

## Exploring Generation Z's Skepticism Towards Cause-Related Marketing: Understanding the antecedents and consequences

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**Quote as:** Kozłowski, W. (2024). Exploring Generation Z's Skepticism Towards Cause-Related Marketing: Understanding the Antecedents and Consequences. *Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu*, 68(2), 106-116.

DOI: 10.15611/pn.2024.2.09

JEL: D01, D64, M14, M31

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**Abstract:** Although cause-related marketing (CRM) is being increasingly applied, little is known about GenZ skepticism. This study aimed to understand the antecedents and consequences of skepticism towards CRM offers among GenZ consumers. Quantitative research was used to test the conceptual model using structural equation model (SEM). The analysis confirmed the proposed hypothesis. The author's findings provide empirical evidence that altruism and the perceived company's motivation negatively affect skepticism toward a CRM campaign. This study further proves the effect of consumer skepticism on purchase intention. As skepticism increases, the willingness to buy cause-related products decreases. The findings are relevant for both scholars and marketers. Scientists will be enriched with knowledge about the prosocial behaviour of Generation Z. From a managerial perspective, this research could help practitioners to design CRM campaigns effectively. To the best of the author's knowledge, no such study has been conducted in the context of Poland.

**Keywords:** skepticism; cause-related marketing (CRM); GenZ

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### 1. Introduction

Cause-related marketing (CRM) concerns corporate donation and social responsibility (Chen and Huang, 2016, p. 868). Varadarajan and Menon defined CRM as "... 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". Cause-related marketing benefits companies, NPOs, charitable causes, individuals, and society. Although it has an attribute of altruistic donors supporting a social cause, it is important to acknowledge that a CRM campaign stands for a marketing-driven strategy (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988, p. 60, 69).

In cause-related marketing, understanding the target audience is extremely important. One way to analyse consumer behaviour is to study the generational cohort to which they belong. Generational theory signals that the era in which individuals are born and live about the same time influences the formation of their view of the world (Codrington, 2008, p. 2). Williams and Page (2014) stated that each generation has its unique characteristics, including expectations, lifestyles, and values that influence their purchasing decisions. Therefore, marketers need to create various CRM strategies suitable for the characteristics of each generation, especially in terms of advertising content (social cause supported by the company and donation size) and marketing communication.

This study focused on Generation Z, namely people born between 1995 and 2010, an important target market for socially responsible companies and non-profit organizations. The results of Narayan's study proves that GenZ cohort values and is willing to reward corporate social responsibility practices. GenZ consumers are more willing to pay more and buy brands from socially engaged companies (Narayanan, 2022), however they may also be skeptical about socially engaged companies (Thomas et al., 2022). Skepticism is defined as a person's tendency to doubt, disbelieve, and question the truth of something (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013, p. 1832).

In recent years, consumer skepticism about various areas of CSR has attracted increasing scientific attention. Between 1998 and 2021, the results of 89 studies were published, of which 25% focused on green marketing skepticism, 45% on CSR skepticism, and 30% on cause-related marketing skepticism (Nguyen et al., 2023, pp. 2-4). Previous studies show that skepticism significantly determines consumers' affective attitudes and behavioural intentions (Silva et al., 2021, p. 340). Its source may be disbelief in the claim, the perceived motives of the company, the truth of the promised benefits and results, and the company's sincerity (Mimouni and Parquel, 2016, p. 610). Despite the prevalence of consumer skepticism, there is little research on the determinants and consequences of Generation Z's skepticism of cause-related marketing, especially in relation to Poland (Nguyen et al., 2023, p. 5). This study defines skepticism as the extent to which a consumer doubts the effectiveness of CRM campaigns (Mimouni and Parquel, 2016, p. 610). This economic interpretation of skepticism is consistent with the view of Müller et al. (2014, pp. 188, 193), stating that CRM campaigns should be designed so consumers do not doubt that the donation will help those in need.

The study aimed to understand the antecedents and consequences of skepticism toward CRM offers among Polish Generation Z consumers. The research questions are as follows: *What is the relation between the altruistic attitudes of GenZ consumers and their skepticism towards CRM? What is the relation between perceived organizational motives for taking socially responsible action and Gen Z's skepticism about CRM? Does GenZ's skepticism affect the willingness to buy cause-related products?* In answering these questions, this article sheds light on the role of skepticism in the prosocial behaviour of GenZ consumers. Additionally, understanding the antecedents of skepticism can help business managers craft efficient CRM strategies to invite favourable GenZ consumer responses.

## **2. Conceptual Background and Hypothesis Development**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

Different theories have been used to explain prosocial consumer behaviour in the context of CSR skepticism. This study relied on value theory and attribution theory. Nguyen et al. (2023) stated that Schwartz's theory of human value has been neglected in research, although it has enormous potential to study the impact of culture on CSR skepticism, and attribution theory is the most widely used in the

study of consumer skepticism (Nguyen et al., 2023, pp. 6-7). Both altruism and a company's perceived motivation for launching CRM campaigns play an important role in consumer decision-making. Thus, these theories were used to understand how altruism and consumers' attribution of company motives affect their assessment of the effectiveness of cause-related marketing campaigns.

Socially responsible consumer behaviour is strongly related to personal values (Lee and Cho, 2019, p. 125, Kropp et al., 1998, pp. 71-72). Schwartz (2009, p. 223) suggested that they are considered when choosing or evaluating an individual's decision to take social action. Referring to Schwartz's value theory, people who appreciate self-transcendence values (benevolence and universalism) are more willing to donate to causes than those who value self-enhancement values (power and achievement). Buying cause-related products links benevolence values with altruism. Altruistic behaviour is an action that is "voluntary, intended to help another person, driven by this motivation to help the other person [...] and is benevolent, meaning that there is no intention of harming other persons during the process of helping (Rodrigues and Hweig, 2021, p. 22). It is assumed that the more altruistic consumers are, the more positive they are about CRM campaigns.

Socially responsible consumer behaviour is also strongly linked to perceived organizational motives for undertaking socially responsible activities. Research suggests that consumer responses to cause-related marketing campaigns vary depending on the CRM motives the consumer attribute to the company. This can be explained by the attribution theory (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006, p. 47; Chen and Chiu, 2018, p. 31). According to Moharam et al. (2020, p. 21), attribution refers to the psychological and cognitive processes used to find the cause of observed behavior. In this study, attribution theory provides a conceptual basis for understanding people's attributions about why a company engages in cause-related marketing programmes and their impact on skepticism towards CRM. It is assumed that negative consumer beliefs about the company's motives show the perceived inauthenticity of cause-related programmes and can lead to consumers' adverse reactions, including CRM skepticism.

## 2.2. Hypothesis

Altruists are willing to devote their time, energy, and money to improve the well-being of others and contribute to society (Kifle and Adarkwah, 2022, p. 4). Although both egoistic and altruistic values may affect consumers' willingness to buy products supporting social causes, CRM blends consumer purchases with altruism (Adomaviciute et al., 2016). Studies confirm that people who appreciate altruistic values have favourable attitudes toward cause-related marketing programmes (e.g. Baek et al., 2020; Lee and Kim, 2016).

Altruists may also be skeptical of CRM campaigns. Zasuwa (2016, p. 3714) argued that consumers with altruistic values believe that supporting social causes is not a natural activity of companies, hence they do not accept cause-related marketing campaigns by perceptually profit-driven companies. Mimouni and Parquel claim that donation size impacts the skepticism of altruists. They showed that skepticism toward CRM campaigns with a large donation is higher for individuals with low levels of altruism (Mimouni and Parquel, 2016, p. 607). Based on self-perception theory, Gneezy et al. (2012, pp. 179, 185) suggest that prosocial behaviour that is personally costly is a signal of the consumer social behaviour, and therefore, the consumer will be more likely to behave prosocially. In contrast to the *costly CRM* campaign, altruistic individuals who engage in the *costless CRM* programme may not be motivated to donate to the social cause because they do not perceive costless social behaviour as a manifestation of their prosocial identity. In this case, the purchase of cause-related products is not associated with additional costs incurred by the buyer, expressed in the higher price of the product (Zasuwa, 2016; Gneezy et al., 2012,). From the above, it can be hypothesised that:

**H1:** Consumer altruism relates negatively to GenZ's skepticism about CRM programmes.

According to Becker-Olsen et al. (2006, pp. 47-48), perceived organizational motivation may affect consumers' attitudes toward companies and their social initiatives. They can be classified into two

categories, i.e. firm-serving and public-serving motives (Kim and Lee, 2012, p. 168). Firm-serving attributions (egoistic, negative motivation) refer to the consumer's belief that companies engage in social activities to obtain business benefits (e.g. increasing sales or profits). Public-serving attributions (altruistic, positive motivation) refer to the consumer's belief that the company undertakes social activities to benefit those in need (e.g. to help needy citizens and raise the consciousness of a given cause) (Zasuwa, 2019, p. 979). Contrary to egoistic motivation, consumers positively perceive public-serving motives because they show the company's altruism and increased societal interest.

Ellen et al. (2006) examined four motives behind CSR efforts, i.e. driven by value, egoistic, strategic and stakeholder-driven. They found that value attributes are the most conducive to positive consumer evaluation and willingness to buy. In Kim and Lee's (2012) classification, value-based motives were considered as public-serving attributions, whilst Skarmeas and Leonidou (2016, p. 1833) stated that consumers are unquestionably inclined to accept and support social initiatives in the presence of attributions of benevolence-motivating giving. Their research proves that values-driven motives are associated negatively with skepticism toward CSR and have more impact than other motives. Thus, in this study, consumer attribution of the company's motive to launch a CRM programme was defined in terms of value-driven motives, which are regarded as "beliefs that companies engage in social actions purely because of their public-serving, ethical, and moral motives" (Chen and Chiu, 2018, p. 32). It can be concluded that consumers' doubts about a company's altruistic motivation to use CRM programmes can be a significant obstacle affecting their effectiveness. In light of the above discussion, the following hypothesis was suggested:

**H2:** Consumer positive perception of the company's motivation relates negatively to GenZ's skepticism about CRM programmes.

Rego et al. (2020) indicated that improvements in brand attitudes and purchase intention measure the success of a CRM campaign. Purchase intention is the consumer's willingness to buy a certain product in a given condition (Silva et al., 2021, p. 341), which can be influenced by price or perceived value changes and customers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, beliefs, and attitudes.

Previous studies show that skepticism results in a negative impact on consumers' attitudes toward firms implementing cause-related marketing, which in turn affects their purchase intention (cf. Amawate and Deb, 2021; Ellen, et al., 2006; Essam and Mahrous, 2019; Fan et al., 2020; Webb and Mohr, 1998). Obermeyer et al. (2006) argued that consumers vary in their level of skepticism. Consumers with a high degree of skepticism are more distrustful of advertising claims and will respond less positively to cause-related marketing than consumers with low levels of skepticism (Webb and Mohr, 1998, p. 236). Regarding GenZ, their social behaviour can be influenced by companies engaged in CSR activities (Wong, 2021). This group of consumers is more concerned about environmental and social issues and tends to be less skeptical of CRM programmes than the previous generation (Casalegno et al., 2022, p. 1010). Research by Thomas et al. (2022) showed that lower GenZ skepticism towards a CRM campaign would lead to higher CRM participation. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H3:** The lower the skepticism about CRM programmes, the higher the purchase intention in Generation Z.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1. Study Design

The author developed an online survey for the proposed model (Figure 1) to examine the hypotheses. The questionnaire was available in January 2022. Since the target respondents were Generation Z, online survey distribution was more convenient and easier to apply, as well as the fastest and most efficient way to get data.

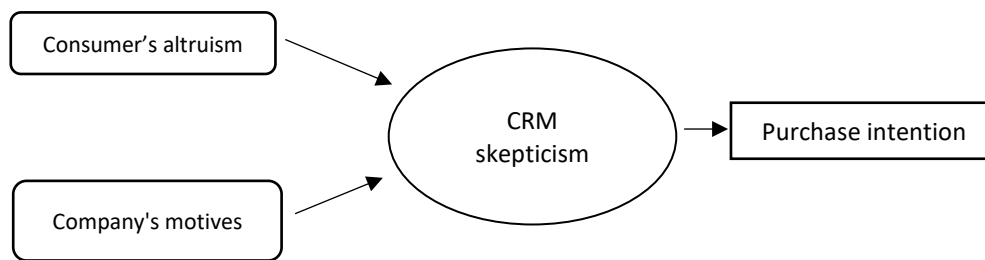


Fig. 1. The proposed conceptual model.

Source: own work.

### 3.2. Sample

Since this study is focused only on GenZ, the age variable was used as a control variable. In total, 421 participants completed the questionnaire, of which 68 were excluded from the analysis due to missing values or not belonging to the Z cohort. The final data set held 353 observations. The participants were recruited through a nonprobability convenience sampling technique.

The sample GenZ consumers comprised 70.25% females. The educational level of more than half of the respondents is a Master's/Bachelor's degree (58.4%). The monthly income of most of the survey participants was below 4,000.00 PLN (60.34%), and the majority of them lived in households of 3 or 4 people (43.34%). Finally, Generation Z is socially engaged, with 76.20% of GenZ consumers having donated money to charity, and 67% buying cause-related products in the last 12 months.

Regarding the sample size, the author followed recommendations from Malhorta (2016, p. 699), who suggested that the minimum sample size for a structural model containing 5 or fewer constructs, each with more than 3 measured variables, and communalities of 0.5 and more, is at least 200. Given the suggested condition, the GenZ sample is adequate.

### 3.3. Questionnaire and Measures

At the beginning of the questionnaire, the respondent was informed about the aim of the study. Next, the concept of CRM was explained, and examples of companies' cause activities were given. Then, the respondent was asked to rate statements relating to the four constructs, i.e. purchase intention, company's motives, consumer's altruism, and skepticism about the CRM campaign. The final part of the questionnaire contained questions related to the socioeconomic characteristics of the sample.

All the construct measures were taken from the relevant literature, then translated into Polish and modified to suit better the context of this study. This study employed a Likert-type scale. The respondents wrote down their level of agreement with the statements on a 7-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" = 1 to "strongly agree" = 7. The construct of purchase intention was derived from Hou et al. (2008) and consisted of six items. Value-driven motives proposed by Ellen et al. (2006) were used to assess the company's perceived motivation to enter a cause-related marketing campaign. This construct was assessed using a five-item scale. Consumer altruism with four items was followed the work of Schwartz (1992). Finally, the scale used by Müller et al. (2014) was adopted to measure skepticism. Originally, it consisted of five positive-meaning statements. They were transformed into negative-meaning statements (e.g. "I believe the money collected during the CRM campaign reaches the needy persons → I don't believe that it reaches needy persons").

To assess the measures, a pretest was conducted among thirty students of Generation Z. The results did not reveal any problems referring to the response formats and measures. All the items showed acceptable reliability that exceeded the threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). The average Cronbach's alpha for the construct was as follows: consumer altruism = .87, companies' motives = .937, skepticism toward the CRM campaign = .862, and purchase intention = .871.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were processed through IBB's SPSS 26 and AMOS 28 graphics software.

The first step was to check the reliability and validity of the measure scales and the sampling adequacy of the four constructs. As shown in Table 1, the model variables fulfilled the minimum values of indices recommended by Shrestha (2021, pp. 5-6). All the standardized and average scale item loading exceeded the recommended minimum values, respectively 0.6 and 0.7. Regarding internal consistency constructs, Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) scores were higher than the minimum threshold of 0.7, and all the AVE (average extracted variance) were greater than 0.5. The reliability analysis revealed that each construct's CR (composite reliability) was above the acceptable threshold level (0.7). Regarding sampling adequacy, the variables showed a KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test) higher than the minimum threshold of 0.80.

Table 1. Measurement model results

Construct	Item	Factor loading	Loading average	$\alpha$	CR	AVE	KMO
Consumer's altruism	A1	.824	.862	.883	.921	.746	.819
	A2	.911					
	A3	.911					
	A4	.803					
Company's motives	SMV1	.807	.835	.891	.920	.698	.862
	SMV2	.848					
	SMV3	.850					
	SMV4	.819					
	SMV5	.852					
Skepticism	S1	.857	.798	.854	.899	.644	.843
	S2	.746					
	S3	.654					
	S4	.879					
	S5	.853					
Purchase Intention	PI1	.726	.735	.824	.876	.541	.828
	PI2	.800					
	PI3	.742					
	PI4	.678					
	PI5	.758					
	PI6	.705					

Source: own work.

Table 2. Model fit results

Measures	Name of Index	Reference value (Jain and Chetty 2022)	Default model
Absolute fit indices	CMIN ( $\chi^2/df$ )	< 5	2.364
	GFI	> .90	.992
	RMSA	< .10	.062
	SRMR	< .08	.076
Incremental fit indices	NFI	> .90	.901
	CFI	> .90	.940
	TLI	> .90	.931
	IFI	> .90	.940
Parsimonious fit indices	PCFI	> .50	.821
	PNFI	> .50	.787

Source: own work.

The next step consisted of evaluating the model fit. As shown in Table 2, the measurement model results provided an acceptable fit to the data. Finally, structural equation modeling was employed to evaluate the hypothesis. The structural model was run in AMOS using the likelihood discrepancy function. The definite model was composed of four constructs and twenty observed variables.

### 4. Results and discussion

Table 3 reveals the results of the relations of the hypotheses paths. *H1* posits that GenZ consumer’s altruism was negatively related to CRM skepticism, which was significant ( $\beta = -.232$ , C.R. = -3.965). *H2* proposes that the company’s motivation to run a cause campaign was negatively related to CRM skepticism, which was also significant ( $\beta = -.464$ , C.R. = -7.290). Consistently with *H3*, the impact of skepticism about CRM programs on the purchase intention of the cause-related product was supported ( $\beta = -.606$ , C.R. = -8.948).

Table 3. Sample path analysis (default model)

Hypothesis relations	Stand. structural coefficients	S.E.	C.R.	P label	Outcome
H1: Consumer’s altruism → Skepticism towards CRM programme	-.232	.065	-3.965	< .001	supported
H2: Company’s motivation → Skepticism towards CRM programme	-.464	.059	-7.290	< .001	supported
H3: Skepticism to CRM programme → Purchase Intention	-.606	.059	-8.948	< .001	supported

Source: own work.

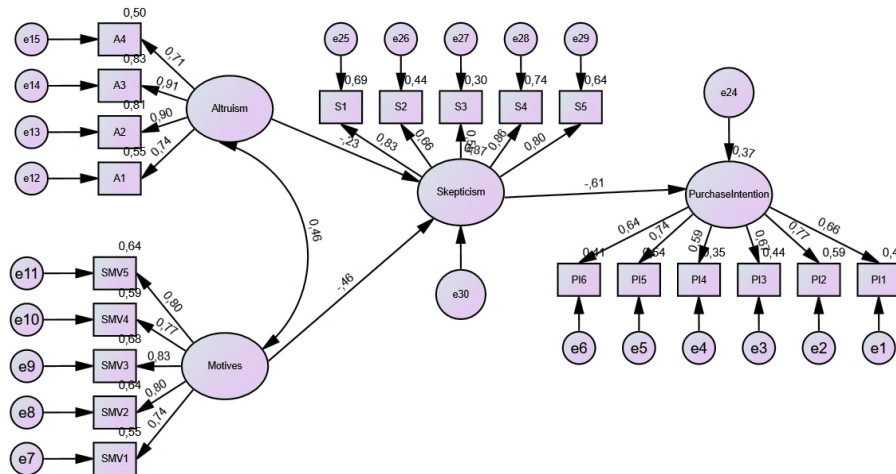


Fig 2. Results of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

Source: own work.

An important outcome of this study is the highly significant correlation between the skepticism toward CRM campaigns and the purchase intentions of Generation Z consumers. Generally, these findings are consistent with predictions that skepticism has a direct negative effect on the purchase intentions of cause-related products (cf. Fan et al., 2022; Rego and Hamilton, 2021; Essam and Mahrous, 2019; Web and Mohr, 1998). Considering Generation Z, research by Pandey et al. (2020) showed that positive attitudes toward CRM initiatives result in their greater purchase intentions. The findings of Thomas et al. (2022) provide evidence that skepticism negatively affects GenZ consumers’ CRM luxury campaign participation.

According to Youn and Kim (2008), consumers are doubtful of the company's altruistic motivation to launch CRM programmes that will affect their effectiveness. The expected impact of altruistic motivational attribution on GenZ consumer skepticism toward CRM was confirmed in this study. Researchers have already pointed out the importance of perceiving the company's motives for consumer response to social initiatives. For instance, Zhang et al. (2020), and Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013) showed that value-driven attribution inhibits skepticism toward social initiatives. Barone et al. (2000, pp. 249, 259) stated that consumers who perceive company motives to engage in CRM as cause/altruistic-oriented have more willingness to accept cause-related campaigns than consumers who perceive company motives as business/egoistic-oriented.

Studies have also explored the effect of altruism attitudes on CRM skepticism. According to Kozłowski and Rutkowska (2015, p. 1521), altruism is "a key personality feature, which reorients the consumer from an egoistic to a socially oriented behaviour." An analysis of the relation between the variables confirms the role of altruistic value in the perceived effectiveness of cause-related marketing. Studies consistently demonstrate that individuals prioritising self-transcendence values are less skeptical of CSR initiatives and tend to engage in more prosocial behavior than those prioritising self-enhancement values (cf. Baek et al., 2020; Lee and Kim, 2016).

## 5. Conclusion

To the best of the author's knowledge, the presented study is the first to examine the skepticism of Polish GenZ consumers towards cause-related marketing. Therefore, this study contributes to the research in this area.

The paper attempts to understand the impact of dispositional factors on skepticism and its outcomes. Studies have found that a company's positive motivation and consumers' altruistic values decrease Generation Z's skepticism toward CRM. The findings also revealed that skepticism plays a significant role in the behavioural attitudes of GenZ consumers. As skepticism increases, the willingness to buy cause-related products decreases. From this perspective, to reduce consumer skepticism toward CRM, companies may adopt a high cause-brand fit strategy (Elving, 2013, pp. 1, 14), chose social causes carefully based on their businesses and reputation and GenZ expectations (Zhang et al., 2020, p. 13) as well as communicate the integration of socially responsible practices with a core business orientation. This would increase the familiarity and credibility of the CRM campaign and the likelihood of donating among those consumers. Companies may also emphasise the communication of CSR policies that refer to value-based motivations (Skarmeas and Leonidu, 2013, p. 1836), which may also lead to the improvement of the altruistic attitudes of Generation Z consumers.

In the context of the significant role of marketing communication, an important characteristic of Generation Z is their innate use of digital technologies. This is the first generation to grow up with the Internet, and extremely 'online' in using social media (*What is GenZ?*, 2023). Thus, leveraging social media in cause-related marketing initiatives can be highly effective for reaching GenZ's audience and reducing their level of skepticism towards CRM. Businesses can use them to inform transparency about their social initiatives and increase consumer awareness, share purpose-driven cause messages, engage with customers, and celebrate achievements of cause marketing efforts. Marketers need to implement cause-related marketing initiatives more effectively by designing social media communication with a youth-centric approach. This means that there is a need to consider preferences, aesthetics, and communication styles that resonate positively with GenZ. Companies should create content that educates Generation Z about the importance of the cause and the need for support, and can use a story-telling and visual content approach to evoke emotions and highlight the impact of CRM initiatives. To reduce consumer skepticism, the company can also collaborate with influencers who genuinely care about the cause highlighted in the CRM campaign and having credibility with Generation Z. Additionally, e-surveys can be used to gather feedback on CRM initiatives and engage the GenZ audience in decision-making processes to choose a social cause and donation size.



The author acknowledges the limitations of the study, the first being related to the attendance. The scope of this study is limited to altruism and value-driven motives, hence there is room for more studies. Further research could investigate how the fit between a brand and a cause, customer involvement level, perception of the company's image and non-profit organization as well as product type, and donation size influence GenZ's skepticism toward CRM. The second limitation is related to the extent to which consumers' skepticism was investigated. For this study, the definition of skepticism was restricted to doubts about the perceived effectiveness of cause-related marketing. This perspective of skepticism is not widely acknowledged, as skepticism is mostly associated with marketing communication claims. As a result, limited number of studies have been conducted on this topic, such as Chabane and Parquele (2016) and Müller et al. (2014), therefore further research is required to validate the present study's findings.

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## Sceptycyzm pokolenia Z względem marketingu społecznie zaangażowanego: przyczyny i skutki

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**Streszczenie:** Marketing społecznie zaangażowany jest coraz częściej praktykowany, jednakże niewiele jest wiadomo na temat sceptycyzmu pokolenia Z. Celem badań jest zrozumienie przyczyn i konsekwencji sceptycyzmu wobec programów CRM wśród Z konsumentów. Badania ilościowe wykorzystano do przetestowania modelu koncepcyjnego za pomocą modelu równań strukturalnych (SEM). Wszystkie hipotezy zostały potwierdzone. Badania dostarczają empirycznych dowodów na to, że altruizm konsumencki i postrzegana motywacja firmy negatywnie wpływają na sceptycyzm wobec kampanii CRM. Ponadto pokazują jego wpływ na intencję zakupu konsumentów pokolenia Z. Wraz ze wzrostem sceptycyzmu zmniejsza się ich skłonność do nabycia produktów wspierających sprawę społeczną. Wyniki badań są istotne zarówno dla akademików, jak i praktyków. Pracownicy naukowci zostaną wzbogaceni o wiedzę na temat prospołecznych zachowań pokolenia Z. Natomiast praktykom badania pomogłyby skutecznie projektować kampanie marketingu społecznie zaangażowanego. Według wiedzy autora w Polsce nie przeprowadzono podobnych badań.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sceptycyzm, marketing społecznie zaangażowany, pokolenie Z

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