



# Connected consumers' responses to negative brand actions: The roles of transgression self-relevance and domain<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Brand misdeeds abound in the marketplace, but prior research indicates that having a strong connection with a brand buffers consumers from adverse effects of brand transgressions. However, the present research questions the scope of this buffering effect. The studies in this research demonstrate that strongly connected consumers are not so forgiving of a brand transgression if the brand's actions are personally relevant to them or if the negative actions are of an ethical nature rather than related to product performance. In particular, this research finds that the well-documented buffering effect emerges only when negative brand actions are not self-relevant for the individual consumer and the negative actions lie in the product, not ethical, domain. Therefore, contrary to the findings of prior research, connected consumers' brand attitudes are far from immune to brand misdeeds. Implications for managing brand crises conclude the article.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumers routinely encounter negative messages about brands, including traditional brands (e.g., Toyota), non-profit organizations (e.g., Susan G. Komen), educational institutions (e.g., Penn State), human brands (e.g., Lance Armstrong), and more. Thus, determining how people are likely to react to bad press about a brand is crucial. Undoubtedly, companies cannot expect one uniform response from all consumers; some consumers may take a wrongdoing in stride, while others may never forgive the brand. Of particular importance is how consumers most connected with and, therefore, valuable to the brand will react.

Much research indicates that consumers who are strongly connected with a brand resist negative information about that brand, allowing their attitudes toward the brand to remain positive (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Ahluwalia, Unnava, & Burnkrant, 2001; Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2012; Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner, 2012; Swaminathan, Page, & Gurhan-Canli, 2007). Conventional wisdom maintains that being strongly connected with a brand buffers consumers from adverse effects of brand transgressions (a "buffering effect"). The present research examines boundary conditions to this buffering effect by focusing on how the details of a brand's negative actions (i.e., what precisely the brand did wrong) may affect connected

consumers' responses. Little insight into how brand transgression characteristics affect consumer reactions exists; rather, prior research predominantly focuses on the mere presence or absence of a brand transgression (e.g., Ahluwalia et al., 2000). One exception is Dawar and Lei's (2009) finding that a brand crisis has greater potential to harm the brand when the crisis undermines (vs. is irrelevant to) the brand's value proposition. The present research builds on this finding to further examine how the characteristics of a brand's transgression affect consumers' reactions, particularly focusing on when strongly connected consumers' brand evaluations are likely to decrease.

Through two studies, this article focuses on how two particular characteristics of negative brand actions affect connected consumers' responses. The first is the role of the self-relevance of the brand's actions to the consumer, with the expectation that consumers for whom the brand's misdeeds have personal significance will react more adversely than those less affected by the brand transgression. The second is the role of the domain of the negative brand actions, with the expectation that consumers will respond more adversely to a brand's ethical transgression than a product failure. To examine these issues, the following conceptual framework begins with a review of the literature on connected consumers' responses to brand transgressions.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Connected consumers' responses to negative brand actions

Consumers form relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998; Valta, 2013). Prior research examines the effect of brand relationships on consumers' reactions to negative brand actions, finding that consumers who are strongly connected to a brand do not react negatively to bad

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press about that brand (Ahluwalia et al., 2000, 2001; Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012; Swaminathan et al., 2007). The reason for such forgiving or overlooking consumers lies in the individual's own personal connection with the brand (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). In this case, the connected consumer's identity is tied to the brand, such that the brand becomes part of the consumer's self (Belk, 1988; Trump & Brucks, 2012). Therefore, a threat to the brand, in the form of negative brand actions, acts as a threat to the self (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). People react to threats to the self in a way that allows them to maintain a positive self-view to reduce the dissonance that arises when the self is in question (Steele & Liu, 1983). Thus, when a threat to the brand acts as a threat to the self, consumers may alleviate the threat by buffering their evaluations of the brand or putting the brand on a pedestal.

Research on service failures, however, contrasts the buffering effect, finding that consumers with the strongest relationships with the company are likely to respond the most unfavorably (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009). This adverse response occurs when these consumers believe that the company did not hold up its end of the relational bargain, such as by treating the consumer unfairly (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008) or by failing to right a wrongdoing (Grégoire et al., 2009). An important distinction between this finding and the buffering effect is the difference in the self-relevance of the two types of transgressions. A service failure directly affects the consumer whom the company failed and thus these transgressions are self-relevant for the customer. However, research finds little about how consumers respond when personally let down by a brand outside the service context because work on brand transgressions tends to focus on general negative publicity (Ahluwalia et al., 2000, 2001; Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012; Swaminathan et al., 2007) that the consumer may or may not perceive as self-relevant (e.g., poor product performance ratings for a brand's fictitious line extension). To fill this void, the present research examines how connected consumers respond to negative brand actions depending on whether those actions are self-relevant.

In summary, evidence suggests that the buffering effect occurs because strongly connected consumers experience bad press about the brand as a threat to the self and therefore safeguard the brand as a way to protect the self (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). However, how these consumers might react if they perceive the negative brand actions as self-relevant, similar to the case of a service failure, remains unexplored. This research addresses this issue, beginning with a discussion of the role of the multifaceted self.

## 2.2. The multifaceted consumer self

The self is multifaceted, with a variety of characteristics, social roles, relationships, and more making up each individual's identity (e.g., Amiot, De la Sablonnière, Terry, & Smith, 2007; Markus & Nurius, 1986; McConnell, 2011; Roberts & Donahue, 1994; Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). Researchers propose a relational self, in which people's self–other relationships define aspects of their identities (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Andersen, Chen, & Miranda, 2002). In this case, just as social roles define aspects of an individual's self (e.g., professor, parent), so do that person's relationships (e.g., with mom, with spouse). Given that consumers form interpersonal-like relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998), it follows that self–brand relationships define portions of the individual's self. Thus, a brand with which a consumer is connected becomes a part of the self (Belk, 1988; Trump & Brucks, 2012), making up one of the consumer's many selves.

When consumers encounter bad press about a brand with which they are connected, the aspect of the consumer self that is defined by the brand relationship is likely threatened. But the self–brand relationship makes up just one piece of the consumer's identity. This research addresses how connected consumers might respond if the characteristics of the negative brand actions also threaten the self. Just as consumers experience role conflict when two of their social roles interfere

with each other (e.g., the demands of being a professor challenge one's ability to meet the demands of being a parent), they may also experience identity conflict when two aspects of the self are simultaneously threatened. As an illustration, consider a consumer who is connected with the brand Apple. Imagine that she is also a human rights activist. For this person, hearing tales of Apple employing unethical labor practices would likely threaten her self–Apple relationship as well as her identity as a human rights activist. Would this connected consumer still be likely to buffer the brand at the expense of her activist self?

This research proposes that connected consumers will not necessarily overlook a brand's negative actions if those actions are self-relevant. Because the brand's transgression is personally relevant, similar to a service failure (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Grégoire et al., 2009), even the consumer with a strong relationship with the brand is likely to hold the brand accountable. Formally stated:

**H1.** Negative brand actions will decrease the brand evaluations of strongly connected consumers for whom the negative brand actions are self-relevant but will have no effect on those for whom the brand actions are not self-relevant (the buffering effect). How strongly connected consumers respond to negative brand actions is the focus of this research. However, to provide a more complete picture of consumers' reactions to a brand's bad behavior, this research also examines how consumers less connected with the brand respond. As in prior research (e.g., Ahluwalia et al., 2000), the prediction is that these weakly connected consumers will hold the brand accountable for negative actions, regardless of whether the information is self-relevant for them. Formally stated:

**H2.** Negative brand actions will decrease the brand evaluations of weakly connected consumers, regardless of the self-relevance of those actions.

## 3. Study 1

### 3.1. Method

This study tested H1 and H2 with a two-factor design: (1) consumer–brand connection and (2) negative brand actions self-relevant/not self-relevant—with the addition of a control condition as a baseline, where no negative brand information was presented. Escalas' (2004) Self–Brand Connection Scale measured consumer–brand connection. The design of the negative brand information was such that it was highly self-relevant for female participants and less so for male participants. Holbrook and Batra's (1987) attitude toward the brand scale assessed brand evaluations, the dependent variable.

One hundred sixty-six undergraduate students (54% male) participated in the study as part of an introductory marketing course. Nike served as the brand for this study because, according to a pretest, both male and female students react positively to the brand, indicating the likelihood of sufficient strongly connected consumers, who are the focus of this research.

All participants provided demographic information, including gender, and indicated their degree of connection with Nike (Escalas, 2004). They then read information about the brand in the form of a press release. Random assignment placed half the participants in the control condition and the other half in a condition that presented information about a negative brand action. In the control condition, participants read factual historical information about Nike. In the negative brand action condition, participants read that Nike was being “accused of gender discrimination at the executive level,” with the press release detailing that “Nike is facing potential legal charges for discriminating against women when hiring at, or promoting to, the executive level in their organization.” Again, the nature of this negative brand action was designed to be highly self-relevant for female participants and less so for male participants.

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