“I” value justice, but “we” value relationships: Self-construal effects on post-transgression consumer forgiveness

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Abstract

Causal attributions and brand-relationships are known to determine how consumers react to brand transgressions. Considering both transgression controllability and brand-relationship strength, the authors show that self-construal moderates consumer reactions to brand transgressions. Three studies using different product and service failure scenarios demonstrate that consumers who have independent self-construals are more forgiving when the brand has no control over the transgression, regardless of brand-relationship strength. However, consumers who have interdependent self-construals are more forgiving when they have strong relationships with the transgressing brand, even if the brand is at fault. Furthermore, the salience of justice concerns versus expectancies for long-term brand-relationships underlies the self-construal effects on consumer forgiveness.

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Understanding when consumers forgive a brand following brand transgressions is vital for firms in winning the hearts and loyalties of consumers. Brand transgressions, defined as violations of implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluations (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004), cause different consumer reactions depending on whether consumers believe the brand could have controlled the transgression and depending on how they relate with the brand. For instance, they will react less negatively if they believe the brand is blameless (Folkes, 1984; Klein & Dawar, 2004) or if they have positive relationships with the brand (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaran, 1998). Yet, we know little about how consumers react when they have close relationships with a brand that they perceive to be at fault. Will they forgive? Will they spread negative word-of-mouth communications? Will they continue to patronize the brand?

If a beloved brand is actually at fault, consumers who focus on their brand-relationship may be more likely to forgive. On the other hand, consumers who focus mainly on fault might be less forgiving. We propose a comprehensive framework combining transgression-controllability and brand-relationship strength to show that self-construal may be the boundary condition determining which factor drives consumer forgiveness. We theorize and demonstrate that consumers who have independent self-construals focus on whether the brand could have controlled the transgression: when the brand was blameless, they are more forgiving, whatever the strength of their brand-relationship. Conversely, consumers who have interdependent self-construals focus on their relationship with the brand: when they have a strong brand-relationship, they are...
more forgiving, whatever the controllability. Furthermore, the salience of justice concerns versus expectancies for long-term brand-relationships in independent versus interdependent self-construals underlies the self-construal effects on consumer forgiveness.

**Conceptual development**

**Consumers’ post-transgression reactions**

When people perceive that they have been harmed or mistreated, they may choose to forgive, avoid, reconcile, or seek revenge (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006). In marketplace transactions, consumers may choose to withdraw from interactions with transgressing firms (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009), to exact revenge by vindictively sharing negative word-of-mouth (Wangenheim, 2005), or to switch to suboptimal rival brands (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003). Because consumer response following brand transgressions may impact long-term brand value, it is vital to understand post-transgression reactions. Particularly, we examine consumer forgiveness as a motivational construct to measure their willingness to forgive a transgressing brand (McCullough et al., 1998). We also explore behavioral intentions to spread negative word-of-mouth, and to continue patronizing brands that have committed transgressions.

**Factors influencing post-transgression reactions**

Attribution theory (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 1980) suggests that individuals make causal inferences about transgressions, which then guide their post-transgression behaviors. Most important may be whether the brand had volitional control over failures (Folkes, 1984; Hess, Ganesan, & Klein, 2003; McCullough et al., 1998). For example, when a flight is cancelled because the airline fails to take proactive actions, the cause is under the airline’s control; when the cancelled flight is due to unpredictable weather, the cause is beyond the airline’s control. Attributions to noncontrollable factors generally decrease the negative impacts of transgressions (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Monga & John, 2008), but attributions to controllable factors can make consumers less likely to forgive (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999) and more likely to take revenge (Folkes, 1984).

Consumers’ brand-relationships also influence post-transgression reactions (i.e., Aaker et al., 2004; Aggarwal, 2004). Willingness to forgive depends on the victim’s relationship with the offender (McCullough et al., 1998); if the victim is closely committed to the offender, forgiveness is more likely because commitment enhances intent to persist and remain in a relationship (Finkel, Ruschult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Consumers interact and build relationships with brands similarly to the ways they build interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998); they are more likely to forgive (Fedorikhin, Park, & Thomson, 2008) and less likely to break from their loyalty (Mattila, 2001) if they are highly committed or attached to transgressing brands. We focus on brand commitment (Ahluwalia et al., 2000) and brand attachment (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010), and examine effects of those brand-relationships and transgression controllability after transgressions. More important, we propose that consumers’ self-construal orientations will determine the relative influence of controllability and brand-relationship.

**The moderating role of self-construal**

Self-construal reflects individuals’ conceptual perceptions of themselves as independent or interdependent in relation to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals who have independent self-construals perceive themselves as objective and separate units in social contexts and are motivated to differentiate themselves; individuals who have interdependent self-construals perceive themselves as part of the social context and are motivated to maintain external relationships (Aaker & Schmitt, 2001; Kampmeier & Simon, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994).

Building on self-construal theory, we propose that self-construal will determine consumer post-transgression reactions. When consumers are faced with brand transgressions, those who have independent self-construals differentiating themselves from the brand will focus more on the transgression rather than on relationship cues. Individualistic cultures, where people tend to have independent self-construals, have been shown to view transgressions as injustice gaps (Ho & Fung, 2011) that call for restorative balance (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Additionally, people believe that offenders who are highly responsible for a transgression should justly experience negative outcomes (Feather, 1999; Lee, Winterich, & Ross, 2014). Assigning responsibility requires attributing misdeeds to internal, controllable causes (Feather, 1999). Thus we predict that consumers who have independent self-construals will have more salient justice concerns and will be more forgiving if the brand lacked control, regardless of their brand-relationships.

In contrast, individuals who have interdependent self-construals will be saliently cued to their brand-relationships (Cross & Madson, 1997). Collectivists view transgressions as threats to interpersonal and social harmony and view forgiveness as a way to maintain and restore balance (Ho & Fung, 2011). For example, Americans focus more on transgression controllability, while Japanese focus on their relationships with transgressors (Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001). Moreover, the emphasis on maintaining harmonious relationships (Gore & Cross, 2006) causes interdependent individuals to overlook misdeeds to preserve long-term affiliations (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, & Witcher, 1997). Thus we posit that interdependent consumers who have strong brand-relationships will also expect the relationships to be long-term; they will see transgressions, regardless of controllability, as harm that must be balanced. Accordingly, they will be more likely to forgive, irrespective of transgression controllability.

**Summary**

We manipulate self-construals with situational primes and test our predictions with three studies using different product
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