Dahl & Lavack, 1995; Koschate-Fischer, Stefan, & Hoyer, 2012; Polonsky & Speed, 2001), donation proximity (Grau & Folse, 2007), choice of cause (Robinson, Irmak, & Jayachandran, 2012), and donation framing (Chang, 2008; Pracejus, Olsen, & Brown, 2003; Tangari, Folse, Burton, & Kees, 2010) on consumer perceptions. While the findings of these informative studies have provided meaningful guidance to marketing practice, they nevertheless impose a "pick and choose" dilemma to marketing researchers and managers, as they have to narrow a multitude of donation strategies down to a few to incorporate into their research or practice and ignore the contributions from others. Thus, there is a dire need for a more parsimonious theoretical framework that unifies these scholarly efforts and offers easy-to-follow managerial insights.

To this end, the current research calls upon the Achievement Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985), and distinguishes between two fundamentally different ways for companies to frame their donations, *i.e.* ability *versus* effort. Whereas an ability-oriented donation entails a company's competence and resources in carrying out the CSR program

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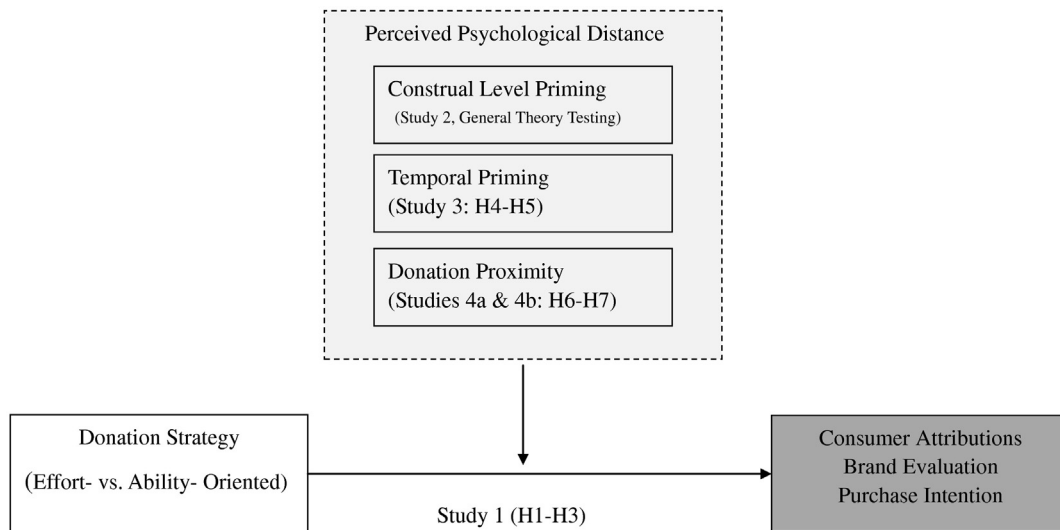
Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

(*e.g.*, The $22 million that Coca-Cola contributed to healthy living programs worldwide signals its ability and competence), an effort-oriented donation reflects its commitment and willpower to engage in socially responsible activities (*e.g.*, The numerous breast cancer awareness campaigns launched by Yoplait over nearly two decades demonstrate their effort and commitment to the cause.) Therefore, the current research contributes to the existing CSR literature by presenting ability- *versus* effort-oriented donation strategies as a theoretically novel moderator to the relationship between corporate CSR actions and consumers' evaluation of the corporation or the brand. Furthermore, the current research integrates multiple moderators of donation strategies identified in prior literature under a general theoretical framework of consumers' perceived psychological distance (made salient by construal level priming, temporal priming, or donation proximity). The current research also contributes to the construal level and psychological distance literatures by identifying the effects of psychological distance and construal level in the domain of donation and CSR strategy (Fig. 1).

In the next sections we first review the CSR literature and then introduce ability- *versus* effort-oriented donation framing to formulate our hypotheses. We then present the results of five studies designed to test our hypotheses.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Corporate donation

The topic of corporate donations to charities is part of a larger concept, *i.e.*, corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR has been defined as a company's commitment to minimizing any harmful effects on society and maximizing its long-term beneficial impact (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001; Petkus & Woodruff, 1992). Among many possible CSR initiatives, corporate donation to charities is one common way for a company to engage in social responsibility and contribute to its community. A substantial body of research in this area has shown that corporate donations can positively influence consumers' attitudes and purchase behavior (Arora & Henderson, 2007; Chang, 2008; Nan & Heo, 2007; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Pracejus et al., 2003) through dissemination of donation information, cause-brand fit, and consumers' involvement. Prior work also documents the effects of donation framing (Bolton & Mattila, 2015; Chang, 2008; Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012; Pracejus et al., 2003) on consumer perceptions.

To illustrate, prior studies demonstrate that a donation strategy that signals a company's overall corporate ability or resources, *e.g.*, a larger donation amount as opposed to a smaller amount, leads to more positive consumer evaluations (Chang, 2008; Folse, Niedrich, & Grau, 2010; Pracejus et al., 2003). Folse et al. (2010) further shows that, as long as the donation is not outside the normally accepted or expected donation range stored in persuasion knowledge, greater corporate donation levels should yield more favorable consumer responses as greater donation amounts will elicit consumer inferences that the firm is altruistic and socially responsible. Other studies, however, advocate an alternative donation-framing strategy that emphasizes a corporation's effort in implementing a CSR campaign (Ellen et al., 2000). This proposition is based on the reasoning that successful corporate philanthropy should be carried out as a long-term effort, as opposed to a short-term campaign (Porter & Kramer, 2002), and the more effort that a firm invests in a CSR campaign, the more it will be perceived as being generous and caring (Ellen et al., 2000). Supporting this notion, Ellen et al. (2000) finds that consumer evaluations are more positive for product donations (*i.e.* donation of tangible products organized by corporations) relative to cash donations (*i.e.* monetary donations by corporations), as product donations are perceived as requiring significantly more retailer efforts and logistical expenses than cash donations.

Within the CSR context, both strategies to frame donations (ability-*versus* effort-oriented) hold promise for enhancing the effectiveness of a CSR campaign designed to improve consumer attitudes and behaviors. It is, therefore, imperative to compare these two donation-framing strategies and identify the boundary conditions under which their effectiveness becomes more pronounced. We now continue by reviewing the theoretical underpinnings of these two donation strategies.

1.2. Donation framing: ability versus effort

In order to investigate the relative effectiveness of ability *versus* effort donation-framing strategies, consumers' attribution of the company's intended actions needs to be considered. According to Achievement Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985), there are two main personal internal causes for an individual's goal attainment: ability and effort. The first one reflects the resources that an individual allocates to a goal; the more one spends, the more important the goal is to the individual (Naylor & Ilgen, 1984). The second one indicates that an individual works hard and persistently on the goal, never giving up, even when facing adversities and difficulties (Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988). Along a similar vein, Holloway (1988) defines effort as pushing on, persisting, not giving up. While ability communicates "can do," effort expresses "want to do." Patrick and Hagtvedt (2012) finds that "I can't do X" denotes an external focus on impediments or resource limitation, while "I don't do X" suggests a firmly entrenched attitude to emphasize

the personal will that drives the decision. The word "don't" reflects one's personal willpower and control.

Biddle and Goudas (1997) observes that teachers and fellow students show a clear preference for working with students who demonstrate effort, which confirms prior research findings showing that effort is more welcomed than native talent. The underdog theory (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007) further documents a similar effect, that is, effort is a kind of compensation for lack of ability and resources, and that people usually are positively disposed to an underdog team or country. As for brands, external disadvantage, determination, and passion often help them win more consumer support, similar to the underdog team in a competition (Paharia et al. 2011).

Given this, it is reasonable to argue that, within the context of CSR, donation strategies that emphasize corporate effort are more likely to demonstrate a company's goal commitment, eliciting consumer attributions of value-driven corporate donation motives. Specifically, consumers will be more likely to believe that these CSR actions are driven by sincere and benevolent motives and that firms engage in charitable activities because they care (Alhouti, Johnson, & Holloway, 2016; Vlachos & Tsamakos, 2009). On the other hand, donation strategies that reflect corporate ability more likely lead to consumer attributions of strategic-driven motives. Strategic-driven motives, according to Vlachos and Tsamakos (2009), support attaining business goals (e.g., increase market share, create positive impressions). Vlachos and Tsamakos (2009) further argues that, while consumers may legitimize strategic-driven motives, since corporate survival requires attracting customers, the effectiveness of this strategy will be undermined by consumer suspicion and public cynicism, as consumers fear that a company's CSR programs will be discontinued in the case of weak financial performances (Franklin, 2008). In other words, value-driven motives often represent the dispositions and moral standards of the firm and are often viewed more positively, whereas strategic-driven motives represent profit-maximizing managerial inferences and are usually viewed more negatively. As such, we formally propose:

H1. Effort-oriented donation framing leads to more favorable brand evaluations than ability-oriented donation framing.

H2. Ability-oriented (versus effort-oriented) donation framing induces more strategic-driven consumer attributions.

H3. Effort-oriented (versus ability-oriented) donation framing induces more value-driven consumer attributions.

1.3. Psychological distance: temporal priming and donation proximity

Another key inquiry of the current study is how donation framing (ability versus effort) used in CSR campaigns interacts with other factors in affecting campaign effectiveness. To this end, we call upon Construal Level Theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2000) and propose that psychological distance may be an overarching construct accounting for a wide range of moderators identified in the CSR literature (e.g., temporal priming/framing, donation proximity, individual differences; Grau & Folse, 2007; Tangari et al., 2010). Construal Level Theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2000) postulates that objects and events that are psychologically proximal are represented as more concrete, contextualized, in low-level terms, and more concerned with how people do things; whereas objects and events that are psychologically distant are represented as more abstract, decontextualized, in high-level terms, and more concerned with why people do things. Nussbaum, Trope, and Liberman (2003) conceptualizes personal situational constrains, similar to "I can't do X," as low-level construal that denotes an external focus on impediments or resource limitation; and individual dispositions, or "I don't do X," as high-level construal. Based on the central tenets of Construal Level Theory and Achievement Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985), it is

reasonable to argue that low-level construal is conceptually congruent with ability-oriented framing, and high-level construal is consistent with effort-oriented framing. Supporting this delineation, Bolton and Mattila (2015) find that CSR framed to signal competence is more congruent with low-construal and pragmatic mindsets whereas CSR framed to signal warmth is more consistent with high-construal and communal mindsets.

As prior research suggests that the construct of psychological distance has numerous dimensions, including temporal distance and spatial distance (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006), in this research, we will investigate the moderating effects of psychological distance via different angles. To start, we examine the temporal distance dimension. Using Fromm's (1976) terminology, as temporal distance reduces, people shift from a "being" orientation to a "having" orientation. By contrast, when temporal distance increases, they give greater weight to their values and idealistic self. Kivetz and Tyler (2007) argues that temporal distance shifts attention inward and therefore enhances preference for identity attributes (intrinsic reinforcements, such as moral values, that support one's true self) over instrumental attributes (benefits, such as money, that enable obtaining other positive outcomes). Therefore, personal values (e.g., social equality, respect for tradition, security) are commonly viewed as abstract, superordinate cognitive constructs that provide continuity and meaning under changing environmental circumstances and serve as trans-situational goals that guide action (Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009; Schwartz, 1992). Supporting this proposition, prior research (Fujita, Eyal, Chaiken, Trope, & Liberman, 2008) finds that communication messages that speak to value-expressive (e.g., environmentally friendly) relative to utilitarian (e.g., convenient to use) concerns are more persuasive for consumers in a future-oriented, i.e. high temporal distance, mindset.

Following the above theories on temporal priming and construal level, we propose that donation framing (ability versus effort) effects on consumer evaluations will be contingent upon the individuals' temporal orientation that is made salient by situational priming. Temporal priming focused on the present will lead to more positive brand evaluations if a company adopts a donation framing that emphasizes ability relative to effort, because an ability-oriented strategy addresses the resources to carry out an intention and how things get done, which is more congruent with low-level construal or a present orientation. On the other hand, temporal priming focused on the future will lead to more positive brand evaluation if an effort- (versus ability-) oriented strategy is employed, because this strategy induces more value-driven consumer attributions and speaks to why a company engages in CSR and, therefore, reflects a high-level construal and is more in line with a future orientation. In total, we posit:

H4. When consumers are primed to be focused on the present, an ability-oriented donation framing will lead to more favorable brand evaluations than an effort-oriented donation framing.

H5. When consumers are primed to be focused on the future, an effort-oriented donation framing will lead to more favorable brand evaluations than an ability-oriented donation framing.

Donation Proximity, the distance between the donation activities and the consumer (Grau & Folse, 2007), represents one specific cue conveyed in CSR campaigns relevant to consumer reactions. As noted earlier, the central tenets of Construal Level Theory associated with psychological distance can also be applied to spatial proximity (Fujita et al. 2006). For example, strong arguments stressing essential, abstract, and global (i.e., high-level) features are more likely to be persuasive for products that are produced in a spatially distant location (such as a foreign country) than those produced in a near location (such as a nearby town). Along a similar vein, Grau and Folse (2007) argues that donations made to a consumers' local community will signal a more concrete or tangible value of the campaign (i.e., low-level construal), which is

often interpreted as having an immediate influence. As noted earlier, an ability-oriented donation framing is more consistent with such low-level construal, whereas an effort-oriented donation framing is more congruent with high-level construal where the donations were made to a more distant community. Such congruency may lead to not only more positive brand evaluations, but also greater purchase intentions. Therefore, we formally propose:

H6. When a donation is targeted to a proximal location, an ability-oriented donation framing will lead to more favorable brand evaluations and greater purchase intentions than an effort-oriented donation framing.

H7. When a donation is targeted to a distant location, an effort-oriented donation framing will lead to more favorable brand evaluations and greater purchase intentions than an ability-oriented donation framing.

2. Study 1: ability *versus* effort donation framing

2.1. Method

In study 1, we tested our hypotheses that an ability *versus* effort donation framing would influence brand evaluations (H1) and that each type of donation framing will lead to different consumer attributions and reactions (H2 and H3). Respondents were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and data were collected through an online survey. Sixty-nine American consumers participated in study 1(45% male; Age range of 20–35: 39.1%, 36–55: 44.9%).

2.2. Design and procedure

Study 1 featured a 2 (ability *versus* effort) donation framing one-factor within-subjects design. The manipulation of donation framing was carried out by a news report that described donations made to an Environmental Protection Organization by a company that manufactured food and beverage products. The Environmental Protection Organization is dedicated to environmental causes, such as water, environment, healthy living and social advancement. In the ability-oriented donation framing condition, the company was reported to have made one donation of $3,000,000 to this organization in the preceding five years, whereas in the effort-oriented condition, the company was reported to have made 20 donations of $150,000 each to the same organization during the preceding five years. Prior to study 1, in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 individuals to ensure that the donation amount and frequency were generally consistent with consumer expectations. Messages that emphasize the absolute dollar amount of the donation signal that the company has the ability or resources to engage in a socially responsible cause, that is, an ability-oriented strategy; whereas messages that focus on the frequency of donations are interpreted as the company's commitment and effort towards the CSR campaign (*i.e.*, an effort-oriented strategy).

After exposure to the manipulation, all subjects were directed to complete an online survey. To ensure the effectiveness of the donation framing manipulation, participants were asked to rate the company's ability in achieving its CSR goals (*e.g.*, "Has the ability to implement its socially responsible intentions," and "Has abundant resources and is effective at achieving its socially responsible goals; Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012). The company's level of CSR effort was measured by two items adapted from Vandello et al. (2007); Ellen et al., 2000; e.g., "The company works hard and persistently in achieving its socially responsible goals;" "This company invests a great deal of effort in carrying out its socially responsible activities"). In addition, the brand personality scale (Aaker, Vohs & Mogilner, 2010) was included to compute the competence index (competent, effective, efficient) and the warmth index (warm, kind, generous) associated with the brand.

Consumer attributions were measured by six items (strategic-driven attributions: "This company hopes to increase profits by making this contribution"; "This company will get more customers by making this contribution"; "This company will keep more customers by making this offer"; value-driven attributions: "This company is trying to give back something to the community"; "This company has a long-term interest in the community"; "This company feels morally obligated to help"; Vlachos & Tsamakos, 2009; Walsh & Bartikowski, 2013). Brand evaluation was measured by four items from Nan and Heo (2007); "extremely favorable/unfavorable," extremely positive/negative," "extremely like/dislike," and "extremely social responsible/irresponsible"). All measures in this research employed seven-point scales. Finally, subjects answered questions about their gender and age. Scale reliabilities ranged from 0.71 to 0.95. The items were averaged to obtain composite scores for the main constructs.

2.3. Results and discussion

Supporting the effectiveness of the donation framing manipulation, an analysis revealed that the two donation strategies led to significantly different consumer perceptions. Consumers believed that the company that adopted an effort-oriented donation-framing strategy made a greater effort in achieving CSR goals ($M_{Ability} = 4.74$ *versus* $M_{Effort} = 6.15$, $t(67) = 5.61$, $p < 0.01$), and was warmer ($M_{Ability} = 5.03$ *versus* $M_{Effort} = 6.07$, $t(67) = 4.20$, $p < 0.01$), and then the company that implemented an ability-oriented strategy. By contrast, consumers perceived the company that made ability-oriented donations as having more ability and resources in implementing CSR intentions ($M_{Ability} = 5.92$ *versus* $M_{Effort} = 5.44$, $t(67) = -2.33$, $p = 0.01$) than the company that made effort-oriented donations. Therefore, the donation framing manipulation was successful.

Further analysis revealed that, compared with ability-oriented donation framing, effort-oriented donation framing led to more favorable brand evaluations ($M_{Ability} = 5.36$ *versus* $M_{Effort} = 6.31$, $t(67) = 3.69$, $p < 0.01$). As such, H1 was supported. Also, we discovered that ability-oriented (*versus* effort-oriented) donation framing induced more strategic-driven consumer attributions ($M_{Ability} = 5.14$, $M_{Effort} = 5.03$, $t(67) = -0.51$, $p = 0.30$), although the effect was non-significant, whereas effort-oriented (*versus* ability-oriented) donation framing significantly induced more value-driven consumer attributions ($M_{Ability} = 5.03$, $M_{Effort} = 6.07$, $t(67) = 2.94$ $p < 0.01$).

Study 1 provides general support for our hypotheses that predict the main effects of donation framing on brand evaluation and consumer attributions. Consistent with our predictions, the effort-oriented donation framing leads to more favorable brand evaluation and induces more value-driven consumer attributions than the ability-oriented donation framing. Studies 2–4 are designed to examine the important moderator, *i.e.*, psychological distance, on donation framing effects. Study 2 investigates the underlying mechanism of the moderating effect by testing the theoretical linkage between the general construal level theory and donation framing. Studies 3 and 4 test the moderating role of psychological distance on two of its important dimensions: temporal distance (temporal priming) and spatial distance (donation proximity).

3. Study 2: construal level

3.1. Method

Study 2 featured a 2 donation framing (ability *versus* effort) × 2 construal level (low *versus* high) between-subjects factorial design. One hundred and thirty-four students (40% male; $M_{age} = 22$) from a major Chinese university were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. The manipulation stimuli for donation framing were similar to those used in study 1, except that, to enhance the external validity of our research, we chose a different social cause in study 2—*i.e.*, the donations were made to an education foundation dedicated

to reducing student dropout rates and improving educational facilities. To manipulate construal level, Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope (2004) technique was used to prime different construal level mindsets. The low-construal (concrete) mindset was made accessible by asking participants to answer questions related to how they would engage in a given activity (e.g., "How do you maintain good health?"), whereas the high construal (abstract) mindset was induced by generating answers as to why participants would engage in a certain activity, (e.g., "Why do you maintain good health?"). Additionally, we asked participants to think either: increasingly concretely about the activity by successively indicating how they would engage in it as well as the lower-level activities comprising it (low-construal), or increasingly abstractly about the activity by successively indicating why they would engage in it as well as the higher-level goals served by it (high-construal). The measures for brand evaluation ($\alpha = 0.87$) were the same as in study 1.

3.2. Results

A 2 donation framing $\times 2$ construal level full-factorial ANOVA was performed on brand evaluation. The results yielded a significant main effect of construal level on brand evaluation ($p = 0.04$); more importantly, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction effect involving donation framing and construal level on brand evaluation ($F(1130) = 4.92, p = 0.03$).

Further analysis demonstrated that participants with a low construal mindset rated the brand that made ability-oriented donations more favorably ($M_{\text{Ability}} = 4.97$) than the one that made effort-oriented donations ($M_{\text{Effort}} = 4.57$, $t(72) = -1.82$, $p = 0.04$). The effect was reversed for participants in a high construal mindset ($M_{\text{Ability}} = 4.85$ versus $M_{\text{Effort}} = 5.23$, $t(58) = 1.35$, $p = 0.09$; see Table 1), however, while the direction of the effect supported our proposition, the contrast effect here was non-significant.

3.3. Discussion

In study 2, we demonstrate that the effect of donation framing on brand evaluation is largely contingent upon the consumers' temporary mindset (low construal versus high construal) made salient by situational priming. In particular, an ability-oriented strategy results in more favorable brand evaluations when consumers are in a low construal level mindset, however, in a high construal level mindset, the effect of donation priming was non-significant albeit displaying the differences in the proposed direction. These interesting findings provide partial support to the theoretical mechanism underlying our further

predictions (i.e., H4–H7), based on construal level theory—that is, the moderating role of temporal priming (study 3) and donation proximity (study 4).

4. Study 3: temporal priming

4.1. Method

Study 3 featured a 2 donation framing (ability versus effort) $\times 2$ temporal priming (present versus future) between-subjects factorial design. One hundred and fourteen students (61% male; 96% between the ages of 21–25) from a major American university were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. The manipulation stimuli for donation framing were similar to those used in studies 1 and 2. In study 3, the ability-oriented donation framing was described as, "donated once, in the amount of close to $3,000,000," and effort-oriented donation framing was described as, "made 20 donations, each of an amount close to $150,000." In study 3, the selected charity context was similar to that of study 1, that is, environment protection. Similar to the approach used in prior research (Liu & Aaker, 2007), the temporal priming manipulation was carried out by asking participants to envision their life in the near or distant future. Specifically, the participants were asked to write 50–100 words on "what they will be like" and "what they will be doing" next week or in 50 years. The measure for brand evaluation ($\alpha = 0.90$) was the same as in studies 1 and 2.

4.2. Results

To test H4–H5, a 2 donation framing $\times 2$ temporal priming full-factorial ANOVA was performed on brand evaluation. The results yielded a significant interaction effect involving donation framing and temporal priming on brand evaluation ($F(1,78) = 4.05$, $p < 0.05$). No other effect was significant. Further analysis showed that, when primed to be present oriented, participants rated the brand that engaged in ability-oriented donations slightly more favorably ($M_{\text{Ability}} = 5.71$) than the one that engaged in effort-oriented donations ($M_{\text{Effort}} = 5.39$, $t(41) = -1.21$, $p = 0.12$); whereas effort-oriented donations led to more favorable brand evaluation than ability-oriented donations when participants were primed to be future oriented, ($M_{\text{Ability}} = 5.33$ versus $M_{\text{Effort}} = 5.75$, $t(41) = 1.54$, $p = 0.06$, see Table 1), however, the effects didn't approach statistical significance.

Table 1
Studies 2–4: descriptive statistics.

Study 2		Low-construal		High-construal	
		Ability-oriented donation ($n = 36$)	Effort-oriented donation ($n = 38$)	Ability-oriented donation ($n = 30$)	Effort-oriented donation ($n = 30$)
Brand Evaluation	Mean	4.97	4.57	4.85	5.23
	SD	0.96	0.96	1.23	0.95
Study 3		Present		Future	
		Ability-oriented donation ($n = 23$)	Effort-oriented donation ($n = 19$)	Ability-oriented donation ($n = 23$)	Effort-oriented donation ($n = 19$)
Brand Evaluation	Mean	5.71	5.39	5.33	5.75
	SD	0.91	0.66	0.99	0.74
Study 4		Near		Distant	
		Ability-oriented donation (a/b) ($n = 35$)	Effort-oriented donation (a/b) ($n = 34$)	Ability-oriented donation (a/b) ($n = 34$)	Effort-oriented donation (a/b) ($n = 36$)
Brand Evaluation	Mean	4.84/6.19	4.56/5.73	4.71/5.06	5.11/6.20
	SD	0.82/0.70	0.89/1.04	1.10/0.99	0.97/0.69
Purchase Intention	Mean	4.63/4.94	4.15/4.50	4.18/4.12	4.64/5.10
	SD	1.24/0.85	1.05/1.06	1.19/1.10	1.05/0.78

5. Study 4: donation proximity

5.1. Study 4a

Study 4a featured a 2 donation framing (ability *versus* effort) ×2 donation proximity (near *versus* distant) between-subjects factorial design. One hundred and forty students (44% male; $M_{age} = 22$) from a major Chinese university participated in study 4a. The manipulation stimuli for donation framing were similar to those used in prior studies in this research. To manipulate donation proximity, the participants were told that the donations were made to a charitable organization near the company's location (eastern China) or far away from its location. The university from which we collected the data was located in the same city as the company described in the stimuli. In addition to brand evaluation ($\alpha = 0.86$), purchase intention was also measured by asking respondents to indicate their purchase intention towards the products produced the company in the news report (*e.g.*, "If I am planning to buy a product of this type, I will choose this product"; "There is great possibility that I will buy this product"; "I am willing to pay a little more for this product"; $\alpha = 0.84$; Tian et al. 2011).

To test H6–H7, a 2 donation framing ×2 donation proximity full-factorial ANOVA was performed on brand evaluation. The results yielded a significant interaction effect involving donation framing and donation proximity on brand evaluation ($F(1135) = 4.56, p = 0.03$). No other effect was significant. Further analysis revealed that, when a donation was made to a local foundation, participants rated the brand that engaged in an ability-oriented donation more favorably ($M_{Ability} = 4.84$) than the one that engaged in effort-oriented donations ($M_{Effort} = 4.56$, $t(67) = -1.38, p = 0.08$), however, the effect was marginally significant. When the donation was made to a foundation located in a distant location, effort-oriented donations led to more favorable brand evaluation than ability-oriented donations ($M_{Ability} = 4.71$ *versus* $M_{Effort} = 5.11, t(68) = 1.65, p = 0.05$, see Table 1).

The analysis on purchase intention yielded similar results. In particular, the interaction effect involving donation framing and donation proximity was significant on brand evaluation ($F(1135) = 6.01, p = 0.02$). No other effect was significant. Further analysis revealed that, when a donation was made to a local foundation, participants indicated higher likelihood to purchase the brand engaged in an ability-oriented donation than the one that engaged in effort-oriented donations ($M_{Ability} = 4.63$ *versus* $M_{Effort} = 4.15, t(67) = -1.74, p = 0.04$). The effect was reversed when the donation was made to a distant location ($M_{Ability} = 4.18$ *versus* $M_{Effort} = 4.64, t(68) = 1.73, p = 0.05$; see Table 1).

5.2. Study 4b

To enhance the external validity of our research, study 4b was designed to replicate study 4a, using an American non-student sample recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. One hundred and fifty-six American consumers (44% male; Age range of 20–35: 59%; 36–55: 33.3%) participated in study 4b by completing an online questionnaire. The study design, manipulation stimuli and measures in study 4b were consistent with those used in Study 4a.

Consistent with study 4a, the analysis demonstrated that, when a donation was made to a local foundation, participants rated the brand that engaged in an ability-oriented donation more favorably ($M_{Ability} = 6.19$) and indicated higher brand purchase intentions ($M_{Ability} = 4.94$) than the brand that engaged in effort-oriented donations (brand evaluation: $M_{Effort} = 5.73, t(71) = -2.21, p = 0.02$; purchase intention: $M_{Effort} = 4.50, t(71) = -1.95, p = 0.03$). The effect was reversed when the donation was made to a distant location (brand evaluation: $M_{Ability} = 5.06$ *versus* $M_{Effort} = 6.20, t(81) = 6.12, p < 0.01$; purchase intention: $M_{Ability} = 4.12$ *versus* $M_{Effort} = 5.10, t(81) = 4.70, p < 0.01$; see Table 1). The consistency of the findings yielded in the American non-

student sample in study 4b suggested robustness in the overarching theory underlying our H6 and H7.

6. General discussion

Corporate social responsibility has recently gained its momentum and continues to be regarded as a viable promotional strategy for companies attempting to improve or sustain a favorable image or reputation among consumers (Brown, Dacin, Pratt & Whetten, 2006). Prior CSR research documents a variety of corporate donation strategies (*e.g.*, product *versus* money, Garretson & Stacy, 2005; local *versus* distant donation, Grau & Folse, 2007; temporal frame of donation message, Tangari et al., 2010) and their effects on consumer evaluations. Our research contributes to the existing CSR literature by comprehensively examining ability- *versus* effort-oriented donation strategies as a conceptually novel and managerially relevant moderator to the relationship between CSR actions and consumers' brand evaluations. Our findings show that, an effort-oriented strategy results in more value-driven consumer attributions (altruistic and sincere) and warmer brand perceptions than an ability-oriented strategy. As warmth and value dimensions are often more diagnostic in the CSR domain for brand evaluation, consumers rate the brands that adopt an effort-oriented strategy more favorably than those that use an ability-oriented strategy (study 1).

The present research further contributes to the CSR and donations literatures by demonstrating that the effectiveness of the donation framing is critically moderated by consumer's perceived psychological distance (made salient by construal level priming or donation proximity). The findings from studies 2, 3, 4a, and 4b converge to show that congruence between donation framing and primed psychological distance leads to more favorable brand evaluations and greater purchase intentions compared with incongruence. In particular, relative to an effort-oriented strategy, an ability-oriented strategy results in more favorable brand evaluations when consumers are in the low construal level mindset (study 2). Similarly, when the donation is made to a local foundation, participants rated the brand that engages in ability-oriented donations more favorably, and the effect is reversed when the donation is made to a distant location (Studies 4a and 4b).

The current work also provides important managerial insights and implications to guide marketing practices. First, our results suggest that an effort-oriented strategy is generally more effective than an ability-oriented strategy in terms of managing consumers' evaluations towards the brand. Therefore, this research advances the collective knowledge regarding how to effectively design CSR campaigns by recommending corporations use an effort-oriented strategy and adapt a long-term orientation when designing and executing corporate philanthropy or CSR campaigns and actions.

Moreover, by examining the congruency effect of donation framing and psychological distance (*e.g.*, construal level and donation proximity), our research helps to further optimize the CSR campaigns based on the characteristics of their target audiences and objectives. The current results suggest that, whereas an ability-oriented strategy may be more effective for charitable donations associated with immediate results (*e.g.*, a disaster relief fund) or made to a local community, an effort-oriented strategy may better serve the company when the committed social causes require persistence (*e.g.*, a preventive educational mission) or are located in a distant area. All these findings should assist marketers in answering important strategic questions related to CSR strategy.

Several limitations of our studies should be acknowledged. One limitation is that the findings are based on laboratory experiments and utilized a college-based sample in several of our studies. Further replications of those results among other populations such as in field experiments would be valuable extensions of the current research. A second limitation is that while findings from study 3 are directional consistent with our predictions, the results are non-significant. A possible explanation is that study 3 uses direct instructions to prime

participants' temporal orientation. Although this approach serves the theoretical goal of this research, it does not mirror the actual CSR practice. Given this, further research may apply CSR campaign characteristics to elicit an individual's temporal orientation. Certainly, more work needs to be done before we have a complete understanding of ability-*versus* effort-oriented CSR strategies. For example, while this research operationalizes this general construct by donation strategies, further research along these lines may replicate these findings with respect to other CSR programs (*e.g.*, walkathons, volunteering programs). Since the dimensions of construal level theory go beyond the temporal and spatial distance dimensions in the current research (Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2010), further research that examines the interaction between CSR strategy and other psychological distance dimensions, such as perceived social distance between consumers and those being helped by the social causes, could be an interesting area for scholarly exploration.

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