

The Matching Effect of Product Type and Gift Option on Brand Recovery After Brand Transgression

Summary

This research investigates the effect of product type and gift options on brand forgiveness after consumers' experience brand transgression. The current research suggests that after experiencing a negative brand experience with a material (experiential) purchase, consumers will forgive the brand more if they can receive a hard-copy (electronic) gift card. This happens because material (experiential) purchase activates concrete (abstract) mindset, and a matching compensation option with activated mindset increase the likelihood of brand forgiveness. This research contributes to the branding literature by presenting novel and important findings for brand recovery effort after brand transgression and discusses managerial implications.

***Keywords:* brand transgression, forgiveness, construal-level, product type, gift option**

Brand transgression is defined as “a violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluation” (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Brand transgressions may generate different consumer reactions and perceptions toward the brand (Lee et al. 2019). After brand transgression, the consumer-brand relationship may be damaged causing the consumers to oppose the brand due to individuals assessing the brand contrarily when it does not satisfy their desires (Aggarwal and Agarwal 2015). Hence, it is essential for companies to focus on brand recovery strategies to regain lost consumers. We argue that consumers’ behavior toward the company may change if they receive a specific form of compensation from the company for their inconveniences, like a hard copy gift-card or an electronic gift card.

On the other hand, individual differences play an important role in consumer’s forgiveness of the brand and brand recovery strategies. One such aspect is people’s different construal mindset. In the branding literature, brand transgression and brand recovery effect have become a prevalent topic (Park and John 2018). However, past research has not focused on how consumers’ different construal level regarding product type affects brand recovery strategies and brand forgiveness after the brand transgression. Therefore, we posit that consumers who have a negative experience with a material (vs. experiential) purchase would have a higher preference toward a hard copy gift card (vs. electronic gift card) as a brand recovery strategy. Additionally, we propose that the matching effect of product type (material vs. experiential) and gift option (tangible vs. intangible) with activated construal mindset (abstract vs. concrete) enhances forgiveness toward the company after the brand transgression.

What influences consumers to forgive a brand and give companies another chance? What types of brand recovery strategies work best in the context of different kinds of products? Does the matching effect of product type and gift option with the activated mindset enhance brand recovery? This research builds on our theory that focuses on these research questions and integrates the construal level theory into the brand transgression and brand forgiveness literature. It seeks to contribute to the branding literature by showing how activation of different construal mindset affects brand recovery. Despite the increased research on brand transgression and brand recovery, to the best of our knowledge, no prior research connects literature regarding product type, brand forgiveness, construal-level theory, and brand recovery strategies. Therefore, the current research fills this gap in the marketing literature. Furthermore, this research has significant managerial implications by showing the kind of recovery strategies that companies can follow after brand transgressions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brand Transgression

One of the main problems for companies is brand transgression. After bad customer service (Sharifi et al. 2017) or product failures such as unfavorable product performance (Park and John 2018), the reactions towards a company may be severe (Sampedro 2017). Brands may face failure in their life cycle in different ways such as product recalls (Mackalski and Belisle 2015), ethical problems (Sims 2009), and moral malpractice (Romani et al. 2015). Brand transgression significantly affects appraisal and consumer behavior (Aggarwal and Agarwal 2015). It is crucial to managing brand failures because when the company cannot handle the brand transgression, it may damage a company's brand equity and identity, and affect consumer's purchase decision, companies market share, creates negative publicity and harms the company's reputation (Hegner et al. 2014; Kucuk 2008). After encountering a brand transgression, consumers may engage in aggressive behavior such as avoidance of the brand (Gregoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009), demonstration of revenge behaviors (Gregorie et al. 2018), and consumers' switching behavior (Consiglio and Osselaer 2019).

On the other hand, after experiencing brand transgression, consumers may engage in nonaggressive behavior such as reconciliation and forgiveness (Donovan 2012). Therefore, the present manuscript focuses on forgiveness and its underlying impacts. We extend the past literature by examining the matching effect of product type and gift card option on brand recovery strategies.

Brand Forgiveness and Brand Recovery Strategies

Consumer forgiveness is defined as "customers' internal act of relinquishing anger, and the desire to seek revenge against a firm that has caused harm as well as the enhancement of positive emotions and thoughts toward this harm-doing firm" (Joireman, Gregoire, and Tripp 2016). Forgiveness is a critical behavior when overcoming the adverse effects of transgression, restoring the damage, and ameliorating the relationship (Donovan 2012). By forgiving an individual or a company, people can reduce the unfavorable emotions and damage. Therefore, they decrease the negative reactions to the wrongdoing and increase positive reactions (Chung and Beverland 2006; Webb et al. 2013).

Following the brand transgression, the brand must act to remedy the situation to achieve recovery of the failure and keep their current consumers (Sampedro 2017). However, whether and under what condition(s) consumers will forgive a company after a brand transgression is a complex issue. Prior research has revealed that the brand recovery and consumer's willingness to forgive may depend on several factors such as the relationship with the company (Mattila 2001; Park and John 2018; Sinha and Lu 2016), type of transgression (Wei and Ran 2019), the severity of transgression (Tsarenko and Tojib 2015).

Furthermore, after brand transgression, compensation may be an effective approach to achieve brand recovery (Casidy and Shin 2015; Mogilner 2008). There are two types of gift cards: physical and electronic versions. Physical gift cards are tangible, whereas electronic gift cards are intangible. Companies have these two options to choose from to give their consumers when they want to recover from brand failures. However, it is essential to know when and under what conditions these two different gift options may work best because every brand transgression results in different consumer reactions. Past research has not advanced the understanding of the effect that product types and compensation types have on brand recovery and what drives that effect. Therefore, the present research seeks to understand the impact of product type and compensation type with the activated construal mindset on brand forgiveness after the brand transgression. Hence, we contend that experiential (vs. material) brand transgression will activate abstract (vs. concrete) mindset. Consequently, brand forgiveness will be enhanced when the compensation aligns with activated construal mindset.

The Effect of Construal Level Theory and Product Type on Brand Recovery

Construal level theory (CLT) asserts that "people's mental representations of stimuli that are psychologically near are low-level and concrete while stimuli that are psychologically distant are high-level and abstract" (Dhar and Kim 2007). While abstract construal level tends to be simpler, more general, structured, and decontextualized, concrete construal level tends to be more detailed, more complex, unstructured, and contextual (Dhar and Kim 2007; Trope and Liberman 2010). Information or actions may be interpreted either as concrete or abstract and an individual's construal level, which reflects the thinking type, affects his/her evaluation, behavior, decisions, and responses to situations (Dhar and Kim 2007; Kim and John 2008). To examine this process, the current manuscript aims to focus on different product types, which we discuss next.

There are two types of consumption and purchase: experiential and material. Experiential purchases are defined as “those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event or series of events that one lives through.” Material purchases are defined as “those made with the primary intention of acquiring a material good: a tangible object that is kept in one’s possession” (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). These definitions show the important differences between these two purchases such that experiential purchases create a life experience like going on a cruise or dining at a restaurant, while material purchases create ownership of a physical product such as electronics, clothes, furniture, and jewelry (Bastos and Brucks 2017; Thomas and Millar 2013).

Drawing from construal level theory, these evidences suggest that on the basis of each product type’s features, intangible and untouchable aspects of experiential purchases make them difficult to interpret, leading them to be abstract and high-level. Possession features of material purchases are easy to interpret, leading them to be concrete and low-level (Kim 2013; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). For instance, the activity of going out to dinner has a higher-level and more abstract meaning when compared to the activity of buying new clothes (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Past research has not focused on the relationship between construal level and different types of products (material vs. experiential), compensation types (hard copy gift card and electronic gift card) and brand recovery. Therefore, the current research aims to address this gap in the branding literature. We propose that the intangible aspect of experiential purchasing matches with the inherent features of electronic gift card recovery strategies. The tangible aspect of material purchasing matches with the inherent features of a physical gift card. Hence, this research posits that experiential (vs. material) brand transgression will activate abstract (vs. concrete) mindset and it will lead consumers to prefer an electronic (vs. hard-copy) gift card as compensation after the brand transgression. Consequently, the matching effect of product type and gift card option with the activated mindset will increase the forgiveness likelihood of the company after the experience of brand transgression. Formally:

H1: When consumers have a negative experience with a material (vs. experiential) purchase, they will have a higher preference for the hard copy gift card (vs. electronic gift card) as compensation.

H2: When consumers have a negative experience with a material (vs. experiential) purchase, they are more likely to forgive the brand after receiving a hard copy (vs. electronic) gift card from the company as compensation.

H3: These matching effects will happen because experiential (vs. material) brand transgression will activate abstract (vs. concrete) mindset. Consequently, post-recovery effort will be enhanced when the compensation aligns with activated mental construal.

Pilot Test 1

The pilot study is a 1 (gift card type: hard copy vs. electronic) between-subjects design. A total of 72 students (54.2% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 22$, $SD = 5.15$) were recruited from Florida International University in exchange for an extra credit.

Participants rated hard copy gift card images that are as recognizable as hard copy ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.76$); whereas electronic gift card images that are as recognizable as electronic ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 2.17$), $t(70) = .655$, $p = .514$. Participants rated the hard copy gift card ($M_{\text{hardcopy}} = 4.67$, $SD = 2.34$) more touchable than the electronic gift card ($M_{\text{electronic}} = 2.64$, $SD = 2.03$), $t(70) = 3.925$, $p = .000$. They rated the hard copy gift card ($M_{\text{hardcopy}} = 4.60$, $SD = 2.25$) more tangible than the electronic gift card ($M_{\text{electronic}} = 2.97$, $SD = 1.81$), $t(69) = 3.360$, $p = .001$. They also rated the hard copy gift card ($M_{\text{hardcopy}} = 5.26$, $SD = 1.99$) more concrete than the electronic gift card ($M_{\text{electronic}} = 3.36$, $SD = 1.90$), $t(69) = 4.107$, $p = .000$.

STUDY 1

The purpose of study 1 was to examine how negative experiences with different product types lead consumers to choose different brand recovery strategies and brand forgiveness likelihood. Hypothesis 1 and 2 were tested in study 1.

Design and Procedure

Study 1 is comprised of a one-factor (product type: experiential vs. material) between-subjects design. A total of 130 participants were recruited from Florida International University in exchange for extra credit. Twelve participants were eliminated from the data analysis for either not completing the writing task or not having any bad experience with their purchase, resulting in 118 final participants (53.4% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.92$, $SD = 3.88$).

At the beginning of the survey, participants read the definition of the material and experiential purchase constructs modified from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) and Carter

and Gilovich (2012). Then, the participants were asked to recall either a material purchase or an experiential purchase that had cost them around \$50 - \$100 (modified from Van Boven and Gilovich 2003) with which they had a negative experience and were assigned to the writing task. To measure their use of brand recovery strategies, participants read a brand recovery scenario and saw the two gift card images (electronic and hard copy). They were asked to indicate their relative preference toward the gift card formats by dividing 100 points between two gift card options (Sinha and Lu 2019). They also indicated receiving which one of the gift card options from the company they think would increase their forgiveness of the brand after the brand failure on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = hard copy gift card, 7 = electronic gift card). Finally, they answered an attention check question, and were debriefed, and thanked.

Results

Gift Card Choice

The one-way ANOVA results revealed that after the brand transgression in the material purchase condition ($M_{\text{material}} = 51.89$, $SD = 31.60$), participants were more likely to prefer a hard copy gift card option than those in the experiential purchase condition ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 39.66$, $SD = 29.36$), $F(1, 115) = 4.675$, $p = .033$. Moreover, in the experiential purchase condition ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 60.34$, $SD = 29.36$), participants were more likely to prefer an electronic gift card option than those in the material purchase condition ($M_{\text{material}} = 48.11$, $SD = 31.60$), $F(1, 115) = 4.675$, $p = .033$.

Brand Forgiveness

Regarding participant's brand forgiveness in terms of receiving gift card options, there was a significant difference between the two conditions ($M_{\text{material}} = 3.73$, $SD = 2.34$ vs. $M_{\text{experiential}} = 4.55$, $SD = 2.06$, $F(1, 116) = 4.116$, $p = .045$). These results support our hypothesis that when consumers engage in material purchasing (vs. experiential), receiving a hard copy (vs. electronic) gift card option from the company would increase their forgiveness of the brand after the brand failure.

Mediation Effect of Gift Card Choice

To examine mediation effect of gift card choice, we used a PROCESS model 4 (Hayes 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. In the PROCESS command, purchase type as an independent variable, format X as a mediator and brand forgiveness as a dependent variable were entered. The mediation test revealed that gift card choice (Format X; hard-copy gift card) mediates the effect (indirect effect; $\beta = .7039$; $SE = .3284$; 95% $CI = .0772$; $CI = 1.3545$).

Discussion

The results of study 1 support the notion that when consumers have a negative experience with a material (vs. experiential) purchase, they are more likely to choose a hard-copy (vs. electronic) gift card as compensation from the company to recover the adverse effects of brand transgression. In addition, this matching effect of purchase type and gift option increases consumer's forgiveness toward the brand after the brand transgression. The result of study 1 also proved that that gift card choices mediates the effect of product type on brand forgiveness. These results support hypotheses 1 and 2.

Pilot Test 2

We used one factor (gift card type: hard copy vs. electronic) between-subjects design. A total of 51 participants (51% male, $M_{age} = 36.65$, $SD = 13.70$) were recruited from MTurk in exchange for a small payment.

As predicted, there was a significant difference between the hard copy and electronic gift card options in terms of their concreteness ($M_{hardcopy} = 5.47$, $SD = 1.25$ vs. $M_{electronic} = 3.41$, $SD = 1.50$, $t(49) = -5.348$, $p = .000$), showing that hard copy gift cards are perceived as touchable, tangible, and concrete; whereas electronic gift cards were perceived as untouchable, intangible, and abstract.

STUDY 2

The main purpose of study 2 was to show the robustness of study 1. Study 2 aimed to replicate the results of study 1 in a different product type manipulation (the same product

view as either an experiential or a material) with the actual consumer and broadened our investigation by using a 2 x 2 factorial design.

Design and Procedure

Study 2 was composed of a 2 (product type: experiential vs. material) x 2 (gift card type: hard copy vs. electronic) between-subjects design. We recruited 280 participants (65.2% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.00$, $SD = 13.23$) from Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for a small payment, and the participants were randomly assigned one of the four conditions. We eliminated people who wrote unrelated things and who stated that they do not have a BBQ grill at their house, and based on the independent coders' responses, resulting in 213 usable participants (66% female, $M = 39.26$, $SD = 12.99$).

This study uses a BBQ grill as a product type and the BBQ grill framed as either an experiential or a material (Bastos and Brucks 2017). Participants were asked to think about the BBQ grill they own, describe specific characteristics of that experience (object) and what it is like to have that experience (object), and write at least 150 words about either experiential or material features.

Upon completing this task, participants answered manipulation check question and read the scenario that the BBQ grill failed/disappointed them. To measure the brand recovery strategies, we used a method similar to the one used in Study 1. They were asked to think about the negative BBQ grill purchase that they imagined earlier, read the brand recovery scenario and saw either a hard-copy gift card or an electronic gift card (worth \$50). After receiving the electronic (vs. hard-copy) gift card as compensation, they reported whether they like the compensation (1 = not at all and 7 = very much), and forgiveness of the brand (1 = extremely unlikely and 7 = extremely likely).

Manipulation Checks

The results show that the main effect for product type ($M_{\text{material}} = 4.05$, $SD = 2.00$ vs. $M_{\text{experiential}} = 5.13$, $SD = 1.80$; $F(1, 209) = 16.614$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .074$) was statistically significant. These results show that in the material condition, participants thought their purchase as a material possession; whereas those in the experiential condition thought their purchase as an experience.

Liking the Compensation

A two-way ANOVA yielded a significant interaction effect between product type and gift card type ($F(1, 209) = 4.474, p = .036, n_2 = .021$). The follow up test involved a simple effect analysis and showed that participants in the material purchase condition like the hard copy gift card ($M_{hard-copy} = 6.45, SE = .168$) rather than electronic gift card ($M_{electronic} = 5.75, SE = .166, F(1, 209) = 8.672, p = .004, n_2 = .040$). On the other hand, in the experiential purchase condition, there was no significant differences in terms of participants liking of two gift card types ($M_{hard-copy} = 5.96, SE = .190$ vs. $M_{electronic} = 6.02, SE = .194, F(1, 209) = .057, p = .811$).

Forgiveness Likelihood

A two-way ANOVA yielded a significant interaction effect between product type and gift card type ($F(1, 209) = 7.733, p = .006, n_2 = .036$). The follow up test involves a simple effect analysis and shows that participants in the material purchase condition reported marginally higher brand forgiveness following brand transgression experience after receiving hard-copy gift card option ($M_{hard-copy} = 5.58, SE = .220$) rather than electronic gift card ($M_{electronic} = 5.00, SE = .218, F(1, 209) = 3.540, p = .061, n_2 = .017$). Participants in the experiential purchase condition reported higher brand forgiveness toward the company after receiving electronic gift card option ($M_{electronic} = 5.62, SE = .254$) rather than hard-copy gift card ($M_{hard-copy} = 4.89, SE = .249, F(1, 209) = 4.198, p = .042, n_2 = .020$).

Moderated Mediation

To test our process model, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis, using a PROCESS model 7 (Hayes 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The indirect effect of product type on brand forgiveness through liking the compensation and gift card type was significant (indirect effect; $\beta = .4876; SE = .2586; 95\% CI = .0357; CI = 1.0476$). On the other hand, the results revealed that liking the compensation mediated the effects of product type on brand forgiveness only for hard-copy gift card ($\beta = .3158; SE = .1578; 95\% CI = .0296; CI = .6512$). Contrary to our expectations, liking the compensation did not mediate the effects of product type on brand compensation for electronic gift card ($\beta = -.1719; SE = .1820; 95\% CI = -.5545; CI = .1515$).

Discussion

In line with hypothesis 1 and 2, the data shows that when people have a bad experience with a material (vs. experiential) product, receiving a hard copy (vs. electronic) gift card from the company as compensation increases their forgiveness likelihood towards the company. However, the results showed that liking the compensation mediates the effect of product type on brand forgiveness only for hard-copy gift card and not for the electronic gift card.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research explores whether and under what conditions consumers are willing to forgive the brand after facing an unsatisfactory situation. Specifically, this current research proposes that having a negative experience with a material (vs. experiential) purchase leads consumers to have a higher preference for the hard copy gift card (vs. electronic gift card) as a compensation. Therefore, receiving their preferred gift card option from the company as compensation after a brand transgression may create a higher level of brand forgiveness. We also hypothesized that this effect will happen because of an activated construal mindset.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The present manuscript extends the current literature by examining the relationships between product type, brand recovery strategies, construal level, and brand forgiveness. Prior research did not examine the incorporation of all these factors. Therefore, it enhances the branding literature because to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has focused on the matching effect of product type and compensation type with the activated mindset on brand recovery. This paper sheds light on the branding literature by exploring construal level theory, product and compensation type, and brand forgiveness. Therefore, the current research offers new insights into the marketing literature by proving how negative experiences from different purchase types (experiential vs. material) affect consumers' gift card choices and therefore it also affects their forgiveness of the company. However, the underlying effects of this relationship and the effect of construal level will be explained in Study 3.

This research also has significant managerial implications. The customer-brand relationship may be damaged due to the brand transgressions. However, organizations need to recoup the adverse effect of these transgressions to keep their consumers. Companies can benefit from this research by focusing on their brand recovery strategies, tailoring them to their different product types. Hence, when companies face brand transgression, managers may create brand recovery strategies regarding what kind of product they are offering. Thus, this research may help managers to reduce the adverse effects of brand transgressions. For example, if the problem comes from the material product, companies can offer customers a physical gift card as compensation. In contrast, if the problem comes from the purchasing of an experiential product, companies can offer customers an electronic gift card. These results may help brand managers to develop recovery strategies that regain their customers after the brand transgression.

Future Research

Further research could pursue other possible mediators to reveal the underlying effects of this relationship such as thinking style. Different thinking styles (experiential and rational) may activate motivations to prefer different gift card types and differ in their likelihood of brand forgiveness. This research has also only considered the experiential vs. material purchase type. Future research may examine a different type of product category such as hedonic versus utilitarian.

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