Customer engagement through choice in cause-related marketing
A potential for global competitiveness

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to construct a conceptual framework of the effects of customer engagement on cause-related marketing (CRM), with the goal of providing a solid scientific foundation for the development and stimulation of future research on the critical intersection of these two topics.

Design/methodology/approach – The research defines customer engagement in CRM campaigns as the conditions under which consumers are allowed to choose the cause that receives the donation, the cause proximity (geographical proximity) and the type of donation in a CRM campaign.

Findings – The paper conceptualizes the role of customer engagement in enhancing the effectiveness of a CRM campaign, in terms of coverage, customization and reduced consumer skepticism, as well as in triggering positive word-of-mouth (WOM) persuasion behaviors.

Practical implications – The conceptual framework provides several practicable directions toward effective control of CRM campaign outcomes, for both local and global firms.

Originality/value – The paper rests on established empirical foundations to develop a comprehensive preliminary multi- disciplinary framework on the subject, setting the path for further research in the fields of CRM, customer engagement and *International Business Research*, and reaching findings of both scholarly and executive worth.

Keywords Consumer choice, Customer engagement, Cause-related marketing, Cause proximity, Cause type, Global competitiveness

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction
Research context
In the spirit and context of a hypercompetitive and incessantly changing contemporary business environment, organizations across the globe increasingly seek value for their products through channels and concepts that embrace what truly matters to the customer (Vrontis *et al.*, 2012; Campanella *et al.*, 2016). Cause-related marketing (CRM) lies at the heart of this philosophy, recognizing, in essence, that product acquisition is driven by motivators that far exceed mere functionality and purpose; and which are adjacent to the customers' social, ideological and self-perceptions. Moreover, unlike most marketing tools, CRM is a uniquely inclusive approach, transforming and transcending customers' traditionally passive role into an active and participative one, thus adding an array of values to the product itself of a more "internal" and consecrated nature. This research focuses on this exact participative attribute of CRM, investigating the role, nature and effect of customer choice in CRM campaigns and the requisite means and factors toward their successful implementation.

Close to three decades following the first significant publication on CRM by Varadarajan and Menon (1988), the concept has grown to become a mainstream marketing tool of value and a global phenomenon (Chatzoglou *et al.*, 2017; Christofi, Leonidou, Vrontis, Kitchen and Papasolomou, 2015; Christofi *et al.*, 2014; Koschate-Fischer *et al.*, 2016; Lafferty *et al.*, 2016;

Müller *et al.*, 2014; Robinson *et al.*, 2012). Defined as the marketing practice of donating a specified amount from product sales to designated charitable causes (Robinson *et al.*, 2012), CRM has become the fastest-growing strategy of sponsorship spending in the USA, with average annual growth rates that exceeded 12 percent at the dawn of this decade (Koschate-Fischer *et al.*, 2012). CRM has been acknowledged to provide various benefits for the donor organizations (Hamby, 2016), such as purchase intentions (Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998), corporate reputation (Koschate-Fischer *et al.*, 2012; Chang, 2008; Larson *et al.*, 2008) and positive WOM persuasion (Lee Thomas, Mullen and Fraedrich, 2011; Lii *et al.*, 2013). It has even been termed as a potential source of sustainable competitive advantage (Christofi, Leonidou and Vrontis, 2015; Christofi *et al.*, 2013; Larson *et al.*, 2008). And though the notion may be somewhat exaggerated, since it is neither rare, nor inimitable, it might offer more transient competitive or differentiation advantages. CRM's nonetheless is not a static phenomenon and it naturally evolves through practice and maturity. Notably, companies have recently begun to apply a new form of CRM campaign: CRM campaigns with choice, in which donor organizations allow consumers to engage in a CRM campaign by determining which cause type should receive the donation (Robinson *et al.*, 2012). Typical examples include SunTrust Bank, which gave a $100 donation to a cause selected by consumers who opened a new checking account; and Amazon, which, since 2013, donates a percentage of the price of most product purchases via its AmazonSmile platform to the charity of the buyer's choice (Kull and Heath, 2016). CRM campaigns with choice have been trending up in popularity, and sponsor organizations expect that such CRM campaigns provide more successful results (Kull and Heath, 2016; Robinson *et al.*, 2012). However, despite their significance in marketing practice and academic research, CRM campaigns with choice remain under-researched (Arora and Henderson, 2007; Kull and Heath, 2016; Robinson *et al.*, 2012).

In addition, extant CRM literature points out another four important gaps that merit attention. First, there is a limited CRM research on consumer attributions and on the motivators underlying the consideration of product purchases linked with a cause (Arora and Henderson, 2007; Webb and Mohr, 1998). This aspect is particularly important, since individual attributions could be different, both in nature and in terms of their strength as drivers of consumer choice. Second, comparing the various outcomes of empirical studies conducted on CRM, several inconsistencies are observed, such as those between consumer responses and preferences toward cause proximity (geographical coverage) issues (Anuar and Mohamad, 2011). Adding to this, extant research failed to develop a framework that considers the cultural differences of consumers within societies and across countries. Third, CRM scholars have either investigated the effects of and/or the outcomes relating to the cause type or the cause proximity constructs of a CRM campaign. However, research on consumer attitudes, as well as on the effects of and/or the outcomes relating to the type of donation construct (money, donation in kind, or the option of sponsor companies to donate a certain amount of their employees' time to a charity) of a CRM campaign is absent. Fourth, extant research ignores heterogeneity in CRM effectiveness across consumers and cultures across countries. And limited understanding of CRM-related interpersonal differences, limits our ability to truly understand why and how it works, and to prescribe actions toward improved effectiveness (Arora and Henderson, 2007).

Research aim, value and contribution to knowledge
Against this background, this research aims to advance our understanding of the nature of CRM campaigns with choice, by developing a multi-perspective interdisciplinary conceptual framework that allows consumers to choose the type of cause, cause proximity and type of donation in the donation process, ultimately, toward control of the marketing outcomes. The terms "Engagement," or "Engage" were used in research relating to co-creation, processes, solution development, marketing related forms of service exchange, personalized

customer experience, as well as interactions (del Vecchio *et al.*, 2018; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). The concept of engagement has been researched across several fields over the years. For instance, in marketing it has been researched as customer engagement (Kumar and Pansari, 2016), whereas in the fields of organizational behavior and psychology as employee engagement (Rowland *et al.*, 2017; Catteeuw *et al.*, 2007) and social engagement (Achterberg *et al.*, 2003), respectively. This study focuses on understanding engagement of the external stakeholders (customer) of the firm within the notion of customer choice in a CRM initiative. Thus, given the above discussion, we define customer engagement as "the conditions in which consumers are allowed to choose: the cause that receives the donation; the cause proximity; and the type of donation in a CRM campaign."

The value of the paper lies in the fact that it is the first to conceptualize the role of customer engagement in enhancing the effectiveness of a CRM campaign, in terms of coverage, customization and reduced consumer skepticism, as well as of triggering positive WOM persuasion behaviors. In fact, there are no studies – neither theoretical nor empirical – that explored cause marketing campaigns with choice of cause proximity and type of donation; as there are no studies that investigated the impact of CRM campaigns with choice on WOM (existing studies on CRM campaigns with choice focus on consumers' choice of cause and their impact on purchase intentions); and no CRM study has used procedural justice (PJ) theory as a theoretical basis for explaining consumers' responses. Adding to this, this paper develops a CRM framework that considers the differences among consumers and countries, so that local organizations to develop global CRM alliances, and global firms to design targeted CRM campaigns for their host countries and heterogeneous markets.

The research's contribution to knowledge relates to the filling of the above gaps in literature; the construction of the theoretical foundation upon which empirical testing may occur; and the development of a new theory, which, among others, explains consumer choice as regards to the type of donation (perceived cause–donation type fit) and incorporates a delineation of consumers' choice regarding cause proximity (in-group boundaries).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, the methodological approach and the need for an interdisciplinary study are presented and a preliminary framework conceptualization matrix for CRM campaigns with choice is developed. The latter sets the course for the study through a brief explanation of the fundamental mechanisms and theories underlying consumers' differential preferences regarding cause type, cause proximity and type of donation in a CRM campaign. Then, in light of this heterogeneity, the theoretical foundation is built of how a CRM campaign with choice can be more effective; in terms of customization, coverage and reduced skepticism and of triggering positive WOM persuasion behaviors. In the final section, the scholarly and managerial contributions and implications of this study are identified and directions toward further research are provided.

Methodological approach
Various scholars (e.g. MacInnis, 2011; Yadav, 2010) underline the significance of developing conceptual frameworks, as they play a key role along the discovery justification continuum that describes the knowledge development process. However, according to the review of extant literature, conceptual contributions within the CRM domain are scarce and constructed without a robust methodological basis. Thus, developing a conceptual framework on an under-researched research path is a first step toward significant development and contribution to the CRM domain. Further, Yadav (2010) proposes that combining knowledge from one or more research areas can initiate theory development in marketing. This study applies Yadav's (2010) suggestion of using interrelations to advocate a framework for CRM campaigns with choice which identifies the underlying mechanisms that explain consumers' choice during a CRM campaign. To achieve this goal, the research draws from a variety of disciplines to comprehensively understand the phenomenon in a

multi-perspective fashion. Hence, the proposed framework that is derived from the integration of theories across a variety of disciplines, with examples from practice to better understand the mechanisms that shape the concept. In addition, a consumer choice approach of conducting CRM campaigns is predicated on the understanding that a choice behavior can enhance CRM effectiveness (Arora and Henderson, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 2012) in terms of coverage, customization and reduced consumer skepticism (Arora and Henderson, 2007; Vlachos *et al.*, 2009), as well as positive WOM persuasion behaviors (Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Vlachos *et al.*, 2009). In the spirit of theory development, the word "construct" is used in this study as a broad mental configuration of a specific phenomenon (Bacharach, 1989). The attitudes of consumers toward the three multidimensional constructs, namely, choice of cause type, choice of cause proximity and choice of donation type, and their operationalization into a framework for CRM campaigns with choice is facilitated by the research propositions (RPs), which have been derived inductively from research and practice and lead in the final section to scholarly transcriptions. To conclude, Crittenden *et al.* (2011), is an example of authors that utilize Yadav's guidelines to establish a conceptual foundation in marketing research.

Framework conceptualisation matrix for CRM campaigns with choice

Table I illustrates the preliminary conceptualzation matrix of the framework – the rationale based on which the following sections develop. The framework is comprised of five layers. The first layer of the framework (namely, choice options) illustrates the choice options of each of the three constructs included, namely, cause type, cause proximity and donation type. The choice options for each of the three structural constructs are in line with the review findings of the CRM literature (see subsequent analysis). Continuing, the next layer of the framework (sub-processes for choice selection) illustrates the sub-processes (mechanisms) that explain how consumers choose each structural construct (e.g. it is proposed that consumers choose the cause proximity according to their collectivistic in-group boundaries and if they benefit directly or indirectly from their choice). The third layer (act of choosing) relates with the outcomes of the act of choosing the three constructs and shall subsequently entail the outcomes that relate with CRM effectiveness, namely, customization, coverage and reduced consumer skepticism. Here, the final framework shall also illustrate the positive role of PJ – through the perceived control over the procedure – on reducing consumer skepticism. The next layer of the framework (sub-processes for positive WOM after choice selection) illustrates the underlying mechanisms that take place, after the choice selection of each construct, and explain why consumers engage in positive WOM

| | | Layers | | |
	L1 Choice Options	L2 Sub-processes for choice selection	L3 Act of choosing	L4 Post-choice WOM sub-processes	L5 Consumers' reactions
Constructs					
C1 cause type	Cause type options	Cause affinity and importance	CRM cause type outcomes	Cause type perceptions	Persuasion behavior and control
C2 cause proximity	Cause proximity options	Benefits and in-group boundaries	CRM cause proximity outcomes	Cause proximity perceptions	Persuasion behavior and control
C3 donation type	Donation type options	Perceived cause-donation type fit	CRM donation type outcomes	Donation type perceptions	Persuasion behavior and control

Table I.
Framework conceptualization matrix

persuasion behavior (final layer: consumers' reactions). Again, at this point the framework shows the positive effect that perceived control over the procedure has on the development of perceived perceptions of transparency of the CRM campaign which leads to trust development and consequently to positive WOM persuasion behavior.

The structural elements of a CRM campaign (the constructs)

Cause type (Matrix C1: L1, L2)

Cause type in CRM alliances, refers to the focus of cause that charities represent. In CRM literature, there are several categorizations of cause types that are generally linked with CRM alliances (i.e. Lafferty and Edmondson, 2014; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012). For the requirements of this study, we adopt Lafferty's and Edmondson's (2014) cause type categorization (human, health, environmental and animal cause types) since it is more detailed and incorporates the main cause categories for which consumers donate. According to the authors, the health cause category includes all causes that deal with human health issues such as cancer, AIDS, diabetes, etc. The human services cause category includes all causes that deal with other human issues, like helping the homeless, or education-related help. The animal cause category entails all causes that deal with issues relating to animals, such as animal rights, or animal protection. Finally, the environmental cause category includes those causes that deal with environment-related issues, such as protecting the oceans, saving the forests etc. However, regarding what type of causes consumers prefer which can enhance CRM effectiveness, prior literature showed that these preferences are based on various aspects, including, consumers' affinity or identification with the cause and cause importance (Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012).

The role of consumer-cause affinity/identification. When people donate to a specific cause that does not belong in a CRM alliance, it is because they are personally relevant or self-congruent with the cause (e.g. Bendapudi *et al.*, 1996; Chowdhury and Khare, 2011). In particular, this implies that the cause focus affects the person directly, such as to donate to the American Diabetes Association because there is a family history of this condition or the person himself has diabetes (Lafferty and Edmondson, 2014). Such consumer-cause affinity is also applied in the CRM domain and is defined as the overlap between consumers' self-concept and their perception of the cause (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2004; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012). In particular, it has been found that many consumption actions for products linked with a CRM campaign, serve goals that support self-identification processes (Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012). Having this in regard, prior CRM research examined consumer-cause affinity and found that it plays an important role in the success of the CRM campaign (Arora and Henderson, 2007; Drumwright, 1996), through effects such as, favorable brand attitudes and brand choices (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2004), enhanced company-cause fit (Barone *et al.*, 2007; Gupta and Pirsch, 2006), as well as positive consumer evaluations and enhanced purchase intentions toward donor companies (Cornwell and Coote, 2005; Gupta and Pirsch, 2006; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012).

Such consumer-cause affinity or identification has its basis in social identity theory which implies that a consumer is psychologically connected with the cause, and in turn supports corporate sponsors of charities because of their identification with its mission and goals. When individuals identify with an NPO, for instance with the Red Cross because themselves or a relative of them has cancer, they become vested in the successes and failures of that NPO. Thus, individuals who identify with a charity's focus are more likely to support their corporate sponsors because the success of that NPO is also their success (Gupta and Pirsch, 2006; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012).

The role of cause importance. However, prior CRM literature also showed that personal relevance with the cause is not the only reason why people choose to donate to specific causes.

In CRM campaigns, the main concern for the consumer is the product. The cause could make the consumer to buy that product over another, if they believe the cause is a worthy or important one, even if the cause is not personally relevant to them (Lafferty and Edmondson, 2014). Termed also as the perceived importance that the cause has for the consumer, cause importance has been researched in CRM literature by various researchers (i.e. Demetriou *et al.*, 2010; Berger *et al.*, 1999).

Thus, it is evident that consumers' attitudes of cause type depend on various factors, including cause importance, and consumer-cause affinity or identification. Also, research indicates that, consumer attitudes of cause affinity and cause importance differ. Thus, what is missing is a deeper knowledge about what "type of cause" means (perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and behavioral tendencies) to consumers, in order to understand how they assign meaning to cause types in CRM campaigns and how these meanings translate into differential behaviors. Against this background, the following proposition emerges:

P1. Consumers' preferences toward the type of cause in a CRM campaign are influenced by their affinity (or identification) with the cause and the importance of the cause to them. If other mechanisms that explain consumers' preferences toward the type of cause in a CRM campaign also exist, affinity (or identification) with the cause and the importance of the cause to them will not fully explain how consumers assign meaning to cause types in CRM campaigns and how these meanings translate into differential behaviors.

Cause proximity (Matrix C2: L1, L2)

Defined as the physical distance between the donation activity of the charity in a CRM alliance and the potential consumers that would make the donation (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988), cause proximity is one of the most important structural elements of CRM campaigns, as it has been proven to significantly influence consumers' response toward CRM (Anuar and Mohamad, 2011; Grau and Folse, 2007). According to prior literature, cause proximity is classified as local, regional, national or international (Grau and Folse, 2007; Ross *et al.*, 1991; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012). However, cause proximity has received a little attention in prior literature and the effects of this structural construct on consumers' response toward CRM campaigns are inconsistent (Anuar and Mohamad, 2011). In particular, prior research has identified: consumers' preferences toward local or regional causes (Grau and Folse, 2007; Hou *et al.*, 2008; Lii *et al.*, 2013; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012); preference on national causes (Liston-Heyes and Liu, 2010); no preference between local vs national causes (Cui *et al.*, 2003), or national vs international causes (La Ferle *et al.*, 2013); and no effect of cause proximity on purchase intentions and positive attitudes toward the company (Ross *et al.*, 1992).

The role of social exchange theory. Against these contradicting results, Vanhamme *et al.* (2012) stated that cause proximity can be explained with the social exchange theory, whereby people try to maximize their self-interest (Bagozzi, 1979), thus consumers identify with firms that fulfill their basic, self-definitional needs, such as self-enhancement (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Hence, consumers prefer causes that are proximate to them, because they believe that they could get something in return, such as benefit from improved conditions, or to see the impact of their donation to a local cause (Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012). Also, according to this theory, one can explain the majority of the results identified in prior literature, but it cannot explain consumer preferences between local, regional or national, causes, neither does it explain why consumers may also sometimes prefer international causes.

The role of collectivistic in-group boundaries. According to Vanhamme *et al.* (2012), consumers' preferences toward cause proximity may also depend on cultural norms. In line with this argument, collectivistic in-group boundaries could explain consumer attitudes toward the cause proximity. According to the collectivistic mindset, people from either

collectivistic cultures belong to cohesive in-groups and place important value on the well-being of their in-group (Kirkman *et al.*, 2006; Lam *et al.*, 2009; Soares *et al.*, 2007). Thus, consumers in collectivistic cultures may tend to have greater felt obligation toward people in need in their own society than individualistic-oriented consumers (La Ferle *et al.*, 2013). By nature, CRM is developed to help a charity/cause that benefits a specific area. Thus, one would expect that a collectivistic consumer will support a cause that advances the well-being of the group in which is a member. On the contrary, when a cause is of international nature, consumers in individualistic cultures of a specific society would be more likely to support that cause. Continuing, at the other end of the scale there are collectivistic societies in which the ties between the members are very tight. Individuals are born into in-groups (collectivities) which might be their extended family, such as grandparents, uncles, etc., their village, or their town, etc. (Hofstede, 1983). And everybody look after the interest, harmony and well-being of his/ her in-group. Thus, whether or not cause proximity, in terms of local, regional, national or international cause will be of greater support from either individualistic or collectivistic societies, this depends on how each society defines its in-group. For example, cause proximity would be less of an issue for collectivistic societies with very strong ties and with restricted in-group boundaries (such as the village boundary) if companies support causes that advance the well-being of their local community. In contrast, individualistic or collectivistic societies in which social ties are loosen and in-groups have bigger boundaries, consumers of such societies would promote a cause that advances the well-being of the region or nation in which they belong to, or even an international cause. From the above discussion, the following proposition is raised:

   P2. Consumers with collectivistic norms will prefer proximate causes, whereas consumers with individualistic norms will prefer distal causes.

Type of donation (Matrix C3: L1, L2)
In extant CRM research, scholars focused on various research paths as regards to the characteristics of the donation type that the company provides to the charity. Specifically, researchers focused on either investigating: the preferred donation magnitude (relative with the price of the product, moderate or high donation size) (e.g. Koschate-Fischer *et al.*, 2012; Müller *et al.*, 2014; Pracejus and Olsen, 2004); the donation framing (in absolute money terms or percentage) (e.g. Grau *et al.*, 2007; La Ferle *et al.*, 2013; Olsen *et al.*, 2003); or presence of donation disclosure, deadline and limit (e.g. Grau *et al.*, 2007; La Ferle *et al.*, 2013). However, none of these CRM studies investigated consumer's attitudes as regards to the type of donation in the CRM campaigns, in terms of donation in kind (Liu, 2013; Liu and Ko, 2011) vs money (Robinson *et al.*, 2012). In addition, another form of donation type suggested by Robinson *et al.* (2012) as an avenue for further research is to examine the possibility of sponsor companies to donate a certain amount of their employees' time to a charity. Against this gap in knowledge, a cause-donation type fit dimension is proposed, a notion that is further explained below.

   Perceived cause-donation type fit. Despite the fact that CRM campaigns have increased in today's era, recent research illustrates that positive outcomes do not occur for all CRM relationships (Hoeffler and Keller, 2002). A lack of congruence or fit between the cause and the brand has been accused for some of the sponsor company's/brand's incapability to benefit from CRM campaigns (Zdravkovic *et al.*, 2010). Thus, several researchers suggest that CRM alliances with high fit between the company and the charity/cause are viewed as better and more favorable than alliances that do not fit well together (Basil and Herr, 2006). For example, drawing from the brand extension literature, Pracejus and Olsen (2004) found that CRM alliances with high fit between the brand and the charity are more favorably evaluated and can impact consumer choice. Similarly, Rifon *et al.* (2004) illustrated that

higher fit between a firm and a cause can promote positive evaluations of the corporate sponsor. Rifon *et al.* (2004) extended Pracejus and Olsen's (2004) initial findings by providing evidence that company-cause fit positively affects perceived motives, which, in turn, influences the credibility and attitudes related with the sponsor organization. Barone *et al.* (2007) also proved the positive effect of fit between the retailers and the cause. On the contrary, if the fit between the brand and the cause is perceived as low, CRM alliances can sometimes negatively affect consumers' purchase intentions (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006; Zdravkovic *et al.*, 2010). In addition, prior literature has also shown that customer-company and customer-cause congruence affect the consumer's overall attitude toward the corporate sponsor and enhances the positive effects of company-cause fit on purchase intent (Gupta and Pirsch, 2006). The idea of fit or congruence is not confined to the CRM domain, but also extends to other business areas, such as strategic management and advertising, to name a few (Zdravkovic *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, consumers' attitudes toward the type of donation will depend on their perceptions that the latter fits with the cause focus, as well as their perceptions on what type of donation charities/causes need at the time of the CRM alliance. Thus, cause-donation type fit exists if there is a perceived association or relevance between the type of donation and the cause, as well as what consumers believe that the cause needs during the CRM campaign. This type of fit could possibly explain why the Product RED campaign was so successful on providing antiretroviral medicine (donation in kind that is relevant with the cause) to AIDS patients in Africa. Against this background, the following proposition is raised:

> *P3.* Consumers' perceptions of cause-donation type fit influence their preferences toward the type of donation in a CRM campaign, such that, the higher (lower) the fit between a cause and a type of donation, the higher (lower) the preference for the type of donation used in a CRM campaign.

Consumers with choice and CRM effectiveness (Matrix L3: C1, C2, C3)

The study of consumer choice has been a focal interest in consumer behavior for over 50 years (e.g. Allen, 2002; Aribarg and Foutz, 2009; Bettman, 1979; Bettman *et al.*, 1998; Botti and McGill, 2011; Evangelidis and Van Osselaer, 2018; Hansen, 1972; Tversky and Kahneman, 1986). By drawing mainly from the psychology and economic disciplines, marketing researchers have developed several theoretical frameworks in order to understand consumer preference or choice behavior (Corstjens and Gautschi, 1983), such as the information-processing approach to consumer choice (Bettman, 1979), the model of constructive consumer choice processes (Bettman *et al.*, 1998), the rational choice theory by Tversky and Kahneman (1986), or the Fits-Like-a-Glove (FLAG) framework by Allen (2002). Consumer choice research has also focused on understanding the context effects in choice (e.g. Dhar and Simonson, 2003; Dhar *et al.*, 2000), the effects of utilitarian and hedonic considerations in consumer choices (e.g. Botti and McGill, 2011; Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000), as well as the conditions through which consumer choice could produce negative effects on the evaluation of a decision outcome (e.g. Iyengar and Lepper, 2000; Mogilner *et al.*, 2008).

Despite extensive research and knowledge in the academic field about consumer choice, prior research on CRM campaigns with choice, i.e. selecting one alternative from a set of various choices (Botti and McGill, 2006), is limited and a review of extant literature revealed that only three studies have focused on such campaigns. Specifically, previous CRM research illustrated the heterogeneity among consumers' responses toward CRM campaigns – some individuals are extremely sensitive to CRM products for attitudinal, behavioral and motivational reasons – which justifies the implementation of a customized CRM offering (Arora and Henderson, 2007). It also shows that the consumer choice of cause type in CRM campaigns enhances purchase intentions (Kull and Heath, 2016; Robinson *et al.*, 2012), brand

attachment (Kull and Heath, 2016) and customization (consumers choosing their preferred cause) effectiveness (Arora and Henderson, 2007). This study seeks to extend this research path by theorizing on how choice of cause type, cause proximity and type of donation can enhance the effectiveness of CRM campaigns through coverage, customization and reduced consumer skepticism.

Coverage
Unlike sales promotions, in which the underlying discriminator among consumers is price sensitivity (Arora and Henderson, 2007), a unique aspect of a CRM campaign is that it could potentially include several causes, or provide donations in various forms, or even entail social causes in which the beneficiary could be local, regional, national or international. According to the heterogeneity among consumers in relation to the mechanisms that determine the different preferences for those constructs (i.e. Arora and Henderson, 2007; Bendapudi *et al.*, 1996), we refer to "coverage effectiveness in CRM campaigns," such that, compared to a single preselected cause, cause proximity and type of donation, multiple options for these structural constructs increase coverage and therefore enhance CRM effectiveness. In this vein, definitions and practical examples of the corresponding three coverage forms are hereby provided:

(1) Cause type coverage refers to the CRM campaign that offers multiple social causes as coverage. Consider, for instance, four causes A, B, C and D, where each could be attractive, in terms of cause affinity and cause importance, to different individuals. A coverage strategy suggests that inclusion of all four cause types in a CRM campaign, compared to the case when either A, or B, or C, or D is included, should result in enhanced CRM effectiveness. That is, more consumers are likely to engage in a CRM campaign linked with multiple causes (increased cause coverage) compared to a CRM campaign with only one cause.

(2) Cause proximity coverage refers to the CRM campaign that offers several cause proximities as coverage. Consider, for instance, two cause proximities – A, which concerns a national cause proximity, and B, which represents an international cause proximity – where each could be attractive to different persons. A coverage strategy suggests that inclusion of both cause proximities in a CRM campaign, compared to the case when either A, or B is included, should result in enhanced CRM effectiveness, since more consumers are likely to engage in a CRM campaign that is linked with multiple cause proximities compared to a CRM campaign that is linked with only one cause proximity option.

(3) Donation type coverage refers to the CRM campaign that offers several types of donation to the charity as coverage. Consider, for instance, three types of donation, money, employee time, and donation in kind, where each could be attractive, in terms of perceived cause-donation type fit, to different individuals. A coverage strategy suggests that inclusion of all three donation types in a CRM campaign, compared to the case whereas one type of donation is included, should result in engagement of more consumers at a CRM campaign which increase coverage and, therefore, enhances CRM effectiveness.

Customization
The effectiveness of a customization strategy allows the sponsor company to satisfy heterogeneous preferences, thus increasing its overall effectiveness (Arora and Henderson, 2007; Bayus and Putsis, 1999). Adding to this, the satisfaction of the heterogeneous preference of consumers relates to cause type, cause proximity and type of donation, such that: cause type

customization permits consumers to select the cause for which they have the highest affinity, as well as the cause for which they consider most important; cause proximity customization provides consumers with the possibility to select the cause proximity for which they feel they can have a direct or indirect benefit, as well as according to their collectivistic in-group boundaries; and donation type customization provides consumers with the option to select the type of donation for which they perceive it matches with the cause type in the CRM alliance. Thus, compared to a single preselected cause type, cause proximity and type of donation, customization of these structural constructs is a more effective form of CRM campaign.

Reduced consumer skepticism

Consumer skepticism and CRM campaigns. Ad skepticism in general has been defined as the tendency toward disbelief or to question the truthfulness of the informational claims of advertising, and varies across individuals (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998). Consumer skepticism in the CRM domain refers to consumers' tendency to question or disbelieve a company's motivation to conduct such a program, particularly, when the donor firm advertizes its efforts (Chang and Cheng, 2015; Webb and Mohr, 1998), and even then consumers' responses toward such campaigns can differ from person to person, according to the level of skepticism toward the CRM claim (Webb and Mohr, 1998). Prior CRM research, showed that consumers can be skeptical of the reasons that donor companies enter into CRM alliances (Ross *et al.*, 1992; Varadarajan and Menon, 1988), and their judgments are based on their perceptions of whether CRM campaigns are cause beneficial, that is, their concern about the social cause vs cause exploitation (to increase profits and/or improve the brand's reputation) motivation (Chang and Cheng, 2015; Foreh and Grier, 2003; Singh *et al.*, 2009; Varadarajan and Menon, 1988). Also, previous studies suggest that consumer skepticism plays a crucial role in affecting consumer responses to CRM (i.e. Brønn and Vrioni, 2001; Gupta and Pirsch, 2006; Singh *et al.*, 2009), including negative evaluations and attitudes toward CRM campaigns (Anuar and Mohamad, 2012; Webb and Mohr, 1998), attitudes toward the brand (Chen and Leu, 2011), purchase intentions (Barone *et al.*, 2000; Gupta and Pirsch, 2006; Webb and Mohr, 1998) and stimulation of unfavorable WOM (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013).

In addition, prior CRM research investigated the reasons underlying consumer skepticism toward CRM claims and found that, among others, the level of skepticism is higher when: it is difficult to verify the CRM claims, and/or when there is a mismatch between the cause and the firm (Singh *et al.*, 2009); and/or when the company is perceived to be exploiting rather than helping the cause (Barone *et al.*, 2000), and/or when the CRM concept is new in a country related setting (Singh *et al.*, 2009), and/or when the level of awareness of CRM is low (Anuar and Mohamad, 2012). Contrarily, low levels of skepticism tend to occur when customers perceive that the company's motivation toward CRM campaigns is driven by more altruistic intentions rather than by the desire to make a profit through increased sales volumes (Gupta and Pirsch, 2006). Consequently, CRM researchers investigated ways to reduce skepticism toward CRM campaigns, including company-cause fit (Foreh and Grier, 2003; Singh *et al.*, 2009), claim repetition (Singh *et al.*, 2009) and disclosure of the monetary amount being donated (Webb and Mohr, 1998). Also, an inverse relationship was found between consumers' knowledge on CRM and skepticism toward CRM claims (Brønn and Vrioni, 2001; Singh *et al.*, 2009; Webb and Mohr, 1998), as was the fact that large donations are perceived as more altruistic and authentic than small donations (Dahl and Lavack, 1995). Finally, Chang and Cheng (2015) found that, contrary to individualism, a collectivistic mindset is negatively related with consumer skepticism.

It is evident that CRM scholars have examined the influence of consumer skepticism toward CRM in terms of the donor company's motives (e.g. Barone *et al.*, 2000; Singh *et al.*,

2009; Webb and Mohr, 1998). However, consumers might also be the skeptical of CRM campaigns because they perceive the selected charity/NPO as not serving the purpose it is supposed to – an aspect of consumer skepticism that has not been examined by prior research. This study, therefore, takes a more holistic view of CRM skepticism and refers to it as "the overall tendency of consumers to distrust and question the CRM claims of the donor company, as well as the CRM utilization by the charity itself." Against this background, we propose that allowing consumers to choosing the structural elements of a CRM campaign themselves will strengthen the perception of control over the procedure, which in turn will raise in their minds the level of transparency of the campaigns and decrease skepticism. This notion is based on the PJ theory, further explained below.

PJ theory. The various components of justice have been traditionally predicated on structural differences in the context in which justice is studied (Ashworth and Free, 2006). Before Thibaut and Walker's (1975) seminal work on PJ, the field of justice was mainly focused on the distribution of outcomes. However, Thibaut and Walker's study, demonstrated that in dispute resolution procedures, perceptions of justice were also a function of the way in which the procedure was applied. In particular, the authors stated that disputants' sense of justice was raised by their ability to actively present their arguments or, in other words, be afforded "voice" (Ashworth and Free, 2006). Early research on PJ assumed that voice was ultimately significant because of its potential to affect outcomes. Later scholars recognized that perceptions of justice could be related to more than just concerns regarding the final output. Lind and Tyler (1988) stated that procedures also convey the extent to which people are valued and respected members of a company, labeled as the group-value or relational model of PJ (Ashworth and Free, 2006). PJ, thus, refers to the perceived fairness of the organizational procedures and policies used to make decisions and allocate resources, the perceived fairness of the means by which ends are accomplished (Hulland *et al.*, 2012; Lind and Tyler, 1988). Research within the marketing field focused on how consumers' perceptions of justice affect their satisfaction toward the firm after service failure (Hulland *et al.*, 2012; Tax *et al.*, 1998). Extending this logic in the current research, PJ deals with the consumers' perceptions of fairness and transparency of organizational policies and procedures of a CRM campaign, through the act of choosing the cause type, cause proximity and type of donation of the campaign. This relationship is subsequently further explored.

Consequence of PJ. Perceived control over the procedure. Drawing from organization science, according to Kim and Mauborgne (1997), one of the main criteria that generally encompass the theoretical domain of PJ theory is engagement. Engagement refers to the involvement of individuals in decision making that affects them, by asking for their input (Folger and Konovsky, 1989; Greenberg, 1987). It has also been demonstrated that perceptions of justice are increased if a sufficient opportunity is given to employees to voice their ideas. However, this occurs only when the managers perceive that their ideas have been considered by top management. Employees seek procedures that make them feel that they participated in developing a decision that will directly or indirectly affect them (Rosier *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, PJ entails the extent to which representatives of the organization engage in two-way communication processes and ask for and use employee input (Folger and Konovsky, 1989; Rosier *et al.*, 2010). This leads employees who are more involved in decisions to see the overall process in a more favorable light (Nandan *et al.*, 2018; Rosier *et al.*, 2010). Applying this logic to the content of this study, allowing consumers to choose the cause type, the cause proximity and the type of donation in a CRM campaign, will increase consumers' engagement in the decision-making process of the CRM campaign. It will let them voice their feelings, thoughts and beliefs and witness the sponsor company implementing their decisions, ultimately leading them to seeing the overall process in a more

favorable light. This argument is supported by empirical research in the marketing field that illustrate that "voice" (i.e. customers' chance to communicate their problems to the firm) increases PJ (Goodwin and Ross, 1992; Hui and Au, 2001).

Also, organizational researchers argue that the ability of organization members to express their feelings and views in the decision-making process enhances their feelings of control (Colquitt *et al.*, 2006; Loi *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, van den Bos (2001) found that PJ has a bigger effect on employees' emotional reactions when they feel lack of control or uncertainty (Loi *et al.*, 2012). Extending this logic to the service recovery domain in the marketing discipline, PJ comprises the firm's disciplines and policies (Smith *et al.*, 1999), including, "outcome control," "procedure control," "right policy and execution" and "appropriate method" (Kim *et al.*, 2009; Maxham III and Netemeyer, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 1999). Adding to this, in the psychology domain, researchers demonstrated that choice increases involvement and perceived control (Botti and Iyengar, 2004; Robinson *et al.*, 2012). Applying this to the CRM context, we argue that allowing consumers to choose the three structural constructs in a CRM campaign will increase consumers' engagement in the processes of the campaign, increase perceived control over the donation process, and create perceptions of fairness and enhanced transparency, which reduce consumer skepticism toward the campaign.

Adding to this, PJ researchers posit that the members of an organization worry about the transparency and fairness of the procedures that affect or govern them because procedural fairness denotes a member's positive or valued position within the organization (Li *et al.*, 2007; Lind and Tyler, 1988). In particular, organizational members who perceive greater PJ will have a stronger feeling that they are valued and respected members of the company and, therefore, their uncertainty about their organizational membership is reduced (Loi *et al.*, 2012). On the contrary, not fair treatment signals marginality and disregard (Li *et al.*, 2007). Thus, to the extent that organizational members perceive they have a valued position within the company, they might be more likely to fulfill their role requirements and enhance their contribution to organizational performance (Li *et al.*, 2007). Extending this logic into the CRM domain, we argue that as the sponsor company conducts the CRM campaign in a perceived procedurally just manner (e.g. considering consumers' views and feelings by engaging them in the overall process and allowing them to choose the structural elements of the campaign), consumer skepticism will be reduced and thus, according to prior literature, CRM effectiveness shall improve. In support of this argument, various marketing studies found that customer-perceived PJ has a positive effect on attitudes toward the firm, firm commitment and trust (e.g. Clemmer, 1988; Goodwin and Ross, 1992; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2003; Tax *et al.*, 1998).

Thus, drawing from the above, the following propositions are raised:

P4. Consumers' engagement in a CRM campaign, through the act of choosing the (a) cause type, (b) cause proximity and (c) type of donation, has a positive effect on their attitudes toward the CRM campaign.

P5. The act of choosing the (a) cause type, (b) cause proximity and (c) type *of* donation, has a positive effect on CRM effectiveness in terms of customization, coverage and reduced consumer skepticism (based on consumers' perceptions of control over the campaign's procedures).

Act of choosing and word-of-mouth (WOM) persuasion behavior (Matrix L4: C1, C2, C3)
WOM and CRM
Defined as the informal communications between individuals (consumers) about the characteristics, usage or ownership of particular products and services or their sellers

(Berger, 2014), WOM can be any literal WOM, face-to-face discussions or online mentions and reviews, either positive or negative, about a product, service, brand or company (Berger, 2014; Vazquez-Casielles *et al.*, 2013); and includes direct recommendations, such as "you'd love this movie" and mere mentions, like "I went to this theatrical play" (Nicoli and Papadopoulou, 2017; Berger, 2014). For the purposes of this study, the term WOM here refers to the informal, face-to-face, positive communications between individuals (consumers) about the characteristics, usage or ownership of particular products and services or their sellers, and serves the function of persuading others. Today, such interpersonal communication is considered as one of the main and most effective communications channels for businesses (Vazquez-Casielles *et al.*, 2013). Companies like Procter & Gamble, Nestle, Bosch and Microsoft, to mention just a few, increasingly recognize that WOM is a highly credible, effective and persuasive tool of informal means of generating consumer engagement. According to Berger (2014), social talk generates more than 3.3b brand impressions each day and shapes consumers' choice. Moreover, WOM has been the focus of a considerable amount of theoretical work in the marketing discipline (Berger and Iyengar, 2013; Vazquez-Casielles *et al.*, 2013). In particular, a great deal of research has proved that WOM: positively affects consumer behavior and influences opinion, diffusion and sales performance (Berger and Iyengar, 2013; Berger, 2014); enhances product/service awareness and persuades other people to do things (Berger and Iyengar, 2013; Berger, 2014), and enhances diffusion of information (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2001) and new customer acquisitions (Berger and Iyengar, 2013; Schmitt *et al.*, 2011).

Despite the importance of WOM in practice and its extensive research in the marketing field, the concept has received a little attention in the CRM domain. This literature finds that: consumer trust (mediating role) (Vlachos *et al.*, 2009), a strong brand/cause relationship (Lee Thomas, Fraedrich and Mullen, 2011), strategically aligned CRM relationships (Lee Thomas, Mullen and Fraedrich, 2011) and the perceived credibility of the campaign (Lii *et al.*, 2013) enhance positive WOM. Reversely, Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013) found that CRM skepticism decreases resistance to negative information about the retailer and stimulates unfavorable WOM. Based on these, some important gaps are identified that merit attention. First, even though the literature has investigated the effects of persuasive communications, there has been limited attention to the sharer side, or why, when, and how consumers share WOM in terms of persuasion (Berger, 2014). In addition, an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms that trigger consumers' WOM persuasion behaviors is scarce. As regards to CRM campaigns with choice, research on how such campaigns affect and are affected by consumers' WOM behaviors is absent. This study eliminates these limitations and focuses on explaining the mechanisms behind consumers' WOM behaviors in a CRM campaign with choice.

Triggering positive WOM persuasion behaviors
Perceived transparency and trust development. Trust and the CRM domain. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust occurs when one party has confidence in another's reliability and integrity. In other words, trust is a generalized expectancy that the word of another can be relied upon (Rosier *et al.*, 2010). The significance of trust in successfully conducting marketing relationships has been well established (Brashear *et al.*, 2005; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In addition, the service evaluation literature demonstrates accumulating support for the mediating role of trust in the satisfaction-loyalty link (Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002; Vlachos *et al.*, 2009). Trust relies on the expectation of ethical behavior (Hosmer, 1995; Vlachos *et al.*, 2009). Also, extant literature on trust argues that confidence on behalf of the trusting party results from a belief that the trustworthy party has high integrity and is reliable, which is commensurate with qualities such as honesty, consistency, responsibility, competence, benevolence and helpfulness (Larzelere and Huston, 1980; Rosier *et al.*, 2010). Applying this

to the context of the current study, trust refers to the consumers' belief that the CRM campaign will fulfill its promise. In the CRM domain, even though consumers' skepticism toward CRM campaigns is increasing exponentially, due to the scandals, ethical lapses, broad cynicism and anxiety for contemporary life (Mohr *et al.*, 1998; Vlachos *et al.*, 2009), research on enhancing consumer trust as a CRM performance factor is limited (Vlachos *et al.*, 2009). In fact, extant research on consumer trust comprises Nowak *et al.* (2004) and Youn and Kim (2008) works, which showed that consumers with high interpersonal trust are more likely to support CRM campaigns; and Vlachos *et al.* (2009) research, which found it to be an important sub-process that regulates the effect of consumer attributions on patronage and WOM recommendation intentions in a CRM campaign.

Linking PJ, perceived transparency and trust development. One of the reasons PJ perceptions are of primary importance is that they lead to significant outcomes for the company and for employee behavior and attitudes (Rosier *et al.*, 2010). Typically, procedurally fair treatment has been found to result in organizational commitment and increased job satisfaction (Cobb and Frey, 1996), as well as organizational citizenship behaviors (Konovsky and Organ, 1996). In the organization science field, the significance of justice in organizations has been widely recognized, and its consequences include, among others, inter-organizational trust and relationship continuity (Hulland *et al.*, 2012; Scheer *et al.*, 2003). In particular, justice researchers found that one of the outcomes of PJ is trust development (i.e. Searle *et al.*, 2011; Yang *et al.*, 2009). Also, the relational or group-value model of PJ (i.e. Lind and Tyler, 1988) argues that perceived fairness of decision making procedures create positive feelings toward the group, leader and organization, including, among others, trust in leader and organizational commitment (Hulland *et al.*, 2012). In doing so, organization science researchers demonstrated that PJ is more important than the outcomes themselves when it comes to predicting various significant organizational variables. For instance, Folger and Konovsky (1989) have found that the procedures for determining pay raises were of similar significance to the actual raise as regards to satisfaction, and even more significant regarding organizational commitment and trust in the employees' manager (Ashworth and Free, 2006). In the marketing discipline, prior literature demonstrated that PJ positively affects trust and WOM (i.e. Kim *et al.*, 2009). Similarly, drawing from prior evidences from the organization, justice and marketing disciplines, in the CRM domain, perceived fairness of the procedures (PJ), which reduces skepticism, should also enhance perceived transparency for the campaigns processes. Also, since increased consumer skepticism provokes negative WOM persuasion behaviors (e.g. Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013), reduced skepticism through the perceived control over the procedures (PJ) should cause the opposite effect and enhance WOM persuasion behaviors. Finally, since Vlachos *et al.* (2009) proved that trust mediates consumers' recommendation intentions toward CRM campaigns, this study argues that perceptions of PJ in the procedures of the CRM campaign will lead to perceived transparency for the procedures which will provoke trust development and, thus, positively affect WOM persuasion behaviors.

Impact of enhanced helping for the selected cause type and cause proximity. In the marketing and service literature, research demonstrated that one of the motives for people to engage in positive WOM behaviors is altruism, to help others (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013). For example, Dichter's (1966) research on WOM identified a group of people with goodwill. Individuals belonging in this category share information to other people because they feel the need to give something to others, or they want to express love, care, or friendship or simply because they want to share their pleasure with another person (Price *et al.*, 1995). Piliavin and Charng (1990) found that altruism, the desire to help others, can trigger positive WOM behaviors and Sundaram *et al.* (1998) established altruism as a reason to engage in positive WOM. Similarly, Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) and Ho and Dempsey (2010) found that concern for others impacts the frequency of online WOM. Adding to this, although it is possible to

have a purely altruistic behavior (Piliavin and Charng, 1990), research also found that helping others is considered as being motivated by self and egoistic driven objectives (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013; Batson, 1991). The benefit from positive WOM behaviors in this case is to satisfy self-needs, such as self-enhancement, and social-needs such as social bonding. However, in order to satisfy those needs via positive WOM behavior, a person needs to engage in a social interaction, which entails social considerations (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013). Adding to this, sharing social information can be viewed as meliorating the society, which is also a form of altruistic behavior. This logic is supported by Boulding *et al.* (1993) and Oliver (1980), who found that intentions are affected by expectations (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013).

Adopting this logic in this research, the core characteristics of (particularly collectivistic) societies involve sharing emphasis, collectivity-orientation, belief in-group decisions and cooperation (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1994). In addition, based on the collectivistic/ individualistic orientation, people belong to cohesive in-groups that take care of them and advance group harmony and well-being (Kirkman *et al.*, 2006; Soares *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, one might expect that, in a CRM campaign, a possible way for consumers to collaborate in order to advance and achieve the collective goals for their society's social well-being, is through WOM persuasion behaviors.

Choice of cause type. Extending the above discussion to the logic of a CRM campaign, prior literature showed that consumers would choose the type of cause for which they are affiliated with, either directly or indirectly. Drumwright (1996) demonstrated that when a customer is affiliated with the cause (cause affinity), this results in evangelizing the cause to other consumers. Thus, in a CRM campaign with choice of cause type, consumers would engage in positive WOM persuasion behaviors to further promote a cause that are affiliated with and with which they are emotionally attached, so as to benefit directly or indirectly.

Choice of cause proximity. Relating to the cause proximity choice, as noted earlier, societies' members have social ties between them (Hofstede, 1983). Individuals are born into in-groups (collectivities) which might be their extended family, such as uncles, aunts, etc., their village, or their town, region, etc., according to their in-group boundaries. And everybody look after the interest, harmony and well-being of his or her in-group (Hofstede, 1983). Thus, in a CRM campaign with choice of cause proximity, consumers would engage in positive WOM persuasion behaviors to further promote a cause that advances the well-being of the town, region, etc., to which they belong.

Customer engagement and perceived importance of its role in the CRM campaign. WOM literature demonstrated that two major motivators for customers to conduct positive WOM behaviors are: customer engagement (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010) and perceptions of enhanced importance of their personal role (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Schindler, 1998). Customer engagement refers to the psychological state reflecting customers' co-creative, interactive experiences with a company (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Verleye *et al.*, 2013). According to the customer engagement behaviors area, customers show their engagement toward a company by spreading WOM (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007), or recommending the company to other customers (Groth, 2005) – behaviors that are labeled as positive WOM (Verleye *et al.*, 2013). The most direct finding on the relationship between involvement with an activity and WOM is provided by Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988). Their study showed that enduring involvement impacts sharing of personal experience, advice and product news (Price *et al.*, 1995). In addition, Gupta and Harris (2010) found that customer engagement can contribute to the company's performance, e.g. by writing online reviews (e-WOM) in order to affect other customers' behaviors and attitudes toward companies.

Linking the above to the choice literature, prior research has illustrated that choices made personally, as compared to choices made by others, lead to more favorable effects,

such as more positive affect and attitude toward the outcome (Botti and McGill, 2011; Zuckerman *et al.*, 1978). A common result of research on freedom and control of choice is that self-made choices, compared to choices imposed by fate or third parties, lead to more positive effects, such as enhanced affect, task enjoyment and outcome evaluation (Botti and McGill, 2006; Langer and Rodin, 1976). In addition, when people perceive to have chosen an outcome through their free will, they tend to increase its subjective value, resulting in an enhanced outcome evaluation (Botti and McGill, 2006, 2011; Shafir *et al.*, 1993). Moreover, consumer engagement in choice literature showed that higher engagement results in the choosers' evaluation of the outcome being more extreme than that of non-choosers (Botti and Iyengar, 2004; Botti and McGill, 2006).

In the CRM domain, Broderick *et al.* (2003) empirically explored and discovered that consumers' participation in CRM programs plays a significant role in consumers' attitudes toward the product and the company, and in their intentions to purchase the advertised product and to participate in the CRM campaign. In the same vein, Hou *et al.* (2008) provide empirical evidence that consumers' involvement in CRM campaigns enhances customers' awareness, perception and response to such campaigns. Furthermore, more recent research has showed that when provided with a choice, consumers believe they are "meaningful agents" in their experience and perceive higher personal causality (Botti and McGill, 2006; Robinson *et al.*, 2012). In turn, perceived personal causality can positively affect evaluations of outcomes. Hence, the evaluation of an outcome depends not only on its objective worth, but also on whether the outcome is accomplished by the self or by a third party (Botti and McGill, 2011; Robinson *et al.*, 2012). On the same note, Robinson *et al.* (2012) found that by giving consumers the option to select the cause type in a CRM campaign, their perceived personal role is enhanced and positively affects their purchase intentions. Similarly, in the WOM literature, Schindler's (1998) study showed that when consumers perceived they were responsible for obtaining a discount for a product, they were more likely to engage in positive WOM communication for the product.

Applying the aforementioned findings from the WOM, choice and CRM literatures to the context of the current study, CRM campaigns with choice of cause type, cause proximity and type of donation could result in positive WOM persuasion behaviors. First, in such a CRM campaign consumers are highly engaged in the donation process. Thus, customer engagement could provoke positive WOM persuasion behaviors (i.e. Groth, 2005; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007). Second, people tend to overstate their personal contribution in collaborative tasks (Burger and Rodman, 1983; Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Ross and Sicoly, 1979). For instance, people conducting a group project tend to give themselves more credit for a good outcome and recall more their personal contribution to the project compared with the efforts of the other members of the group (Robinson *et al.*, 2012). The current knowledge base points two main reasons for which people perceive their personal role as greater in-group tasks: people are motivated by seeing themselves in a positive light, and contributing to an act that leads to a positive result helps implement this goal (Robinson *et al.*, 2012) and; people's personal acts are more salient than the acts of others (Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Ross and Sicoly, 1979), which are underweighted (Kruger and Savitsky, 2009; Robinson *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, a CRM campaign in which the consumer is allowed to choose the cause type, the cause proximity and the type of donation, enhances consumers' perceptions of their role and personal responsibility in the donation process, and potentially produces positive results for the sponsor companies through enhanced positive WOM persuasion behaviors (Robinson *et al.*, 2012). Third, Strahilevitz and Myers (1998) state that consumers prefer products associated with CRM campaigns, because of the extra utility they derive from donating to a cause. This utility is likely to be further amplified by the enhanced personal role and personal responsibility consumers perceive

through their choices, thus, leading to positive WOM persuasion behaviors for the sponsor organization of the CRM alliance. Ensuing from the above discussion, the following propositions emerge:

P6a. The act of choosing the cause type positively influences: (a) the development of consumers' trust toward the CRM campaign, (b) consumers' perceptions of enhanced helping impact for the selected cause type and (c) consumers' engagement and perceived importance of their role in the CRM campaign, which in turn, positively influence consumers' WOM persuasion behavior toward the CRM campaign.

P6b. The act of choosing the cause proximity positively influences: (a) the development of consumers' trust toward the CRM campaign, (b) consumers' perceptions of enhanced helping impact for the selected cause proximity and, (c) consumers' engagement and perceived importance of their role in the CRM campaign, which in turn, positively influence consumers' WOM persuasion behavior toward the CRM campaign.

P6c. The act of choosing the type of donation positively influences: (a) the development of consumers' trust toward the CRM campaign, and (b) consumers' engagement and perceived importance of their role in the CRM campaign, which in turn, positively influence consumers' WOM persuasion behavior toward the CRM campaign.

Discussion
Framework construction
Bringing forward the individual components of the framework as developed throughout the paper, we are now in a position to compile them into a single, unified, comprehensive, preliminary conceptual framework for customer engagement through choice in CRM (Figure 1). Following our previous discussion, the framework (see Figure 1) includes three constructs related to consumer choice in CRM campaigns (type of cause, cause proximity and type of donation) and the options provided to consumers for each construct, based on CRM literature. Furthermore, our framework includes the mechanisms through which consumers choose each construct, as well as the outcomes from the act of choosing on CRM effectiveness, namely, customization, coverage and reduced consumer skepticism. In addition, the framework also includes WOM as additional outcome from the act of choosing, and describes the sub-processes that trigger consumers to engage in such a behavior. Finally, the framework entails the RPs emerged in this study.

Scholarly research implications
This research pursues a balanced approach to exploring the phenomenon of CRM and customer engagement and seeks to trigger future collaborative research between various business and non-business disciplines. Importantly, the framework provides the conceptual means to extending current marketing theory and to guiding empirical research to explore the elements and relationships hereby portrayed. The framework rests upon well-established theoretical foundations to show that customer engagement, via consumer choice, should be an integral part of the CRM strategic processes toward the maximization of the campaign effectiveness and its marketing value to the donor organization. The research further contributes to the limited literature on customer engagement in the CRM domain and advances our understanding of the causes and underlying mechanisms of consumers' heterogeneity of preferences, as regards to cause type, cause proximity and type of donation in CRM campaigns.

At the same time, this study provides a theoretical basis for explaining consumers' attitudes toward the type of donation in CRM campaigns (new dimension of fit: cause-donation type fit); introduces employee time as a type of donation in the CRM research (Robinson *et al.*, 2012);
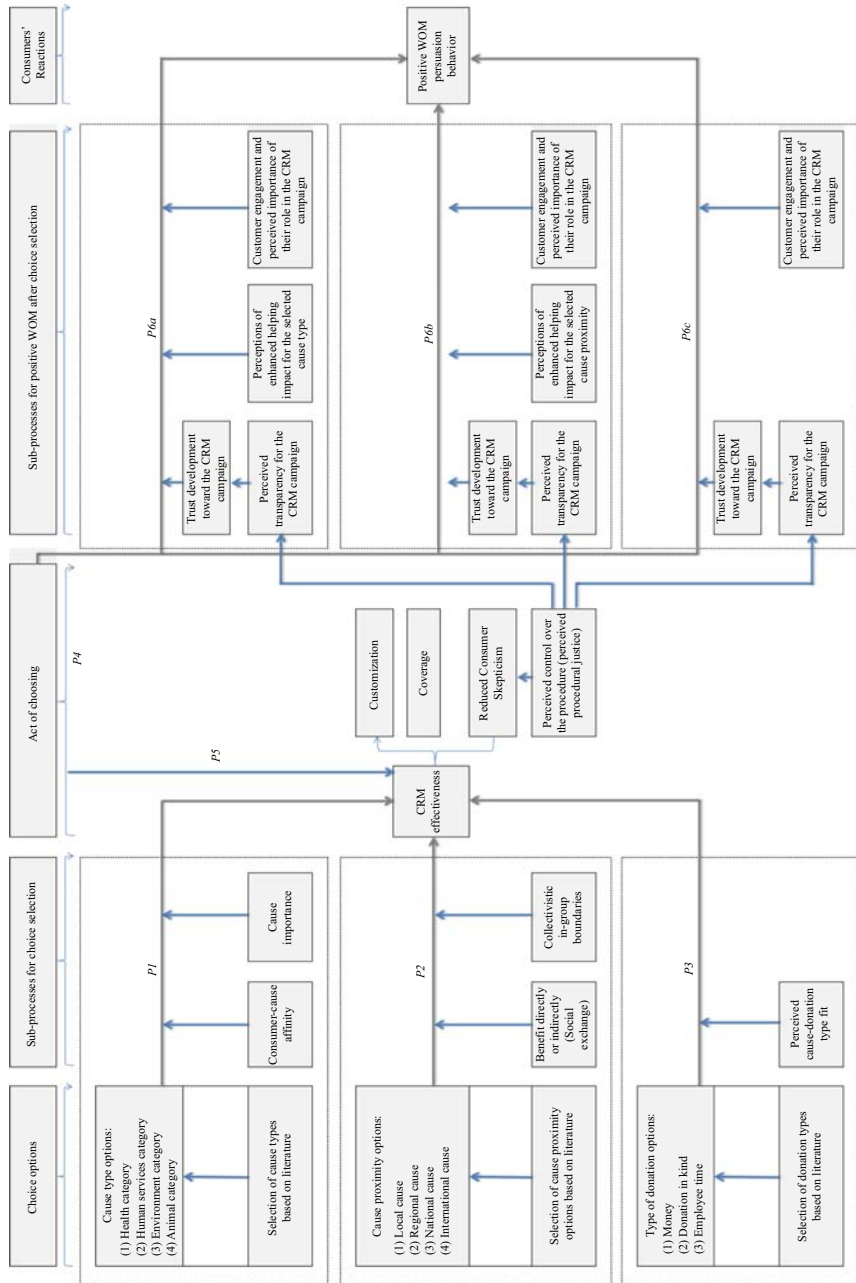
Figure 1.
A preliminary
conceptual framework
for customer
engagement through
choice in cause-related
marketing

answers to calls from prior research (Arora and Henderson, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 2012) for developing CRM campaigns with choice so as to enhance their effectiveness; and extends prior CRM research by proposing, for the first time, customer engagement (via choice) for the three structural elements of a CRM campaign, in order to enhance its effectiveness and provoke positive WOM persuasion behaviors.

Moreover, CRM research that focuses on consumer skepticism and on ways for reducing skepticism toward CRM campaigns is on the rise (Singh *et al.*, 2009). This study advances PJ theory in the CRM domain, by showing how perceived control over the procedure in CRM campaigns with choice reduces consumer skepticism, and in turn advances perceived transparency over the campaign's procedures. At the same time, perceived transparency, advances trust development toward the CRM campaign, an underlying mechanism that is empirically shown in extant literature to positively affect WOM persuasion behaviors.

Finally, this paper contributes to international business and marketing research as well. The framework builds on prior CRM research to explain how choice of cause type can overcome a previously under-researched gap and limitation of CRM campaigns, namely, heterogeneous cause importance and consumer-cause affinity perceptions; and how choice of cause proximity can overcome another limitation of CRM campaigns, that is, to solve the contradictory findings of previous literature regarding the diverse preferences of consumers, in terms of local, regional, national or international cause proximity.

Managerial implications (contributions to practice)
In addition to the abovementioned theoretical contributions, this study also informs and guides practice. First, given the breadth of literature covered in this study, the insights will assist marketing practitioners of for-profit organizations in understanding the various direct and indirect linkages between CRM determinants and outcomes, within and across countries and in formulating appropriate CRM campaigns in a structured and systematic way. It also provides an in-depth understanding of consumers' attitudes toward the three structural elements of a CRM campaign. In turn, these insights will provide marketing practitioners with valuable information about what type of cause, cause proximity and type of donation firms should target when conducting such campaigns. Second, the study provides a process-based conceptual framework and operational guidance for CRM campaigns with choice, and identifies key elements and underlying mechanisms within each structural construct. Adding to this, the manuscript represents a grounded contribution that offers marketing practitioners insight into the development and implementation of customer engagement related CRM strategies. Third, it sheds more light on a new donation type that can be offered to the cause in a CRM campaign, i.e. to donate employee time. In turn, this type of donation could enhance the company's corporate performance, internal legitimacy and its attractiveness to employees, as extant CRM research demonstrated that these benefits are outcomes of employee engagement in CRM campaigns (Liu *et al.*, 2010).

Fourth, another innovation of the framework is the time-free reduction of consumer skepticism toward CRM campaigns. Consequent to various unethical practices of several businesses in the past, consumers have become skeptical of CRM campaigns, thus, a crucial element for companies to reduce consumer skepticism is to build trust (Vlachos *et al.*, 2009). However, a significant and widely accepted antecedent of trust formation is that it needs time to develop because it is developed incrementally through prior experiences, it is the shadow of the past (Poppo *et al.*, 2008; Svejenova, 2006). Thus, for a company to be seen as trustful is very time-dependent. Against this background, the developed framework provides to managers, the path for enhancing consumers' trust without the antecedent of time, through the perceived control over the procedures, which emerges from the effect of choice during the CRM campaign. Thus, for example, a newly established company can create trust toward the consumers for its CRM practices without having to pre-establish

such an image that could take a long period of time. Also, a company that is in the market for several years but failed to be seen as trusted in the eyes of the consumers as regards to its CRM practices, it could engage in such campaigns with choice and provide the feeling of trust to its customers concurrently.

Fifth, the framework incorporates the possibility of giving, also, donations in kind (food, equipment, etc.) and/or employee time. This flexibility allows businesses to conduct CRM campaigns without having to give from their net liquid profits (money) only, a factor that could encourage other companies, perhaps with smaller economies of scale, to engage in such practices.

Sixth, the developed framework considers the differences among consumers and countries. This dimension of the framework can provide an operational guidance for local organizations in order to develop global CRM alliances and target the various heterogeneous preferences of consumers (in-group boundaries) in their local markets. Adding to this, the framework can also prove beneficial for global organizations that want to pursue an adaptation approach at their host countries, so that to develop customized CRM campaigns for their target markets.

In conclusion, customer engagement in CRM campaigns with choice provides businesses with a way to engage more extensively with their clientele. In turn, this engagement will potentially provide businesses with the possibility to acquire more information regarding their customers' preferences, decision making, beliefs and attitudes. Concordantly, this information could provide the basis for the companies to design even more successful CRM campaigns and other CSR practices, as well as to conduct more focused marketing strategies for their existing clients.

Limitations
Despite its contributions, this research also has its recognized limitations. First, while our framework rests on well-established theoretical foundations, other theories may also exist that may complement or substitute our discussion of customer choice in CRM campaigns and its intended outcomes. Second, our framework and RPs were developed with a main focus on business-to-consumer contexts; hence their applicability to other contexts (e.g.: business-to-business) is unknown (Homburg *et al.*, 2013).

Further research
The fullness and interdisciplinary dimension of the framework points to a wide range of opportunities for further research. Thus, it is an end in itself for this paper to guide future interdisciplinary research across business and non-business disciplines in establishing a more profound understanding of the role of customer engagement in developing CRM campaigns with choice. Six prolific avenues for future research are identified: first, from the development of the conceptual framework, several RPs were derived. Thus, empirical testing and validation of the RPs advanced here constitutes a logical avenue for future research. Second, the identification of a new dimension of fit, namely, cause-donation type fit, may provide a starting point for research. More specifically, future research should examine how the consumers' perception of cause-donation type fit affects their behavioral responses toward CRM campaigns, e.g. their purchase behavior. In addition, this could lead CRM researchers to explore patterns or mechanisms leading to high fit levels between the two constructs, which will contribute to the effectiveness of CRM campaigns. Third, one should also comprehend that CRM is just one type of sponsorship. CRM focuses more on altruism than other sponsorship types, such as to support a sporting event or a football team (Zdravkovic *et al.*, 2010). As such, the study's framework could be adjusted in the future to other sponsorship settings as well. Fourth, this study introduces a new type of donation to firms engaging in CRM practices, namely, to donate employee time, which could

offer various benefits not only in terms of positive WOM persuasion behaviors, but also to enhance corporate performance, since it has been demonstrated that CSR activities with employee engagement can enhance job performance (Korschun *et al.*, 2014). However, research that focuses on the potential benefits of employee engagement in CRM activities is limited (e.g. Liu *et al.*, 2010; Polonsky and Wood, 2001). Hence, future scholars could focus on this research path, not only for the company, but also from the employee perspective. Fifth, future research should attempt to explore additional outcomes on consumers' behavioral responses that derive from CRM campaigns with choice. For example, such campaigns with choice could also affect consumers' loyalty toward the sponsor company, their willingness to pay a higher price, as well as their perceptions toward the image of the donor company and the NPO/charity. Sixth, the association between corporate social responsibility (CSR) research and the literature on multinational enterprises (MNEs) is at its infancy (Park and Ghauri, 2015) and, as Husted and Allen (2006) state, the scarcity of academic research on the topic is one of the reasons that MNEs often fail to respond effectively to CSR issues in host countries. Adding to this, the relationship between CRM (which falls under the wider umbrella of CSR) and MNE literature is limited as well. Moreover, the increasing interdependence of world economies through globalization of trade requires companies based in developed countries to find new markets for their products and differentiate them from competition in their host countries (Cateora and Graham, 2007; La Ferle *et al.*, 2013). More importantly, CRM initiatives emerge as a communication strategy that creates differentiation of businesses in new markets (La Ferle *et al.*, 2013). Based on this, *International Business Research* could explore the strategic importance of CRM campaigns with choice as a market entry strategy for MNEs in the target markets, a research path that needs to be developed rapidly due to the increase of globalization in today's era.

In conclusion, the rapidly increasing popularity of customer engagement in CRM practice reveals an urgent need for systematic research, recognizing the limitations in the literature. We hope that this manuscript has set the ball rolling in this regard.

Catalectic comment
This paper does not claim to offer any absolute or definitive answers to the critical questions posed, nor to conclusively cover the gaps identified in a subject that is still much under-researched and constantly evolving. It rather innovatively utilizes extant research findings to put everything in perspective, through a comprehensive framework that facilitates their empirical research; and to identify factors and prescribe actions toward effective control and positive outcomes of CRM practices. Concluding on the same contextual imperative stated at the start of this paper, marketing scholars and practitioners need to perceive CRM, not an isolated tool at their disposal, but as the means to offering consumers value that transcends functionalistic attributes to satisfy self-image, perceptive and soft-factor needs that largely define contemporary, global consumer behavior.

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