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## A Preliminary Examination of Consumer Response to a Brand Norms Violation

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### Abstract

*This research reports results from an experiment on the effect of type of brand norms violation on consumer choice, attitude, and behavior. Participants were randomly assigned to different brand norms violation conditions where detailed information was provided about a specific type of brand norms violation for a consumer good brand. Participants were then instructed to complete a series of consumer measures. Consistent with previous research there was evidence that brand norms violation had an immediate negative impact on consumer choice and attitude. In addition, it was found certain brand norms violations were perceived in more negative terms than others. This research adds to a growing literature on consumer response to service failures, brand norms violations, and brand transgressions. The implications of the research from an applied marketing perspective are discussed as well as potential areas of future research.*

**Key words:** Brand Norms Violation, Brand Relationship, Consumer Response



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### INTRODUCTION

The consumer-brand relationship is multidimensional with numerous factors impacting consumer involvement, trust, and loyalty with brands. Therefore, it is important to look at variables that might influence this complex, interactive relationship. One such area to examine is the potential effect of type of a brand norms violation on consumer attitudes and behaviors. The extant literature captures some components of consumer response to a brand norms violation by examining an overlapping construct, brand transgression. Brand 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). A brand norm violation is construed as falling along the service failure (less severe) and brand transgression (more severe) continuum. Examining the subtleties of consumer-brand violations of trust will lead to more advanced, nuanced, and relevant theories in the consumer-brand relationship spectrum.

A brief review of the current literature on brand transgressions provides a useful background for understanding the brand norms violation construct. It is a truncated literature, one that has been dependent on case study methodologies to explain the effect of brand transgressions on consumer attitudes and behaviors (Chisolm, 1998). There are few accepted theoretical models that can be used to explain brand transgression effects (Johar, Birk, & Einwiller, 2010). Refined theories are necessary to advance marketers' understanding of the fickle relationship consumers have with brands.

However, in recent years, some researchers have attempted to study brand transgression using experimental methods. For example, one of the most well-known experimental studies in this area was conducted by Aaker, Fournier, and Brase (2004). In their research, they found that consumer-brand attitudes and behaviors changed after consumers were informed of a brand transgression. In addition, they reported that brand personality type had a regulating effect on brand transgression and consumers' subsequent subjective brand evaluations (Aaker, Fournier, & Brase, 2004). Steinman (2012a; 2012b, 2013a; 2013b) and Steinman and Wolfrom (2012) reported a sequence of experimental research examining different factors that moderate the relationship consumers have with brands following a severe brand norms violation. Steinman (2012a) found that consumers exposed to an egregious brand transgression had weaker brand-specific associations, perceptions of their relationship with the brand, and prospective brand-related purchase behaviors. Steinman (2012b) replicated Steinman's preliminary research (2012a) and then extended these findings by examining the role of the brand personality in consumer-brand trust

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after becoming aware of a brand's transgressor actions. Steinman (2012b) found that brand personality characteristics altered how consumers related to the brand after a severe brand norms violation. More specifically, there was a significant interaction of brand personality type and brand transgression on consumer perceptions of the brand. In a related study where a similar experimental paradigm was used, Steinman (2013a) examined the relationship between indirect consumer attitude measures, brand transgression, and the consumer-brand relationship. This research was unique in that it attempted to disentangle automatic consumer behaviors from more deliberate or conscious actions. Steinman (2012c) found that participants' scores on indirect and direct attitude measures diverged after being exposed to a brand transgression. This incongruity was likely due to the indirect consumer attitude measures capturing some automatic aspects of consumer behavior that were absent from the direct attitude measurement process. It appears that explicit and implicit attitudes led to variations in consumer involvement, trust, and loyalty reactions. This has implications for marketers as they strive to better understand the interplay between their brands and core consumer segments.

Steinman and Wolfrom (2012) examined the role of product category on consumer behavior following a serious brand norms violation. They conducted two experiments on consumers' response to a brand's unethical action in a specific product category, the fast moving consumer goods domain. Interestingly, they found that in this domain the consumer-brand relationship was unaffected by a transgression. These results suggest that consumers do not appear to be always focused on the ethical behavior of brands when making decisions within a specific product class. Furthermore, Steinman (2013b) examined the individual as well as interactive effects of consumer ethnocentrism, brand-country associations, and brand transgression on consumer choice, attitude, perception, and behavior. There was strong evidence that exposure to a brand transgression had an immediate negative impact on these variables. In addition, Steinman (2013b) found that consumer ethnocentrism and brand-country associations had a significant interactive effect on the consumer-brand relationship after a transgression has occurred. The aforementioned research provides a basic understanding of consumer reactions to brand transgressions; however, overall, there is an incomplete literature on the effect of brand norms violations on consumer perceptions of the brand.

The purpose of this preliminary research effort is to gauge consumer response to a brand norms violation. It has been reported that severe brand norms violations have an immediate deleterious effect on consumer brand attitudes and behaviors. It is also known that this might vary based on other factors such as brand personality, product category, brand-country associations, and consumers' ethnocentric tendencies. However, there is a lack of research on the effect of type of brand norms violation on subsequent consumer attitude and behavior. This preliminary experimental research study attempts to determine if specific content-based brand norms violations are perceived in more negative terms than others.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Fifty-five students enrolled in introductory courses at a north-eastern university in the United States of America were randomly assigned to one of four groups: 1) animal cruelty brand norms violation condition, 2) environmental damage brand norms violation, 3) corporate fraud brand norms violation condition, and 4) product recall brand norms violation condition. This independent groups design ensured that any differences in consumers' attitudes and behaviors could be attributed to the brand norms conditions manipulation. The participants in each group were asked to read several news articles and other pertinent information about a consumer goods brand described as engaging in one of the previously noted brand norms violations. The fictitious scenarios were comprehensive and clearly outlined the animal cruelty, environmental damage, corporate fraud, and product recall brand norms violations, respectively. In addition, participants were provided with detailed materials documenting the brand norms violation, a brief history of the brand, the brand's response to their specific brand norms violation, and information about the public's immediate reaction to news of the violation. The fictitious materials were constructed to resemble what one might view on a news website.

A pilot test was conducted in advance of the actual research to examine the mundane realism of the experimental materials. The results from the pilot test indicated that participants viewed the different conditions as reflective of appropriate content for each of the defined brands norm violations. Participants indicated that the materials were realistic, believable, and representative of the desired manipulation. Therefore, the validity of the materials was confirmed. Also, a manipulation check during the experimental research study revealed that participants viewed the animal cruelty, environmental damage, corporate fraud, and product recall brand norms violation, respectively, as emblematic of the researcher's intended manipulated constructs. Participants reported that the information provided to them was convincing and relevant. They also indicated that the study materials were credible. The results from the manipulation check suggest that social desirability effects were non-existent as well as any experimental artifacts potentially occurring from the interface between the participants and research materials.

After random assignment to one of the four conditions where participants read, learned about, and cogitated on their assigned brand norms violations, participants were then asked to complete a series of consumer attitude, belief, brand identification, brand personality, and behavioral intention measures. The instruments have been assessed for reliability and validity. All participants completed the measures in the same sequence to avoid any order effects. The same consumer goods brand was used in all conditions; the only difference among these four groups was the description of the brand norms violation. Therefore, the effect of the severity of type of brand norms violation could be examined in the context of the participant's perceptions about the brand. At the conclusion of the session, the participants were thanked and thoroughly debriefed.

## **MEASURES**

### **Explicit Attitude**

Participants completed a semantic differential, feeling thermometer, and various traditional rating scale measures regarding their explicit attitudes towards the targeted brand (and other brands). For the semantic differential measure, participants rated the brand on a range of bipolar dimensions. 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 five scores revealed a reasonable level of consistency. For the feeling thermometer measure, respondents rated the brand and other brands on a scale from 0 (Extremely negative) to 100 (Extremely positive). The semantic differential, feeling thermometer, and rating scale measures were intercorrelated and therefore were standardized to create a composite explicit attitude measure.

### **Brand Identification**

Participants were asked to respond to questions assessing their identification 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. A composite brand identification score was calculated for each participant.

### **Brand Personality**

Participants were instructed to complete a brand personality measure. These questions were designed to assess consumers' evaluations of the brand's image. This measure was used to determine if participants' perceptions of the brand's personality changed after being exposed to the different brand norms violations conditions. Representative items include: 1) "The brand is sincere," 2) "The brand is wholesome," and 3) "The brand is sentimental," A Cronbach's alpha computed on these scores revealed a reasonable level of internal consistency. A composite brand personality score was calculated for each participant.

## **Behavior**

Participants were asked to respond to several self-reported questions regarding prospective consumer behavior. In general, marketers are interested in behavioral intentions because of their link to purchasing behavior. Although consumers' behavioral intentions do not wholly predict future behavior they are frequently used as an outcome variable (Chandon, Morwitz, & Werner, 2005). Representative items include: 1) "Think about the next 30 days. Please indicate how many times you expect to purchase an item from the brand during this time period," 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," and 3) "Think about the next 90 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. A composite behavioral intention score was calculated for each participant.

## **RESULTS**

A series of one-way analyses of variance was performed to determine the effect of brand norms violation type on consumer attitudes, brand identification, brand personality perceptions, and behavioral intentions. Tukey post-hoc tests were used to identify any significant pairwise differences among the brand norms violation conditions.

For the composite consumer attitude measure, there was a statistically significant difference when comparing the four brand norms violation conditions. Tukey post-hoc tests revealed significant pairwise differences. Participants viewed the animal cruelty brand norms violation as the most egregious of the four conditions. A similar but weaker effect was found for the environmental damage brand norms violation condition. There was no effect when assessing the product recall and corporate fraud brand norms violation conditions. This suggests that there were differences in consumer attitudes based on brand norms violation conditions.

For the composite brand identification measure, there was a statistically significant difference when making comparisons across the four brand norms violation conditions. Tukey post-hoc tests revealed significant pairwise differences. Participants viewed the animal cruelty brand norms violation in the most pejorative terms compared to the other brand norms violation conditions. A similar yet less pronounced effect was found for the environmental damage brand norms violation condition. There was no effect when testing the product recall and corporate fraud brand norms violation conditions. This provides evidence that there were differences in brand identification based on brand norms violation conditions.

For the composite brand personality measure, there was a statistically significant difference when comparing the four brand norms violation conditions. Again, Tukey post-hoc tests revealed significant pairwise differences. Participants viewed the animal cruelty brand norms violation as the most negative of the four conditions. Similar to the previous results, a significant but weaker effect was found for the environmental damage brand norms violation condition. There was no effect when examining the product recall and corporate fraud brand norms violation conditions. This suggests that there were differences in perceptions of brand personality traits based on type of brand norms violation.

For the composite behavioral intention measure, there was a statistically significant difference when making comparisons across the four brand norms violation conditions. Tukey post-hoc tests revealed significant pairwise differences. Participants viewed the animal cruelty brand norms violation as the most reprehensible of the four brand norms violation conditions. A comparable effect was found for the environmental damage brand norms violation condition. There was no effect when assessing the product recall and corporate fraud brand norms violation conditions. This suggests that there were differences in consumer intentions to purchase from the brand based on participants' response to type of brand norms violation.

## **DISCUSSION**

This research was a replication and extension of previous research in the areas of service failure, brand norms violations, unethical brand actions, and brand transgressions. Overall, the results suggest that

brand norms violations have an immediate negative impact on consumers' brand attitudes, brand identification, brand perceptions, and behavioral intentions. Interestingly, in this preliminary examination of consumer response to a brand norms violation, the magnitude of the response was dependent on the type of brand norms violation. A brand norms violations centered on animal cruelty was perceived as the most egregious type; it was also found that environmental damage brand norms violations were also perceived in more negative terms compared to other frequently experienced brand norms violations. This support previous research that suggests the perceived intentions of the brands' unethical actions have a significant effect on consumer perceptions of the brand (Yoon, Gurjan-Canli, and Schwarz, 2006).

This study was inspired by the need for more experimental research in the area of brand norms violations. A laboratory study was used in this research so that the type of brand norms violations could be manipulated in an experimental manner. This is impracticable when using case study methodologies, the paradigms frequently used to study this construct. As such, there was strong internal validity because the dosage of the independent variable was kept consistent. However, in general, a laboratory setting can inhibit the pragmatism of the research as participants might become sensitive to implicit or explicit demand cues in their immediate sensory environment. Another limitation in this research, one that is common in many consumer behavior research efforts, is that it did not include an irrefutable behavioral outcome variable. Self-report behavioral intentions were used as the de facto behavioral dependent variable. It should be noted that participants were engaging in a conjectural exercise where there were no economic repercussions for their consumer choices. It is therefore possible that the simulation experience might have influenced their decisions. These are regular challenges when performing consumer research in a laboratory setting. However, the principal results provide preliminary support for type of brand norms violation as an important variable for consideration when assessing damage to the consumer-brand relationship. It is imperative to replicate the results from this preliminary research to see if the results will be consistent across various consumer domains. This will increase the applicability of the findings from this research on brand norms violations.

The brand norms violation manipulations were written descriptions of hypothetical situations whereby a brand behaved in a distinctly unethical way. It was clearly established that the brand had fragmented the trust of their consumer base. The brand norms violations were meticulous constructed to highlight this violation. The message conveyed to the consumer was transparent; therefore, this likely resulted in a pronounced effect. However, less severe, or even overlapping, brand norms violations could have been used in this research too. In the marketing environment there are often instances where this occurs. It is recommended that these evolving situations are empirically examined to provide insight into the severity of brand norms violations as well as the short-term and long-term effects on the brand. Furthermore, it is suggested that researchers examine the role of additional moderator variables such as product category, industry type, pricing, and brand equity perceptions. This will help consumer researchers better understand the rapidly evolving dynamics of the consumer-brand relationship after a brand norms violation has occurred.

It is also advisable for researchers to explore the time component of brand redemption. That is, how can brands redeem themselves after a brand norms violation? How much time is necessary? An experimental design with longitudinal components is recommended as it provides multiple data points on consumers' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. This will provide more conclusive information about the consumer forgiveness aspect as a brand attempts to redeem itself. It will also provide information that researchers can use to attempt to decode the complex consumer-brand relationship. It is important that future researchers continue to examine consumer response to brand norms violations to learn more about this singular construct.

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