

SPECIAL ISSUE

Cause-related marketing in pandemic context—The effects of cause-brand fit and cause-brand alliance on customer-based legitimacy and reputation

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Abstract

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has represented an intense period of stress and anxiety for individuals, it has also been an opportunity for firms to engage in cause-related marketing initiatives as a means of providing support and helping them cope with this global pandemic. This study analyzes the influence of cause-brand fit and cause-brand alliance on customer-based legitimacy and reputation. This study also examines the mediating and moderating roles of trust and betrayal, respectively. Data were collected from 455 participants during the first wave of the pandemic, especially during the first lockdown. The results contribute to unveiling the economic and societal outcomes of cause-related marketing. The findings also enrich the antecedents of the legitimacy and reputation conferred by customers.

KEYWORDS

betrayal, cause-related marketing, legitimacy, reputation, trust

1 | INTRODUCTION

"We're all in this together," a message companies were diffusing to the general public while the COVID-19 pandemic was bumping the world severely (Hultgren, 2020), and still is. This pandemic is no longer a health crisis that can end but a profound social, economic, and cultural crisis that will last much longer than expected (The British Academy, 2021). This pandemic will also have a profound impact on corporate social responsibility (CSR), consumer ethics, and marketing philosophy (He & Harris, 2020), challenging existing CSR assumptions, concepts, and practices (Crane & Matten, 2020).

The pandemic was an opportunity for companies to implement more genuine and authentic CSR initiatives, addressing global social and environmental urgencies (He & Harris, 2020). The latest surveys showed that more than 80% of customers indicated that trusting the brands for doing what is right is a deal breaker in their brand buying decisions, and 65% claimed that brands' responses to this outbreak will have a huge impact on their future brand choices (Edelman, 2020). Furthermore, consumers seemed unforgiving of

brands acting inappropriately in response to the COVID pandemic; most of them were ready to make negative reviews for brands acting poorly in light of the outbreak (Guttman, 2020). As such, a new "crisis-shaped CSR" has appeared, in which companies go beyond donations or act responsibly in their core business and change their production to manufacture suitable products addressing the outbreak's urgencies (Giacomini et al., 2021). CSR initiatives are ways for companies to gain legitimacy, although audiences can be skeptical toward these initiatives due to growing public awareness of greenwashing and scandalous corporate behavior (Panwar et al., 2014). During the outbreak, companies used universal CSR claims (i.e., "We are here for you"), which could be seen as a way to act opportunistically and reap short-term gains from the crisis (Yang & Mundel, 2021).

Cause-related marketing (CRM) is part of brands' CSR practices through which companies link monetary or in-kind donations to product sales or other consumer actions (Kotler et al., 2012). It is used by the brands as a communication tool to differentiate themselves and their offerings (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). CRM initiatives flourished during COVID-19, such as Dyson's creation of 15,000

ventilators for distribution in the United Kingdom and other countries, AB InBev's donation of millions of gallons of alcohol to produce hand sanitizers and disinfectants, and Nestlé's food, medical nutrition products, and bottled water donation to communities in need (Hultgren, 2020). Nevertheless, the pandemic challenged brands' CSR initiatives by questioning their genuineness (He & Harris, 2020) and influencing stakeholders' sentiments about these initiatives (Giacomini et al., 2021) and brands' legitimacy.

Past research has revealed brands' increasing use of CRM as a means of communicating their commitment to CSR (Woodroof et al., 2019), with the aim of enhancing their image and reputation (Thomas et al., 2020), and their legitimacy (Campbell et al., 2012). Firms engaging in CRM initiatives aim to improve their image, brand value, and reputation in the eyes of their customers (Silva et al., 2020). Such initiatives also add trust to the brand and enhance its legitimacy (Ferraris et al., 2020). The CRM literature also suggests that consumers may develop skepticism regarding brands' motivations to support a cause (Deb & Amawate, 2020; Vrontis et al., 2020). Existing studies conducted during the COVID outbreak revealed that consumers' perception of brands' opportunism was due to a lack of brand–social cause fit, reducing their positive attitudes toward the brands (Yang & Mundel, 2021). Studies have also highlighted the psychological role of brand trust in higher donation intention in CRM campaigns during the COVID pandemic (Huang & Liu, 2020). Nevertheless, the effect of cause–brand fit on consumers' attitudes and behaviors in the CRM context is still debatable (Zhang et al., 2020). Overall, the latest studies suggest a more promising CRM effect on long-term image building than on companies' sales (Schamp et al., 2022).

CRM research has mainly focused on investigating the factors linked with the efficacy and success of CRM campaigns (Christofi et al., 2015; Vrontis et al., 2020; Yucel-Aybat & Hsieh, 2021), neglecting other outcomes, such as reputation and legitimacy (Kircova & Gürce, 2019), and mediators/moderators, such as trust (Kim et al., 2015) and betrayal (Rego & Hamilton, 2021). This study incorporates the institutional perspective of organizational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) and reputation (Fombrun et al., 2000) to investigate why customers challenged the legitimacy and reputation of brands engaging in CRM campaigns during the COVID-19 outbreak when considering cause–brand fit (Yang & Mundel, 2021) and cause–brand alliance (Lafferty, 2007, 2009). This study also illuminates the roles of trust and betrayal as psychological drivers that affect customers' reputational and legitimacy judgments (Chen et al., 2020).

The study's contributions are fourfold. First, the findings extend the CRM literature by unveiling the novel outcomes (i.e., reputation and legitimacy) of CRM campaigns (Rego et al., 2021; Woo et al., 2020). Second, the results enrich the institutional literature by considering CRM attributes (i.e., cause–brand fit and alliance) and their effects on reputation and legitimacy (Thomas et al., 2020). Third, this study reveals additional underlying mechanisms (i.e., trust and betrayal) that either enhance or endanger CRM campaigns (He & Harris, 2020). Lastly, this study provides empirical evidence of customers' perceptions of CRM initiatives in the COVID-19 context,

which is considered the most severe pandemic in society's history and is changing the way businesses and consumers behave (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020).

The article is structured as follows: we present the literature review, followed by the empirical section, the discussion, and concluding remarks.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Perspectives on CRM, reputation, and legitimacy

CRM is “the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives” (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, p. 60). It is part of companies' CSR activities that links brands' levels of giving to consumer actions (Kotler et al., 2012). Legitimacy is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Legitimacy is conferred by audiences that evaluate companies' appropriateness (Deephouse et al., 2017), and therefore is key for companies' survival, allowing them to gain resources and sustained support from their stakeholders (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Reputation is “a collective representation of a firm's past behavior and outcomes that depicts the firm's ability to render valued results to multiple stakeholders” (Fombrun et al., 2000, p. 243). Reputation positively impacts customer trust and loyalty while reducing transaction costs (Walsh & Beatty, 2007).

CSR initiatives are strategic vehicles for companies to nurture positive public sentiment, build reputation capital, reach legitimacy to ensure their sustainable development (Du & Vieira, 2012), and promote ethical values for their businesses and the society at large (Magni et al., 2022). Such initiatives are also vital as part of companies' marketing tools, allowing them to address consumers' expectations and improve their reputations while helping worthy causes (Lii & Lee, 2012). Our focus is on customer-based legitimacy (i.e., firms' acceptance as a part of their environments by consumers, Randrianasolo & Arnold, 2020), and customer-based reputation (i.e., customers' overall evaluation of firms based on their reactions to firms' goods, services, communications, interactions, and known activities, Walsh & Beatty, 2007).

Consumers act as legitimating agents, having the power to confer or deny legitimacy through their relationships with firms (Lillqvist et al., 2018). They tend to identify with brands that conduct CRM initiatives (Lii & Lee, 2012). How customers perceive brands' motives through their involvement in CRM campaigns and the amount of help they provide to the cause are key factors in CRM campaigns' success (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). Nevertheless, if not implemented properly, CRM can endanger brands' image and reputation (Woodroof et al., 2019). Given that CRM campaigns link a cause to brands' profit

generation, requiring consumers to make efforts (i.e., purchase or sacrifice), such campaigns tend to perform worse on consumer evaluation compared to philanthropy or sponsorship (Lii & Lee, 2012).

Prior studies have suggested that CSR (and thus CRM) initiatives strengthen moral legitimacy through which stakeholders evaluate firms' actions based on what they think is the right thing to do (Giacomini et al., 2021). Brands use communication to build their reputations and gain legitimacy by improving dialog and engagement with consumers (Seele & Lock, 2015). However, stakeholders might be skeptical and distrust CSR disclosures (Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2016). These feelings are exacerbated even more by social media's influence on these disclosures (Arrigo et al., 2022). Additionally, not all consumers respond similarly to companies' CRM campaigns (Thomas et al., 2020). For many of them, high cause-brand fit and authentic cause-brand alliance are key drivers of CRM acceptance (Yucel-Aybat & Hsieh, 2021). In the next section, we investigate the effects of cause-brand fit and alliance on customer-based reputation and legitimacy.

2.2 | Cause-brand fit and alliance as determinants of legitimacy and reputation in CRM campaigns

Cause-brand fit is paramount for CRM campaign success (Rego et al., 2021). Perceived fit is "*the degree of similarity or compatibility that consumers perceive exists between the cause and the brand*" (Lafferty, 2007, p. 448). A cause-brand alliance (CBA) is "*the long-term partnership between a firm and a cause*" (Lafferty, 2009, p. 360). A good cause-brand fit reflects customers' perceptions that the alliance is logical, complementary, and congruent (Rego & Hamilton, 2021), eliciting positive effects on attitude toward the brands and purchase intentions (Lafferty, 2007).

In the CRM context, brands face the double challenge of choosing the right partner or cause for an alliance and ensuring the positive effect of their motivations for engaging in the alliance on customers' attitudes toward it (Myers et al., 2013). Overall, a high level of cause-brand fit increases stakeholders' evaluations of the brands and their credibility (Kuo & Rice, 2015). Furthermore, to maintain congruity, customers favorably perceive a cause-brand alliance to form a positive evaluation of the implemented CRM campaigns (Myers et al., 2013).

CRM campaigns are becoming an effective marketing tool used by brands to improve their image and reputation (Ferraris et al., 2020). Prior research has revealed that brands gain sociopolitical normative (Chen et al., 2020) and moral (Giacomini et al., 2021) legitimacy through their CRM activities. The CRM literature also recommends that firms partner with causes that are conceptually (i.e., corporate values, brand image, and product positioning) and perceptually (i.e., color, size, and shape used by brands) congruent (Huo & Rice, 2015). As such, the more customers perceive the cause-brand alliance positively, the more likely they are to participate in the alliance through their purchases (Myers et al., 2013).

Additionally, in high cause-brand fit CRM campaigns, customers attribute more negative motives (i.e., stakeholder-driven and egoistic reasons to implement such campaigns) to low reputation firms (Zhang et al., 2020). Given that customers play the role of legitimating agents (Lillqvist et al., 2018), how they perceive the level of cause-brand fit (Lafferty, 2007) and form their attitude toward the cause-brand alliance (Myers et al., 2013) determines whether they grant or deny legitimacy to the brands' CRM campaigns. Therefore, we posit the following hypothesis in a CRM context:

H1a. A favorable attitude toward the cause-brand fit positively influences legitimacy.

H1b. A favorable attitude toward the cause-brand alliance positively influences legitimacy.

CRM campaigns and brand reputation go hand in hand (Ferraris et al., 2020). Firms often use CRM activities as either defensive (i.e., protecting valuable resources from competitors) or offensive (i.e., leveraging existing resources) strategies (Woodroof et al., 2019). A CRM strategy may also help firms build a more positive reputation and increase sales (Shih & Wang, 2021). As such, high-reputation firms implementing high cause-brand fit CRM campaigns produce greater value-driven attributed motives from customers, conducive to their positive attitudes and evaluations of these firms (Zhang et al., 2020). Nevertheless, customers need to perceive the logical fit of the cause of the brand and believe in the cause-brand alliance (Myers et al., 2013). If customers perceive CRM activities as self-interested or profit-oriented, they become skeptical about the brands' motives, which may hurt their reputations (Shih & Wang, 2021). Accordingly, a high cause-brand fit elicits value-driven motives, whereas a low fit elicits strategic motives (Zhang et al., 2020), damaging brands' reputations, and provoking losses in brand attitudes and sales (Rego & Hamilton, 2021). Therefore, we posit the following hypotheses in a CRM context:

H2a. A favorable attitude toward the cause-brand fit positively influences reputation.

H2b. A favorable attitude toward the cause-brand alliance positively influences reputation.

2.3 | The roles of brand trust and perceived betrayal

Trust is among the most important desired qualities in the consumer-brand relationship and is one of the most major attributes of brands (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003). Brand trust refers to consumers' expectations about brands' reliability in risky situations or their willingness to rely on brands to perform their stated functions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). For Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2001, p. 1254), brand trust is "*a feeling of security that the brand will meet*

consumption expectations." It is based on consumers' beliefs that brands are honest, secure, and reliable (Khamitov et al., 2019).

Marketing's ultimate goal is to generate trust bonds between customers and brands (Hiscock, 2001). Nevertheless, greenwashing behaviors engender a crisis of trust, with bad effects on companies' reputation and legitimacy (Guo et al., 2017). Furthermore, CRM campaigns with low cause-brand fit might be perceived as abusive marketing tools (Chéron et al., 2012). Previous studies have emphasized the role of consumer legitimacy judgment in the trust buildup or erosion process (Chen et al., 2020). Brands, through their CRM activities, endeavor to vehicle their core purposes and values and future prospects to their customers (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2005). The more genuine experience customers have with their brands, the stronger their connections and trust in them, and the lower their belief brands would behave opportunistically (Sichtmann, 2007). Past studies have also emphasized the impact of CSR on trust. Customers' perceptions of brands' trustworthiness are closely linked to the way they view the similarities between their proper beliefs and brands' identity (Pivato et al., 2008). Brands' CSR initiatives also signal an ethical corporate brand image to customers (Kim et al., 2015).

In a CRM context, research has found a positive effect of cause-brand fit on trust (Silva et al., 2020). Customers' feeling of distrust toward brands' motives in engaging in CRM increases their skepticism toward CRM campaigns (Alavi & Zeynali, 2013), thus delegitimizing them as well as the brands. Additionally, developing brand trust enhances corporate reputations (Kim et al., 2015). Firms with a high reputation are highly trusted by customers (Walsh & Beatty, 2007). Customers need to believe in the trustworthiness of CRM campaigns, which reduces their skepticism toward the campaigns and the brands (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). Therefore, we posit the following hypotheses in a CRM context:

H3a. Brand trust mediates the relationship between attitude toward cause-brand fit and legitimacy.

H3b. Brand trust mediates the relationship between attitude toward cause-brand fit and reputation.

Brands form alliances with causes to endorse mutual interests in the public perception of their legitimacy (Kircova & Gürce, 2019). Cause-brand alliances are a means for firms to implement CRM initiatives to build up trust and, ultimately, enhance their reputation and legitimacy (Du & Vieira, 2012). Customers' positive perceptions of cause-brand alliances influence their evaluation of CRM campaigns (Myers et al., 2013). Nevertheless, customers become skeptical when cause-brand alliances' credibility is questioned (Till & Nowak, 2000).

Past studies have shown the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between customer perception of CSR and reputation (Kim et al., 2015). Trust was found to have a substantial effect on customers' intention to support cause-brand alliances (Till & Nowak, 2000). Cause-brand alliances signal good corporate citizenship (Lafferty, 2009), allowing firms to leverage the gains in reputation, legitimacy, and customers' trust reached through such alliances (Kircova & Gürce, 2019).

Brands making alliances with familiar causes build their brand trust and reputation, especially when entering new marketplaces (Singh & Duque, 2020). Unfamiliar brands greatly benefit from cause-brand alliances when the causes are important for customers (Lafferty, 2009). Therefore, we posit the following hypotheses in a CRM context:

H4a. Brand trust mediates the relationship between attitude toward the cause-brand alliance and legitimacy.

H4b. Brand trust mediates the relationship between attitude toward the cause-brand alliance and reputation.

In a close relationship context, individuals feel betrayed when they perceive a breach of trust or a violation of an implicit or explicit relationship-relevant norm or moral obligation (Finkel et al., 2002). In a branding context, perceived betrayal is defined as "a customer's belief that a firm has intentionally violated what is normative in the context of their relationship" (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008, p. 250). Regardless of the context, betrayal is a serious threat to relationships with forgiveness, a very difficult task to attain (Finkel et al., 2002).

Brand betrayal erodes brand trust and provokes anger and negative word-of-mouth (Reimann et al., 2018), jeopardizing brands' efforts to enhance their reputation and legitimacy. For customers, brands' betrayal acts are difficult to forget and forgive (Finkel et al., 2002), explaining their revenge or brand avoidance feelings (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). Customers perceiving brands' fallaciousness (i.e., brands displaying fallacious personality traits such as misleading, deception, hypocrisy, or lying) trigger mistrust, negative word-of-mouth, brand betrayal, and ultimately, brand hate (Bayarassou et al., 2020). Further, brands cheating, not respecting their promises (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), or exhibiting opportunistic behaviors (Kim et al., 2015) exacerbate their feeling of betrayal.

The very few CSR studies investigating the links between cause-brand fit and brand opportunism suggest that a lack of fit between brands and supported causes makes customers suspicious of brands' motives in engaging in CSR initiatives, augmenting their perception of brand opportunism and resulting in backlash (Yang & Mundel, 2021). As such, customers who perceive brand opportunistic behavior may find themselves betrayed by the brands' intentions through their CRM campaigns. Such betrayal feelings provoke retaliation in the form of negative word-of-mouth tarnishing brands' reputations and delegitimizing them and their efforts to support causes. Therefore, we posit the following hypotheses in a CRM context:

H5a. Perceived betrayal negatively moderates the relationship between attitude toward cause-brand fit and legitimacy.

H5b. Perceived betrayal negatively moderates the relationship between attitude toward the cause-brand fit and reputation.

Cause–brand alliances aim to strengthen the relationships between customers and brands through signaling firms' commitments to causes (Lafferty, 2009). Customers greatly accept alliances between partners with a strong fit (Lafferty et al., 2004). Nevertheless, the stronger the brand–customer relationship, the greater their betrayal feeling and retaliation intention (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), especially in case they perceive cause–brand alliances as opportunistic (He & Harris, 2020), which would threaten brands' reputation and legitimacy (Giacomini et al., 2021). Therefore, we posit the following hypotheses in a CRM context:

H6a. Perceived betrayal negatively moderates the relation between attitude toward cause–brand alliance and legitimacy.

H6b. Perceived betrayal negatively moderates the relation between attitude toward cause–brand alliance and reputation.

Figure 1 displays the research model.

3 | EMPIRICAL STUDY

3.1 | Data collection and sample

The COVID-19 context, especially the fight against the pandemic, represents a major and insightful CRM initiative. To test the hypotheses, a questionnaire was administered online between April and May 2020. This period represents the first wave of confinement in most countries worldwide. For the purpose of the study, responses were collected from two different countries: France and Turkey. These countries were chosen because they displayed high numbers of contaminations at the beginning of data collection (April 2020), and both had started to establish partial or full lockdowns. The questionnaires were originally created in the English language and then translated into French and Turkish and then back-translated by another native speaker. The final versions were

pretested, and after some minor changes, they were designed in the Qualtrics platform.

To test all the company- and brand-related constructs, the company Nestlé was selected in the study for several reasons. First, Nestlé benefits from its overall positive image and stability all over the world. Indeed, Nestlé is among the most admired companies all over the world (rank 45 in 2021 vs. 39 in 2020) and reaches second position in the consumer food industry (Fortune, 2021a). Nestlé is among the stable firms, ranking 79 in the 2021 Global Fortune 500, which represents a stable ranking for the past several years and has appeared in the last 27 years of the ranking (Fortune, 2021a). It also ranked 54th of Fortune's 2019 annual list (Fortune, 2021b) and on the world's most valuable brands (Swant, 2019). Second, past studies have shown that real-life examples and companies (vs. fictional brands) should be used because they bring greater realism (Lafferty, 2007), especially in the COVID-19 context. Nestlé has initiated many actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, both internally—by keeping its employees healthy, safe, and supported—externally—by helping with local relief efforts—and on a broader societal level, by joining forces with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Nestlé, 2021).

To grasp the fit dimension, the study focused on the use of masks for several reasons. First, many firms from diverse industries created CRM campaigns around masks. For instance, the toy company Playmobil has used its own plastics expertise to launch the first reusable Playmobil Nose and Mouth Mask to fight against the pandemic (Toyworld, 2020). The fast fashion company H&M repurposed its supply chain to produce face masks for health-care workers around the world and to a broader public at an affordable price to help combat COVID-19 (Inside H&M, 2020). The H&M Foundation also donated \$500,000 to the fund setup by the World Health Organization to ensure better care for sick patients (Bougro, 2020). Second, the mask was used all over the world by all types of individual users, and was the main initiative recommended by medical experts and politicians in most countries. Hence, the participants in the study were familiar with the product that they use on a daily basis. Similarly, the mask represented a major challenge, especially during the first waves of the

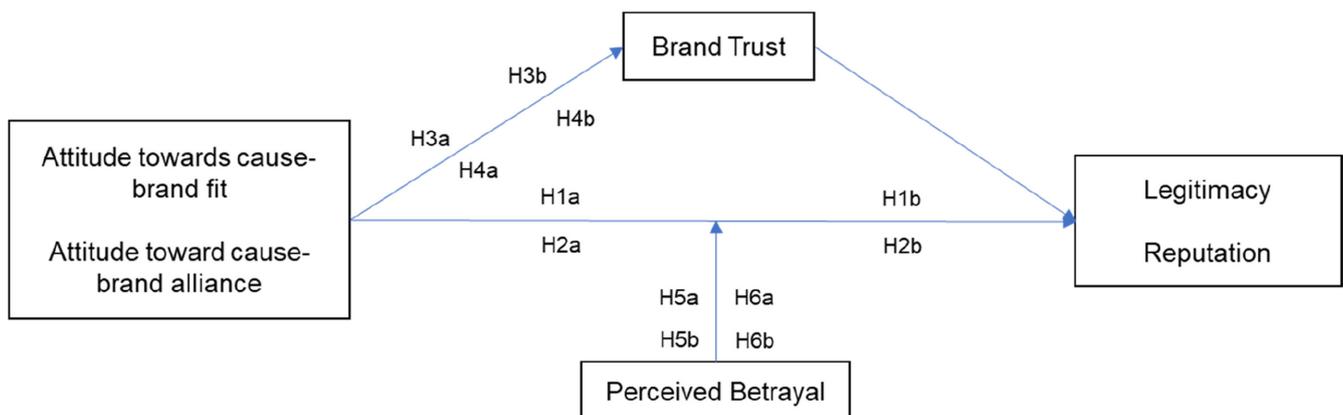


FIGURE 1 Research model.

pandemic in early 2020 (limited number of masks available, diverging opinions about their use and usefulness in fighting against the COVID-19).

To answer the research question and address the research objectives, a short description was presented to the participants at the beginning of the survey. The advantage of the description was to avoid any recall of past events by participants, and to ensure a similar level of information was provided to all participants, hence avoiding potential biases in their answers. The short description encompasses the following dimensions to better grasp the fit between the cause (health related to COVID), the company (Nestlé), and the fit (Nestlé using masks in a CRM campaign during the pandemic), their respective impact on legitimacy and reputation, and considering the mediating influence of trust and the moderating role of betrayal.

Upon agreeing to participate in the survey, subjects read a welcome instruction screen explaining the study's purpose of examining their perceptions about a brand. Next, participants read a CBA message stating, "The dramatic spread of COVID-19 has disrupted lives. Nestlé contributes to the infection risk reduction by donating five million of the masks that are in its stock to the people in countries that are in greatest need." The participants then moved to answering questions related to the variables.

3.2 | Measures

3.2.1 | Independent variables

Attitude toward the cause–brand alliance and attitude toward the fit in a cause–brand alliance were measured using self-response multi-item scales, relying on earlier studies (Aaker & Keller, 1990; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989, respectively), and adapting the scales to the context of this study. All items were measured on 5-point Likert-type scales, with anchors ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

3.2.2 | Dependent variables

Consumer-based legitimacy and reputation represent the two dependent variables of the model. The constructs were measured using self-response multi-item scales (5-point Likert scales), relying on earlier studies, and adapting the scales to the context of this study. Customer-based legitimacy is the perceived legitimacy conferred by consumers to brands (Randrianasolo & Arnold, 2020). Reputation measures the degree to which a customer believes that a certain company (1) cares about customers and treats them fairly; (2) is performing well financially and is expected to continue being successful; (3) is a good one to work for because it is managed well, especially in how it treats its employees; (4) produces high-quality, innovative goods and services; and (5) is responsible in its service to society and the environment. It therefore encompasses the following dimensions: customer orientation, financial strength, good

employer, product quality, and social and environmental responsibility (Fombrun et al., 2000; Walsh & Beatty, 2007).

3.2.3 | Mediating variables

Trust and betrayal were used as moderators in the model. Both constructs were measured using self-response multi-item scales (5-point Likert scales). Trust in the brand measures the degree of confidence a consumer has in a brand, and the belief it can be counted on to do what it is supposed to do (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Grohmann, 2009). Betrayal measures the degree to which a customer believes a company has done something unexpected that has damaged their relationship (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Grégoire et al., 2009).

3.2.4 | Control variables

Gender, age, and education are used as primary control variables, as they might bias the results. Gender, education (ISCED, 2011), and occupation (ILO, 2012) are categorical measures. Age is a continuous measure. Lastly, the perceived financial situation (Almli et al., 2011) is a single-item scale (7-point Likert scale) ranging from "Difficult" to "Moderate" and "Well off."

Table 1 presents the operationalization of each variable and each construct.

4 | RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Overall, there were 455 valid cases after eliminating incomplete and invalid questionnaires. Unfinished, incomplete cases were not taken into consideration. We also relied on the response quality in open-ended questions by retaining the relevant responses and excluding invalid/inaccurate responses as using this type of elimination provides greater accuracy than attention checks (Ziegler, 2021).

Among the respondents, 49.67% were male, and 50.33% were female, with an average age of 35 years. Most respondents (47%) perceived their financial status as positive, 35% as moderate, and 18% as difficult. Participants revealed their highest level of education completed as follows: up to high school (4%), high school diploma (18%), undergraduate diploma (39%), and graduate or higher diploma (30%). In total, 40% of the participants held managerial positions, and 22% were staff and employees. Students, retired, and unemployed respondents represented 28% of the participants, whereas self-employed and individuals working in agricultural activities represented 8% and 2%, respectively.

Overall, 42% of the respondents declared that they personally knew someone who was COVID-positive, and 45% said that they did not know anyone. Further, 13% responded that they did not know the situation of other people they knew. A vast majority of the respondents were confined when they participated in the study

TABLE 1 Operationalization of the variables.

Variables	Items	Sources
Independent variables		
Attitude toward the cause–brand fit (att_fit)	I think this cause–brand fit is: Consistent 6 5 4 3 2 not consistent, complementary 6 5 4 3 2 not complementary, makes sense 6 5 4 3 2 does not make sense	Aaker and Keller (1990)
Attitude toward the cause–brand alliance (att_cb_all)	My overall impression of this cause–brand alliance is: 1. good/bad 2. favorable/unfavorable 3. satisfactory/unsatisfactory 4. negative/positive 5. disliked/liked	MacKenzie and Lutz (1989)
Dependant variables		
Legitimacy	In regard to the COVID situation: the actions of the brand Nestlé are focused on: (Not at all = 1, Very important = 7) • Product-oriented concerns • Brand-oriented concerns • Customer-oriented concerns • Societal-oriented concerns	Edelman (2019)
Reputation	In regard to the COVID situation in your country, do you agree with the following statement regarding the brand Nestlé? (Strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 7) Customer orientation: Nestlé is concerned about its customers Financial strength: Nestlé appears to make financially sound decisions Good employer: Nestlé seems to treat its people well Product quality: Nestlé stands behind the products that it offers Social and environmental responsibility: Nestlé appears to support good causes	Fombrun et al. (2000), Walsh and Beatty (2007)
Mediating variables		
Trust	Please indicate your level of (dis)agreement regarding your relationship with the brand (strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 7) 1. I trust this brand 2. I rely on this brand 3. This is an honest brand 4. This brand is safe	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), Grohmann (2009)
Betrayal	Please indicate your level of (dis)agreement regarding your relationship with the brand (strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 7) 1. I (feel) betrayed by the brand 2. The brand broke (breaks) the promise made to me 3. The brand let me down in a moment of need	Grégoire and Fisher (2008), Grégoire et al. (2009)
Control variables		
Confinement (conf_1 and conf_2)	I am currently confined: 1 = yes and 2 = no I am currently working: 1 = yes and 2 = no	n/a
Covid	Do you personally know someone who is Covid-positive? 1. Yes 2. No 3. Do not know	n/a
Familiarity with the cause (FwCause)	1. Very familiar/very unfamiliar 2. Not at all informed/highly informed 3. Know a great deal/know nothing at all	Adapted from Oliver and Bearden (1985)
Familiarity with the brand (Brand_fam)	1. Familiar/unfamiliar 2. Recognized/did not recognize 3. Heard of/had not heard of	Adopted from Simonin and Ruth (1998)
Gender	Categorical variable 1 = Male–2 = Female	
Age	Continuous variable	n/a
Education (Edu)	Categorical variable 1. No degree 2. High school diploma 3. Undergraduate degree 4. Master's degree and above (i.e., PhD)	ISCED (2011) levels

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Variables	Items	Sources
Occupation (Occup)	Categorical variable 1. Agriculture 2. Self-employed 3. Higher level management 4. Middle level management 5. Employed 6. Worker 7. Retired 8. Others (i.e., students, unemployed)	ILO (2012)
Perceived financial situation (Fin)	7-point Likert scale 1–Difficult; 4–Moderate; 7–Well off	Almli et al. (2011)

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics, correlations between constructs and reliability.

	Mean	SD	Cronbach alpha	1	2	3	4	5
1. Att_fit	5.080	1.579	.8740					
2. Att_cb_all	5.964	1.275	.9411	.5908***				
3. Trust	4.160	1.554	.9174	.4284***	.3005***			
4. Betrayal	2.233	1.545	.8976	-.1180*	-.2820***	.0064		
5. Reputation	4.555	1.249	.8924	.4159***	.3630***	.7115***	-.0456	
6. Legitimacy	4.492	1.146	.6105	.2360***	.1795***	.4675***	.0417	.5552***

* $p < .05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

(89%), and most were not working (53%), whereas 47% pursued their professional activity. Most respondents were familiar with the cause and with the company, as they knew about COVID (5.1 on average, $SD = 1.35$) and the Nestlé brand (5.6 on average, $SD = 1.35$).

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables, as well as the correlation matrix. It also displays the reliability coefficient. The Cronbach's alpha scores indicated acceptable ranges for further statistical analysis (between .612 and .941).

To test the proposed hypothetical model, we used linear regressions to test hypotheses H1 and H2. We conducted statistical analyses using STATA 16.1. We created three models for each hypothesis. Model 1 includes the control variables, Model 2 includes the independent variables, and Model 3 includes all the variables (see Tables 3 and 4).

The results from Table 3 show that all three models were statistically significant overall ($F = 2.35, p = .017$; $F = 14.30, p = .000$; and $F = 84, p = 0.00$, respectively). In the base model (Model 1), all the control variables are not statistically significant except for gender and conf_2 ($p = .017$; $p = .002$). Both attitude toward the fit and attitude toward the cause brand alliance had a positive and significant influence on the perceived legitimacy of the consumer ($p = .007$ and $p = .058$, respectively) in Model 2. The full model, Model 3, had the greatest explanatory power, as it explained 11.25% of the variance. Attitude toward the fit in a cause-brand alliance and attitude toward the cause-brand alliance were statistically significant and had a positive effect ($p = .013$ and $p = .027$, respectively). Therefore, H1a and H2a were supported.

The results from Table 4 show that all three models were statistically significant overall ($F = 15.62, p = .000$; $F = 45.49, p = .000$; and $F = 18.48, p = 0.00$, respectively). In the base model (Model 1), conf_2, gender, and age are the three control variables that are statistically significant ($p = .016, p = .001$ and $p = .096$, respectively). In Model 2, both attitude toward the fit and attitude toward the cause brand alliance had a positive and significant influence on reputation ($p = .000$ and $p = .003$, respectively). Therefore, H1b and H2b were supported. The full model, Model 3, had the greatest explanatory power, as it explained 23.97% of the variance.

We conducted a simple mediation analysis with 5000 bootstrapped samples using Model 4 of the PROCESS SPSS macro (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) to test brand trust's mediating effect between attitude toward the cause-brand fit and legitimacy (H3a) and reputation (H3b), and between attitude toward the cause-brand alliance and legitimacy (H4a) and reputation (H4b). Table 5 displays the mediation results.

The results of the bootstrapping analysis showed that brand trust significantly mediated attitude toward the cause-brand fit's conditional indirect effect on legitimacy ($b = .145$, with a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval that excluded zero [.101, .192]), and reputation ($b = .229$, with a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval that excluded zero [.178, .287]). The results of the bootstrapping analysis also revealed that brand trust significantly mediated attitude toward the cause-brand alliance's conditional indirect effect on legitimacy ($b = .123$, with a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval that excluded zero [.078, .174]), and reputation ($b = .199$, with a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval that excluded zero [.135, .267]).

TABLE 3 Determinants of legitimacy.

Legitimacy	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	t (p value)	Coef.	t (p value)	Coef.	t (p value)
Conf_1	.206	.212			.242	.135
Conf_2	.340	.003			.289	.009
Covid	-.104	.154			-.124	.072
Gender	-.258	.017			-.285	.007
Age	.006	.303			.008	.144
Occup	-.032	.338			-.030	.361
Edu	-.001	.993			-.023	.706
Fin	.074	.115			.065	.145
Att_fit			.128	.007	.117	.013
Att_cb_all			.103	.058	.123	.027
Att_cb_all*Trust						
Att_fit*Trust						
Att_cb_all*Betrayal						
Att_fit*Betrayal						
_cons	3.929	.000	3.225	.000	2.740	.000
F	2.35		14.30		4.84	
Prob>F	.017		.000		.000	
R ²	.0441		.0676		.1125	

TABLE 4 Determinants of reputation.

Reputation	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	t (p value)	Coef.	t (p value)	Coef.	t (p value)
Conf_1	-.009	.960			.041	.817
Conf_2	.315	.016			.223	.052
Covid	-.024	.776			-.059	.428
Gender	-.376	.001			-.418	.000
Age	-.010	.096			-.006	.231
Occup	.007	.851			.013	.680
Edu	.053	.430			.013	.835
Fin	.000	.999			-.012	.758
Att_fit			.253	.000	.232	.000
Att_cb_all			.163	.003	.184	.001
Att_cb_all*Trust						
Att_fit*Trust						
Att_cb_all*Betrayal						
Att_fit*Betrayal						
_cons	4.844	.000	2.296	.000	2.796	.000
F	3.30		44.82		12.98	
Prob>F	.001		.000		.000	
R ²	.0596		.1909		.2397	

Overall, these findings suggest that brand trust mediated the effect of attitude toward the cause–brand fit and attitude toward the cause–brand alliance on legitimacy and reputation. Therefore, H3 (a, b) and H4 (a, b) were supported.

We tested the moderating effect of betrayal (H5 and H6) depicted in Table 6. We tested the hypothesis of whether the influence of a higher attitude toward the cause–brand fit on the likelihood of customer legitimacy and customer reputation is higher when

Variable/effect	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% confidence interval	
Att_fit → legit	.030	.033	.910	.363	-.035	.096
Att_fit → Trust	.431	.042	10.380	<.001	.349	.513
Att_fit → Trust → Legit	.337	.034	9.930	<.001	.270	.404
<i>Effects</i>						
Direct	.030	.033	.910	.363	-.035	.096
Indirect ^a	.145	.023			.101	.192
Total	.176	.033	5.311	<.001	.110	.241
Att_fit → Reput	.099	.028	3.469	<.001	.043	.155
Att_fit → Trust	.431	.041	10.381	<.001	.350	.513
Att_fit → Trust → Reput	.531	.029	18.331	<.001	.474	.588
<i>Effects</i>						
Direct	.099	.028	3.469	<.001	.043	.155
Indirect ^a	.229	.027			.178	.287
Total	.328	.034	9.470	<.001	.261	.395
Att_CBA → Legit	.070	.039	4.818	.069	-.005	.147
Att_CBA → Trust	.369	.055	6.761	<.001	.261	.476
Att_CBA → Trust → Legit	.333	.032	10.432	<.001	.270	.396
<i>Effects</i>						
Direct	.070	.039	4.818	.069	-.005	.147
Indirect ^a	.123	.025			.078	.174
Total	.193	.041	4.693	<.001	.113	.275
Att_CBA → Reput	.142	.033	4.290	<.001	.077	.207
Att_CBA → Trust	.369	.055	3.761	<.001	.261	.476
Att_CBA → Trust → Reput	.540	.027	19.895	<.001	.487	.593
<i>Effects</i>						
Direct	.142	.033	4.290	<.001	.077	.207
Indirect ^a	.199	.033			.135	.267
Total	.341	.043	7.909	<.001	.256	.426

^aBased on 5000 bootstrap samples.

betrayal increases. We are also interested in a strengthened positive influence of attitude toward the cause–brand alliance on the likelihood of customer legitimacy and customer reputation contingent on the variable betrayal.

As displayed in Tables 3 and 4, we first ran the normal regression models, including the control variables (Model 1). Then, we ran the model with the control variables and the independent variables, which highlighted the direct effects of attitude toward the cause–brand fit and attitude toward the cause–brand alliance on legitimacy and reputation, respectively. Then, a model that included the interaction term between the two variables (independent and moderator) for which there was a moderation hypothesis was tested. As displayed in Table 6, all models were statistically significant ($F=5.04, p=.000, F=4.56, p=.000, F=11.75, p=.000$, and $F=11.55, p=0.00$, respectively). Model 3 had the greatest explanatory power, as it explained 23.01% of the variance (vs. 12.13%, 11.62%, and 19.59% for Models 1, 2, and 4, respectively).

The results showed that with a more positive attitude toward the cause–brand, there was an even stronger effect on legitimacy

and reputation, even when perceived betrayal increased ($p=.063; p=.021$ for legitimacy and reputation, respectively). Hence, H5a and H5b were not supported, as the coefficients were positive (.043 and .053, respectively), as shown in Models 1 and 3 (Table 6). The positive effect on reputation and on the legitimacy of attitude toward the cause–brand alliance was not strengthened with greater perceived betrayal, as the coefficient was not statistically significant ($p=.643; p=.121$ for legitimacy and reputation, respectively), as shown in Models 2 and 4 (Table 6). Hence, H6a and H6b were not supported.

To better explicate the results, we next examined the effects at specific values of the variables. Overall, we analyzed the marginal effect of attitude toward the cause–brand fit and of attitude toward the cause–brand alliance at different values of legitimacy and reputation. To this end, we repeated the command for all levels of the interaction terms, and then we used the post-estimation command “margins” on STATA. This helped check the marginal effect or effect size of each particular level of the independent variable. Lastly, we plotted the interaction term using the margin plot command. Each

TABLE 5 Mediating effect of trust.

TABLE 6 Moderating effect of betrayal.

	Legitimacy				Reputation			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 3	
	Coef.	t (p value)	Coef.	t (p value)	Coef.	t (p value)	Coef.	t (p value)
Conf_1	.133	.390	.227	.152	-.071	.664	.069	.702
Conf_2	.275	.013	.297	.008	.210	.071	.243	.044
Covid	-.113	.103	-.118	.086	-.047	.542	-.051	.504
Gender	-.254	.015	-.298	.005	-.378	.000	-.449	.000
Age	.010	.072	.008	.162	-.005	.386	-.008	.149
Occup	-.014	.651	-.029	.366	.027	.392	.000	.987
Edu	-.006	.917	.005	.931	.020	.749	.038	.557
Fin	.057	.191	.049	.279	-.015	.702	-.035	.402
Att_fit	.082	.192			.197	.002		
Att_cb_all			.206	.018			.273	.003
Betrayal	-.136	.281	.041	.781	-.237	.063	-.161	.303
Att_fit * bet	.043	.063			.053	.021		
Att_cb_all * bet			.012	.643			.041	.121
_cons	3.400	.000	2.599	.000	3.929	.000	3.390	.000
F	5.04		4.56		11.75		11.55	
Prob>F	.000		.000		.000		.000	
R ²	.1213		.1162		.2301		.1959	

of the four graphs confirmed the results from Hypotheses 5 and 6. Nevertheless, they offer a fine-grained perspective, as we particularly assess potential differences at each confidence interval, as displayed in Figure 2. This figure presents evidence of the marginal effect of attitude toward the cause–brand fit and of attitude toward the cause–brand alliance. The figure clearly shows that at higher levels of attitude toward the cause–brand fit and of attitude toward the cause–brand alliance, customers with high levels of perceived betrayal will grant a greater level of legitimacy and reputation.

5 | DISCUSSION, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 | Discussion

This study investigates why customers challenge the legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) and reputation (Fombrun et al., 2000) of brands engaging in CRM campaigns during the COVID-19 outbreak.

5.1.1 | Direct effects

In addressing the main research objectives, the findings show a direct positive and significant effect of both cause–brand fit (Yang & Mundel, 2021) and cause–brand alliance (Lafferty, 2007, 2009) on legitimacy (Hypothesis 1) and reputation (Hypothesis 2). Our study shows that a favorable attitude toward the cause–brand fit and toward

the cause–brand alliance plays a significant role for customers to confer legitimacy and reputation to organizations engaging in CRM activities during the first wave of the pandemic and the first COVID-19 lockdown. This study emphasizes the general importance of CRM initiatives implemented by companies to gain economic and societal support from their main stakeholders—their customers—in a pandemic context.

Among the portfolio of available CRM tools, the results contribute to past research that underscores the need to further analyze the antecedents of legitimacy and reputation, and to past work calling for new studies to further illuminate cause–brand fit and cause–brand alliance positive outcomes. As such, CRM initiatives, being strong image builders (Schamp et al., 2022), should nourish and further strengthen legitimacy and reputation as basic requirements for customer support.

5.1.2 | Indirect effects

This study also analyzes the role of trust and betrayal as psychological drivers of customers' reputational and legitimacy judgments (Chen et al., 2020). Based on our theoretical framework, we conclude that in the pandemic context, trust plays a mediating role between CRM initiatives and customer support. From the empirical results, we can conclude that even though legitimacy and reputation are very distinct concepts, they share a strong customer orientation. Such support also persists in chaotic times, as encountered during the first lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic. It could even be argued that the pandemic could have increased skepticism (Deb & Amawate, 2020) or created a trust crisis among customers, and

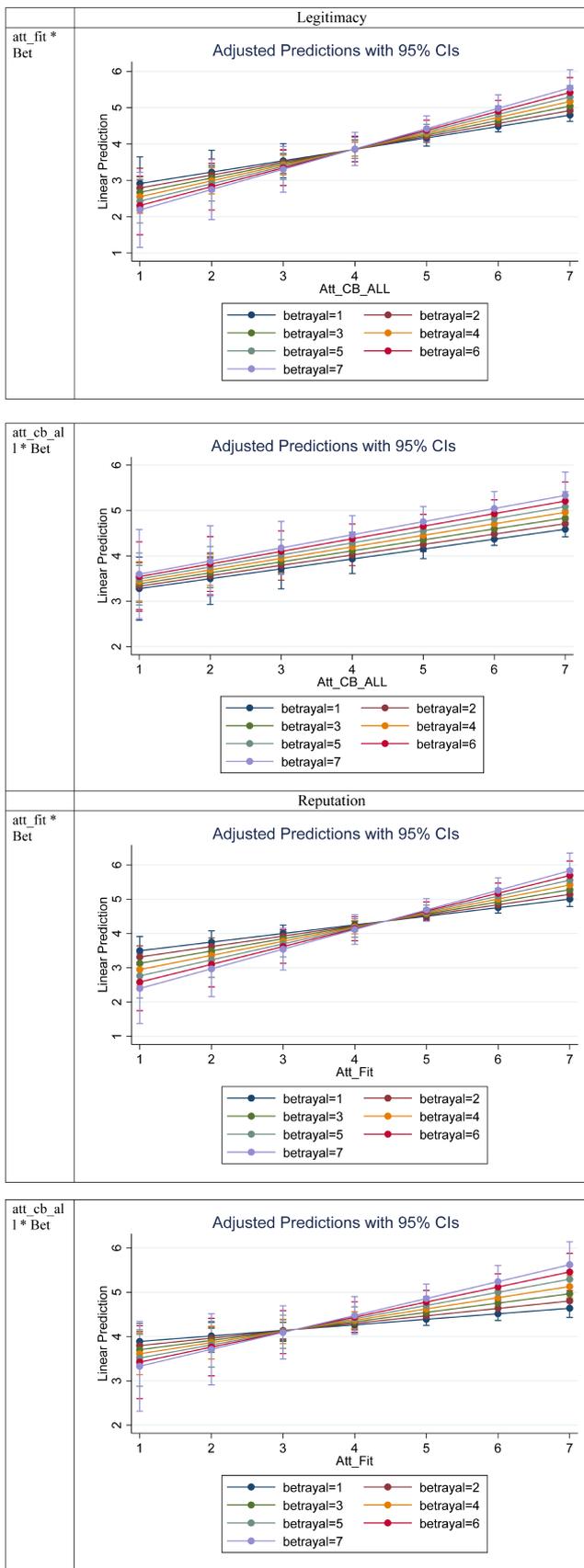


FIGURE 2 Moderating role of betrayal.

negatively challenged the societal and economic support toward firms engaging in CRM activities. Thus, the results confirm the theoretical findings that suggest that low cause–brand fit and low cause–brand alliance might be perceived as abusive marketing tools (i.e., Chéron et al., 2012). During the COVID-19 period, characterized by high levels of stress and anxiety, customers sought reliable and secure brands, praising their sincerity signals (Schamp et al., 2022). The trust issue has become paramount for customers to confer legitimacy and reputation (Hypotheses 3 and 4).

Our last objective in this article is to enhance our understanding of the role of betrayal with respect to CRM initiatives and to add nuance to earlier research. Indeed, hypotheses 5 and 6 were not supported. Counterintuitively, the results show a positive moderating influence of betrayal. In particular, the findings indicate that with greater levels of betrayal, cause–brand fit brings reputation, and cause–brand alliance brings legitimacy. Consequently, in times of extreme stress and anxiety, regardless of the level of betrayal, customers will continue to provide economic support and societal support to firms that engage in CRM activities. Such behavior can be explained mainly as a kind of decoupling (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Orth et al., 2019). Due to the particular COVID-19 context and the lockdown, customers have chosen to dissociate their personal negative perception (betrayal) of marketing activities (CRM) and the overall economic and societal support they confer to the very same firms.

5.2 | Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to different streams of the literature. First, although past work has mainly analyzed the marketing outcomes of CRM initiatives, this study offers broader outcomes. Indeed, the results of this study extend the CRM literature by uncovering their economic and societal effects (reputation and legitimacy, respectively) (Rego et al., 2021; Woo et al., 2020). Even though past studies have shown that reputation and legitimacy ensure the firms' sustainable development through appropriate CSR initiatives (Du & Vieira, 2012), we found that cause–brand fit and cause–brand alliance have a greater impact on reputation in comparison to their influence on legitimacy.

Second, the findings enrich the institutional literature. In particular, we use the customer perspective as a pertinent level of analysis. Whereas most studies have simultaneously analyzed reputation and legitimacy through organizational lenses, we herein adopt a micro-institutional-level approach (Xie et al., 2017) to analyze how a particular audience confers legitimacy and reputation in extreme contexts. This study is also among the first to consider cause–brand fit and cause–brand alliance as means of bringing customer-based reputation and legitimacy (Thomas et al., 2020). Overall, among the existing portfolio of tools, CRM represents a new perspective for organizations to obtain the societal support necessary for their survival and to conduct their economic activities.

Third, the study unveils additional underlying mechanisms (i.e., trust and betrayal) that either enhance or endanger CRM campaigns (He & Harris, 2020). Although recent work has examined the trust concept in marketing (Khamitov et al., 2019), only a few studies have examined the particular role of betrayal (Bayarassou et al., 2020), and even fewer have combined the two in a single study (Reimann et al., 2018). Firms can reach legitimacy and reputations using CRM initiatives through trust. However, the findings showed no support for betrayal as a moderator. Hence, we unravel the complex and intertwined links between the two concepts.

Finally, this study contributes to the current research on customers' perceptions of CRM initiatives in the COVID-19 context. It represents one of the most severe pandemics, changing the way businesses operate (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020) and consumers behave (Partouche-Sebban et al., 2022). The results enrich past studies that analyzed cause–brand fit and alliance in extreme environments faced with high uncertainty, stress, and anxiety. During the lockdown, firms did not only seek increased sales and profits but, first, and foremost, societal support from their customers by deploying responsible CRM activities (Magni et al., 2022).

5.3 | Implications for practitioners

The study's findings also have managerial implications for brand managers implementing CRM campaigns or strengthening their brand–consumer relationships through such initiatives during global pandemics. CRM should be viewed as more than a mere posture in an outbreak context, such as COVID-19, affecting the world at all the economic and social levels and hitting consumers as well. As such, CRM initiatives were strongly expected and desired by this group of stakeholders (Carroll, 2021), and not responding well to such a global crisis would be unforgivable for brands (Guttman, 2020).

Global brands still need to consider cause–brand fit in their CRM messages. Such messages should be clearly articulated and explicit, displaying in a transparent and sincere manner the benefits of CRM campaigns for the global cause (Schamp et al., 2022). Providing customers with clear facts about the cause–brand fit and alliance may allow them to better process the information and hence work on fostering cognitive-based legitimacy (Chen et al., 2020). Brand managers may also clearly state the reasons for their cause–brand alliance and how their CRM initiatives are the “right thing to do” during global pandemic periods to strengthen moral legitimacy (Giacomini et al., 2021).

Trust remains paramount for brand legitimacy and reputation in pandemic times. It is a genuine vehicle for showing brands' altruism in their CRM campaigns (Woo et al., 2020). Brand managers designing CRM initiatives need to consider the way customers perceive brands' motivations in making an alliance with the global cause. To this end, managers may think about setting up a trust barometer to monitor whether their CRM initiatives are fostering brand trust, and to check for possible negative reputation signals and legitimacy concerns.

6 | CONCLUDING REMARKS, LIMITATIONS, AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Thus far, cause-related marketing as an antecedent of customer-based legitimacy and reputation has drawn limited scholarly attention. This study also includes the role of trust and betrayal in analyzing CRM in the pandemic context. The COVID-19 pandemic has led many consumers to reconsider their priorities and behaviors inherent in increased stress and extreme anxiety, especially throughout the first lockdown. The results show positive societal and economic outcomes for CRM initiatives. The findings also support the key role of trust in such a context. Surprisingly, despite some perception of betrayal, customers still granted high levels of reputation and legitimacy to firms engaging in CRM campaigns.

This study suffers from some limitations that also represent avenues for future research. First, future work could include fine-grained dimensions of CRM. For instance, the theoretical background could further investigate the reputational and legitimating role of promotion versus prevention CRM messages (Partouche-Sebban et al., 2022), and of marketing, organizational (Christofi et al., 2015), and responsible innovation (Magni et al., 2022) on CRM success. Future studies could also consider different CRM initiatives to test the hypotheses. Indeed, scenarios could compare different brands (i.e., local vs. global) and different products (i.e., low vs. high involvement). Finally, a longitudinal analysis could be undertaken to compare the results from the first lockdown and the results after the different waves of the pandemic or after specific vaccination waves.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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