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What Did You Expect: How Brand Personality Types and Transgression Types Shape Consumers' Response in a Brand Crisis

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Abstract

We examined how different types of brand personality play a role to develop a specific consumers' expectation toward a brand, and how this expectation works in various ways in different types of brand transgressions. Based on expectancy violation theory and brand transgression research, a 2 (brand personality types: sincerity vs. competence) × 2 (brand transgression types: morality-related vs. competence-related transgression) factorial design was employed. Corporate evaluations and purchase intention toward the brand were considered as dependent variables. We found that a brand having a sincerity personality is more vulnerable to a morality-related transgression. However, there is no difference in consumers' responses by transgression type for a brand with a competence personality. We identified that brand personality types and transgression types can be critical factors to influence consumers' responses in times of crisis. Theoretical and empirical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Brand personality, Brand transgression, Expectancy violation theory

1. Introduction

Brand crises are escalating across industries, underscoring the urgent need for robust crisis management and communication strategies. Even top companies are not immune, as seen with Volkswagen's emissions scandal and Samsung's Galaxy Note smartphone recall. These high-profile crises highlight the critical importance of preparing for and effectively managing brand-related emergencies. However, most consumers do not anticipate brands to commit wrongdoing in their relationships, so the influence is often perceived as more detrimental than it really is [2, 27]. Thus, after experiencing transgressions, consumers are more likely to have negative

evaluations toward a brand, switch to a competitor or alternative brand, or even decide to stop buying the company's products [6, 13, 14]. If so, when going back to the above cases, which types of brand transgression influence consumers' responses more or less destructively? Considering that Volkswagen has developed their "sincere" brand image with a clean diesel advertising campaign, is it more vulnerable to morality-related transgressions (e.g., violation of social norms or ethical codes)? Or given that Samsung's "competent" brand personality, compared to transgressions with morality, does the competence-related crisis (e.g., product defects and recalls) more profoundly violate consumers' expectations toward the brand, or vice versa?

According to previous literature [11, 12, 16], brand personality induces strong, unique, and favorable brand associations, which is a part of a brand's overall equity. In addition, consumers understand its attributes, benefits, and functions, thereby forming a basis of their evaluative conceptions and relationship expectation with the brand through brand personality [1, 2]. Therefore, consumers tend to respond and evaluate different types of brand crises based on their expectations developed and reinforced by a certain brand personality.

In this respect, this study aims to examine how brand personality contributes to developing consumers' expectation toward a brand, and how this expectation works in various ways in different types of brand transgressions from expectancy violation perspectives. To be specific, this research empirically tested 1) how different types of brand personality (sincerity versus competence) influence developing consumers' different expectation types in terms of the brand's ability versus morality, and 2) how each expectation type developed by a certain brand personality interacts with different transgression types (morality-related versus competence-related crisis) on consumers' corporate evaluations and behavior intentions. As a theoretical background, Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) was adopted to explain those relationships.

Given the limited theoretical approaches explaining brand transgression effects [15], this research aims to fill the gap and suggest practical guidelines to alleviate damages from a brand crisis and suggest ways for organizations to manage a crisis effectively from an expectancy violation perspective.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. The Role of Brand Personality on Expectations Toward a Brand

On the basis of the notion that a brand can develop its personality like a human, brand personality has been regarded as a valuable tool that enables consumers to identify the needs the brand satisfies [26]. Defined as "a set of human characteristics associated with a specific brand" [3], brand personality includes dimensions like sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. It establishes a brand's distinctive identity and image [18, 29], forming the basis of consumer expectations and evaluations [1].

Consumers can develop distinct brand associations, which ultimately contributes to developing expectations toward a brand, through brand personality. Previous studies showed some evidence of the possible relationship of brand personality and expectations on the basis of the notion that brand personality contributes to form consumers' perceptions about the brand's role [11]. For instance, brand personality contributes to strong, unique, specific, and favorable brand associations, a key part of brand equity [12, 16].

There are generally two dimensions of brand association: corporate ability (CA) associations related to a company's competence aspects and corporate social responsibility (CSR) associations associated with a company's ethical and socially responsible aspects [5, 7]. Specifically, CA association represents a company's renowned ability and expertise to provide high-quality products or service, whereas CSR association represents the aspects of company's social responsibility and morality in relation to social, environmental, and ethical issues [5, 21]. And, it is critical for corporations since each association contributes to building different types

of consumers' expectations toward a brand [5, 7, 20, 22].

Brand personality could be an effective tool to develop and convey the different meanings and associations of brand in relation to competence and social responsibility. Thus, brand personality can contribute to building consumers' expectation types in terms of corporate ability (CA) and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Considering attributes of each personality, sincere and competence brand personalities appear to have distinct associations in relation to social responsibility and competence respectively. Sincerity implies trust, warmth, and honesty, leading to CSR associations. Competence implies reliability, intelligence, and technical skill, leading to CA associations [3]. Therefore, a CSR association might be more salient in the sincere dimension, while a CA association might be more salient in the competence dimension. Based on this, to explore the role of brand personality in a brand crisis, as a first step, the current research proposes relationships between brand personality types and association types, which ultimately develops distinct types of brand expectations (CA vs. CSR). Thus, the following hypotheses are developed:

H1: When a brand has a sincere personality, individuals will be more likely to have a CSR-related expectation toward the brand.

H2: When a brand has a competent personality, individuals will be more likely to have a CA-related expectation toward the brand.

2.2. Expectancy Violation Theory: The Role of Brand Personality in Brand Transgression

Then, how does each type of expectation play a role in times of brand crisis? Given that consumers' expectations toward a brand affects their judgments and evaluations toward a brand, it may also influence governing reactions to interrupt a brand's action (i.e., transgressions). To explore the role of brand personality in a brand transgression, the Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) is adopted as a theoretical background. Originating from interpersonal communication [4, 8, 9], basically, the EVT explains the effect of one's expectations on judgments about other's behaviors that deviate from one's expectations. In interpersonal relationships, expectancy violations are conceptualized as ''behavior[s] that a receiver notices as being different from the behavioral display that (s) he expected'' (p. 367) [4].

According to the EVT, the target's violation of the expectation functions as a motivational trigger in cognitive processing, thus influencing the post evaluation of the target. The EVT can help explain the impact of brand personality in a brand crisis situation by focusing on situations where the brand behavior violates expectations from consumers. Brand transgressions can certainly be considered as violations of consumers' expectation toward a brand in a negative way, significantly influencing consumers' responses and evaluations [8, 21]. Accordingly, the consequence results in more negative responses toward the company, such as lower purchase intentions, and higher negative eWOM intentions. Considering that brand personality can function as developing consumers' expectancies toward a brand, it also affects to shape how people process crisis information, and ultimately consumers' reactions and evaluations toward a brand [9, 21].

2.3. The Types of Brand Transgression: Competence vs. Morality

Generally, brand transgression is defined as "a violation of implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluations" (p.4) [2]. Such negative situations usually result in undesirable consequences for the brand (e.g., physical, reputational, and financial damages), and accordingly, it affects destructively on the brand equity.

Given that brand transgressions usually have various kinds of types in terms of issues, how would the level

of expectation violation differ depending on the brand personality and transgression type? For instance, in the case of Samsung's product recall crisis, a consumer may be much more shocked and disappointed due to its competence personality highlighting their higher expertise and technology in offering high-quality smartphones. By contrast, in the case of VW's emission scandal, a consumer may be much more upset and disappointed due to its sincere personality highlighting their environmentally responsible image (e.g., clean diesel). Would the similar consumers' responses and reaction patterns appear when Samsung is engaged in other types of transgressions that are more related to immorality or when VW is involved in defective product scandal that is associated with another technological issue?

To answer the question, the present study explores the interplay between brand personality types and transgression types. Based on the EVT perspective, relevant crisis type might determine which types of expectation will be violated and damaged in negative ways. To explore this, the current study draws upon different transgression types to determine the relative impacts of brand personality; 1) a competence-related crisis, and 2) a morality-related crisis [19]. To be specific, a competence-related transgression refers to a critical (negative) event that primarily affects corporate association with the competence and expertise of a product and service. In contrast, a morality-related transgression refers to a major event that poses a threat to association with moral and/or social norms and values cherished by society, and socially expected obligations [19, 25]. Previous findings showed that the detrimental effect of positive competence reputation in a product harm crisis [21]. In contrast, in a moral harm crisis, its favorable prior company's CSR reputation functioned as a backfire since its good reputation is significantly disrupted [28]. In this way, the consequences of transgression may differ by brand personality types.

Taken together, the current study suggests the interactive effects of brand personality types and transgression types on consumers' responses and evaluation. Specifically, a sincere brand may cause greater negative expectation violations in a morality-related crisis resulting in more undesirable outcomes. By contrast, a competent brand may lead to greater negative expectation violations in a competence-related crisis resulting in more damaging outcomes. Based on this, the following hypotheses are developed:

> **H3**: Under a morality-related crisis, people will display a) more negative evaluations towards the company and b) lower purchase intention when the brand has a 'sincerity' personality rather than a 'competence' personality.

> **H4**: Under a competence-related brand transgression, people will display a) more negative evaluations towards the company and b) lower purchase intention when the brand has a 'competence' personality rather than a 'sincerity' personality.

3. Methods

To test proposed hypotheses, a 2 (brand personality types: sincerity vs. competence) × 2 (transgression types: morality-related vs. competence-related transgression) between-subjects randomized experiment was executed. brand personality types and transgression types were manipulated.

3.1. Stimulus Development

A fictitious automobile company, "AK Motors," was used to avoid potential confounding variable. The brand personality was manipulated through social media pages, with posts emphasizing either the "sincerity" or "competence" dimensions. The sincerity version of the brand page focused on customer relationships, sustainability, corporate social responsibility and its positive efforts on the environment by directly using

words of a sincerity dimension. The competence personality version of the brand page featured product-related values, such as state-of-the-art technology, reinforced durability, outstanding quality, and innovations. Next, to manipulate brand transgression types, two versions of online news articles were created, each featuring a different type of brand crisis (i.e., morality-related or competence-related). For the moral transgression, an "emission deception scandal" issue was adopted, while a "faulty ignition switches in vehicles" issue was employed for the competence transgression.

3.2. Samples and Procedures

A total of 167 participants were recruited to participate in the online study utilizing Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The demographical characteristics of the participants were fairly similar to the United States population. Of the participants, 41.3% (n = 69) were male and 58.7% were female (n = 98). Participants' average age was 34.82 (SD =11.40). Upon agreeing to participation, participants were informed that the purpose of this study. They were then exposed to AK Motors' brand page and asked to evaluate its visual appearance, likability, and familiarity [30] to ensure the manipulation of brand personality. They were then exposed to a brief crisis scenario description, varying by transgression type, and asked to carefully read the corresponding article. Afterward, they completed manipulation checks, outcome measures, and provided demographic information.

3.3. Measures

Manipulation check items for transgression types asked participants to rate whether the crisis affected the company's competence or morality on a seven-point bipolar scale (1 = Competence, 7 = Morality) [10].

To verify different associations by brand personality types, CA association was evaluated using a seven-point Likert scale with five items ($\alpha = .90$). CSR association was similarly evaluated with five items [20].

Dependent variables included company evaluation, measured by a seven-point Likert scale with five items ($\alpha = .96$) [20], and purchase intention, measured by a seven-point Likert scale with two items ($\alpha = .91$) [23]. Additionally, this study measured the likability (Dislike/Like), visual appearance (Very bad/Very good), and familiarity (three items, $\alpha = .90$) of the social media brand page, as well as individuals' level of product involvement (five items, $\alpha = .98$) using a seven-point bipolar scale [15,17].

4. Results

4.1. Manipulation and Assumption Check

The results of an independent sample t-test between the two brand personality traits (i.e.., sincerity vs. competence) indicated that each type of brand personality was successfully manipulated ($M_{sincere} = 3.82$ vs. $M_{competence} = 4.92$, $t(203) = -5.00$, $p < .001$]. Further, a series of two-way analysis of variances (ANOVAs) was executed to investigate whether other independent variables and the interaction between independent variables moderated the effects of a single independent variable. In terms of transgression types manipulation, no other main effects or interaction effects were found except for the main effects of crisis $F(1, 163) = 99.24$, $p < .001$. The mean score for the competence crisis ($M_{competence} = 3.01$, $SD = 1.72$) was significantly different from that for the moral crisis ($M_{moral} = 5.45$, $SD = 1.41$). We included product involvement as a covariate and re-conducted the same ANOVA test but the result was not changed in a statistically significant way.

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

A series of independent sample t-tests, MANOVAs, and ANOVAs were performed to test the hypotheses. First, the results of an independent sample t-test captured a significantly different association with the sincere personality, in turn participants who were assigned to the sincere brand personality felt more likely to have a CSR related expectation toward the brand ($M_{sincere}$ = 5.43, SD = 1.01 vs. $M_{competence}$ = 4.59, SD = 1.23), $t(165)$ = -4.80, $p < .001$. However, contrary to our expectations, there is no significant mean difference between ability and morality expectation in the competence brand personality ($M_{sincere}$ = 4.82, SD = 1.11 vs. $M_{competence}$ = 5.04, SD = 1.11), $t(165)$ = 1.23, $p > 1$.) Thus, H1 was supported whereas H2 was not supported.

To test H3 and H4, a series of MANOVAs were conducted. The results indicated a marginally significant two-way interaction (Wilks' λ = .069, F = 2.71, p = .069). To further investigate the interaction effects, a series of two-way ANOVAs were executed. Significant main effects of crisis type for both company evaluation (M_{moral} = 2.77, SD = 1.53 vs. $M_{competence}$ = 3.61, SD = 1.62; $F(1, 163)$ = 11.72, $p < .001$) (See Figure 1), and purchase intention (M_{moral} = 2.42, SD = 1.64 vs. $M_{competence}$ = 3.15, SD = 1.62; $F(1, 163)$ = 8.34, $p < .01$) (See Figure 2) were found, but no main effect of brand personality on both company evaluation and purchase intention were found (ps > .05). More importantly, the results found a marginally significant interaction between brand personality types and transgressions types on company evaluation ($F(1, 163)$ = 3.51, $p < .063$, η^2 = .021) and purchase intentions ($F(1, 163)$ = 5.44, $p < .05$, η^2 = .030).
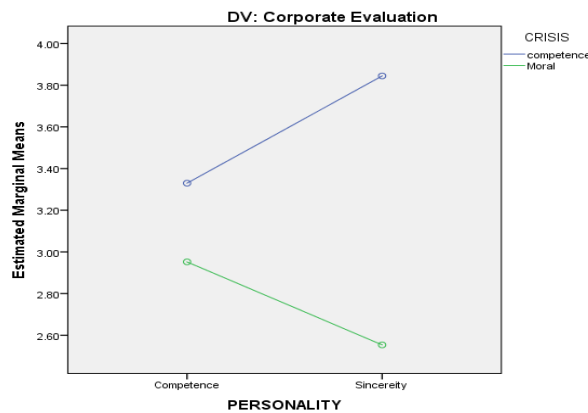

Figure 1. The interaction between brand personality and crisis types on company evaluation
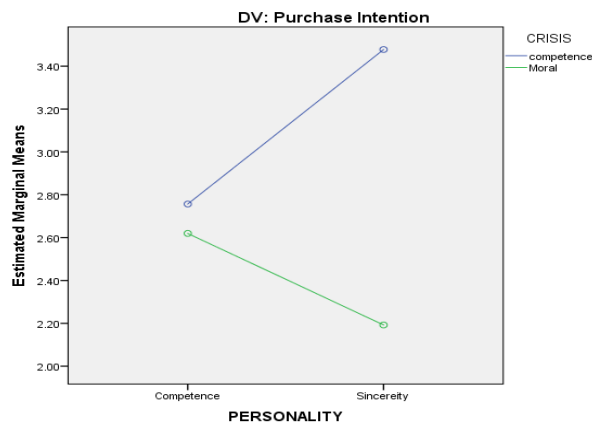

Figure 2. The interaction between brand personality and crisis types on purchase intention

To make sure where this interaction comes from, this study conducted a post-hoc test for simple main effects. The results revealed that only in the sincerity brand personality condition, the mean difference between competence crisis and moral crisis conditions was statistically significant for both company evaluation ($M_{competence}$ = 3.84, vs. M_{moral} = 2.55, $F(1, 163)$ = 14.16, $p < .001$); and purchase intention ($M_{competence}$ = 3.48, vs. M_{moral} = 2.19, $F(1, 163)$ = 13.753, $p < .001$). However, for the competence brand personality condition, the mean difference between the competence crisis condition and moral crisis condition was not statistically significant both in company evaluation ($M_{competence}$ = 3.33, vs. M_{moral} = 2.95, $F(1, 163)$ = 1.19, $p > .05$) and purchase intention ($M_{competence}$ = 2.76, vs. M_{moral} = 2.62, $F(1, 163)$ = .154, $p > .05$) (See Table 1). Therefore, interaction effects between brand personality type and transgression type were driven by only the sincerity brand personality dimension but not for the competence brand dimension. Thus, H3 was supported, whereas H4 was not supported. To exclude an alternative explanation, we re-ran the same ANOVAs that included product involvement, stimulus likability and visual appearance as covariate variables but the result was not statistically different.

Table 1. Simple main effects of means (Brand personality × Crisis type)

	Sincerity Brand	Competence Brand
Dependent Variable	Moral vs. Competence Crisis	Moral- vs. Competence Crisis
Corporate Evaluation	2.55 vs. 3.84 (1.29) ***	2.95 vs. 3.33 (.38)
Purchase Intention	2.19 vs. 3.48 (1.29) ***	2.62 vs. 2.76 (.14)

5. Discussion

The growing frequency of corporate crises accentuates the necessity for practitioners and scholars to pinpoint determinants influencing consumer reactions and evaluations during such events. While existing research has delved into aspects of brand crisis management, the intricate role of brand-related factors in shaping these crises warrants further investigation [24]. This study leveraged expectancy violation theory to scrutinize how different brand personalities cultivate distinct expectations—either corporate ability (CA) or corporate social responsibility (CSR)—and how these expectations interact with various types of brand transgressions to affect consumer responses.

Our findings reveal that brands with a sincerity personality significantly influence consumer expectations towards CSR, which, in turn, affects reactions in morality-related crises (H1). This contrasts with brands possessing a competence personality, which did not significantly impact CA expectations (H2), thus indicating a complex interplay between brand personality and consumer evaluations in times of crisis. This differential response to transgressions, predicated on underlying brand personalities, reaffirms the potency of expectancy violations: brands aligned with sincerity suffer more in moral crises due to pronounced violations of anticipated ethical standards, resulting in more negative consumer reactions.

This research also considers the limitations imposed by using a fictitious brand, AK Motors, which might influence the generalizability of our findings. High expectations of competence and performance are commonplace in the automobile sector; thus, messages that emphasize these aspects might not generate distinct CA associations among consumers. Future studies could explore a broader range of product categories or real-

world brands to enhance the applicability of these insights across different contexts. Moreover, the stronger consumer backlash observed in morality-related transgressions suggests these incidents may require particularly careful management. Expanding future research to include non-product-related moral issues, such as labor practices, could provide deeper insights into the dynamics of brand personality and crisis management.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we underscore the importance of aligning brand personality with crisis management tactics to mitigate the adverse effects of brand transgressions. By integrating expectancy violation theory into our analysis, we contribute a nuanced framework that elucidates the pivotal role of brand personality in navigating corporate crises. We have demonstrated that brand personality significantly contributes to shaping consumer expectations, which critically influences their reactions to brand crises. Specifically, brands with a sincerity personality predispose consumers to expect high CSR standards, making such brands more vulnerable to severe backlash in moral crises. This approach not only enriches the academic discourse but also serves as a practical guide for organizations aiming to fortify their resilience against potential brand crises. Practically, our findings offer crucial insights for developing effective crisis management strategies. By understanding how different brand personalities influence consumer expectations and reactions, brand managers and PR practitioners can tailor their crisis response strategies more adeptly. For brands with a sincerity personality facing morality-related transgressions, adopting a more accommodative stance and taking proactive measures to address consumer grievances and restore trust are essential. In sum, aligning brand personality with crisis management tactics is paramount to mitigating the adverse effects of brand transgressions and enhancing organizational resilience against potential crises.

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