

Brand Personality, Brand Transgression and Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

This research reports results from an experiment on the effect of brand personality and brand transgression on consumer behavior. Participants were randomly assigned to brand personality and brand transgression conditions, and then instructed to complete a series of consumer measures. There was evidence that brand transgression had an immediate negative impact on consumer attitude and behavior. It was also found that the brand personality variable could influence how consumers relate to the brand after a transgression. This research adds to a growing literature on brand transgression as well as illuminates aspects of the consumer-brand relationship.

Keywords: Brand Relationship, Brand Personality, Brand Transgression

1. Introduction

Brand personality is defined as a set of human characteristics associated with a particular brand (Aaker, 1997). It is a topic of attention in consumer behavior research as it is often used to describe the ways consumers relate to and become connected with various brands. This variable is also used as a moderator to explain the disengagement process that sometimes occurs as consumers seek to extricate themselves from consumer-brand relationships. The brand personality construct is given considerable attention in consumer behavior research as it is generally accepted that consumers imbue brands with human personality traits.

The theoretical orientation most frequently applied to the study of brand personality is the Big Five Model of personality (Goldberg, 1990). In this model, the large number of trait adjectives frequently used to describe individuals' personalities is condensed to five broad personality constructs. These Big Five Factors are: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness (Goldberg, 1990). Overall, the Big Five Model provides a conceptual framework for classifying personality types. The same paradigm has been used to describe brand types as well. However, the Big Five Model is not the only personality model used to explain brand personality. There are scales purportedly measuring brand personality from trait, cognitive, and psychoanalytic perspectives, respectively. Conceptually, these models might differ in terms of how they define brand personality and characterize the brand personality development process. However, the models are similar in the supposition that perceptions of brand personality types can be formed and shaped by and direct or indirect contact the consumer has with the brand (Plummer, 1985). As a result, the brand personality construct has advanced consumer researchers' understanding of how brands serve as self-expression mechanisms (Belk, 1988), the function of brand personification from a consumer perspective (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990), and the symbolic meaning of brands conveyed to the consumer (Fournier, 1998). In addition, consumer researchers have learned about

the associations evoked by brands with strong brand personalities. These valuable associations include attributes, benefits, and appropriate consumer situations to use the brand (Farquhar & Herr, 1993).

Despite the interest in the brand personality construct, overall, there is a lack of empirical research in this area. It is an important variable to examine because it has been found that brands often project back to the consumer the things they deem important about themselves (Fournier, 1998). Therefore, if brands can match their brand and consumer personalities, respectively, then this will likely lead to a strong consumer-brand link. This consumer-brand relationship is at the core of successful businesses like Apple, Coca-Cola, and Ford. Anecdotally, it is not uncommon to hear consumers of these brands (as well as others) talk about their favorite brands as if they were animate objects; they frequently assign attributes to these brands such as eccentric, trustworthy, loyal, conscientiousness, outgoing, and sporty. These character inferences impact the consumer-brand pact as long as the brand “behaves” in line with its personality. These implicit contracts are essential to maintaining a longstanding and profitable relationship with the consumer. However, what happens to this relationship when the brand has violated rules and social norms? Does the effect vary based on the brand personality type?

These brand norm violations are typically referred to as transgressions. Transgressions are defined as violations of consumer-brand relationship-relevant norms, and refer to the breaches of the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluation (Aaker, Fournier, & Brassel, 2004).

Unfortunately, there are recent examples of brand transgressions in the marketplace. In the past few years, there are several examples of brand transgressions that have reverberated on a global scale. For example, Toyota Motor Corp. received noteworthy negative publicity after an increase in fatal accidents due to faulty acceleration and braking in their vehicles. Tiger Woods contaminated multiple brands – including Nike, Buick, and Gatorade – after his extramarital escapades became known (Agyemang, 2011). Similarly, fast food giants have had to deal with public displeasure after unsanitary food practices were discovered at their retail outlets. Multiple airlines have had to address safety concerns from passengers after narrowly avoiding catastrophe. There have been well publicized reports of corporate theft and abuse of power at Fortune 500 companies. There are numerous examples of brand transgressions that could be mentioned. Ultimately, the stigma by association leads brands to attempt to quell, as quickly as possible, the negative public groundswell.

Despite the seemingly omnipresent brand transgressions that permeate the daily news, there is minimal experimental research on this topic. Why? Most frequently, case studies have been used to examine the effect of transgressions on consumer perceptions of the brand (Chisolm, 1998). Overall, there are limited theoretical approaches that can be used to explain brand transgression effects (Johar, Birk, & Einwiller, 2010). Research in this area suggests consumers place more weight on positive than negative information in forming overall evaluations of an attitude objects (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). Yet most of this research in this area has focused on advertising appeals orchestrated by skilled professionals. To some extent, brand transgressions are unforeseen and can gain force as formal and informal media outlets share information. The powerful influence of consumer opinion leaders frequently leads to a weakening of consumer sentiment; this disapproval can have a significant impact on brand equity.

A recent study on the effect of brand transgressions on consumers’ perceptions of the brand (Steinman, 2012) showed that brand transgressions had a negative impact on consumer evaluation of and behavior toward the brand. In this study, participants were randomly assigned to a brand transgression or no brand transgression condition. In the transgression condition, participants read a fictitious news article

informing them that a well-known brand was facing criminal sanctions due to the hiring and employing of illegal workers. Participants assigned to the no transgression condition read a fictitious news article informing them that a well-known brand was introducing a new advertising campaign. After reading the fictitious news article, participants were asked to complete a series of consumer attitude, brand relationship, brand personality, and behavioral intention measures. Overall, it was found that the brand transgression had an immediate negative impact on brand-specific attitudes, brand relationship, brand perceptions, and brand purchase intentions. This was a preliminary research study and therefore it needs to be replicated before stronger conclusions can be made.

The aforementioned findings are interesting, but would the results vary if brand personality was manipulated? Would one expect the same results if the brand was viewed as loyal and dependable? Would the results be different if the brand was viewed as extraverted and adventurous? Brand personality is a potential moderator variable that could have a significant impact on consumer response to brand transgressions. In their longitudinal field experiment on consumer-brand relationship, Aaker, Fournier, and Brase (2004) found that consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses after a brand transgression were dependent on the brand's personality. However, there are no published studies in which brand personality and brand transgression are manipulated in a truly controlled environment. In a laboratory environment, extraneous factors can be eliminated therefore yielding stronger conclusions about the effect of brand personality and brand transgressions on consumer perceptions of the brand. The primary purpose of the research is to replicate the findings from Steinman (2012) as well as extend this research by adding the variable of brand personality. It is generally accepted that negative public relations has a toxic impact on the brand, but there is a lack of experimental research in this area (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). This will help marketers better understand how a brand's personality impacts consumer perceptions of the brand after learning of a major brand transgression.

2. Hypotheses

There were four hypotheses in this research study on the effect of brand personality and brand transgression on consumer perceptions of the brand:

H1: Participants who were exposed to a brand transgression would report less favorable attitudes than participants who were not exposed to a brand transgression.

H2: Participants who were exposed to a brand transgression would have a weaker relationship with the brand than participants who were not exposed to a brand transgression.

H3: Participants who were exposed to a brand transgression would indicate they are less likely to consume the brand's offerings than participants who were not exposed to a brand transgression.

H4: There will be an interactive effect of brand personality and brand transgression on consumers' perceptions of the brand.

3. Methodology

In this experiment, participants were tested in groups of up to five at a time. One hundred and seven participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups: an experimental condition (brand transgression) or a control condition (no transgression). Within the transgression conditions, participants were also assigned to two brand personality conditions: 1) "dependable" and 2) "adventurous." All participants were asked to read a news article about a well-known brand. Participants assigned to the

transgression condition read a news article informing them that a well-known brand was facing criminal sanctions due to a history of using illegal labor. A manipulation check revealed that participants found the transgression to be severe. Participants assigned to the control condition read a news article informing them that a well-known brand was introducing a new advertising campaign. A manipulation check revealed the participants found the content of the article to be benign. In both conditions, the news article was designed to resemble what one might find on an internet news site such www.cnn.com. After reading the news article, participants were then asked to complete a series of consumer attitude, brand relationship, brand personality, and behavioral intention measures. All participants completed the measures in the same order. The consumer brand personality variable was manipulated within the brand transgression conditions so that some participants were exposed to the dependable brand whereas others were exposed to the adventurous brand. Therefore, participants were in one of four conditions: 1) brand transgression and dependable brand, 2) no brand transgression and dependable brand, 3) brand transgression and adventurous brand, and 4) no brand transgression and adventurous brand. A 2 x 2 factorial design was used so that the effect of the brand transgression on subsequent consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions could be assessed as well as the potential interactive effect of brand transgression and brand personality on the aforementioned outcome variables. At the conclusion of the session, the participants were thanked and completely debriefed.

3.1 Measures

First, participants were instructed to complete several consumer attitude measures. For example, participants were instructed to complete a semantic differential measure. Participants rated the brand on a variety of bipolar dimensions representing various attributes of the brand. Each dimension was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from -3 (the negative pole) to +3 (the positive pole) and participants were instructed to circle zero if the anchoring adjectives were irrelevant to the concept. A Cronbach's alpha computed on these scores revealed a reasonable level of internal consistency. Participants were also instructed to complete a feeling thermometer attitude measure for the brand being assessed. For the feeling thermometer measure, participants were asked to rate how positive or negative they found the brand on a scale from 0 (Extremely negative) to 100 (Extremely positive). In addition, for the consumer attitude measures, participants were asked to complete a variety of questions in a rating scale format regarding the brand and its propensity to engage in egregious behavior. The semantic differential, feeling thermometer, and rating scales measures were intercorrelated and thus were standardized to create a single consumer attitude composite.

Second, participants were asked to respond to questions assessing their relationship with the brand. Representative items include: 1) "I am very loyal to the brand," 2) "The brand says a lot about the person I would like to be," 3) "I am willing to make sacrifices in order to keep using the brand," 4) "The brand makes a statement about what is important in life to me," and 5) "I can always count on the brand to do what's best." A Cronbach's alpha computed on these scores revealed a reasonable level of internal consistency.

Next, participants were instructed to respond to brand personality questions. These questions were designed to assess consumers' perception of the brand and the brand's image. Representative items include: 1) "The brand is sincere" and 2) "The brand is honest." A Cronbach's alpha computed on these scores revealed a reasonable level of internal consistency.

Finally, participants were asked to respond to several self-reported past and future behavioral questions. Behavioral intentions refer to the individual's anticipated or planned future behavior (Ajzen, 1987). Marketers are interested in intentions primarily because of the link to purchasing behavior. Although consumers' self-reported intentions do not perfectly predict future behavior most academic studies use consumers' self-reported intentions as the outcome variable. Similarly, companies often rely on consumers' intentions to predict consumer behavior (Chandon, Morwitz, & Werner, 2005). Representative items include: 1) "Think about the past 60 days. Please indicate how many items you have purchased from the brand during this time period" and 2) "Think about the next 60 days. Please indicate how many times you expect to purchase an item from the brand during this time period." A Cronbach's alpha computed on these scores revealed a reasonable level of internal consistency.

4. Results

For the composite consumer attitude measure, there was a statistically significant difference between the transgression and control conditions, $t(105) = 3.26, p < .05$. Participants in the transgression condition reported less favorable attitudes toward the brand than participants in the no transgression condition. This provides support for Hypothesis #1.

For the brand personality measure, there were statistically significant differences between the transgression and control conditions. Representative statistically significant items included: 1) "The brand is sincere," $t(105) = 3.20, p < .05$; 2) "The brand is wholesome," $t(105) = 2.11, p < .05$; 3) "The brand is honest," $t(105) = 2.07, p < .05$; and 4) "The brand is family-oriented," $t(105) = 2.08, p < .05$. These results indicate that participants in the transgression condition perceived the brand in more negative terms than those in the no transgression condition. This also provides support for Hypothesis #1.

For the brand relationship measure, there were statistically significant differences between the transgression and control conditions for several of the individual items. Representative statistically significant items included: 1) "The brand understands my needs," $t(105) = 2.31, p < .05$; 2) "The brand fits well with my current stage of life," $t(105) = 1.90, p < .05$; 3) "The brand says a lot about the person I would like to be," $t(105) = 2.54, p < .05$; 4) "Using the brand makes a statement about what is important to me," $t(105) = 2.00, p < .05$; 5) "I can always count on the brand to do what's best," $t(105) = 2.62, p < .05$; 6) "If the brand makes a mistake, it will try its best to make up for it," $t(105) = 2.22, p < .05$; and 7) "A brand failure would be inconsistent with my expectations," $t(105) = 1.68, p < .05$. This provides support for Hypothesis #2.

For the behavioral intention measure, there was a significant difference between the transgression and control conditions for the amount of money participants expected to spend on the brand in the upcoming month, $t(105) = 1.56, p < .05$. There was not a significant difference between the transgression and no transgression conditions when examining self-reported past behavior. Overall, participants in the transgression condition were less likely to consume the brand's offerings in the future than participants in the no transgression condition. This provides support for Hypothesis #3.

A series of two-way analyses of variance were conducted to test the hypothesis that there will be interactive effect of brand personality and brand transgression on consumers' perceptions of the brand. These included: 1) consumer attitude measures, 2) a brand relationship measure, and 3) behavioral intentions measures.

For the composite consumer attitude measures as well as the behavioral intention measures, there was not a significant interaction between the variables of brand personality and brand transgression. However, for the brand relationship measure there was a statistically significant interaction for several of the individual items. Representative statistically significant items included: 1) "I would be willing to postpone my purchase if the brand was temporarily unavailable," $F(1, 101) = 3.87, p < .05$; 2) "I am so happy with the brand that I don't feel the need to watch out for other alternatives," $F(1, 101) = 3.70, p < .05$; 3) "The brand understand my needs," $F(1, 101) = 3.72, p < .05$; 4) "I would feel comfortable describing the brand to someone who is not familiar with it," $F(1, 101) = 4.58, p < .05$; 5) "I am familiar with the range of products the brand offers," $F(1, 101) = 3.72, p < .05$; and 6) "The brand makes a statement about what is important in life to me," $F(1, 101) = 3.86, p < .05$. In each of the significant interactions, the "adventurous" brand had lower mean scores than the "dependable" brand. This suggests that participants viewed a brand transgression as more severe when it was committed by an "adventurous" brand as compared to a "dependable" brand. Overall, these results provide some support for Hypothesis #4.

5. Discussion

This research was a replication and extension of Steinman's (2012) study on brand transgression. Overall, these results support previous research that a specific type of brand transgression could have an immediate and negative effect on consumers' brand-specific attitudes, the consumer-brand relationship, the identification between the consumer and the brand, and self-reported consumer behavior (Steinman, 2012). This research serves as an extension in that the principal investigator also examined the interactive effect of brand personality and brand transgression on consumers' perceptions of the brand. This aspect of the research built upon findings from Aaker, Fournier, and Brassel's (2004) research on the consumer brand-relationship. In this component of the current research study, brand personality and brand transgression interacted in a unique way to alter consumer perceptions of the brands. More specifically, it was found that "adventurous" brands suffered more than "dependable" ones when participants were exposed to a brand transgression. Interestingly, there were no significant interactions between these two variables when examining self-reported behavioral intentions or explicit attitudes. Therefore, this issue needs to be better understood before making any conclusive remarks about the importance of brand personality when a brand attempts to overcome a public transgression.

This study was inspired by the need for more experimental research in the area of brand transgression. This research was conducted in a laboratory setting. A laboratory setting provides high levels of control and allows the researcher to eliminate extraneous variables participants might be exposed to in a field setting. However, a laboratory setting can inhibit the realism of the research, and participants might shape their responses based on demand cues. Another limitation in this laboratory study is that an actual behavioral outcome variable was not used. Self-report survey methods were used to collect data. The fact that participants were not fully experiencing the brand transgression nor were they completely exposed to the brand's personality might have influenced the results. Future research efforts should address this issue; it is recommended that observational methods and/or simulations be used as a more practical dependent variable as long as the integrity of the experiment is not compromised. A larger sample is also recommended in future efforts. One that is representative of diverse consumer populations would increase the generalizability of the results.

In this research, the transgression manipulation was a fictitious news article that highlighted the brand's illegal labor history. This transgression was selected because of its pragmatism. However, there are other examples that could have been used in this research. These include: inhumane or unsafe working conditions, unsanitary working conditions, employee theft, or celebrity endorsers engaging in socially unacceptable conduct in their personal lives. Furthermore, in this research two brand personality profiles were created. The researcher selected dichotomous personality profiles; however, in the marketing environment there are many instances where brand personality differences are not as pronounced. Cultivating a brand's personality is a nuanced endeavor and the dichotomy examined in this research might not be as prevalent in the applied sector. It is recommended that researchers examine more slight variations in brand personality to determine if there are additional moderator variables that might impact the relationship between brand personality and brand transgression on consumers' perceptions of the brand. This will help consumer researchers and marketers better understand the role of brand personality in the consumer-brand relationship. It is also suggested that researchers explore the time component of brand forgiveness. That is, when do consumers "forgive" the brand after a transgression? A longitudinal design would be beneficial as it offers multiple data points on consumers' attitudes, perceptions, and behavior. This will provide more conclusive information about the consumer forgiveness aspect embedded in the consumer-brand relationship. It is important that future researchers continue to examine consumer response to brand transgressions.

6. References

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