

# FEELING ATTACHED TO SYMBOLIC BRANDS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF BRAND TRANSGRESSIONS

Eda Sayin and Zeynep Gurhan-Canli

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** We propose that brands with strong associations and dedicated customers may be vulnerable if customers perceive them as exploiting their relationship.

**Methodology/approach:** We start by reviewing the literature on brand meaning, brand attachment, brand relationships, and brand transgressions. The extant literature implies that as a result of their willingness to sustain their brand relationship, highly attached consumers will either discount negative information about a brand or attribute the responsibility for the negative information to some external factors. We propose, on the other hand, that when negative information dilutes the reason for brand attachment, the norm of the consumer-brand relationship is violated (brand transgression). Then we argue that highly attached consumers of that brand will react more negatively (when compared to consumers not feeling highly attached) toward the brand.

**Findings:** We introduce a typology of brand transgressions against the (1) expressive, (2) exclusive, (3) expert, and (4) empathic nature of brands. We discuss the possible effects of attachment levels on consumers' reactions after such brand transgressions. Additionally, we articulate the moderating effects of four consumer motives (need for self-enhancement, need for uniqueness, need for risk avoidance, and need for justice) on consumer reactions.

**Originality/value:** Our reasoning counters the literature suggesting that highly attached consumers of a brand will engage in relationship sustaining behaviors. We contribute to the brand-transgression literature by providing a more structured and detailed definition of brand transgressions by classifying them under four distinct types.

**Keywords:** Brand transgression; brand attachment; brand relationship

There is an ownership mentality in the current marketing world: We have this many followers, this many e-mail subscribers, this many “likes.” But no audience is truly owned. They can turn off their televisions, unfollow you on Twitter and RSS feeds, unlike you on Facebook, unsubscribe from your e-mail lists. The audience controls the nature of the relationship.

Jeffrey Rohrs<sup>1</sup>

Social media and the Internet provide several opportunities as well as challenges for brand managers to create, develop, and sustain customer brand relationships. Although Internet- and mobile-communication channels now make establishing and fostering relationships with consumers much easier for marketers, the interactive nature of these new media platforms allows consumers to be more powerful than ever. As the opening quotation illustrates clearly, customers can quickly change the terms of their relationships with brands in response to new information. Information is abundant and rapidly diffused across different consumer segments in different parts of the world. We propose that brands with strong associations and dedicated customers may also be vulnerable in this environment if customers perceive them as exploiting their relationship. Consumers choose to establish strong relationships with and feel attached to brands that have meanings consistent with their own actual or ideal self-concepts. Consumers’ relationships with such brands rely on the assumption that these brands will continue to convey the same meanings and that these meanings will be transferred to the consumers’ self-concepts. If the brand behaves inconsistently with its meaning, the norm of the relationship is breached because the brand can no longer transfer the same associations to its consumers. Any behavior that violates the norms of the consumer-brand relationship is perceived as a brand transgression. We introduce four types of brand transgressions against the (1) expressive, (2) exclusive, (3) expert, and (4) empathic nature of the brand. We believe that consumers’ attachment levels toward a brand and consumers’ motives in engaging in such a relationship with that brand will influence their perception following these transgressions. We outline some propositions for future research to address.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, we present the critical constructs of our conceptual framework, which builds up to our propositions, reviewing the literature on brand meaning, brand attachment, brand relationships,

and brand transgressions. Then we propose different types of brand transgressions (expressive, exclusive, expert, and empathic) and articulate their expected effects on consumer behavior, focusing on consumers' motives in engaging such a relationship. A general discussion section lays out the implications of our propositions for managers.

## BRAND MEANING

Marketers spend millions of dollars every year to position their brands in the minds of their existing and potential consumers in such a way that consumers will find the brand appealing and relevant. Companies decide on brand positioning after a thoughtful analysis of the market to determine the desired image for a brand, and it is considered to be effective only if the branding creates strong, favorable, and unique associations in line with the positioning in consumers' minds. Brand associations consist of brand awareness (recognition and recall of brand attributes and benefits), brand attitude (overall evaluation of a brand, whether good or bad), brand image (perceptions about a brand as reflected by the favorability, strength, uniqueness, and types of brand associations held in consumer memory), and brand personality (the set of human characteristics associated with the brand) (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1998, 2003; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). The underlying value of a brand is this set of associations because they form the brand meaning as perceived by consumers. In other words, how consumers perceive and interpret positioning of a brand forms the brand meaning.

Brand meaning is important in shaping consumers' preferences. Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986) suggest that brands might have functional, symbolic, and/or experiential meanings. Brands with a functional meaning are usually designed to solve consumption-related problems. These brands are known by aspects that are related to product performance, and consumers that need to satisfy functional needs prefer them. Brands with experiential meanings, on the other hand, are designed to provide sensory pleasure, variety, and cognitive stimulation to their consumers (Park et al., 1986). Finally, brands with symbolic meanings fulfill an internally generated need, such as self-enhancement, by reducing the gap between consumers' actual and desired selves (Solomon, Zaichkowsky, & Polegato, 2008). Some consumers choose to consume brands with symbolic meanings that either suit their self-concepts or help them signal the self they want to reveal (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 1998; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Walker & Olson, 1997). These brands help consumers communicate their self-concepts to their social environment through

brands' symbolic meanings (Griskevicius et al., 2007). These brands are incorporated into consumers' self-concepts and become part of their extended selves (Belk, 1988).

Once a brand meaning is established, it differentiates a brand from other brands in the same category, insulates the brand from competition, and enhances the brand's market performance (Shocker & Srinivasan, 1979). Consumers appreciate a brand meaning only if it satisfies some specific needs that are personally relevant to consumers and is commonly accepted. With a shared understanding of the brand meaning, a brand can be used to communicate some specific messages about a consumer's self-concept to others (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Kleine et al., 1995; Kleine et al., 1993; Walker & Olson, 1997). A brand's ability to transfer some specific meaning to its consumers' self-concepts is an important criterion in consumers' brand selection and tendency to establish a long-term relationship with the brand. As such, the meaning of a brand affects the nature of the relationship consumers build with that brand. To understand the consumer-brand relationship, grasping the meaning a relationship provides to consumers is vital (Fournier, 1998).

## BRAND ATTACHMENT AND BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

As mentioned, consumers create their self-concepts and present themselves in public through their brand choices based on the "fit" between brand meaning and their self-concepts (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005; Fournier, 1998). Consumers feel connected to brands that either represent their self-concepts or are personally relevant in pursuit of specific personal goals. Brand-self connection is defined as a sense of oneness that consumers develop with certain brands, establishing cognitive and emotional links that connect the brand with the self (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Brand attachment and brand-self connection are two constructs the literature usually uses interchangeably. However, Park, MacInnis, and Priester (2009) define brand attachment as a broader concept that includes both brand-self connection and brand prominence. They define brand prominence as the extent to which feelings and memories about a brand are at the top of consumers' minds. Both brand-self connection and brand prominence positively affect consumers' engagement in relationship-sustaining behaviors (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Thomson, MacInnis, and Park (2005) suggest that highly attached consumers will more likely forego self-interest to continue their relationships with brands. In other words, they will repeatedly purchase the same brands, develop a tolerance to

switching (Crispell & Brandenburg, 1993), and even accept paying a price premium. Therefore, the notion that consumers form a link and feel attached to a brand is important to marketing managers because it predicts committed and loyal consumers (Thomson et al., 2005). Fournier (1998) suggests that feelings of attachment lie at the “core of all strong brand relationships.”

The consumer-brand relationship is a complicated phenomenon resembling interpersonal relationships. Literature characterizes interpersonal relationships via three constructs: interdependence, temporality, and purposiveness (Hinde, 1995). Interdependence suggests that the exchange between active and interdependent relationship partners should be reciprocal. Temporality implies that relationships are not one-time interactions and that they evolve over a series of repeated actions. Finally, relationships should serve a specific purpose. They should provide benefits to the people who engage in them so that people are willing to continue the relationships. Accordingly, in the consumer behavior context, the nature of the brand relationship is affected by the duration and purpose of the relationship, and the interaction between brand and consumer. Brand meaning is critical in a consumer’s decision to form a relationship with a specific brand. Additionally, a consumer’s self-concept and personal motive in forming a relationship determine brand choice and the nature of an interaction. A strong consumer-brand relationship requires that both brand and consumer be contributing partners. Additionally, this relationship should be successfully serving a certain motive of the consumer, thereby increasing the consumer’s willingness to sustain the relationship in the long run.

Once consumers have a strong relationship with a brand and feel attached, they are keener to sustain that relationship. Hence, customer retention becomes less costly and marketing expenditure is reduced (Blackston, 2000; Dowling, 2002). Accordingly, marketers try to form strong brand relationships and invest heavily in brand meaning to attain consumers who ideally feel attached to their brands. As brand attachment increases, consumers engage in relationship-sustaining behaviors more, establishing a greater tolerance to the brand.

We have previously mentioned that consumer-brand relationships resemble interpersonal relationships. In such relationships, partners sometimes engage in damaging behaviors that violate implicit or explicit rules of the relationship. These damaging acts are referred to as transgressions (Metts, 1994). How would highly attached consumers react if a brand behaves in a way that breaches the norms underlining their brand attachment? Will highly attached consumers protect brands from the negative effects of inconsistent brand behaviors? We argue that consumers’ reactions toward a brand transgression will depend on the extent of

and reason for the attachment they feel for the brand, the nature of the transgression, and the consumers' motives in their engagement with the brand.

## BRAND TRANSGRESSIONS

Literature defines brand transgressions as any violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding the consumer-brand relationship (Aaker, Fournier, & Brassel, 2004). This rather broad definition implies that a wide range of brand behaviors, such as product failures, inappropriate brand extensions and co-branding, and spokesperson changes, might be perceived as brand transgressions as long as they violate the norms of a brand relationship. The marketplace has many examples of brand transgression. For example, Toyota Motor Corp. breached its safety promise when fatal accidents occurred due to faulty acceleration and braking in their vehicles. Tiger Woods's marital infidelity negatively affected multiple brands, including Nike, Buick, and Gatorade (Agyemang, 2011). Brand transgressions have the potential to negatively affect the consumer-brand relationship and are easily shared with the public via media outlets. Consumers make inferences and conclusions about a brand after such negative acts.

Research in this area shows that the severity and cause of transgressions predict the amount of damage to the relationship. When a brand transgression occurs, consumers' prior feelings and attitudes toward that brand are critical indicators of their reaction toward the transgression. Once exposed to a transgression, consumers need to make a decision: either adapt and continue their relationship with the brand or abandon the brand. The severity level of the transgression is critical in this decision. Some transgressions are so severe that consumers can no longer continue their relationship with a brand. For the rest of the transgressions, in order to continue their relationship, consumers ignore or discount the new information, and/or attribute the responsibility for the transgression to other factors.

Dissonance theory from social psychology might explain the first option (Festinger, 1957). Dissonance theory suggests that individuals experience cognitive dissonance (1) after making an important decision, (2) after being coerced to do something that is contrary to private attitudes or beliefs, and (3) after being exposed to discrepant information (Oshikawa, 1969). Because dissonance is perceived as an aversive arousal, people are motivated to reduce this aversive state. Brehm and Cohen (1962) note that motivation to reduce dissonance will be stronger when an individual has a behavioral commitment to a decision.

Aronson (1968) additionally suggests that dissonance creates a significant motivational force only when the self-concept is involved.

The theory indicates that there are many possible ways to reduce dissonance. For example, once committed to an alternative, people prefer supportive information compared with dissonant information to avoid post-decisional dissonance. This effect is known as selective exposure to information (Fischer, Jonas, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2005). Selective exposure to information refers to the phenomenon during information seeking whereby people tend to select information that is in line with their own opinion. They prefer information that is consistent with their beliefs and attitudes and neglect inconsistent information (Fischer et al., 2005).

The basic implication of cognitive dissonance theory in the consumer behavior context is that consumers rationalize a choice by enhancing its positive aspects and suppressing its negative aspects (Mazursky, LaBarbera, & Aiello, 1987) through selective exposure. For example, suppose a consumer carefully studied the attributes of a brand and purchased it because the brand's meaning is the best match to his actual or ideal self-concept. In this context, the consumer is committed to the brand and his ego is involved in this self-relevant relationship. Accordingly, he will experience a dissonance when he is later exposed to an inconsistent behavior of the brand, such as an incongruent brand extension or an unfitting marketing communication. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that this consumer will have a tendency to either avoid or discount such information in order not to experience the dissonance.

The other perspective focuses on attribution theory. This theory suggests that people interpret behavior in terms of its causes and that these interpretations play an important role in determining reactions to the behavior (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Attribution theory predicts that individuals as rational information processors try to find a reason and even an explanation for a violation (Folkes, 1984). Accordingly, consumers who have positive attitudes toward a brand will have a tendency to find justification for discounting a violation of the brand, in order to reduce the dissonance caused by the violation. For example, suppose a consumer buys a new car and discovers flaws in the performance indicators of the car, such as acceleration, road handling, ride comfort, or fuel economy. According to the attribution theory, the consumer will search for a reason for the flaws and may arrive at explanations such as the consumer himself failed to drive properly, or the gas quality was the problem. Both cognitive dissonance theory and attribution theory support the notion that once consumers have positive attitudes toward a brand, they will experience cognitive dissonance after a brand transgression and try to decrease this dissonance, either by selective exposure to

new information or by attributing the responsibility to other factors. As a result, they can sustain their relationship with the brand. For example, Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava (2000) demonstrate that highly committed consumers have a greater tendency to question the validity of the source of negative publicity about a brand and generate counterarguments to attenuate its effects. Cheng, White, and Chaplin (2012) suggest that consumers with high brand-self connection maintained favorable brand evaluations despite brand failures (poor product performance). They predict that such a defensive reaction is motivated by the consumers' motivation to protect their self-concepts.

Each brand relationship has a different weight in an individual's life. Accordingly, the extent to which the individual perceives the dissonance as uncomfortable after a brand's transgression varies. Cognitive dissonance theory implies that the perceived magnitude of dissonance is a function of the importance of the brand relationship for an individual. Accordingly, consumers who are highly attached to a brand will experience greater dissonance when they are exposed to negative information about the brand and will have a greater tendency to discount or avoid the negative information or attribute the responsibility to some other factors to cope with the dissonance.

Our predictions challenge the assumptions of the existing literature, which implies that brands with highly attached consumers are safer because their consumers will hardly revise their positive attitudes toward these brands. We argue that under some circumstances, having highly attached consumers may backfire and lead to even stronger negative consequences for a brand. Consumers feel attached to brands that provide a specific benefit that is highly important to them and expect the brand to continue to provide this benefit. For example, if consumers feel attached to a brand that is highly associated with creativity because they want to transfer its associations to express their self-concepts, these consumers will be alert to any inconsistent message that might dilute the brand's creativity associations. As a result of this dilution, the brand can no longer transfer the same associations to its consumers' self-concepts, and the reason for the consumers' attachment to the brand is breached. We suggest that highly attached consumers will perceive this type of inconsistency (inconsistency with the reason for attachment) as a violation of the norm of their brand relationship, and the effect of the violation will be amplified because it is an instance of high self-relevance and might be reflected in their self-concepts. Accordingly, highly attached consumers will react more negatively toward the brand when compared to the consumers who are not as attached to the brand. However, we expect highly attached consumers to have a greater tendency to ignore or discount to some extent any other type of inconsistent behavior by the brand that does not breach the reason for attachment.

In this paper, we primarily focus on consumers' reactions after a brand transgression within a high attachment context. The extant literature tends to focus on utility-related transgressions rather than symbolic ones. We are, on the other hand, mainly interested in transgressions that are related to the symbolic meaning of a brand, where consumers' need to transfer a specific meaning from the brand to the self-concept is the reason for attachment. Therefore, brand transgressions in our context are any marketing activities that influence and dilute brand meaning and hence negatively affect a brand's ability to transfer its associations to its consumers.

### **Types of Brand Transgressions**

We introduce four different types of brand transgressions that are based on the nature of consumer-brand relationship: transgressions against the expressive, exclusive, expert, or empathic nature of the brand. For example, someone might purchase a L'Oreal moisturizer because the brand expresses her personality (i.e., expressiveness) and/or because it is a status symbol and provides exclusivity to a specific social group (i.e., exclusiveness) and/ or because L'Oreal's expertise in skin care gives confidence (i.e., expertise) and/or because the brand understands consumers' needs and behaves accordingly and responsibly (i.e., empathy).

### **Transgressions Against Expressive Nature of the Brand**

Brand meaning goes beyond a brand's physical attributes. Brands help consumers create, portray, and communicate their actual or ideal self-concepts (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Kleine et al., 1995; Kleine et al., 1993). The expressive value of a brand depends on the extent to which the majority of the people have similar associations with the brand. Hence, these associations may be used to express its consumers' self-concepts via consumption (Snyder & DeBono, 1985).

The extent of these brands' ability to effectively and continuously communicate the intended self-concepts leads consumers to feel attached to them. Because these brands help them express and enhance their self-concepts, consumers will be very meticulous in their brand choices. These brands will be chosen according to their ability to reflect the right messages about the person to other people. The more the brand communicates the right image for the consumer, the stronger the consumer-brand relationship and consumer's attachment to the brand.

If a brand engages in marketing activities that are inconsistent with its meaning such as changing the spokesperson, brand logo, major product features, and personality of the brand, these activities negatively affect the expressive value of the brand. Once the set of associations attributed to the brand is re-established due to new marketing activities, the brand can no longer transfer the same meaning to its consumers and may even start to transfer another meaning. Highly attached consumers initially prefer this brand as a signal for their self-concepts. Hence, they would perceive the inconsistency between their self-concepts and the brand's new meaning as a threat to their self-concepts. Accordingly, highly attached consumers who use this brand for its expressive value would perceive such marketing activities as a transgression against the expressive nature of the brand. As a result, consumers who feel highly attached to the brand will react more negatively toward it.

**Proposition 1.** When the basis of brand attachment is expressiveness, attached (vs. not attached) consumers are more likely to respond negatively to transgressions against expressiveness.

### **Transgressions against Exclusive Nature of the Brand**

Consumers prefer some brands (e.g., prestige brands) for status and exclusivity reasons (Park, Milberg, & Lawson, 1991). From the perspective of others, exclusive brands transfer their status and exclusivity to brand users. Hence, these brands acquire additional utility and become more desirable. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines an exclusive item as “one that is limited to possession, control, and use by a single individual or group.” Exclusivity of brands is based on limited supply or high price (Kirmani, Sood, & Bridges, 1999), so only a small, targeted audience can acquire it. Positioning a brand carefully with prestige pricing and a scarcity approach reinforces a positive and exclusive brand meaning in the mind of customers.

A brand may also attain exclusivity as a result of its consumption by a specific group of people that identify themselves with the meaning of the brand. Such an ability to transfer status rests to the extent to which the brand's ownership and consumption are confined to desirable, aspirational groups (Dawson & Cavell, 1986). Remember when Porsche first entered the SUV category with Cayenne in 2003. Consumers had different associations with the Cayenne (safety conscious, family oriented, and conservative) than with other Porsche cars (speed, luxury, sporty, and masculine zeal). The new associations created for the Cayenne did not “fit” with the brand meaning, and the brand was no longer exclusive to consumers

who identified with associations like speed, luxury, and masculinity (Deighton, Avery, & Fear, 2011). Consumers who had a strong relationship with and felt connected to the Porsche brand because of its established brand meaning perceived the introduction of the new extension (the Cayenne) as a transgression because launching an SUV diluted the “speedy, sporty, and masculine” associations of the Porsche brand. The exclusivity of the brand to people that identified with the speedy, sporty, and masculine associations of the brand was attenuated because Porsche users were then also identified with safety conscious, family oriented, and conservative.

Once a brand meaning is established, the brand is expected to communicate messages in line with this meaning, extend into product categories that are “fitting,” and form alliances with brands (co-branding) that have matching meanings. If the brand undertakes marketing activities in order to appeal to different targeted audiences, existing customers might consider this act as a lack of fidelity because such attempts decrease the exclusivity of the previously established customer base.

**Proposition 2.** When the basis of brand attachment is exclusivity, attached (vs. not attached) consumers are more likely to respond negatively to transgressions against exclusivity.

#### Transgressions against Expert Nature of the Brand

Consumers prefer some brands specifically for their expertise. For example, Volvo is an automobile brand that excels in the areas of mechanical and electronic security. The brand won “Thatcham International Vehicle Security Award” two years in a row, both in 2011 and 2012. This brand is acknowledged for its expertise in vehicle safety. Some consumers who are very sensitive about safety issues will prefer this brand, not only because of its utilitarian value as a safe car, but also because it reflects their safety consciousness and may even portray them as caring parents. The more sensitive consumers are about security, the more they will have a tendency to feel attached to the Volvo brand. Another example of an expert in a different industry is Whole Foods Market. Whole Foods Market is the world’s largest retailer of natural and organic foods, with stores throughout North America and the UK. It claims to sell the highest quality natural and organic products. Accordingly, consumers who are more conscious about healthy eating would tend to shop at Whole Foods Market. If healthy eating is an important aspect of a consumer’s self-concept, this consumer will establish a strong relationship with Whole Foods Market and even feel attached to it. Shopping there will reflect this sensitivity. Expertise requires being competent, trustworthy, and dependable in

the specific expertise area (Keller, 2001). Consumers who feel attached to these expert brands believe in their credibility and expect them to keep their expertise. Accordingly, if such a brand fails to keep its expertise (e.g., if Whole Foods Market starts selling non-organic food), consumers who feel attached to these brands will react more negatively than consumers who do not feel attached.

Additionally, any product failure is inherently damaging because it creates negative associations with the brand expertise and threatens the consumer-brand relationship. An expert brand is expected to be dependable and trustworthy and to respond accordingly after a failure. How a brand responds after a failure is a crucial determinant of its impact on consumer attitudes toward the brand (Keller, 1993). Additionally, the brand's recovery efforts after a failure reveal its willingness to continue a relationship with its consumers and its commitment to its expertise value. The literature demonstrates that brands may emerge stronger after a crisis if they respond quickly and effectively to maintain consumer confidence in their brands (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). To manage a crisis effectively, brands must understand possible reactions of their consumers toward failures. Whatever the reparation initiative is, a company should undertake it appropriately to maintain the expert value of its brand. Otherwise, the brand can no longer communicate the same associations related to its expertise and the reason for attachment is breached. As a result, consumers who feel attached to this brand because of its expert value are inclined to react more negatively (compared to consumers who do not feel attached).

**Proposition 3.** When the basis of brand attachment is its expert value, attached (vs. not attached) consumers are more likely to respond negatively to transgressions against its expert value.

### **Transgressions against Empathic Nature of the Brand**

Consumers believe in the good faith of brands whose products they use. They expect brands to behave responsibly. Even though the main motive of brands is to earn a profit, brands are expected to perform activities for the welfare of their consumers and the society at large and within the framework of ethical norms (Holme & Watts, 2000). Corporate responsibility (CR) entails conformity with law and ethics on issues such as environmental protection, human resources management, safety at work, and relations with consumers, suppliers, and local communities (Branco & Rodrigues, 2006). Carroll (1979) suggests that firms have four types of responsibilities: economic (firm's obligation to produce goods and be profitable), legal (firm's obligation to pursue economic responsibilities within the confines of written law), ethical (firm's obligation to operate within the

confines of customary business ethics), and discretionary (firm's obligation to do what is right in its interactions with stakeholders). CR activities can be costly because they require firms to purchase environmentally friendly equipment, to implement additional quality controls, health, and safety programs and to communicate their activities effectively with public. Firms usually engage in CR activities, expecting to gain some competitive advantage. They communicate their CR activities to enhance brand evaluations (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), increase loyalty (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007), and to ease the effects of any future negative publicity (Klein & Dawar, 2004). Consumers trust and form strong relationships with brands that behave responsibly.

Despite the benefits of CR, even very reputable brands sometimes behave irresponsibly on some issues. For example, Exxon spilled 11 million gallons of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound in 1989, and some species such as the brown bear and harbor seal suffered great loss in population. Additionally, the spill negatively affected Alaska's fisheries, national parks, beaches, and forests. Recently, Johnson & Johnson was fined a \$2.2 billion penalty in Arkansas for fraudulently marketing and selling the antipsychotic drug Risperdal (Ingram & Krasny, 2013). Such irresponsible behaviors negatively influence consumers' attitudes toward a brand (Klein & Dawar, 2004) and customer-company identification (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

If a consumer forms a relationship with a brand and feels attached to it specifically because of its empathic value and as a signal of her empathic self-concept, she will expect the brand to continue to behave responsibly. When she is exposed to an irresponsible behavior of the brand, she will feel more uncomfortable when compared to consumers that do not feel attached to the brand and hence react more negatively toward it. For example, if a consumer engages in a relationship with and feels attached to a brand because of its responsible "green" meaning, and because he believes this meaning reflects his self-concept, any brand behavior that is contrary to this meaning will negatively affect the brand evaluations.

**Proposition 4.** When the basis of brand attachment is its empathic value (trust in the brand to behave responsibly), attached (vs. not attached) consumers are more likely to respond negatively to transgressions against its empathic value.

In this section, we have discussed that the nature of brand transgressions and consumers' attachment levels affect their reactions toward brands. Next, we will discuss consumers' motivation to engage in a relationship and how their motivations affect their perception of and reaction toward a brand transgression.

## CONSUMER MOTIVES

Consumers have different needs, motives, and goals in mind while they are establishing relationships with brands. Some consumers use their brand relationships to portray their self-concepts, some use them as symbols of exclusivity, and some use them because they trust their expert or empathic nature. In this paper, we focus on four different consumer needs that might strengthen consumers' reaction to different brand transgressions: need for self-enhancement, need for uniqueness, need for risk avoidance, and need for justice.

### Need for Self-Enhancement

Self-enhancement theory suggests that people are motivated to maintain and increase their self-concepts (Epstein, 1973; Greenwald, Bellezza, & Banaji, 1988). Brown (1998) suggests people's need to feel good about themselves is basic to their nature. However, people differ in their tendencies to feel good or bad about themselves (i.e., level of self-esteem). When people pursue self-enhancement, they are guided by beliefs about what they need to do or be to have worth and value as a person (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). This motive to protect and enhance one's self-concept is presumed to lead to a wide range of behaviors. People differ in their beliefs about the domains on which their self-worth depends. For example, they might believe their self-worth depends on their appearances, morality, or professional success (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003; Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002).

We have already mentioned that consumers feel attached to brands that they can use to portray their actual or ideal self-concepts (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Kleine et al., 1995; Kleine et al., 1993). Consumers identify with and feel attached to the brands that fulfill their self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) and establish favorable self-concepts through their brand choices (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Because brands serve as social symbols that comprise a shared meaning, consumption of certain brands contribute substantially to the maintenance and enhancement of customers' self-concepts (Grubb & Gratwohl, 1967).

We assume that highly attached consumers who have high self-enhancement needs will have even greater tendency to use specific brands to establish favorable self-concepts. Because they have greater need to enhance their self-concepts, they will be more cautious in their choice of brands. When a brand acts inconsistently with its meaning (transgression against the expressive nature of brand), the set of associations attributed to the brand is re-established. In other words, its expressive value is diminished and the brand can no longer transfer the specific meaning

needed to fulfill these consumers' self-enhancement needs. We predict that when the brand can no longer keep its promise to transfer specific meanings to their self-concepts and satisfy their self-enhancement needs, highly attached consumers with higher self-enhancement needs will react more negatively. By reacting negatively, they intend to dissociate themselves and avoid the spill-over of the new meaning of the brand to their self-concepts.

**Proposition 5.** Highly attached consumers with higher need for selfenhancement (vs. lower need for self-enhancement) will react more negatively after a brand transgression against the expressive nature of the brand.

### Need for Uniqueness

Brewer (1991) proposes that "social identity derives from a fundamental tension between human needs for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other)." Although conformity to norms helps people get accepted by others, individuals do not want to be perceived as conforming and "following the crowd." Actually, individuals have an intrinsic desire to be perceived as special and different from others. This desire is called need for uniqueness (Fromkin & Snyder, 1980; Snyder, 1992). Individuals who value uniqueness usually differentiate themselves from other individuals and try to establish a sense of "specialness" by demonstrating variation in their choices (Fromkin & Snyder, 1980; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977).

In the consumer behavior context, consumers' need for uniqueness is defined as the trait of pursuing differentiation from others through possession and consumption of goods. Need for uniqueness is a significant predictor of choice behavior. Consumers with high need for uniqueness reflect their personal style through purchase of original, novel, or unique consumer goods (Kron, 1983). These consumers seek to make consumption choices that are socially different from most others but at the same time are likely to be considered good choices by others. Individuals with high need for uniqueness have a tendency to prefer scarce possessions and form strong relationships with and feel attached to exclusive brands. The possession of a scarce resource such as a limited-edition brand provides differentiation from other people and hence a valued sense of self-uniqueness (Snyder, 1992). For example, consumers with high need for uniqueness are more likely to prefer distinct product designs (Bloch, 1995) that differentiate them from members of their reference groups (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). These consumers may even be unwilling to promote a brand, because if

others consume the same brand, exclusivity of the brand will decrease (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010). Furthermore, they may feel a threat to their self-concepts if others start consuming the same brands, negatively affecting the exclusivity of those brands (Berger & Heath, 2007; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Consequently, consumers with high need for uniqueness are more likely to be reluctant to promote a brand to which they feel attached, because they do not want the brand to be common. They need the brand to remain unique and special so that uniqueness and specialness may be transferred to their self-concepts. If such a brand changes its marketing strategy and positions itself to more and different consumer groups, it loses its exclusivity. When the brand is no longer exclusive, it will no longer satisfy the consumers' need for uniqueness. We have already argued that highly attached consumers of an exclusive brand will react more negatively toward the brand if the brand behaves inconsistently with its exclusive nature (when the reason for their attachment is the exclusivity of the brand). We additionally predict this effect will be strengthened for consumers with higher need for uniqueness.

**Proposition 6.** Highly attached consumers with higher need for uniqueness (vs. lower need for uniqueness) will react more negatively after a brand transgression against the exclusive nature of the brand.

#### Need for Risk Avoidance

Consumers differ with respect to the amount of risk they are willing to take in a given situation (Mandrik & Bao, 2005). Some consumers are more biased to avoid risk. The risk-avoidance tendency affects consumers' decision making in various ways (Rao & Bergen, 1992; Shimp & Bearden, 1982). Risk-averse consumers feel threatened by ambiguous and uncertain product information. Hence, they are more motivated to look for a trustworthy brand in order to avoid any possible risk in their purchases. Brands can reduce perceived risk because they are perceived to be credible symbols of product quality (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Montgomery & Wernerfelt, 1992). Rao and Ruekkert (1994) suggest that credibility has two main components: expertise and trustworthiness. Consumers expect brands to have the ability (i.e., expertise) and willingness (i.e., trustworthiness) to deliver their promises (Matzler, Grabner-Krauter, & Bidmon, 2008). Accordingly, consumers trust brands that are experts in their fields and rely on their ability to deliver their stated promises (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In particular, we predict that consumers with high need for risk avoidance will form strong relationships with brands that are known as experts.

Even though every brand might fail, consumers trust the brands they perceive as experts in their field and do not expect them to fail. We predict that if a consumer feels attached to a brand because of its expert value, she will react more negatively toward the brand when a failure occurs. This negative effect will be stronger for consumers with higher need for risk avoidance (relative to consumers with lower need for risk avoidance).

**Proposition 7.** Highly attached consumers with higher need for risk avoidance (vs. with lower need for risk avoidance) will react more negatively after a brand transgression against the expert nature of the brand.

### Need for Justice

Need for justice is an individual difference variable measuring sensitivity to injustice and unfair behaviors. Justice is defined as being fair in our dealings with others as well as with ourselves (Taylor, 2003). Justice is regarded as a precondition to approximate a good life by increasing the reciprocal quality of relationships and well-being (Tolman, 2006).

Accordingly, individuals with high need for justice will be more concerned about what is happening to them and to others. Hence, they will be more attentive to CR activities of brands and sensitive to information when a brand behaves irresponsibly and in an unethical manner. Some consumers may form a relationship with and feel attached to a brand just because of its CR activities. They identify with responsible and ethical associations of that brand and expect the brand to continue to behave responsibly. If they are exposed to new information about irresponsible behaviors of the brand, they will feel irritated and react more negatively toward the brand. This effect will be stronger for highly attached consumers with higher need for justice (relative to consumers with lower need for justice).

**Proposition 8.** Highly attached consumers with higher need for justice (vs. with lower need for justice) will react more negatively after a brand transgression against the empathic nature of the brand.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this paper, we propose that brands with strong meanings and highly attached consumers are not immune to negative information, as implied by the extant literature. Consumers feel attached to and establish a strong relationship with a

brand when they find a fit between the brands' meanings and their own actual or ideal self-concepts. When the brand behaves inconsistently with its brand meaning, the norm of the relationship is breached (brand transgression) because the brand's ability to transfer its meaning to the consumer's self-concept is diluted. We predict that when the main reason for brand attachment is breached, highly attached consumers will not be tolerant toward these brands. They will react even more negatively than non-attached consumers, because inconsistent behaviors will dilute the brand associations, and this dilution might reflect onto their own self-concepts.

Our reasoning is counter to the literature that suggests that highly attached consumers of a brand will more likely engage in relationship-sustaining behaviors. This literature suggests that highly attached consumers will either discount any negative information about the brand or attribute the responsibility for the negative information to some external factors. We propose, on the other hand, that when negative information concerns the reason for the attachment to a brand, the norms of the consumer-brand relationship are violated (brand transgression). Consumers feel attached to specific brands because of their expressive, exclusive, expert, and empathic values. If brand behaviors dilute these values, attached consumers perceive such actions as brand transgression. The self-relevance of this relationship amplifies the inconsistency between the brand behavior and the brand meaning and results in greater negative reaction toward the brand. We do not dispute that, highly attached consumers will have a tendency to discount any other type of inconsistency (that does not dilute the reason of attachment), as the previous literature demonstrates. Accordingly, as a managerial implication of our propositions, we recommend marketers to be very meticulous in understanding why consumers feel attached to their brand and avoid any contradictory behavior.

We contribute to the brand-transgression literature by introducing four types of brand transgressions against the (1) expressive, (2) exclusive, (3) expert, and (4) empathic nature of brands. We argue that if a consumer feels attached to a brand because of its expressive (exclusive, expert, and empathic) value, that consumer will not tolerate any brand transgression against the expressive (exclusive, expert, and empathic) nature of the brand. Additionally, we suggest that higher need for self-enhancement (need for uniqueness, need for risk avoidance, and need for justice) will strengthen the reaction of a highly attached consumer toward the transgression against the expressive (exclusive, expert, and empathic) nature of the brand.

We do not expect the reasons for brand attachment to be independent from each other. A consumer might feel attached to a brand because of both its exclusive and expressive values (multiple reasons for brand attachment). When a brand's behavior breaches only one of these reasons, consumers' negative reactions might be attenuated, because the other reason for attachment is still valid. In the future, researchers might examine our propositions empirically and extend the scope of this research by investigating consumers' reactions when consumers have multiple reasons for being attached to a brand and what happens when a brand's transgression challenges one of these reasons.

#### NOTE

1. <http://www.convinceandconvert.com/podcasts/social-pros-podcast/you-do-notown-your-audience/>

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