

The Relationship of Self-Brand Connection and Self-Conscious Emotion in a Brand Failure Context

HO Kin-yan

City University of Macau, Taipe, Macau, China

kin.y.ho@durham.ac.uk, ireneho@cityu.mo

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how customer-brand relationship affects existing customers' levels of brand embarrassment and subsequent behaviours when a negative brand incident occurs. Two studies were conducted and data was collected from adults in mainland china. The results suggested that when customers who have strong relationship with a brand and a strong and positive (past) self-brand connection, they will feel less embarrassed if a negative brand incident occurs. Commitment is a driving factor behind the strength of the customer-brand relationship. Customer-brand relationship moderates the severity of brand embarrassment. The role of 'past' self-brand connection explains why a customer maintains the relationship with a brand and influences their emotions. The findings also showed that existing customers who have a strong relationship with a brand spread positive comments by word of mouth to boost their self-esteem. The results of this study extend cognitive appraisal framework of a negative emotion by examining the relationship between self and brand, and it provides new directions for brand managers with respect to how they manage customers' negative emotion if a negative brand incident occurs.

Keywords: Self-Brand Connection, Brand Embarrassment, Negative Publicity

Introduction

Because of fierce market competition and the growth of technology, it is difficult for brand managers and marketers to control a brand's image or customers' perceptions of a brand. For example, to reduce production costs, managers at Volkswagen produced false emission figures to pass the vehicles' emissions test; however, this unethical behaviour damaged the brand's image. Similarly, in the Guo MeiMei incident in China, Hermès (a renowned luxury handbag company) was singled out as a 'tool for bribery' and identified as a brand used by wealthy Chinese to display their wealth. Consequently, negative associations were linked to Hermès and its elegant brand image was damaged. Indeed, today, many of the existing customers of these two companies feel embarrassed to be seen carrying a less prestigious brand's products.

Consumers use brands to construct a sense of identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consequently, when a brand fails to meet an individual's needs (e.g., by providing poor quality services) or has an image, values or morals that are inconsistent with those of its consumers

(Hogg, Banister, & Stephenson, 2009; Lee, Motion, & Conroy, 2009), negative effects may result, as the brand can no longer construct or maintain the individual's self-identity. This may also result in anti-consumption behaviours and brand avoidance (Johnson, Matear, & Thomson, 2011). To grow a company's business, solid bonding between customers and brand is momentous, however, previous embarrassment studies (Grant & Walsh, 2009; Romani, Grappi, & Dalli, 2012) did not quantitatively measure the relationships between each cause and effect of embarrassment if a negative brand incident occurs, particularly in relation to existing customers with different customer-brand relationship levels. Therefore, to narrow the knowledge gap, this study is focused on the factors that influence customers' feelings of brand embarrassment and how these factors interact and affect customers' coping strategy.

The results of this study reveal that strong customer-brand relationship, strong (past) self-brand connection are significant in reducing a negative brand incident's severity and the strength of brand embarrassment. The role of customer-brand relationship acts as a mediator in explaining embarrassed customers' behaviour on a positive word-of-mouth even a negative brand incident occurs. Positive past experiences contribute as an agent for the strength of connection between self and the brand.

Brand Embarrassment and its influential factors

According to Lazarus (1991), emotion is a mental state of readiness that forms in response to an appraisal of the environment and an individual's own thoughts. Different emotions trigger different appraisal tendencies, including various changes in cognition, physiology and action (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Consumers may experience different types of negative emotions such as anger, offence, regret and disappointment when a brand fails to satisfy their needs.

Brand embarrassment is defined as any form of anxiety or negative emotion that a brand evokes. It occurs when an individual's public identity is threatened in a particular situation. The embarrassed individual experiences feelings of awkwardness and discomfort as the result of an encounter with a brand. The negative emotions may arise in anticipation of, during or shortly after the encounter (Walsh, Albrecht, Hofacker, Grant, & Takahashi, 2016).

Previous studies have focused on external factors as a source of embarrassment, such as how others perceive an individual and brand associations; however, a primary appraisal in cognitive appraisal theory refers to how a situation is relevant to an individual (Lazarus, 1991). Several studies examined how the unfavourable branding and market targeting adopted by a company caused customers or potential customers feel embarrassed (Grant & Walsh, 2009; Levy, 1959; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). Emotions associated with consumption are formed in response to a specific consumer appraisal, so it is legitimate to apply a self-other distinction to consumer emotions (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). Johnson et al. (2011) indicated that when a brand has relevance to the goal of identity construction, the brand's self-relationship tends to be strong and to have a significant effect on a person's emotional wellbeing. A negative customer-brand relationship reflects the way consumers feel about themselves when in the relationship with the brand (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Therefore, it is expected that when a negative brand incident occurs, an individual's internal factors (e.g., customer-brand relationships, self-brand connection, and perceived severity) may influence the strength of embarrassment and subsequently affect an individual's behaviour towards a brand.

Customer-Brand Relationships

Relationships both affect and are affected by the contexts in which they are embedded (Berscheid, 1994). Psychological, sociocultural and relational factors shape the significance of a relationship for the individual involved (Holbrook, 1993; Mick & Buhl, 1992). Meaningful relationships can change an individual's self-concept through expansions into new domains or reinforce an individual's self-concept through mechanisms of self-worth and self-esteem (Aron & Aron, 1996). Park, Eisingerich, and Park (2013) proposed that a brand's hedonic, functional and/or symbolic benefits can help customers to achieve their self-related goals, and thereby bring a brand closer to the self. Individuals purchase a product from a brand because it helps them to express who they are (i.e., their actual self) or who they want to be (i.e., their ideal self). If a brand enhances an individual's self-esteem, the individual is more likely to maintain a relationship with that brand. Conversely, if a brand fails to enhance an individual's self-esteem, the individual may decide not to maintain the customer-brand relationship.

Negative brand events damage consumers' trust, a lack of trust damages established customer-brand relationships and leads to customers' rage and disappointment (Castaldo et al., 2010; Gargiulo and Ertug, 2006). If a high-quality relationship exists, customers will trust and commit to a long-term relationship with a brand. Highly committed customers tend to question the validity of the information source or generate counter-arguments that neutralise the effect of negative brand publicity (Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007); however, such customers will also be more likely to take offence if they find themselves the victims of a service failure episode. Further, such customers may feel betrayed if they believe that a firm has intentionally violated what is normative in their relationship (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Thus, when existing customers experience negative brand incidents or negative associations, they may feel that they are the victims of the brand or that the brand has violated its commitment to them. Conceptually, this will deteriorate the customer-brand relationship.

However, customers with extensive brand experience are less likely to consider any given piece of information as diagnostic (or reflective) of the brand's core competence. Because of their extensive prior knowledge about the brand, new information will not be used to update their prior judgements and is more likely to be discounted (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). Therefore, it is argued that if customers feel that they have a strong, high-quality relationship (e.g., high levels of trust and a long-term commitment), the results may differ because these customers will trust in their previous or current experiences with the company. Such consumers will also feel confident that the brand will protect their self-worth and self-esteem by helping them to achieve or reinforce their self-concepts; thus, brand embarrassment may not be easily evoked. Accordingly, it was hypothesised that:

H1: *When a negative brand incident occurs, consumers with a strong customer-brand relationship will experience less brand embarrassment than consumers with a weak customer-brand relationship.*

Perceived Severity

The severity of an incident refers to the perceived amount of damage caused by the incident (Coombs & Holladay, 2011) and the degree to which the incident breached an individual's established expectations (Fediuk, Coombs, & Botero, 2010). When individuals make a decision, the severity of the incident also relates to the negative impact they suffer (Tennen & Affleck, 1990). However, the happiness evoked from an experience will be stronger and last longer than that evoked from possessing a product (Kumar, Killingsworth, & Gilovich, 2014).

For example, when individuals talk about a holiday they feel happier than they would if they were talking about purchasing a new product. It is difficult for customers to compare their experiences with others; thus, they should not be upset easily. Consequently, if an individual has a strong relationship with a brand due to a pleasant past experience (e.g., because of the prestige associated with and the dedicated services provided by a brand), negative emotions will not be easily evoked. Customers want to maintain a relationship with a brand if they have had a favourable experience with that brand. Consequently, the effects caused by a negative brand incident may be less severe. Thus, the strength of a customer-brand relationship may lessen the degree of the severity with which an individual perceives a negative incident and may reduce the level of brand embarrassment a customer experiences. Accordingly, it was hypothesised that:

H2: *A strong and positive customer-brand relationship will reduce the perceived severity of a negative brand incident and make customers feel less embarrassed.*

Self-brand Connection

Self-brand connection refers to the degree to which consumers have incorporated a brand into their self-concepts (Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The image of consumers with a strong self-brand connection is closely tied to the image of the brand (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). When individuals have a strong level of self-brand connection, but low self-esteem (high self-esteem), embarrassment makes them evaluate a more conspicuously branded product less (or more) favourably. It shows that ego threat cause people with high self-esteem to concern with maximizing their esteem so as to enhance favourable views of themselves. However, the interaction effect between embarrassment and self-esteem will be diminished if individuals have a weaker level of self-brand connection (Song, Huang, & Li, 2016). Feelings of embarrassment activate a threat to an individual's self-concept. Further, the positivity of an evaluation is negatively related to the degree of threat to a consumer's self-concept. Thus, self-brand connection is a motivator that can strengthen an individual's response to embarrassment. Consequently, when this motivator is weakened, the effects of embarrassment will be diminished.

Aron, Aron, Tudor, and Nelson (1991) showed that close relationships are more likely to be incorporated into one's self-concept. Under self-concept theory, the past self (or temporal self), current self and future self can be used to represent an individual's concept of self (Sirgy, 1982). As a brand with which a consumer is connected becomes part of the self (Belk, 1988; Trump & Brucks, 2012), the 'self' in self-brand connection could represent a brand connection that links an individual's temporal, current or future self.

Zhang and Aggarwal (2015) suggested that a strong connectedness with a temporal self (e.g. five years ago) leads to a more favourable evaluation now than does a weak connectedness with a temporal self. These types of customer-brand connection would affect consumers' evaluation towards a brand (Clark & Taraban, 1991). They claimed that consumers in a communal relationship may evaluate the brand more positively if they have strong connectedness with their temporal self, and this may persist over time to a greater extent. When consumers' enjoyable experiences occur to their temporal self, a strong connectedness leads to such favourable experiences being perceived similarly by the current self (Zhang & Aggarwal, 2015). It is expected that strongly connected customers (those for whom favourable experiences occurred to the temporal self) evaluate the brand more positively and are more likely to experience positive emotions than are weakly connected customers (those for whom less favourable experiences occurred to the temporal self). However, Tu and Soman (2014) showed

that an event made salient because it was a birthday or a new calendar year, it may heighten perceived disconnectedness with a temporal self. Hence, if a negative brand event occurs, a customer's temporal self may disconnect with the brand and affect their emotions, but this depends on the strength of connectedness with their temporal self. Accordingly, it was hypothesised that:

H3a: *When a negative brand incident occurs, the strength of brand embarrassment experienced by existing customers who have a strong (past) level of self-brand connection will be reduced.*

H3b: *When a negative brand incident occurs, existing customers who have a strong (past) level of self-brand connection will experience weaker brand embarrassment than those who have a strong (current) level of self-brand connection.*

Coping with Brand Embarrassment

Consumers may cover up, remove or conceal the logos of brands to avoid the feelings of embarrassment certain brands evoke (Grant & Walsh, 2009). Millennials and non-millennials use 'masking' as a coping strategy when purchasing a variety of personal care products (Nichols, Raska, & Flint, 2015). This strategy results in enhanced basket sizes and the inclusion of complementary and counterbalancing products. This effect is also moderated by an innate susceptibility to embarrassment.

Negative impacts to companies when individuals experience embarrassment in personal selling include decreases in sales volumes and decreases in the quality of sales interactions (Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2003). The negative consequences of embarrassment drive individuals to complain, spread negative comments by word of mouth (i.e., negative WOM) and switch to other brands (Romani et al., 2012). Conceptually, embarrassed individuals are less likely to spread positive word of mouth (i.e., positive WOM).

However, some individuals tend to discount and argue against negative information to avoid damaging their self-identity (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Positive emotions can undo some negative physiological effects caused by negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan and Tugade, 2000) and counteract ego depletion (Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli and Muraven, 2007). It is expected that such individuals would argue negative information with positive information to enhance their self-identity. It is posited that customers who have strong customer-brand relationship may make more comments about a brand's negative incident, as they can retrieve positive information about the brand from their memory. To enhance their self-identity, these individuals may spread positive comments about the brand by word of mouth publicly or within their social groups. Accordingly, it was hypothesised that:

H4: *Embarrassed customers' customer-brand relationships mediate the extent to which consumers spread positive word of mouth.*

Data and Methodology

A structured and self-administrated questionnaire was distributed to postgraduate students, administrative and teaching staff aged from 20 to 40 years at a university in mainland. According to Wang et al. (2011), Chinese individuals aged between 20 and 40 years have the greatest spending power in the consumer market. Thus, such individuals should have more brand knowledge and form connections with brands that fit their identities. Simple random sampling

was used in this study. The participants comprised three hundred and twelve undergraduate and postgraduate students (aged 20-40; 47% female and 53% male) recruited from a university.

This research consisted of 2 studies. Consent questions were asked at the beginning of the study so that individuals could refuse to participate in the questionnaire. Participant responses remained anonymous.

Study 1

This study aimed to test what individuals perceive and feel about a brand embarrassment scenario. Prior to the study, researchers explained the term ‘brand embarrassment’ to the participants as this term might be new and unfamiliar to them.

To ensure that these scenarios elicited feelings of brand embarrassment, a pre-test was conducted in which 40 students and staff members (both male and female) at a university were asked to rate the severity of these scenarios on a scale of 1 to 5 (for instance, 5 indicated, ‘I would be very embarrassed if I were the person wearing the brand’s products in this situation’ and 1 indicated, ‘I would not be embarrassed if I were the person wearing the brand’s products in this situation’). Participants were also asked to indicate how they would feel in these situations (e.g., uncomfortable, joyful or angry on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represented ‘not at all’ and 5 represented ‘very much’). All of the participants in the pre-test understood the content and over 80% agreed that this scenario would elicit feelings of brand embarrassment.

In main study, participants were asked to imagine that they were wearing a Brand X jacket at a gathering where their friends were criticising Brand X for its involvement in a recent scandal (shown as below). Then, participants in both conditions evaluated the brand and expressed how they felt to the situation on a 5-point scale (Dahl, Manchanda, & Argo, 2001): negative/positive, embarrassed, joyful, and angry (where 1=not at all and 5=very much). At the end of the study, debriefing was conducted. The scenarios stated:

You are invited to your friend’s birthday dinner. A few of your other friends will also attend the dinner for the celebration. To show the importance of this birthday dinner, you wear your favourite Brand X jacket as Brand X always provides dedicated services and products to customers. During the dinner, one of your friends discusses a scandal related to Brand X that recently happened in the town and makes negative comments about Brand X. During the conversation, your friends say that they think that people who wear Brand X clothing just want to display their wealth and success. They also state that the clothes are not made from high-quality materials and that they are not worth such high prices. Brand X also has negative meanings or associations and is referred to as “a tool for bribery” and products for the rich.

Study 2

This study aimed to test how the customer–brand relationship affects the strength of brand embarrassment and customers’ subsequent behaviour. Participants were asked to complete a survey and their demographic profile (age, gender, education and income). All measures for the questionnaire were adopted from existing scales in the established research. Likert scale of customer-brand relationship was adopted from Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol (2002) and Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci (2001). These 5-point scales include items such as ‘I felt that the firm ‘Brand X’ was:- ’ (where 1 = very undependable and 5=very dependable) and ‘I was very committed to my relationship with Brand X’ (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Brand Embarrassment was measured using Grant and Walsh (2009)’s items and 5-point scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). The items included: ‘I do not want my friends and acquaintances to see that I buy products from Brand X, as it makes me feel

embarrassed' and 'I feel embarrassed when I believe that others think the worst of me because I use and wear Brand X'.

Perceived severity was measured using a one-item scale developed by Philippe, Keren, and Zeelenberg (2013). The item read: 'I perceive the incident that evoked the brand embarrassment to be severe' and was measured using 5-point scale (where 1 = no severity at all and 5 = substantial severity).

Positive Word-of-Mouth's scale was adapted and revised from Goodwin and Ross (1992) and Hartline and Jones (1996)'s scale. A 5-point Likert scale was used (where 1 = strongly disagree/very unlikely and 5 = strongly agree/very likely). The three items in the scale read 'To repair my self-image, I would spread positive word of mouth about Brand X to my friends or acquaintances', 'How likely are you to spread positive WOM about Brand X's products?' and 'If my friends were looking for leather products, I would tell them to try Brand X'.

Results and Discussion

The statistical software package SPSS was used to analyse the data. A Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test H1: the connection between the customer-brand relationship (independent variable) and brand embarrassment (dependent variable). The results reveal a medium, negative correlation between the two variables ($r = -.45$, $n = 312$, $p < .01$). This suggests that the stronger the customer-brand relationship, the weaker the brand embarrassment experienced by the customer.

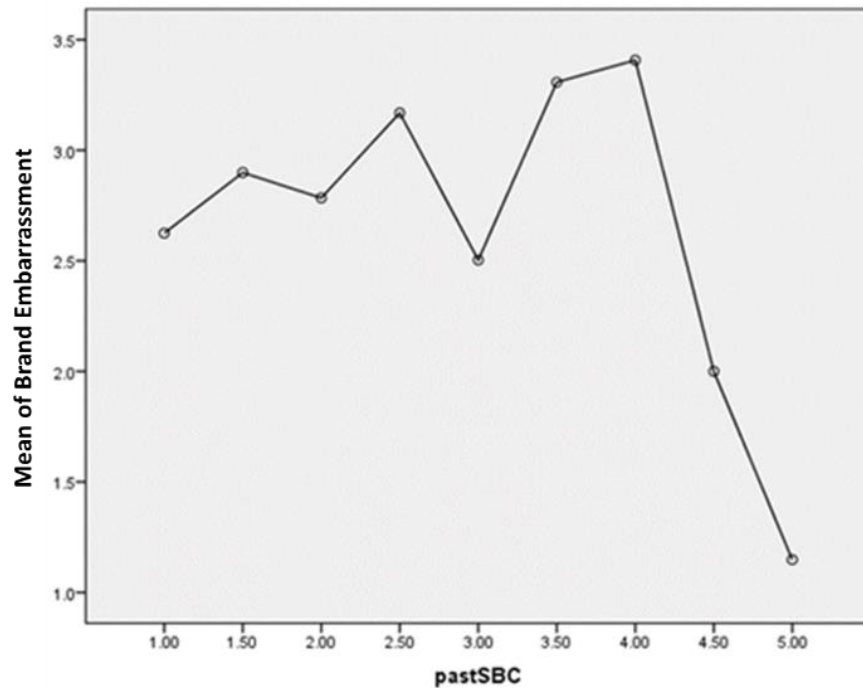
To check whether the strength of the customer-brand relationship influences the effect of perceived severity on brand embarrassment (i.e., H2), a moderation analysis was conducted (PROCESS procedure; model = 1; Hayes, 2013), with perceived severity as an independent variable, brand embarrassment as a dependent variable and the customer-brand relationship as a moderator. The results indicate that the interaction effect was statistically different from zero, as revealed by a 95% confidence interval of $-.25$ to $-.07$ ($p = .00$). This suggests that the customer-brand relationship moderated the effect of perceived severity on brand embarrassment.

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the effect of self-brand connection on the strength of customers' brand embarrassment (i.e., H3a and H3b). Participants were divided into two groups: (past) self-brand connection, and (current) self-brand connection. In each group, a scale of 1 to 5 was used to show the strength of the self-brand connection, with 1 representing the weakest connection and 5 the strongest.

For (past) self-brand connection in H3a, the results show a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level for brand embarrassment [$F(8, 303) = 8.67$, $p = .00$]. Post-hoc comparisons using the least significant difference test indicate that the mean differences between weak (past) self-brand connection (i.e., a score below 4.5) and strong (past) self-brand connection (i.e., a score of 4.5 or above) were significant at the $p < .05$ level.

For (current) self-brand connection, the results show a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level for brand embarrassment [$F(18, 293) = 5.41$, $p = .00$]. Post-hoc comparisons using the least significant difference test indicate that the mean differences between weak (current) self-brand connection (i.e., a score below 4.5) and strong (current) self-brand connection (i.e., a score of 4.5 or above) were significant at the $p < .05$ level. Compared with the line chart of (past) self-brand connection, the average brand embarrassment level in the line chart of (current) self-brand connection was higher. Therefore, in general, these results suggest that customers who have a strong (past) self-brand connection will experience weaker brand embarrassment when compared with those who have a strong (current) self-brand connection.

Figure 1. Customers who have a strong (past) self-brand connection reduces the strength of brand embarrassment.



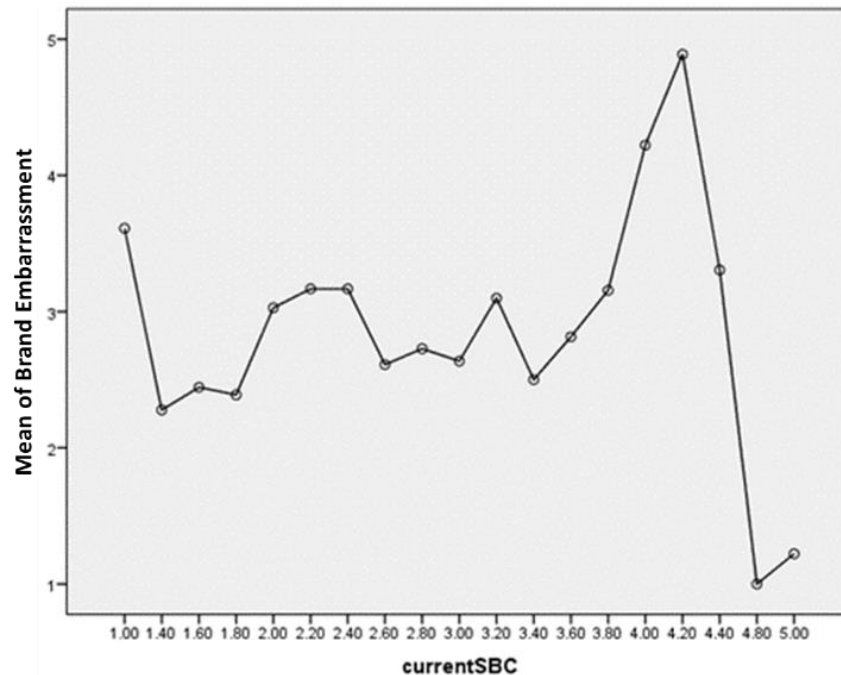
Note: pastSBC = (past) self-brand connection

When testing customer-brand relationship as a mediator, a mediation analysis was conducted (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). Brand embarrassment was taken as the independent variable and positive word-of-mouth as the dependent variable. The results show that the indirect effect of brand embarrassment on positive word-of-mouth is $\beta=0.3643$. As revealed by a 95 per cent bootstrapped confidence interval, the indirect effect is statistically different from zero (-0.1500 to -0.0243, $p=0.01$). Thus, H4 is accepted as the customer-brand relationship mediates the relationship between brand embarrassment and positive word-of-mouth.

The results of this study provide converging evidence that customer-brand relationship, perceived severity and self-brand connection influence existing customers' feelings of brand embarrassment when a negative brand incident occurs. Although customers will feel embarrassed if they perceived such an incident as severe, if they have strong relationship with the brand and a strong (past) self-brand connection, they will feel less embarrassed.

Commitment is a driving factor behind the strength of the customer-brand relationship. When customers are committed to a brand, they will continue to visit shops that sell that brand, purchase the brand's products, make repeat purchases, place trust in the brand and maintain loyalty towards it. Customers' favourable past experiences with a brand forge a solid relationship with it. This bonding lends credit to the brand and protects it against negative information. Therefore, when existing customers encounter a negative brand incident, they feel angry towards the parties involved in the negative incident, and defend the brand in order to repair their damaged self-esteem; consequently, their feelings of embarrassment are weakened.

Figure 2. Customers who have a strong (current) self-brand connection reduces the strength of brand embarrassment.



Note: currentSBC = (current) self-brand connection

Conclusions

Our findings support our theory that the customer–brand relationship moderates the severity of brand embarrassment and mediates embarrassed customers’ to spread positive-word-of-mouth in response to a negative brand incident. However, a committed relationship with a brand allows a customer to reflect on their past experiences with that brand; they will be more likely to forgive the brand if they have a good relationship with it that they intend to maintain. A strong customer–brand relationship is thus a moderator that helps reduce feelings of brand embarrassment, and acts as a mediator for customers to spread positive word-of-mouth.

Further, our findings reveal a connection between a brand and a customer’s sense of self (past self and current self). When customers have a high (past) self–brand connection, it means that they have found a brand that best represents them in some way. The longer they engage with the brand, the better their connection with it. The customer–brand relationship is then fortified, and customers feel less embarrassed if a negative brand incident occurs. In addition, when a customer has a history with a brand and can recall many prior positive experiences with it, they create a solid connection between that brand and their ‘past’ self, which thus lessens the severity of their brand embarrassment. For a customer’s current self, their brand relationship is very new as a customer does not has real history with the brand. Therefore, their ‘current’ self-brand connection is not strong enough to reduce their brand embarrassment feeling.

Our findings contribute to aid understanding of how customer–brand relationships operate and influence the strength of a customer’s brand embarrassment when a negative brand incident occurs. Customer’s history with a brand can recall their past experiences with a brand,

the role of past self explains why a customer maintains the relationship with a brand and influences their emotions. Further, this study shows that committed customers' thoughts about and attitudes towards a brand are not functional, but rather, experiential and affective.

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