

Corporate actions mediating the consumer's brand trust and attitude in case of a brand scandal

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ABSTRACT

Consumers are eager to observe the actions taken by their trusted brand to rebuild consumers' confidence in case of a brand scandal. They perceive it as a sign of the extent to which a brand cares about its consumers. During a brand scandal, the role of corporate actions in influencing consumers' attitudes towards the brand scandal and their forgiveness may become important. This study explores the influence a brand has on its consumers during brand scandals through structural equation modeling.

Key words: *Corporate Action, Brand Scandal, Brand Trust*

INTRODUCTION

Brand scandals are defined as an unethical actions or events linked with the brand that causes outrage and reactions (Sims, 2009; Kuhn and Lee Ashcraft, 2003; Tucker and Melewar, 2005). They are complex situations in which products are found to be defective, unsafe, or even dangerous (Dawar and Pillutla, 2000), and sometimes they may be of the form of an event in which a product could harm the consumers (Nagar and Kour, 2018). Such incidents disappoint consumers' expectations and have negative consequences for the brand's reputational and financial assets (Coombs, 2007; Huber et al., 2010), revenue losses (Cleeren et al., 2013), deterioration of brand equity (Dawar and Pillutla, 2000; Hegner et al., 2014), negative brand perceptions and lower purchase intentions (Huber et al., 2010), and decreased effectiveness of marketing activities (Van Heerde et al., 2007).

A good consumer brand relationship forms the building block for the success of a brand. Several findings support the notion that for consumer good brands, brand relationship quality is a significant barometer for

building the strength and depth of consumers' relational behavior (Fournier, 1994). However, brand scandals could result in a consumer losing its confidence entirely in the brand (Wang and Alexander, 2018), which in turn may lead the scandalized brand and the company in a crisis. As brand scandals may jeopardize consumer-brand relationships, the same is a matter of grave concern for marketers. An organization is expected to strategically deal with a scandal before, during and after its occurrence (Benoit, 1997; Grebe, 2013; Kovoormisara, 1996; Pearson and Mitroff, 1993). The inability of an organization to manage a scandal in these three phases can worsen the scandal by generating negative publicity (Dean, 2004), eventually ruining the brand's image and reputation (Claeys et al., 2010; Dean, 2004) and even endangering the survival of the organization (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

The main purpose of this confirmatory research is to empirically validate a theoretical model for understanding the mediating role of corporate actions in the relationship between consumer's brand trust and their attitude about the brand scandal. This mediating role may ultimately influence the consumer's behavior to forgive a scandalized brand.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Recently, Bozic and Kuppelwieser (2019) posited that trust is that condition of mind wherein one intends to accept susceptibility based upon positive expectations of another person's intentions or behaviour. Trust in relationship marketing can be defined as "when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity" (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 23). When a brand scandal occurs, consumers' existing trust in the brand determines the possibility of consumers' intention to accept its susceptibility. Brand trust plays a legitimate agent's role, accessing and constructing marketing legitimacy (Lillqvist et al., 2018). Past studies show that, in case of food safety scandals, brand trust is very critical (Falkheimer and Heide, 2015; Yannopoulou et al., 2011). Any scandal related to unethical, improper or illegal action or any product wrongdoing may severely damage consumers' trust in the brand (Custance et al., 2012). On the other side, strong brand trust is also essential to restore positive perceptions after a scandal (Chen, 2008). In fact, brand trust also influences the consumer-brand relationship and consumer response (Roy et al, 2018), and consumers' purchase intentions may depend on their level of brand trust, leading to positive brand referrals (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013). What is still unclear is the relationship between brand trust and the attitude toward a brand scandal (Kapoor and Banerjee, 2020), and as such we propose the following hypothesis:

- H1.* Consumers' high level of pre-scandal brand trust significantly and favorably affects their brand scandal attitude.

An essential aspect of scandal management is the scandal communication (Grebe, 2013). Laufer and Coombs (2006) laid down four scandal communication strategies: denying, diminishing, rebuilding and bolstering. Some of the corporate actions meant for scandal management are advertising, recalling defective products promptly and offering remedies. Interestingly, companies with higher recall experiences and greater severity of recall, and those upstream in the supply chain, tend to offer lower recall remedy (Muralidharan et al., 2019). This is because an experienced firm tends to avoid admission of guilt and, thus, pre-empts litigation.

During a scandal, a brand may need to apply different strategies for different stakeholders (Stephens et al., 2005). A rectification strategy may be applied for communication purposes with general public and consumers. In contrast, other strategies, like bolstering and denial, could be used to address media concerns. Although several scandal communication strategies are available with companies, a few might still prefer to remain silent (Coombs, 2007). This may be due to uncertainties surrounding the scandal (Coombs, 2007). This "no response" strategy's negative effect on individuals' attitude towards the concerned company has been statistically proven (Bradford and Garrett, 1995): consumers may interpret silence as "no comment" (Taylor and Perry, 2005), which may lead them to feel that the company is not concerned about their response or that it is concealing something (Heath, 1998).

Thus, we conjecture that if a brand's scandal, corporate's actions, and consumers perceptions are mismatched, then the same may be proved more detrimental for the scandalized brand. Accordingly, the role of the corporate action may become crucial during brand scandal event, and there is a requirement to understand the way consumers perceive it and form an attitude about it and forgive accordingly. However, to the best of our knowledge, there was no prior research which investigated the role and influence of corporate's action in shaping consumer attitude during the brand scandal (Cleeren et al., 2017; Kapoor and Banerjee, 2020). The current research is an attempt to understand the role of corporate actions in mediating the relationship between pre-scandal brand trust and consumers' brand scandal attitude, with the following hypothesis:

- H2.* Corporate actions positively mediate the relationship between pre-scandal brand trust and consumers' attitudes towards brand scandal.

The process of forgiveness begins when consumers brand trust is damaged. Fernández-Capo et al. (2017, p. 247) view forgiveness as “one of the most important processes in restoring relationships”. Consumers then observe the initial set of trust repairing activities of the brand. These actions help consumers make sense of the scandal in terms of what happened, who is responsible and the possible outcomes (Bozic and Kuppelwieser, 2019). Recently, Fetscherin and Sampedro (2019) generalized in their study that almost 50% of consumers who come to know about a brand transgression are reluctant to forgive a brand, compared with about a third (32%) who are ready to forgive. Additionally, consumers who are more likely to forgive the brand tend to re-engage rather than avoid or attack (Fetscherin and Sampedro, 2019). Regaining consumer confidence after food safety scandals is extremely challenging (Wang and Alexander, 2018), but some researchers implied that if the brand is loved and has a strong market position, it may be forgiven (Wei et al., 2020). Thus, consumers may forgive a scandalized brand for once (Zhang et al., 2020), but subsequent scandals may jeopardize the consumer-brand relationship. We argue that brand forgiveness could be influenced by the positive attitude of consumers toward the scandal, and given a lack of studies on this assumption (Kapoor and Banerjee, 2020) we propose to test the following hypothesis:

H3. Consumers’ favourable attitude toward the brand scandal actuates their brand forgiveness.

METHODOLOGY

This research applied structural equation modeling (SEM) to empirically verify the theoretical model. This study involved a two-step process comprised of a measurement model followed by a structural model (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The overall proposed model is presented in Figure 1, which also summarizes the proposed hypotheses:

- H1.* Consumers’ high level of pre-scandal brand trust significantly and favorably affects their brand scandal attitude.
- H2.* Corporate actions positively mediate the relationship between pre-scandal brand trust and consumers’ attitudes towards brand scandal.
- H3.* Consumers’ favourable attitude toward the brand scandal actuates their brand forgiveness.

We applied survey methodology and used existing measures from the literature. We circulated the questionnaire within India amongst the consumers of Maggi. Out of 753 responses received, 717 were qualified for the study (95% response rate). Out of the total respondents, males were 55.2%, and females were 44.8%. The demographic profiles of the respondents comprised of different age groups (25-34= 38.1%, 15-24= 36.1%, 35-44= 17%, 45 and above age group= 8.8%).

The context of this study is the Maggi brand scandal, and each respondent was aware of it. In this paragraph we are summarizing the case overview. On June 5, 2015, The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) imposed a ban on the production and sale of Maggi. This ban was based on the laboratory test report showing the product had lead content beyond the permissible limit along with the presence of Monosodium Glutamate (MSG), which were extremely harmful to human health. Additionally, Nestle India was ordered to withdraw all nine variants of Maggi instant noodles from the market. However, on June 10, 2015, lead and arsenic levels in Maggi samples tested in Bengaluru found within the permissible limit. On June 11, 2015, Nestle India appealed to Bombay High Court for judicial review of the FSSAI ban. Finally, the countrywide ban on Maggi was lifted by Bombay High Court on Aug 13, 2015. Maggi was re-launched in 100 cities of India on November 10, 2015, with previously followed formula and ingredients. However, the brand could not come out from the scandal completely. There were reports of fresh cases and the same reignited brand scandal. In November 2017, Maggi again failed to clear a laboratory test in Uttar Pradesh’s Shahjahanpur district of India, and a fine was imposed on Nestle, three distributors, and two retailers (Indian Express, 2017). This time ash content was found above the permissible limits of human consumption. On January 3, 2019, the Supreme Court of India gave the National Consumer Dispute Redressal Commission (NCDRC) permission to proceed with a class-action suit brought against Maggi noodle makers Nestle in 2016 by the center for allegedly selling noodles that fell short of the existing food standards (The Economic Times, Jan 4th, 2019).

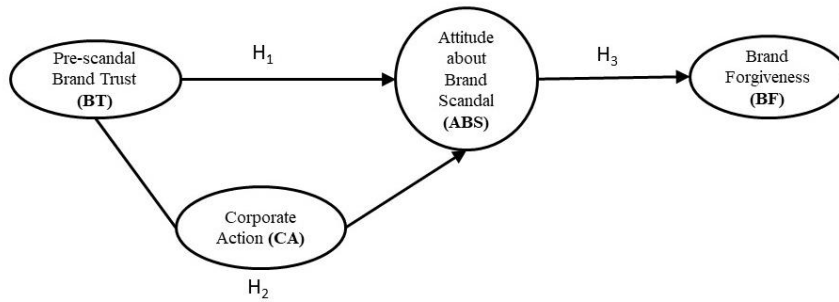
For evaluating the internal consistency and construct reliability, Cronbach alpha and composite reliability (CR) scores were used (Peterson and Kim, 2013). The constructs were considered reliable when they possess Cronbach alpha value above 0.5 and CR scores above 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019). Both the values of the constructs matched the threshold criteria. Item and scale level CVI (content validity index) were assessed, and both showed values greater than 0.9 for each case. Since the average variance explained (AVE) for each construct exceeded

the threshold of 0.5, convergent validity was achieved (Hair et al., 2016). The square root of AVE exceeding the shared variance between any two constructs ensured discriminant validity.

FINDINGS

This paper studies if consumers' pre-scandal brand trust (BT) can influence their attitude about the brand scandal (ABS), which further may affect the brand forgiveness (BF). In particular, this model tests if corporate actions (CA) play as mediators between consumer's brand trust and brand attitude in case of a brand scandal.

Figure 1. The proposed model



The first hypothesis results, depicted in table 1, show that consumer's pre-scandal brand trust significantly impact consumers' attitudes about the brand scandal ($\beta=0.196$). This first findings can suggest that, when a brand is trusted and has probably built a strong a positive relationship with its consumers, the scandal in itself is not perceived so negatively. Avoiding a negative attitude about a scandal is vital to reduce its negative effects, and to enhance forgiveness But is this scandal attitude being only influenced by brand trust? We argue that the scandalized company, throughout effective scandal management actions, may change or influence the scandal attitude, and maybe impact brand trust also.

Our second hypothesis verified if corporate actions are active part in this relation between brand trust and scandal attitude. Results show that corporate action partially mediates the favourable relationship between consumers' pre-scandal brand trust ($\beta=0.314$; BT->CA), and their attitude about the brand scandal ($\beta=0.040$; CA->ABS). These findings are confirming the importance of some actions and response strategies, because they can protect brand trust, and furthermore avoid negative scandal perceptions. These insights are very critical because they are confirming the importance of company reactions during and after a scandal, and as such the need of scandal management implementation. However, observing this company, we noted that during this case study scandal, brand managers made some unorganized efforts to undo its deeds and re-launch its products by gaining consumer confidence and retailer engagement. We suppose that respondents did not specifically recall the intensity or the quality of actions during this particular scandal, but only if some actions have been taken. Further studies could explore which action can play a better role in mediating brand trust and scandal attitude. Maintaining a positive consumers' attitude towards scandal is very challenging, and as the first two tests demonstrated, it is strictly connected with brand trust and it is partially influenced by corporate actions. The third hypotheses tried to reveal if this attitude could impact consumer behaviour in some ways, exploring in particular its forgiveness. Our results confirm that consumers' attitudes about the brand scandal affect the hypothesized behavioural outcome, brand forgiveness ($\beta=0.895$). This finding is opening new perspectives on brand forgiveness, because it is leveraging the attitude, and related perceptions, of the scandal, and it is not directly related to brand trust. It means that scandal management, in influencing the scandal attitude, could also affect consumer behaviour.

Note: The detailed version of all the tested diagnostics shall be presented later during the full publication of this paper.

CONCLUSIONS

We specifically tested the mediating role of corporate actions because we assumed that they could play a fundamental role in scandal management. Corporate actions are important because any negative publicity about the brand can create negative brand associations, especially for consumers with existing brand trust. Companies should respond, keeping in mind the level of perceived severity of negative news about the scandalized brand.

Damage to their reputation is directly linked to the level of perceived scandal severity (Zhou & Ki, 2018). And for some researchers, the more severe the brand transgression is, the less likely is the forgiveness (Fetscherin and Sampedro, 2019). Chang et al. (2015) revealed that response strategies and severity of brand failure affect customer attribution, leading to negative attitudes towards them.

However, our study reveals that corporate actions do influence consumers brand trust in case of a brand scandal and ultimately affect their attitude towards the brand scandal, and this attitude leads also to brand forgiveness. It implies that scandal severity and brand failure are not the only protagonists in explaining consumer behaviour and brand forgiveness. In fact, consumers with high brand trust levels tend to respond positively to open apology for wrongdoing (Song, 2016). When a brand communicates or makes an effort to respond to its consumers, they, in turn, feel heightened reassurance (Xie et al., 2017). Thus, timely and thorough communication from corporate in the case of a brand scandal may shape consumers' attitudes towards the scandal. It may also profoundly influence their attitudes and behaviour towards the brand.

The study reveals consumers' attitudes about the brand scandal and the scandalized brand. In our effort to understand the concept of brand scandal and the role of mediating variable, the study underwent certain limitations. The sample set represents the developing economy perspective of the metropolitan urban centers in India. The study should be validated with other major emerging markets and developed western countries to capture model generalizability. Future researchers may examine brand scandals across various industries and do a comparative analysis. Our study caters to the corporate action; future researchers may explore different kinds of corporate actions and the degree of its impact on consumer attitudes in case of a brand scandal.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE

This study makes a significant contribution to consumer behavior, brand scandal, and brand management studies. The mediating effect of corporate action and its importance in influencing consumers' attitudes towards the brand scandal are discussed and tested. This focus on the consumers attitude towards brand scandal is rarely discussed in the literature. Additionally, the influence of this attitude about the brand scandal impacting a consumers' behavior-brand forgiveness- is also explained.

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