

When Good Brands Do Bad

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This article reports results from a longitudinal field experiment examining the evolution of consumer-brand relationships. Development patterns differed, whereby relationships with sincere brands deepened over time in line with friendship templates, and relationships with exciting brands evinced a trajectory characteristic of short-lived flings. These patterns held only when the relationship proceeded without a transgression. Relationships with sincere brands suffered in the wake of transgressions, whereas relationships with exciting brands surprisingly showed signs of reinvigoration after such transgressions. Inferences concerning the brand's partner quality mediated the results. Findings suggest a dynamic construal of brand personality, greater attention to interrupt events, and consideration of the relationship contracts formed at the hands of different brands.

Because of its relevance and potential for insight generation, the relationship paradigm has enjoyed much resonance among marketing academics and practitioners. To date, however, research that examines relationships within the evolutionary context that defines them has been limited. Longitudinal field experiments have been particularly sparse, leaving unanswered many foundational questions regarding the factors that make relationships lasting and strong. Empirical investigations have also favored application domains where relationships are actively constructed by human partners, thereby especially limiting our understanding of the influences that operate in the context of consumers' relationships with brands. One factor affecting relationship strength that has received much attention concerns the transgressions that befall long-term relationships. Studied primarily within the services field, this research operates on the assumption that the response to the transgression, and not the transgression itself, is of critical importance to relationship quality and course (Hart, Heskett, and Sasser 1990). Questions thus remain as to the effects

of relationship breaches independent of the recovery efforts that balance them and the conditions under which these effects may be more or less detrimental to the relationship at hand. The effects of the personalities committing transgression acts become especially interesting in this regard, due to their potential to influence relationship strength both directly and indirectly.

Attempting to address these gaps, we embarked on a longitudinal field experiment in which relationships were formed between consumers and an online photographic products and services brand. Evolving relationship strength profiles were monitored over a 2-mo. period, in response to brand personality and transgression manipulations. To shed light on underlying process mechanisms, the mediational role of character inferences concerning the quality of the brand as relationship partner was also explored. Below we draw on research from both the consumer and interpersonal relationship fields to develop our conceptual model and hypotheses.

BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Relationship strength, broadly construed in the spirit of durability and impactfulness (Petty and Krosnick 1995, p. 3), is the most frequently studied relationship characteristic in the interpersonal relationships domain (Fincham and Bradbury 1987) and the one quality most centrally linked to relationship stability both directly and indirectly (Price-Bonham and Balswick 1980; Rusbult et al. 1991). Further, relationship strength predominates in marketing, where it constitutes the top goal of managers (Gummesson 2002) and a priority for academic research (Marketing Science Institute 2002). The study of relationship strength is inherently concerned with the specification of factors that sys-

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tematically influence development trajectories and, hence, the depth of resulting relationship bonds. Two such factors, the personality of the relationship partner and the commission of transgression acts, merit particular attention in light of their controllability through marketer action and the significance of their relationship effects.

Personality Effects on Relationships

Research has shown that relationships are influenced by the personalities of the partners involved (Robins, Caspi, and Moffitt 2000). Additive and joint effects have been observed for traits such as extroversion (Gifford 1991), traditionalism (Robins et al. 2000), warmth (Hill 1991), and flexibility (Shoda, Mischel, and Wright 1993). Fletcher et al. (1999) specify three trait clusters of particular note: status, warmth, and vitality. These traits underlie peoples' conceptions of ideal partners in intimate relationships and thus exert particular influence on relationship strength potential. The effects of personality on the relationship are both direct and indirect, as partner personality systematically influences the behaviors displayed in a relationship and biases the character inferences that are derived from the observation of these behaviors over time (Auhagen and Hinde 1997). Indeed, it is suggested that middle- and later-stage development is centrally concerned with character inferences regarding the relationship partner, as these shape maintenance processes (Hinde 1979; Holmes and Rempel 1989).

Partner Quality Inferences. One notable subclass of character inferences affecting relationship evolution concerns evaluations of partner capabilities and efforts in managing the relationship along implicit and explicit contract lines (Altman and Taylor 1973). In a marketing context, such inferences include whether the partner is likely to behave in such a manner that promises are kept (Iacobucci, Ostrom, and Grayson 1995), relationship failures are avoided (Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999), problems are resolved (Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002), and long-term consumer interests are served (Braun and Zaltman 2000). General perceptions regarding the partner's dependability and reliability (Boon and Holmes 1999), trustworthiness (Holmes and Rempel 1989), supportiveness (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993), and accountability (Altman and Taylor 1973) also appear significant in gauging partner capabilities, intentions, and motives in meeting relationship obligations. In line with act-frequency theories of impression formation (Buss and Craik 1983), these character inferences cohere into a generalized perception of the quality of the relationship partner through a dynamic process that considers a string of partner behaviors over time. Research has shown that partner quality inferences are used to calibrate general beliefs about the relationship (Fletcher and Kininmonth 1992), gauge the significance of and formulate responses to partner transgressions (Holmes and Rempel 1989), and ascertain overall satisfaction and loyalty levels (Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002), thereby influencing relationship strength and course.

Sincere and Exciting Brand Personalities. Two brand personality templates merit attention in light of their prominence in the marketing landscape. Further, these two personalities are fundamental in that they compose two of the three partner ideals in intimate personal relations (Fletcher et al. 1999) and capture the majority of variance in personality ratings for brands (Aaker 1997; Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Guido 2001), a finding that is robust across individuals, product categories, and cultural contexts (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera 2001). First are "sincere" personalities that dominate the world of classic brands such as Hallmark, Ford, and Coca-Cola (Smith 2001). The sincere personality has been pursued by both smaller companies seeking to establish themselves as warmer and more caring and considerate than larger, unwelcoming rivals (e.g., Gateway Cow campaign) and by larger companies seeking a more down-to-earth face in consumer-brand interactions (e.g., MetLife's use of Snoopy). Research suggests that sincere brands will garner relationship advantages. Traits of nurturance, warmth, family-orientation, and traditionalism, which have been positively related to relationship strength (Buss 1991; Robins et al. 2000), are characteristic of sincere personalities (Aaker 1997). Sincerity can also spark inferences of partner trustworthiness and dependability (Aaker 1999), which temper feelings of vulnerability and support relationship growth (Moorman et al. 1993).

A second personality type that has received increased marketing attention is that of the "exciting" brand built around qualities of energy and youthfulness (Aaker 1997). Exciting brands, including such exemplars as YAHOO!, Virgin, and MTV, attempt differentiation through unique and irreverent advertising, atypical brand logos, and hip language. Brands have pursued exciting personalities when chasing younger demographics (e.g., Mountain Dew's "Do the Dew" campaign), repositioning for increased cultural vitality (e.g., BMW's "Driving Excitement" campaign, circa 1993), and seeking differentiation against incumbent market leaders (e.g., Dr. Pepper vs. Pepsi and Coca-Cola). Branding critics charge that, although exciting brands are attractive and attention-getting and thus highly capable of generating interest and trial, they are seen as somehow less legitimate long-term partners (Altschiller 2000). Thus, although the exciting trait is held as an ideal in intimate relations, this personality may harbor inherent disadvantages relative to the sincerity template in fostering perceptions of partner quality and encouraging long-run relationship strength.

Acts of Transgression

A second factor often singled out for its determinant effects on relationship strength is the commission of a transgression, which refers to a violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluation (Metts 1994). Some argue that how people cope with negative threats to the relationship has greater impact on relationship strength than positive relationship features (Rusbult et al. 1991) and that the true status of a relationship is evident only under conditions of risk and peril that activate

the attachment system (Reis and Knee 1996). The significance of transgression acts derives at least in part from the high levels of salience and diagnosticity of negative events (Fiske 1980). Building on the literature above, transgressions provide opportunities for learning about the qualities of the relationship partner, which guides subsequent development paths (Altman and Taylor 1973). Accordingly, although transgressions will vary in their severity and cause and differ in their ultimate negotiations, all are significant in their ability to affect relationship progress. In this sense the transgression stands as the hallmark of the relationship, representing perhaps the most significant event in the relationship history.

The seeming inevitability of transgressions in long-term relationships contributes to their significance as well. As interdependence increases and partners interact across more domains or with increased frequency, the likelihood of a transgression augments in kind (Grayson and Ambler 1999). Interestingly, as is true with personal relationships (Reis and Knee 1996), consumers' expectations regarding brand transgressions are antithetical to this relational reality. Smith et al. (1999), for example, suggest that customers do not expect failures in their service interactions and adopt a no-transgression scenario as their operative reference point.

Research is equivocal regarding the likely effects of the transgression interrupt event. The most commonly held view is that transgressions are inherently damaging as they precipitate a string of negative inferences that threaten the relationship core (Buysse et al. 2000). In essence, the transgression reveals disconfirming evidence of the partner's intentions to act according to the terms of the relationship contract and thus exposes vulnerabilities, doubts, and uncertainties that alter and undermine partner quality perceptions (Boon and Holmes 1999). Research has shown that, once these perceptions begin to erode, it can be difficult to slow relationship decline, despite recovery efforts that may appear successful in the short run (Maxham and Netemeyer 2002).

Some researchers are less fatalistic in their views and propose contingency theories that govern the destructive influences of transgression acts. Of particular note is the relationship context in which the transgression is committed, such that relationship-serving biases dilute the negative effects of transgressions in strong unions and past positives cancel them in long-standing relations (Wiseman 1986). Partner traits have also been offered as potential moderators of transgression effects, as with competitive personalities that exacerbate negative effects and cooperative personalities that assuage them (Cupach 2000). In marketing, research has focused on the moderating effects of the recovery effort, or interactions between the recovery and characteristics of the transgression (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990; Smith et al. 1999). For inspiration, this research draws on causal attribution theory, which highlights judgments of culpability and seriousness of the transgression, and distributive justice theory, which considers the fairness and equity-balance of reparations and costs (Bolton and Lemon 1999; Tax et al.

1998). Findings in this research stream demonstrate how marketer-initiated recovery attempts can dilute what is regarded as the inevitable negative fallout from failures, sometimes driving the relationship to satisfaction levels beyond pre-event marks (Smith and Bolton 1998).

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The literature reviewed above provides the basis for understanding how the strength of consumer-brand relationships may be affected directly and indirectly by different brand personalities, particularly as they commit transgression acts (see fig. 1). The proposed model rests on the premise that consumers make inferences regarding a brand's character based on the observation of brand behaviors over time and that these inferences cohere into a generalized assessment of the brand in its role as a relationship partner (Blackston 1993; Fournier 1998). These partner quality inferences allow development processes to occur, thereby governing reactions to interrupt events such as transgressions. Hypotheses derived from the model are developed below, building first from anticipated effects of brand personality within the two transgression conditions to the mediating effects of partner quality predicted to govern results overall.

We hypothesize that stronger relationships will accrue for brands with sincere relative to exciting personalities. Specifically, compared to the young and trendy characteristics of the exciting brand, the sincere brand should (a) harbor inherent advantages in fostering strong relationships and (b) encourage more positive perceptions of partner quality, which, in turn, deliver strength advantages. We suggest that the sincere personality advantage will hold only in relationships that persist without the commission of a brand transgression:

H1: In conditions of no transgression, stronger relationships will accrue for sincere brands relative to exciting brands.

Two opposing predictions concerning the interactive effects of brand personality and transgression acts are offered in light of previously cited research. One literature stream suggests that a transgression should disproportionately harm

FIGURE 1

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

