Research Article

# Whose fault is it? Effects of relational self-views and outcome counterfactuals on self-serving attribution biases following brand policy changes

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**Abstract**

Many consumers view their relationships with brands as part of their identity and this affects how they react to a brand's behavior that negatively impacts them. In assigning responsibility for negative outcomes, individuals often demonstrate a self-serving bias by assigning more responsibility to their partner and less to themselves. In three studies, we demonstrate that this tendency is resisted among consumers holding a strong relational self-view. However, their self-serving bias emerges when the outcome represents a near-miss situation in which a more favorable counterfactual alternative outcome was highly possible. This change in attributions is associated with increased feelings of being betrayed and perceived unfairness by the brand even though its actions are identical in the near-miss and far-miss situations.
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## Introduction

The competition for consumers' interest and purchases continues to grow with the availability of the internet to contact, solicit and reward consumers at all places and times. Tactics originally designed to encourage repeat buying, discourage switching behavior, and motivate sales have been found to foster what can best be described as a friendship between the brand and its customers. Predating these technological advances, Fournier (1998) encouraged consumer researchers to move beyond considering loyalty in purely economic terms and to think of consumers as having relationships with the brands that they use. But, despite the positive benefits that derive from consumers' relational bonds to brands, the occasion may arise when a brand does something that disrupts the harmony of the relationship. For example, a brand may discontinue a favored

product or service or it may raise prices. While some of these actions may clearly be seen as not under the brand's control (e.g., a phase out of incandescent light bulbs mandated by government regulations), others may be seen as solely decided by management (e.g., a national retailer closing a local branch store) and still others may result from a combination of events, some of which involve the consumer. For example, a brand may increase prices in order to meet consumers' demand for free shipping and easy returns or limit quantities for popular products in order to prevent stockouts.

Recently, Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone (2012) proposed that consumers perceive brands as having intentions and abilities and view their brand relationships with these perceptions in mind. If such is the case, then consumers might make attributions of responsibility for changes in their consumer–brand relationship. The issue addressed in this paper is how consumers interpret outcomes with undesirable consequences that occur in their brand relationship when neither party is entirely exempt from responsibility. More specifically, we answer the question of what types of attributions consumers might make in their brand relationship for

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outcomes where the consequences could have possibly been avoided (near-miss) versus outcomes whose consequences were not so easily avoided (far-miss).

We build on prior research that shows a tendency for individuals to over-attribute causation to others and under-attribute it to themselves when outcomes are unfavorable, a phenomenon referred to as the Self-Serving Bias (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Miller & Ross, 1975), and on research showing that this tendency is bounded in relationships (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000; Moon, 2003; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998). In line with the finding that partners in a close relationship (e.g., friends) may accept some responsibility for negative outcomes, we propose that consumers' attributions for unfavorable outcomes that occur in a consumer–brand relationship will not always be self-serving. Instead, these attributions will depend on the degree to which the outcome is appraised as having resulted from an act of betrayal or is perceived as being unfair. These appraisals will vary in intensity based on the nature of the outcome and the relative strength of the relational self-view, which we define as aspects of the self-concept that are derived from the interpersonal connectedness to a significant other, in this case a brand (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). We further identify conditions under which those consumers not expected to exhibit the self-serving bias do evidence this bias.

In three studies, we find an attenuation of the self-serving bias for consumers who hold a relatively strong view of themselves as a relationship partner to a brand when their interaction with that brand results in an unfavorable outcome. However, this attenuation did not occur for these consumers when a counterfactual favorable outcome is in close proximity (e.g., near-miss). These studies also demonstrate a self-serving bias in consumers who hold a relatively weak relational self-view as they are theorized to be more motivated by self-interest and less by a mutual concern for the interests of the other party involved. Further, consumers with a weak self-view did not alter their attributions of causation based on the proximity of the alternative outcome. The results of this research contribute to several streams of literature by showing a unique relationship between self-views and the nature of the unfavorable outcome in producing a self-serving pattern of attributions that has not been previously researched by consumer psychologists. In so doing, this research demonstrates how similar actions may be interpreted differently by consumers depending on the ease of developing counterfactuals that would have prevented an unfavorable outcome. Thirdly, this research identifies feelings of betrayal and perceptions of unfairness as underlying factors leading to more self-serving attributions among those with a high relational self-view.

## Relational self-view

Brands frequently strive to form relational bonds with their customers in order to build trust and commitment (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). For example, many brands have adopted loyalty reward programs as a mechanism for building relationship equity (Vogel, Evanschitzky, & Ramaseshan,

2008) and fostering consumer–brand relationships (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001). Brand managers believe that encouraging loyalty to such programs will directly translate into behavioral and psychological commitment to the brand (Youjae & Hoseong, 2003).

Beyond commitment, a close relationship can be incorporated into one's self-concept (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991), resulting in a relational self-view. A relational self-view is a mental representation of the self that is derived from being a member of a specific relationship. This representation is defined by the role that one plays in that relationship and the degree to which one sees oneself as being a committed member to that relationship (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gaertner et al., 2012). As detailed in their Table 1, Brewer and Gardner (1996) conceptualize the relational self as an aspect of the self-concept that is distinct from the personal and collective self-concepts that have been the basis for self-construal research looking at independent and interdependent self-construal (e.g., Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005). Activation of the relational self fosters an altruistic motivation that is specific to the relationship partner and focuses on a mutual concern for the interests and outcomes of one's relationship partner rather than to oneself or to a group. In their research, they found that activating a strong relational self increased the tendency to think of the self in relational terms (e.g., "I am very happily married" rather than "I am very athletic" or "I am a Black woman") and priming a relational self-view facilitated similarity judgments for ambiguous attitude statements. Other research shows that thinking of oneself in very relational terms enhances commitment to goals that are of high value to one's relationship partner (Shah, 2003) and mitigates self-interest motives in favor of actions that benefit the relationship (Chen, Chen, & Portnoy, 2009). Consequently, individuals with a strong relational self-view tend to think and act in ways that strengthen their connection with close others (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003) because seeing oneself as a positive member of a relationship can generate a feeling of self-worth (Bromgard, Trafimow, & Bromgard, 2006).

## Transgressions in brand relationships

Recent research in the domain of brand relationships suggests that consumer interactions with brands mimic those between people (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Kervyn et al., 2012) and that the formation of a consumer–brand relationship parallels that of a friendship (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). However, as with many interpersonal relationships, consumer–brand relationships are often subject to transgressions in which an action taken by one member of the relationship disconfirms the other's expectations and threatens the continuity of the relationship (Aaker et al., 2004). For example, brands may implement policies that are disliked by their customers (Aggarwal, 2004) or they may fail to provide the expected level of service (Aaker et al., 2004; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999; Wan, Hui, & Wyer, 2011). Although one might intuitively expect loyal customers to be more forgiving of brand transgressions that result in an unfavorable outcome for the consumer, several lines of research have shown that transgressions often result in more adverse reactions from