


## Article

# Enhancing the Effectiveness of Cause-Related Marketing: Visual Style, Self-Construal, and Consumer Responses

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**Abstract:** The visual presentation of cause-related marketing (CRM) messages is gaining increasing attention from researchers and practitioners. This study delves into the impact of the visual style of CRM messages on consumer responses and the moderating role of self-construal. The results demonstrate that visual style has a significant effect on consumer responses, as cause-focused messages engender a higher brand attitude and purchase intention than product-focused messages (Studies 1 and 2). Meanwhile, the effects of visual style on both consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention are mediated by the perceived self-serving motives. Importantly, self-construal moderates the relationship between visual style and consumer responses (Study 2). Cause-focused messages lead to enhanced brand attitudes and purchase intentions than product-focused messages by reducing the perceived self-serving motives for consumers with an interdependent self-construal, although not for consumers with an independent self-construal. Grounded in these findings, the theoretical contributions and practical implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** cause-related marketing; visual style; self-construal; self-serving motives; attribution theory



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## 1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations provide a clear path for improving human society. Companies are including the sustainability value through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts as part of their marketing tactics to obtain the UN Sustainable Consumption and Production goal [1]. To facilitate sustainable development, marketers shift their emphasis from the consumer to the social context, like cause-related marketing (CRM) [2,3]. CRM is defined as the process of creating and executing marketing initiatives that are distinguished by a firm's promise to donate a specific sum of money to a chosen cause in exchange for consumers engaging in revenue-generating activities that meet corporate and individual goals [4,5]. In CRM initiatives, firms associate their promotional campaigns with varied social and environmental causes, from providing disaster relief to protecting wildlife to combating desertification, to boost brand differentiation and brand image. Raman et al. [6] identified CRM as an important topic of Sustainability Reporting that corresponds with the SDGs. As a type of CSR activity, CRM is regarded as a valid marketing tool that links charitable endeavors with revenue growth [4]. CRM mainly differs from other CSR activities in that consumers' exchanges or interactions with the firm, such as purchasing and information sharing, serve as the premise for the firm to contribute to charitable causes [7–9]. A large number of brands, including American Express, Nike, Taobao, and Alipay, have taken advantage of CRM

as a differentiation and promotion strategy to enhance their brand values and achieve profit gains.

CRM campaigns are promoted via a variety of communication tools like print ads, network ads, and social-media-based ads and posts [8,10,11]. In light of the fact that nearly 75% of the information that the brain processes is acquired from visual observation, the visual presentation of CRM messages is crucial for the success of CRM campaigns [12–14]. Based on the focus of CRM messages, researchers distinguished between two typical types of visual styles: product-focused and cause-focused [10,15]. A product-focused message emphasizes the product and presents the cause as a supplementary element, encouraging consumers to purchase the featured product. For instance, pictures and descriptions of the product may occupy a majority of the space in a product-focused ad, whereas the cause information may appear in a less-noticed place in the ad. On the contrary, a cause-focused message highlights the supported cause by explicitly visualizing the cause and motivating consumers to contribute to the firm's charitable efforts [10,16]. In this sense, pictures and descriptions of the cause may take up most of the space in a cause-focused ad, whereas product-related information is placed in a less-prominent position in the ad.

Though the visual style of CRM messages was investigated by a number of studies, they yielded mixed findings [10,12,15,17,18]. Samu and Wymer [15] noted that cause-focused ads lead to more positive consumer responses (e.g., attitude toward the cause and intent to purchase) than product-focused ads, particularly when the brand–cause fit is high. Badenes-Rocha, Bigne, and Ruiz-Mafe [17] showed that the visual attention paid to the text is enhanced for cause-focused (vs. product-focused) ads, which further increases brand advocacy. However, other researchers reported an insignificant main effect of visual style; instead, the effect of visual style is dependent on factors such as product type [10], gender [16], and appeal type [18]. The prior literature raises several questions: Does visual style truly have a main effect on consumer responses? If yes, what is the underlying psychological mechanism? Is there any other boundary condition for visual style to impact consumer responses?

Drawing on attribution theory, we postulate that visual style can have a significant influence on consumer responses through the attribution of self-serving motives. Attribution theory suggests that individuals have a natural tendency to identify the causes that underlie a specific event or human behavior, and these inferences affect individuals' attitudes and behavioral patterns [19,20]. Considering that a product-focused message puts an emphasis on product-related information, consumers may perceive that a firm's motivation is profit-oriented and self-serving [12,15]. In other words, consumers attribute the firm's motives underlying its CRM campaign to its desire to sell its goods and services instead of its aspiration to support the cause. By contrast, consumers may perceive the firm as authentic and public-serving when evaluating a cause-focused message, since a prominent presentation of the cause is a signal of social responsibility that arouses less suspicion about the firm's motive [12,15,21]. Consequently, it is highly likely that a cause-focused (vs. a product-focused) message results in lower levels of perceived self-serving motives, which subsequently enhance consumers' positive responses to the message.

Additionally, building on self-construal theory, we propose that self-construal moderates the effect of visual style on consumer responses to a CRM campaign. Self-construal represents the way individuals perceive themselves and their relationships with others in the social context [22]. Individuals with an interdependent self-construal tend to see themselves as part of a social environment and place a higher emphasis on their relationships with other people, while individuals with an independent self-construal put more value on autonomy, uniqueness, and their personal goals [22–24]. Consequently, we theorize that consumers with different types of self-construal are likely to view product-focused and cause-focused messages differently, as consumers with an interdependent self-construal are more attentive to others' needs when the cause is highlighted, rather than when the product is highlighted.

Taken together, this study is intended to address the following questions:

Q1. How does the visual style of CRM messages affect consumer responses (i.e., brand attitude and purchase intention)?

Q2. How does self-construal moderate the impact of visual style on consumer responses to CRM messages?

By answering these questions, this study makes several important contributions. First, it adds to the CRM literature by empirically testing the main effect of visual style on promoting consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention and uncovering the mediating role of perceived self-serving motives. Second, it advances the evolving stream of research on the role of visual style in CRM by delineating the moderating role of self-construal as well as the psychological mechanism underlying the moderating effect. To the best of our knowledge, this study represents one of the first studies to examine the interactive effect between visual style and self-construal on impacting consumer responses to CRM messages. From a sustainability perspective, this study responds to the calls for research on ethical and sustainable marketing strategies that involve social and environmental initiatives. Practically, the findings of the present study bear implications for marketers to enhance the effectiveness of CRM campaigns by matching the visual style with consumers' self-construal.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a conceptual framework and formulate our hypotheses based on earlier research. Second, we evaluate the formal hypotheses by conducting two scenario-based experimental studies. Eventually, we provide a summary of this study, present its theoretical and practical implications, point out its limitations, and suggest potential research avenues.

## 2. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

### 2.1. CRM

According to Varadarajan and Menon [4], CRM refers to a marketing initiative in which a firm guarantees to donate a portion of each consumer's revenue to a chosen charity when consumers participate in revenue-generating exchanges. For instance, a donation is made by the firm to support a social cause when a consumer purchases a product from the firm or shares an ad of the firm on a social media network [4,8]. In a broader sense, marketing campaigns that attempt to boost firm sales by collaborating with non-profit organizations can be categorized as CRM [25]. CRM is regarded as an approach for firms to show CSR, owing to their contribution to enhancing public welfare [26,27]. It can not only aid firms in reaching their profit-making goals but also enable consumers to have a satisfying experience of helping others [4,28].

Given the importance of CRM, it has drawn substantial attention from marketing researchers in recent years, and the related research has steadily expanded [29–31]. Numerous studies demonstrated the positive outcomes of CRM, such as enhanced brand attitude [12,15], purchase intention [1,5,32], consumer preference [33], firm sales [28], and the consumer–brand relationship [34,35]. For example, a CRM ad engenders a more positive attitude toward a company than a non-CRM ad [36]. Additionally, compared to a non-CRM ad, a CRM ad leads to a significant increase in consumers' purchase intention as well as their actual purchases because it induces a heightened warm glow feeling [28]. Zemack-Rugar, Rabino, Cavanaugh, and Fitzsimons [33] reported that when a CRM campaign is present, consumers develop an increased preference and choice for hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products. Similarly, a hedonic product linked to CRM results in a higher willingness to buy than a hedonic product not linked to CRM, owing to reduced anticipated guilt [37].

Studies also tried to elucidate how to bolster the effectiveness of CRM campaigns. Four groups of factors were identified as the key determinants of the success of CRM initiatives: consumer-related characteristics, product-related characteristics, company-related characteristics, and execution-related characteristics [29,38]. In terms of consumer-related characteristics, traits like guilt sensitivity [33], regulatory focus [39], thinking style [40], and self-construal [32,41] were examined by the extant research. Product-related characteris-

tics include factors like product type [10,37], price [42], and product quality [29]. As for company-related characteristics, factors like brand familiarity [43], CSR reputation [21], and brand origin [44] were examined. Regarding execution-related characteristics, prior studies investigated the donation amount [21], donation cap [8], consumer choice of the cause [35], product–cause fit [15,37,40], message framing [10], language abstractness [3], and visual style [12,16,17]. Apart from these factors, social media serves as an important context for CRM, as it is increasingly being used by CRM campaigns to reach out to consumers and promote interaction among them [8,11,12,17]. Firms can increase public awareness and enhance the effectiveness of their CRM communications through social media [8,45].

## 2.2. Attribution Theory and Inferred Motives of CRM

Attribution theory postulates that people are inclined to draw inferences about human behavior or social events [19,20]. The psychological process, known as causal attribution, is the persistent pursuit of individuals to understand reality. Causal attribution is a personal judgment that must be inferred or conjectured because causes are mostly invisible [46]. Individuals engage in causal attribution to make sense of the motivations and goals underlying others' behavior [46,47]. Two types of firm motives can be inferred by consumers when they are exposed to a CRM campaign. Consumers deem that firms initiate a CRM campaign either out of self-serving motives (e.g., to increase sales and profits) or out of altruistic and public-serving motives (e.g., to help those in need and promote the betterment of society) [21,48]. When a firm displays explicit self-interest in its CRM campaigns, consumers believe that the firm does not genuinely care about the cause and infer self-serving motives, which generates negative consumer responses. In contrast, when a firm emphasizes its support for a social or environmental cause, consumers infer public-serving motives and, subsequently, demonstrate favorable responses to the CRM campaign [12,49]. The inferred motive is pivotal in influencing consumers' evaluations and purchase intention [33,50–52].

Against this backdrop, a stream of work probed the CRM elements that influence consumers' inferred motives [12,49,50,53]. The firm–cause fit is related to positive perceptions of firm motives, which, in turn, enhance sponsor credibility and attitudes toward the sponsor [49]. The donation amount of a CRM campaign positively affects the attributions of altruistic firm motives, especially when the firm–cause fit is low and when the firm's CSR reputation is high [33,50]. Singh, Crisafulli, and Quamina [51] demonstrated that CRM ads with high guilt appeal intensity lead to more negative inferred motives than those with low guilt appeal intensity because consumers become suspicious about why the firm attempts to elicit strong feelings of guilt in them. The negative inferred motives further result in a reduction in corporate image and purchase intention [51]. When the firm–cause fit is low, consumers attribute altruistic motives to the firm when it uses the verbal cue “hope” rather than “can” and, subsequently, exhibit higher purchase intention [48]. In a recent study, Han and Lee [12] revealed that a partake-in-our-cause message boosts brand attitude and purchase intention to a larger extent than a promotional social cause message because the former message undermines the perceived self-serving motives of the firm.

## 2.3. Visual Styles in CRM

It is well-established that the visual display of CRM-related information is crucial for attracting consumers' attention and inducing favorable outcomes [10,11,15,16]. CRM ads transmitted through an online network (including social-media-like social networking sites) heavily rely on visual presentation. In particular, the visual elements are regarded as the focus of social media ecology because diverse visuals bolster consumer engagement [54]. In this regard, the visual style of CRM ads drew researchers' attention. This visual style, also referred to as visual presentation or execution style, delineates how the visual elements are presented [10,12,16]. According to the focus of a CRM ad, researchers identified two typical types of visual style, i.e., product-focused and cause-focused [10,16]. A product-focused ad highlights the product with texts and pictures and portrays the cause as a supplementary element, while a cause-focused ad accentuates the supported cause with a large proportion

of the content [10,16]. More specifically, product-related information like texts and pictures may take up most of the space in a product-focused ad, whereas the opposite is true for a cause-focused ad. A product-focused ad, by explicitly demonstrating the product features, attempts to foster consumers to purchase the product. By contrast, a cause-focused ad encourages consumers to support the firm's charitable endeavors.

Prior CRM research on visual style produced diverse findings. Samu and Wymer [15] demonstrated that consumers show a more positive attitude toward the cause and higher purchase intention for a cause-focused (vs. a product-focused) ad, particularly when the brand–cause fit is high. Chang [10] further noticed that a cause-focused ad is more effective in enhancing campaign attitude and purchase intention than a product-focused ad for a hedonic product due to congruity in the emotional features, whereas the opposite is true for a utilitarian product due to congruity in the cognitive features. Relying on construal level theory, it is found that a cause-focused ad engenders a higher campaign attitude than a product-focused ad when charitable organizations are far from achieving their goals or are targeting foreign consumers, but a product-focused ad generates a higher campaign attitude than a cause-focused ad when charitable organizations are close to achieving their goals or are targeting local consumers [18]. Badenes-Rocha, Bigne, and Ruiz-Mafe [17] employed an eye-tracking technique to show that the visual attention paid to the text is enhanced for cause-focused (vs. product-focused) ads, which further increases brand advocacy; meanwhile, the visual attention paid to the picture is enhanced for product-focused (vs. cause-focused) ads, but it does not influence brand advocacy. A recent study suggested that visual style moderates the impact of message type (a partake-in-our-cause message vs. a promotional social cause message) on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intention [12]. Nevertheless, the authors did not find the main effect of visual style in their study [12].

Prior studies yielded many insights into the role of visual style in CRM campaigns. However, prior studies produced mixed findings regarding the main effect of visual style on consumer responses, with some of them reporting a significant main effect [15,17] and some of them reporting a non-significant main effect [12,18]. This raises a question about whether visual style has a strong enough effect to influence general consumers. More importantly, the psychological mechanisms underlying the impact of visual style on consumer responses have not been clearly characterized or empirically tested. Building on attribution theory, we propose that visual style has a significant effect on consumer responses (i.e., brand attitude and purchase intention) through perceived self-serving motives. As previously discussed, a product-focused ad emphasizes product-related features with an explicit demonstration of self-interest, aiming to sell goods and services by supporting a cause [10,12]. In this case, consumers perceive a high level of self-serving motives for the firm's CRM campaign. By contrast, a cause-focused ad highlights cause-related features, displaying genuine care for the cause and encouraging consumers to support the cause. Hence, it is logical to presume that consumers perceive a low level of self-serving motives when evaluating a cause-focused ad. The prior literature suggested negative influences of perceived self-serving motives on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intention [12,49,51]. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

**H1.** *A cause-focused message leads to a higher (a) brand attitude and (b) purchase intention than a product-focused message in CRM campaigns.*

**H2.** *Perceived self-serving motives mediate the effect of visual style on consumers' (a) brand attitude and (b) purchase intention.*

#### 2.4. Moderating Role of Self-Construal

Self-construal reflects the way people view themselves and their relationship with others in the social environment [22,55]. Individuals define their interactions with others based on different self-construals, which provide the foundation on which affective and



cognitive responses are developed. Self-construal can be split into two types: interdependent self-construal and independent self-construal. Individuals with an interdependent self-construal put an emphasis on the social self, viewing the self as an entity belonging to its community. Contrastingly, individuals with an independent self-construal place importance on individuality, thinking, and acting in ways that separate the self from others [22,55]. In other words, interdependent self-construal values social and contextual roles, obligations, and social connections with other community members, whereas independent self-construal values uniqueness, autonomy, and personal goals [24,56,57]. It is evident that self-construal systematically influences the weight people put on themselves and others during decision making [58,59].

A number of studies investigated the association between self-construal and charitable behaviors [24,32,60]. In general, compared to consumers with an independent self-construal, those with an interdependent self-construal attend to others' needs more and show a higher purchase intention when a product is linked to a social cause [41,60]. For instance, Winterich and Barone [41] demonstrated that an interdependent self-construal is positively related to consumers' preference for a product that entails a donation. Consumers with an independent self-construal respond more negatively to CRM than to corporate philanthropy because CRM does not match their need for autonomy, whereas consumers with an interdependent self-construal respond similarly to CRM and corporate philanthropy because they take contextual information into account and comply with the reciprocity norm [61]. Interdependent self-construal predicts consumers' empathy and evokes their moral identity, both of which positively influence their CRM evaluations and purchase intentions [32]. More recently, van Esch, Cui, and Jain [24] showed that consumers with an interdependent self-construal exhibit a higher donation intent when a charity ad emphasizes identifiable victims (vs. statistical victims) of COVID-19, but consumers with an independent self-construal exhibit similar levels of donation intent for these two types of frames.

Based on the above-mentioned facts, it is logical to presume that self-construal moderates the effect of the visual style of CRM messages on consumer responses. Consumers with an interdependent self-construal are more likely to attend to a cause-focused message because they attach importance to contextual and social roles and, thus, are sensitive to a social cause that requests them to make a contribution [24,32,41]. For these consumers, the explicitly presented cause-related information, including texts and pictures, suggests that the firm genuinely cares for the cause that boosts the betterment of society. However, when they are faced with a product-focused message, they would be suspicious of the firm's motive behind the CRM campaign because the message is mainly aimed at selling goods and services rather than supporting the cause [12,50]. This impedes their need to build social connections with those in need and fulfill their social obligations. Consequently, consumers with an interdependent self-construal develop more positive responses to a cause-focused (vs. a product-focused) message due to reduced perceived self-serving motives. Consumers with an independent self-construal, however, value autonomy and are less attentive to contextual information and contextual roles, leading them to act indifferently to CRM messages with different visual styles [24,61]. Formally, we hypothesize the following:

**H3.** *Self-construal moderates the effect of visual style on consumer responses. Specifically, consumers with an interdependent self-construal show a higher (a) brand attitude and (b) purchase intention for a cause-focused (vs. a product-focused) message; whereas consumers with an independent self-construal are indifferent to visual style.*

**H4.** *Interdependent self-construal enhances the indirect effect of visual style on consumer responses through perceived self-serving motives.*

The overall theorization is demonstrated in Figure 1.

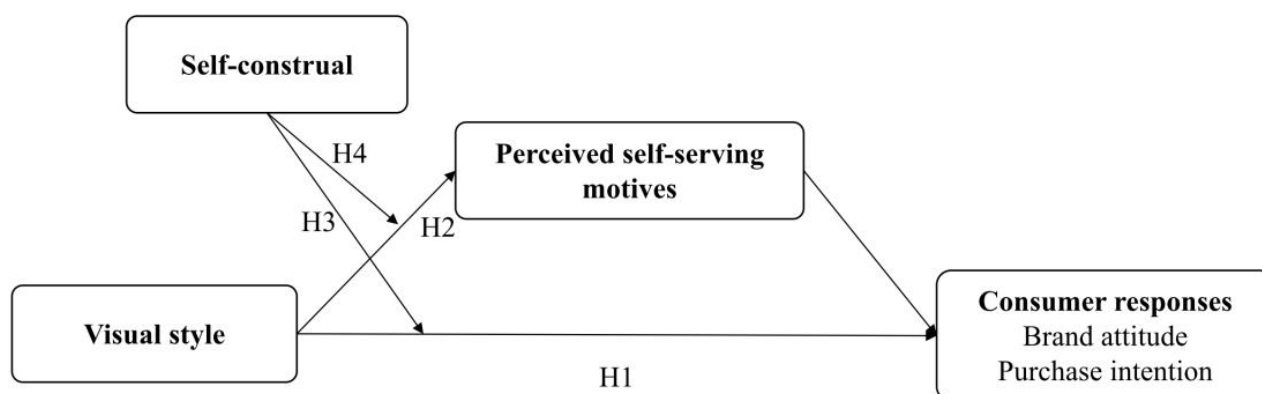


Figure 1. The conceptual framework.

### 3. Study 1

#### 3.1. Pretest

We created two posters featuring a pair of outdoor hiking shoes with a fictitious brand, Casuel. The visual style was manipulated by varying the headlines and the photos of the cause and product. For the product-focused poster, the headline was “Casuel makes a difference in the world”. Moreover, a pair of shoes along with the brand logo and product description were presented at the center of the poster. For the cause-focused poster, the headline was “Your help makes a difference in the world”. Additionally, a cause photo depicting education for underprivileged children was presented at the center of the poster. A small-sized shoe image, along with a brand logo and product description, was displayed below the cause photo to make the poster appear realistic. At the bottom of both posters, the brand claimed that the firm would donate 5% of the sale price of each pair of shoes to the Shanyun Charity Fund, the fictitious name of the sponsored cause, to support education for underprivileged children in mountainous areas. All the other aspects of the posters remained invariant (see Appendix A).

One hundred participants were recruited from Credamo, an online survey platform in China, to take part in the pretest. They were assigned to one of the posters and asked to evaluate the poster regarding visual style, message clarity, and poster attractiveness. The results showed that the cause-focused poster was perceived to be more focused on the cause than the product-focused poster ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 6.14$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 3.35$ ;  $F(1, 98) = 80.407$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, the participants’ perception of the message clarity ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 6.27$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 6.19$ ;  $F(1, 98) = 0.392$ ,  $p = 0.533$ ) and poster attractiveness ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.55$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 5.67$ ;  $F(1, 98) = 0.375$ ,  $p = 0.542$ ) did not differ between these two visual styles. Hence, the visual style was successfully manipulated, and the experimental materials were suitable for the formal experiment.

#### 3.2. Participants, Design, and Procedure

Two hundred fifteen participants (age range = 20 to 57,  $M = 30.64$ ,  $SD = 5.88$ , 64.7% female) from Credamo took part in the experiment, in exchange for a small financial reward. The participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a single-factor (visual style: product-focused or cause-focused) between-subjects experimental design.

The participants were asked to imagine that they came across a poster while surfing the Web. They had to carefully read the poster before they were instructed to respond to items used to measure brand attitude, purchase intention, and perceived self-serving motives (see Table 1). Next, they responded to an item for a manipulation check (i.e., “The poster visually focused on ...”; 1 = the product, 7 = the cause) [10] and provided their personal information (e.g., gender, age, and education).

**Table 1.** Measurement items.

Constructs	Measurement Items	Source
Brand attitude (Studies 1 and 2)	Unfavorable–favorable Bad–good Unappealing–appealing	[62]
Purchase intention (Studies 1 and 2)	I would be willing to participate in this CRM campaign I would consider purchasing this product in order to help the cause It is likely that I would contribute to this cause by getting involved in this CRM campaign	[63]
Perceived self-serving motives (Studies 1 and 2)	The firm has a hidden motive in its involvement with the cause The firm is acting in its own self-interest The firm is ultimately acting to benefit itself The firm ultimately cares about its profits The firm wants to persuade me to buy its products I have respect for the authority figures with whom I interact It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me I respect people who are modest about themselves I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments	[49]
Self-construal (Study 2)	I should take into consideration my parents’ advice when making education/career plans It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I’m not happy with the group I would offer my seat to my superior at any occasion I’d rather say “No” directly than risk being misunderstood I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards Having a lively imagination is important to me My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me Speaking up during a conference is not a problem for me	[64,65]

### 3.3. Results and Discussion

- Manipulation check

The ANOVA on the perceptions of visual style showed that the cause-focused poster was perceived to be more focused on the cause than the product-focused poster ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 6.26$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 2.65$ ;  $F(1, 213) = 405.669$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, the manipulation of the visual style was successful.

- Main effects

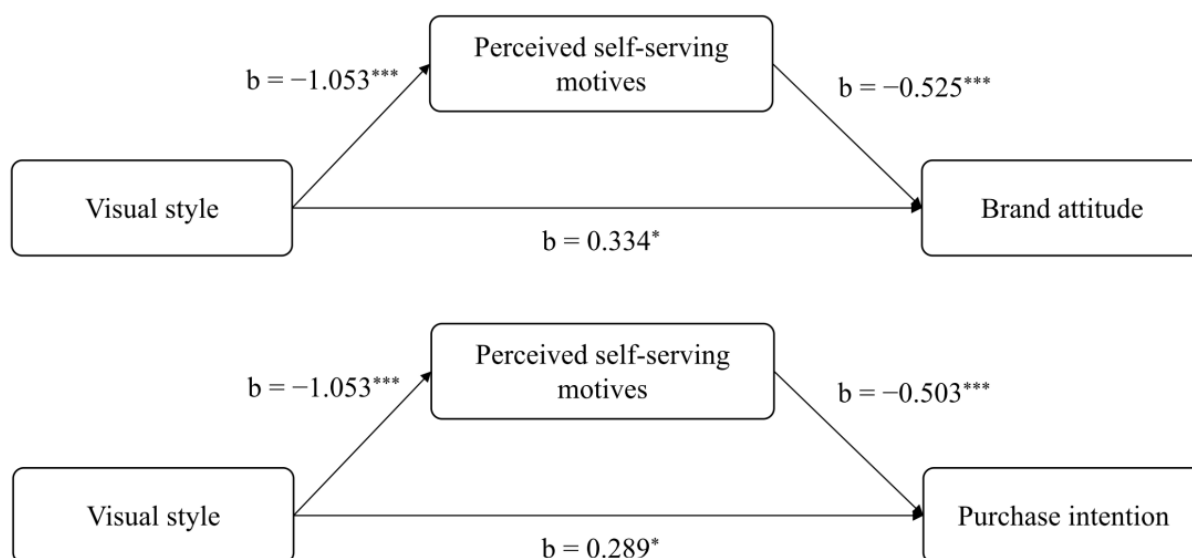
Single-factor (visual style: product-focused or cause-focused) ANOVAs were conducted with brand attitude, purchase intention, and perceived self-serving motives as dependent variables. The results revealed the significant main effects of visual style on these dependent variables, as the cause-focused poster led to a higher brand attitude ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.22$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 6.11$ ;  $F(1, 213) = 28.506$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), a higher purchase intention ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.35$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 6.17$ ;  $F(1, 213) = 24.241$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and lower perceived self-serving motives ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 3.92$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 2.87$ ;  $F(1, 213) = 28.033$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than the product-focused poster. Thereby, H1 was supported.

- Mediation effects

Bias-corrected bootstrap analyses using the PROCESS Macro (model 4 with 5000 samples) were performed to test the mediation paths [66]. As Figure 2 illustrates, an analysis with brand attitude as the dependent variable showed that visual style (0 = product-caused, 1 = cause-focused) negatively predicted perceived self-serving motives ( $b = -1.053$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),



which, in turn, influenced brand attitude ( $b = -0.525, p < 0.001$ ). The indirect effect of visual style on brand attitude through perceived self-serving motives was significant ( $b = 0.553, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.3182, 0.6054]$ ). Another analysis with purchase intention as the dependent variable showed that visual style negatively predicted perceived self-serving motives ( $b = -1.053, p < 0.001$ ), which further affected brand attitude ( $b = -0.503, p < 0.001$ ). The indirect effect of visual style on purchase intention through perceived self-serving motives was significant ( $b = 0.530, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.2937, 0.8213]$ ), supporting H2.



**Figure 2.** Mediation results of Study 1. \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

### 3.4. Discussion

In Study 1, a general online setting was used to test the main effect of visual style on consumer responses and the underlying psychological mechanism. The findings offered evidence for our proposition that visual style significantly affects consumer responses. To elaborate, consumers developed a higher brand attitude, a higher purchase intention, and lower perceived self-serving motives for the cause-focused (vs. the product-focused) poster. Corroborating prior studies, the visual style of CRM ads was confirmed to be a critical determinant of consumer responses [15,17]. Additionally, the results revealed that perceived self-serving motives mediates the relationships between visual style and brand attitude and between visual style and purchase intention. In other words, the cause-focused poster led to an enhanced brand attitude and purchase intention because it resulted in lower perceived self-serving motives than the product-focused poster. In line with attribution theory, the result provided support for prior studies elucidating the negative impact of perceived self-serving motives on consumer responses (e.g., corporate image and purchase intention) [12,51]. The product-focused poster, which stressed aspects of the product in an effort to promote the sales of related products and services, clearly displayed self-interest [10,12]. The participants, in this instance, believed the firm's CRM effort had a high degree of self-serving motives. The cause-focused poster, in contrast, emphasized aspects that were relevant to the cause, demonstrating genuine concern for the cause and enticing customers to support the cause [10,12,15]. Hence, the participants perceived less self-serving motives for the cause-focused (vs. product-focused) poster and, thus, demonstrated a higher brand attitude and purchase intention for the former condition.

The findings of Study 1 extended the literature on the visual style of CRM ads by demonstrating the main effect of visual style on consumer responses and empirically testing the mediating role of perceived self-serving motives in a general online setting. Grounded in the prior visual style research [16,18] as well as the findings of Study 1, we raised further questions: Is there any boundary condition for visual style to impact consumer responses?

Specifically, do personality traits like self-construal moderate the effect of visual style on consumer responses? Study 2 was conducted to shed light on these questions.

## 4. Study 2

### 4.1. Pretest

Two posts were created to mimic the posts on Weibo, one of the most popular social networking sites in China. Similar to Study 1, the visual style was manipulated by varying the texts and photos of a product and cause. For a product-focused post, the text emphasized the product, a newly launched backpack, and the backpack image was presented right below the text. For a cause-focused poster, the text highlighted the cause supported by the firm; meanwhile, a large photo depicting the prevention of desertification and a small-sized image of a backpack were displayed below the text. The posts proclaimed that the firm would donate 5% of the sale price of each backpack to the China Environmental Protection Foundation to improve ecological environments in the northwestern area of China. The other details on the posts remained consistent (see Appendix A).

One hundred participants were recruited from Credamo, randomly assigned to one of the posts, and asked to evaluate the post regarding visual style, message clarity, and poster attractiveness. The results showed that the cause-focused post was perceived to be more focused on the cause than the product-focused post ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 2.96$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 5.96$ ;  $F(1, 98) = 90.296$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, the participants' perception of message clarity ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.88$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 5.80$ ;  $F(1, 98) = 0.289$ ,  $p = 0.592$ ) and poster attractiveness ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.00$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 5.43$ ;  $F(1, 98) = 2.527$ ,  $p = 0.115$ ) did not differ between these two visual styles. Hence, the visual style was successfully manipulated, and the experimental materials were suitable for the formal experiment.

### 4.2. Participants, Design, and Procedure

Two hundred forty-nine participants (age range = 18 to 59,  $M = 31.01$ ,  $SD = 8.28$ , 64.3% female) from Credamo were recruited to complete the experiment, in return for a small financial reward. By recruiting a different group of participants from Study 1, the size and diversity of the sample could be increased so that the validity and generalizability of the findings could be enhanced. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a single-factor (visual style: product-focused or cause-focused) between-subjects experimental design.

Participants were instructed to imagine that they come across a brand's post when browsing the social network site (i.e., Weibo). They had to carefully read the post before evaluating their brand attitudes, purchase intention, and perceived self-serving motives. As in Study 1, the same items were used to measure these variables. Thereafter, the participants responded to the item for a manipulation check of the visual style and a scale for measuring self-construal. Sixteen items were adapted from Singelis [64] and Pan and Lv [65], with 10 items used to measure the interdependent self-construal (e.g., "I have respect for the authority figures with whom I interact."; see Table 1) and 6 items used to measure the independent self-construal (e.g., "I'd rather say 'no' directly than risk being misunderstood."). Finally, the participants provided basic personal information.

### 4.3. Results and Discussion

#### • Manipulation check

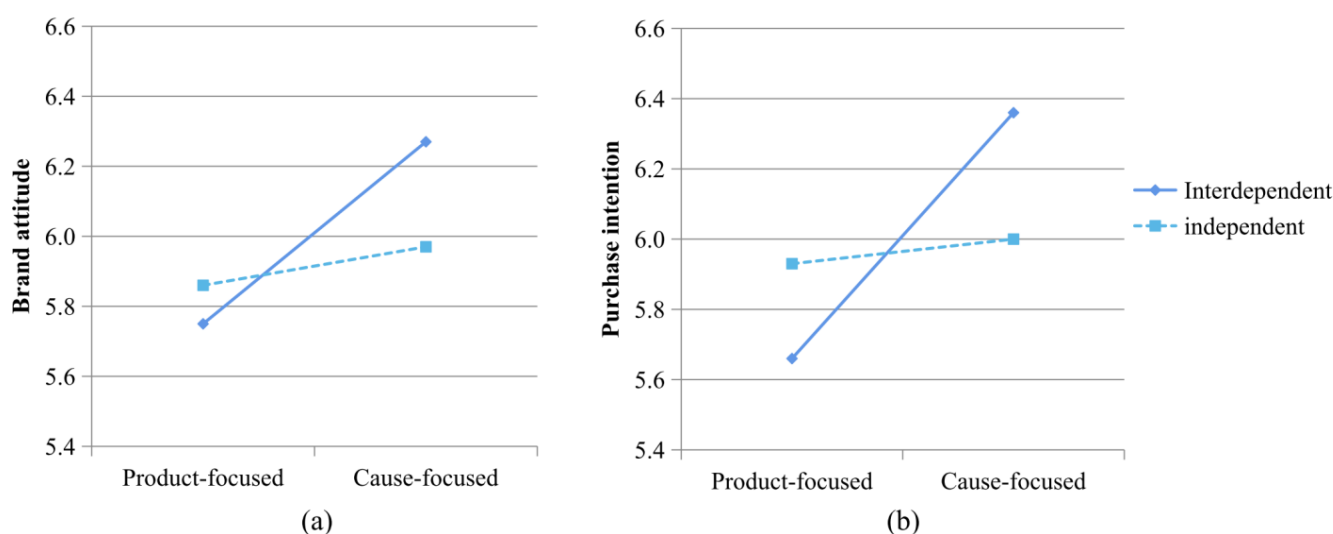
The ANOVA on the perceptions of visual style showed that the cause-focused poster was perceived to be more focused on the cause than the product-focused poster ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 6.16$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 3.62$ ;  $F(1, 247) = 158.851$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, the visual style was successfully manipulated. In line with the prior research [41,67], we computed a self-construal index using the formula (interdependent – independent)/(interdependent + independent), with a higher score representing a dominant interdependent self-construal and a lower score representing a dominant independent self-construal. The ANOVA on the self-construal index showed that the participants with an interdependent self-construal re-

ported higher scores than those with an independent self-construal ( $M_{\text{interdependent}} = -0.09$ ,  $M_{\text{independent}} = 0.19$ ;  $F(1, 247) = 211.703$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hence, these two groups of participants could be clearly distinguished from each other in terms of self-construal.

- Main effects and moderating effects

Two-factor 2 (visual style: product-focused or cause-focused)  $\times$  2 (self-construal: interdependent or independent) between-subjects MANOVAs were performed with brand attitude, purchase intention, and perceived self-serving motives as dependent variables. The results demonstrated the significant main effects of visual style, as the cause-focused post engendered a higher brand attitude ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.81$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 6.11$ ;  $F(1, 245) = 9.488$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), a higher purchase intention ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.80$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 6.17$ ;  $F(1, 245) = 14.280$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and lower perceived self-serving motives ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 3.53$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 2.82$ ;  $F(1, 245) = 14.738$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than the product-focused post. Thereby, H1 was validated again.

The interaction effects between visual style and self-construal on brand attitude ( $F(1, 245) = 4.235$ ,  $p = 0.041$ ), purchase intention ( $F(1, 245) = 9.399$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), and perceived self-serving motives ( $F(1, 245) = 9.664$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) were also significant. Specifically, as displayed in Figure 3, consumers with an interdependent self-construal expressed a higher brand attitude ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.75$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 6.27$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), a higher purchase intention ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.66$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 6.36$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and reduced perceived self-serving motives ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 3.79$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 2.46$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) for the cause-focused (vs. product-focused) post. However, consumers with an independent self-construal did not differ in their brand attitude ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.86$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 5.97$ ;  $p = 0.462$ ), purchase intention ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 5.93$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 6.00$ ;  $p = 0.608$ ), or perceived self-serving motives ( $M_{\text{product-focused}} = 3.29$ ,  $M_{\text{cause-focused}} = 3.15$ ;  $p = 0.599$ ) for posts with different visual styles. Consequently, H3 was supported.

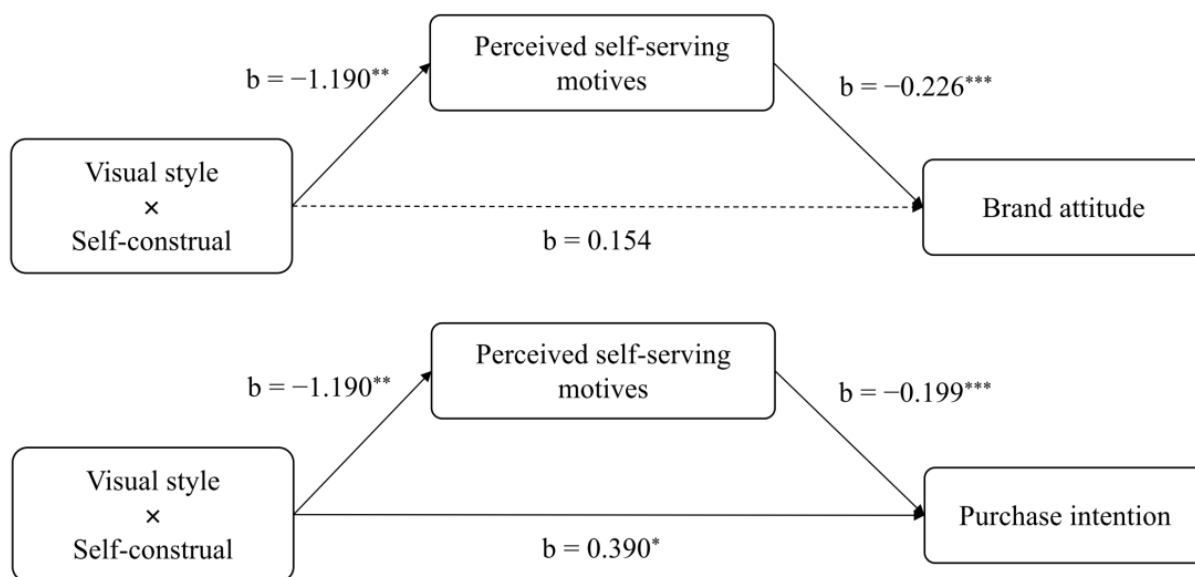


**Figure 3.** Interaction results of Study 2: (a) Brand attitude, (b) Purchase intention.

- Moderated mediation effects

Bias-corrected bootstrap analyses using the PROCESS Macro (model 8 with 5000 samples) were conducted to verify the moderated mediation model [66]. As Figure 4 shows, the interaction between visual style (0 = product-focused, 1 = cause-focused) and self-construal (0 = independent, 1 = interdependent) predicted perceived self-serving motives ( $b = -1.190$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), which further impacted brand attitude ( $b = -0.226$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The conditional indirect effect of the interaction between visual style and self-construal on brand attitude through perceived self-serving motives was significant (index of moderated mediation = 0.269, 95% CI [0.0879, 0.5017]). To elaborate, the indirect effect of perceived self-serving motives was significant for consumers with an interdependent self-construal

( $b = 0.300$ , 95% CI [0.1413, 0.5082]); however, it was not significant for consumers with an independent self-construal ( $b = 0.032$ , 95% CI [−0.0870, 0.1576]).



**Figure 4.** Moderated mediation results of Study 2. \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Likewise, the interaction between visual style and self-construal influenced perceived self-serving motives ( $b = -1.190$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), which, in turn, impacted brand attitude ( $b = -0.199$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The conditional indirect effect of perceived self-serving motives was significant (index of moderated mediation = 0.237, 95% CI [0.0740, 0.4619]). To be specific, the indirect effect of perceived self-serving motives was significant for consumers with an interdependent self-construal ( $b = 0.265$ , 95% CI [0.1156, 0.4642]), but it was not significant for consumers with an independent self-construal ( $b = 0.028$ , 95% CI [−0.0758, 0.1435]). Taken together, H4 was validated.

#### 4.4. Discussion

Study 2 was intended to explore the effect of visual style on consumer responses and the moderating role of self-construal. Corroborating the results of Study 1, Study 2 offered additional evidence that a cause-focused (vs. a product-focused) message triggers more positive consumer responses. Moreover, the effects of visual style on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intention were moderated by the perceived self-serving motives. A cause-focused message triggered more positive consumer responses than a product-focused message for consumers with an interdependent self-construal but not for consumers with an independent self-construal. Eventually, this study elucidated the mechanism underlying the interaction effects, as the interaction effects between visual style and self-construal on brand attitude and purchase intention were mediated by the perceived self-serving motives.

Since participants with an interdependent self-construal valued contextual and social roles, they were sensitive to a social cause that asks them to contribute and were highly likely to pay attention to the cause-focused post [24,32]. These customers were given the impression that the company actually cares about the cause that promotes the improvement of society by the plainly displayed cause-related content (e.g., texts and pictures). When presented with a product-focused post that was primarily centered on selling products rather than advancing a cause, however, these individuals became dubious of the company's motivations for the CRM effort and showed a lower brand attitude and purchase intention [12,50]. On the contrary, the participants with an independent self-construal valued their independence and paid less attention to contextual cues and roles, which

caused them to disregard CRM communications with various visual styles and exhibit indifferent responses [24].

The findings of Study 2 make an advancement for the visual style literature by unraveling the moderating role of self-construal in the relationship between the visual style of CRM ads and consumer responses. Moreover, differently from Study 1, Study 2 used a social networking context (i.e., Weibo) to enhance the validity of the findings and respond to the calls for more research in social media contexts [8,11,12]. Social networking sites have been overwhelmingly popular among consumers in the recent decade and have been crucial advertising carriers for companies to communicate brand- and product-related information [8,12]. This study extends this line of research by considering the use of Weibo, one of the most widely used social networking sites in China.

## 5. General Discussion

### 5.1. Key Findings

Grounded in attribution theory, this study investigated the impact of the visual style of CRM messages on consumer responses, the mediating role of perceived self-serving motives, and the moderating role of self-construal. Two scenario-based experiments were conducted to validate the research hypotheses. Study 1 provided evidence for the effect of visual style on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intention, as cause-focused messages led to enhanced brand attitude and purchase intention compared to product-focused messages, through the reduction in perceived self-serving motives. Study 2 further verified that self-construal moderated the influence of visual style on consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. To elaborate, consumers with an interdependent self-construal expressed a higher brand attitude and purchase intention for cause-focused (vs. product-focused) messages; consumers with an independent self-construal, however, expressed no differences in their brand attitude and purchase intention for these two types of visual styles. Additionally, Study 2 revealed that the interaction effect between visual style and self-construal on consumer responses was mediated by the perceived self-serving motives.

### 5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it advances the CRM literature by demonstrating that the visual style of CRM messages has a significant impact on consumer response through the mediating role of perceived self-serving motives. Though CRM has gained increasing attention in recent years [31,38,40], very limited research was conducted on the impact of visual style on consumer responses [10,12,16,18]. Prior studies on the visual style of CRM messages produced mixed findings [10,15,17]. In addition, the psychological process that underlies the effect of visual style on consumer responses has not been clearly delineated or empirically tested. By using diverse online settings, the current study narrows this research gap by revealing that cause-focused messages engender a higher brand attitude and purchase intention than product-focused messages because the former visual style reduced consumers' perception of the firm's self-serving motives. Consequently, these findings enrich our understanding of how visual style affects consumer responses [10,12,17].

Second, this study adds to the small but growing literature on the visual style of CRM messages by unraveling the moderating role of self-construal. Previous studies explored the influence of product type [10,16], gender [16], and appeal type [18] on the effectiveness of visual style in CRM advertising. However, these studies largely overlooked the impact of personality traits on the effectiveness of visual style. Delineating this point is conducive to developing feasible segmenting and targeting strategies for products engaged in CRM. To this end, this study serves as one of the initial attempts to examine the interactive effect between the visual style of CRM messages and self-construal on consumer responses. The results indicate that cause-focused messages lead to higher levels of brand attitudes and purchase intentions than product-focused messages for consumers with



an interdependent self-construal, but messages with different visual styles generate no differences in brand attitudes or purchase intentions for consumers with an independent self-construal. Additionally, this study suggests that perceived self-serving motives mediate the interaction effects between visual style and self-construal on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions. These findings are revealing since they inform researchers of the boundary condition of the impact of visual style on consumer responses as well as the underlying mechanism [10,17,18].

### 5.3. Practical Implications

The findings from the two experiments provide meaningful guidelines for marketing practice. First, marketers are advised to use cause-focused messages for CRM advertising rather than product-focused messages. This study indicates that, in general, cause-focused messages are more effective than product-focused messages at inducing positive brand attitudes and purchase intention. It is evident that visual style is a crucial point that should be taken into account when marketers are designing CRM messages (including ads and posts). Second, the finding regarding the moderating role of self-construal suggests that cause-focused messages should target consumers with an interdependent self-construal, as these consumers display enhanced brand attitudes and purchase intentions for cause-focused (vs. product-focused) messages, but should not target consumers with an independent self-construal, as these consumers display similar levels of brand attitudes and purchase intentions for messages with different visual styles. To this end, marketers are encouraged to use measures such as surveys and data mining to understand consumers' self-construal and, subsequently, target consumers with an interdependent self-construal to enhance the effectiveness of CRM campaigns. Eventually, the findings of the mediation and moderated mediation analyses shed additional light on how to enhance the effectiveness of CRM campaigns. This study shows that perceived self-serving motives negatively affect consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Thereby, marketers should devote efforts to diminish consumers' perceptions of the firm's self-serving motives when launching CRM campaigns. For instance, they can make use of advertisements with genuine appeals.

### 5.4. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Though this study provides interesting findings, it is important to point out its limitations, which may guide future research directions. First, this study employed fictitious brands to ensure that consumer responses were not contaminated by prior experience with, knowledge of, or affection toward real brands [68,69]. However, consumers are often faced with brands with different levels of familiarity, which might systematically alter how they respond to CRM messages with different visual styles [43,70]. Hence, future research is recommended to use real brands and take factors like brand familiarity into consideration to enhance the generalizability of the research findings. Second, the present study mainly recruited participants from China, which is characterized by collectivistic cultural values. It is suggested that interdependent self-construal is more prevalent in collectivistic cultures, while independent self-construal is more prevalent in individualistic cultures [55,71]. Thus, it is likely that the main effect of visual style on consumer responses is observed because the participants are mainly endorsed by interdependent self-construal. Notwithstanding this limitation, the main effect still bears important implications in countries featuring collectivistic cultural values. To further boost the external validity of the results, future studies are encouraged to consider cultural differences when investigating the downstream effects of visual styles.

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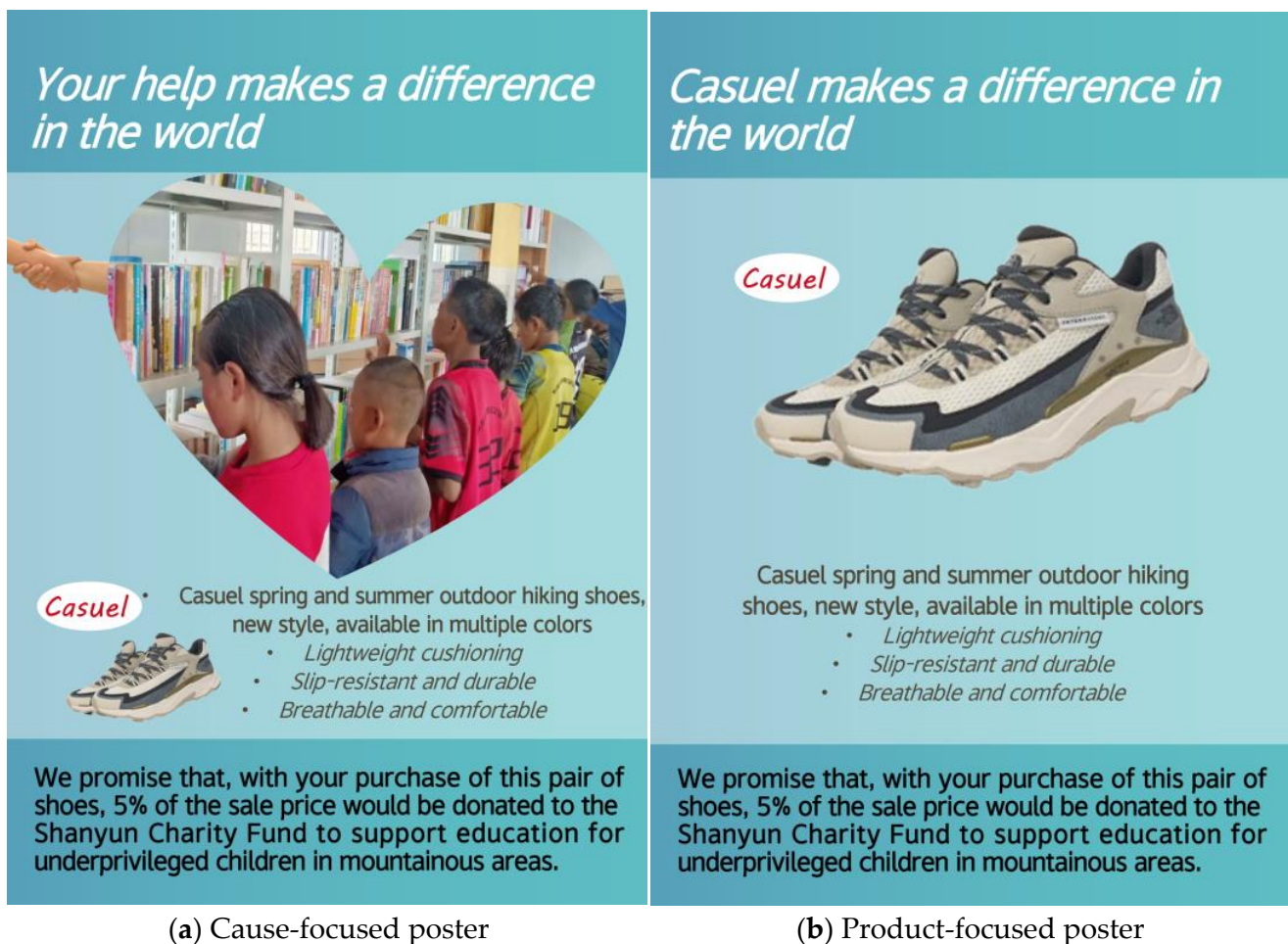
**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was conducted with the approval of the School of Management, Guangdong University of Technology, in compliance with the guidelines and regulations of the university's institutional review board.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A. Experimental Materials of the Study



**Figure A1.** Stimuli of Study 1.

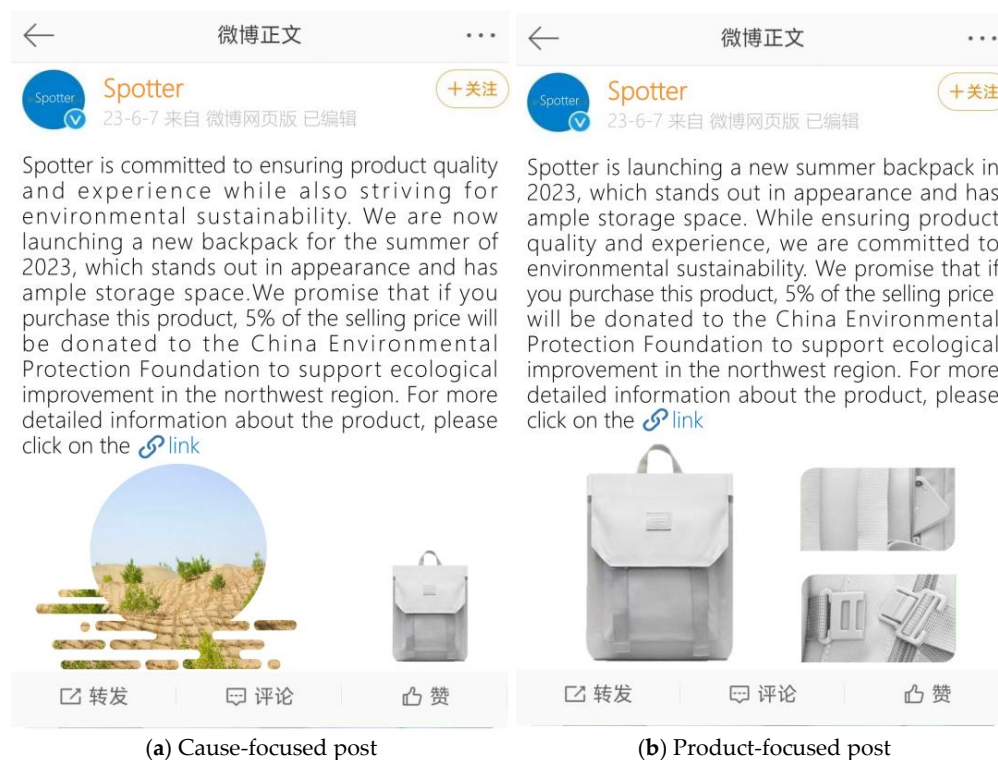


Figure A2. Stimuli of Study 2.

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