TO FORGIVE OR NOT? CONSUMERS' RESPONSE TO BRAND TRANSGRESSION

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Description: This study explores consumers' forgiveness and unforgiveness in response to environmental and social brand transgressions.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

According to earlier research, consumers throughout the world are developing a high interest in social and environmental sustainability (Harris, 2007; Tey et al., 2018; Vitell, 2015; Boccia et al., 2019). The rising sustainability awareness among consumers is studied in different marketing contexts, mostly aiming to promote sustainable consumption or to explore the motivations and mechanisms underlying it (e.g., Hosta & Zabkar, 2021; Balderjahn et al., 2013). However, there has been scant research on how consumers' sustainability awareness affects their response to a brand's unsustainable behavior. Another gap addressed is the variations in consumers' response (i.e., forgiveness and unforgiveness) to social and environmental unsustainability, which are two important pillars of the sustainability concept. Tsarenko and Tojib (2015) presume that the specific type of misconduct can have a major impact on consumers' reactions to negative brand practices i.e., the impact on human health versus the environment. Therefore, we attempt to respond to their call for reaching a full picture of consumer responses by comparing consumer reactions to environmental vs. social brand transgression. Thereupon, we aim to find out 1) how forgiving and unforgiving are consumers of social vs. environmental brand transgression and 2) how consumers' sustainability consciousness affects their response to brand transgression.

Method and Data

Brand transgressions were manipulated by creating experimental and control conditions. Two between-subject manipulations and one corresponding between-subject control condition were created for environmental and social misconduct to produce three questionnaire versions. To test our hypotheses, we followed the conditional indirect effect procedures suggested by Hayes

(2013). The moderating and dependent variables were measured variables. The variables in our design can be summarized as follows:

(1) A manipulated variable (X), representing exposure to one of the two experimental conditions or the control condition, where the environmental violation is coded 1 and the social violation is coded -1, and the control condition is coded 0.

(2) Three continuous moderating variables (W) which include sustainability consciousness and its two sub-dimensions of environmental and social consciousness.

(3) Two continuous outcome variables (Y) reflecting the consumers' unforgiving and forgiving answers to transgressions. The forgiving response comprises two dimensions of emotional and decisional forgiveness.

The experimental and control conditions' narratives were developed, pretested, and revised following the pretesting. Using a fictitious brand name, the narratives began with a description of the company and then proceeded with explanations of the company's environmental and social irresponsibilities. The control condition's narrative contained a neutral account of the same brand.

Summary of Findings

The results indicated that consumers are more vulnerable to the environmental violation of a brand than its social wrongdoing. We treated forgiveness and unforgiveness as two distinct constructs rather than two opposite ends of the same spectrum as suggested by e.g., Worthington, (2006, 2003) and Kira et al. (2009). Our results show the variation of these constructs and their different interactions with the type of brand irresponsibility and consumer consciousness. Overall, the positive emotions (forgiveness) outweigh the negative emotions (unforgiveness) when comparing the size of the effects. We found that sustainability consciousness is a

moderator of consumer forgiveness and unforgiveness but the effect is different depending on the type of transgression (environmental vs. social). More specifically, sustainability consciousness reduces consumers' forgiveness toward environmental irresponsibility while increasing forgiveness toward social irresponsibility. The effect is weaker but has the same direction for unforgiveness, endorsing our assumption about the disjunction of forgiveness and unforgiveness in the consumer-brand context.

Key Contributions

This study contributes to the knowledge about consumer-brand relationships by investigating the important role of consumer forgiveness and unforgiveness in responding to brand transgressions. The consumer behavior literature has so far equated low forgiveness with unforgiveness. However, according to our study and several interpersonal relationship studies, unforgiveness and forgiveness are two different constructs entailing different emotions and predictors. Next, we contribute to the growing research stream on consumers' social and environmental consciousness and its major role in consumer decision-making.

The findings demonstrate that consumers are more strongly against environmental irresponsibility than the social one. As a result, in case of an environmentally related crisis, companies will most likely experience higher tension in their relationship with consumers. However, this finding does not imply that consumers are not responsive to social malpractices. In fact, sustainability consciousness was found to increase unforgiveness in case of a social transgression. This, therefore, gives rise to our recommendation that managers should attempt to prevent transgressions from happening at both levels. Our results show that consumers in both types of brand transgressions are willing to allow the company to compensate for its

wrongdoing. This highlights the important role of ameliorative strategies for restoring the broken consumer-brand relationship.

Reference Available upon Request