"I'll Stand by You:" Understanding Customers' Moral Decoupling Processes and Supportive

Behavioral Intentions in Cases of Corporate Misconduct

"I'll Stand by You:" Understanding Customers' Moral Decoupling Processes and Supportive

Behavioral Intentions in Cases of Corporate Misconduct

Transgressions perpetrated by brands and companies, when they happen, often pose

an ethical dilemma for loyal customers (Bhattacharjee, Berman, and Reed II 2012). Not only

do some customers build a strong emotional attachment toward brands (Bhattacharjee et al.

2012; Saju, Harikrishnan, and Anand 2018), they also invest tangible and intangible

resources toward their relationship with the brand (Zainol, Yasin, Omar and Hashim 2014),

which may make it difficult for them to suddenly dissociate themselves from the brand they

love and follow. Moreover, some extremely committed customers develop a strong feeling of

oneness with the brand (Lin and Sung 2014), which makes their identities inseparable from

that of the brand.

As several instances of alleged brand misconduct have borne witness, from

Samsung's bribery charges (McCurry 2017) to Apple's slowed down iPhones (Gibbs 2018),

as well as United's infamous violent "re-accommodation" or passenger removal incident

(Martin 2017), unethical corporate behavior may not necessarily result in proportionate

customer exodus. Indeed, although the backlash to United's re-accommodation incident was

vociferous and widespread (Griffiths and Wang 2018), the company's bottom line remained

relatively unaffected (Martin 2017). Whereas for United the explanation for the limited

business impact may lie in the nature of the airline industry and the lack of alternatives

(Maidenberg 2017), this may not be the case for all industries. Some consumers may decide

to stay in their relationship with the brand because they may prioritize the performance of the

brand or the benefits they gain from the brand over the egregiousness of the brand's act,

while not forgiving the brand for its actions. For other consumers, a threat to the brand may

be perceived as a threat to one's own identity and self (Cheng, White, and Chaplin 2012), and

thus protecting the brand from punitive action may be the only logical way to preserve one's

self and identity. Such customers may help offset the negative impact of those who do feel

betrayed by the brand's misconduct (Sohn and Lariscy 2015) and decide to boycott it.

Several scholars have attempted to explain why some consumers decide to continue

their relationship with a brand despite its misconduct (e.g., Mazar, Amir, and Ariely 2008;

Shu, Gino and Bazerman 2011). For example, Mazar, Amir and Airely (2008) suggested that

more devoted consumers may re-interpret the transgression as *less* unethical so that they may

continue to support the brand. Additionally, such consumers may seek to reduce their

cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) to maintain their positive view of the brand

(Bhattacharjee et al. 2012). As their continued commitment to the brand conforms with their

prior beliefs and expectations about the brand, negative information related to brand

transgression will likely be dismissed (Dawar and Pillutla 2000; Sohn and Lariscy 2015).

Bhattacharjee et al. (2012) defined this process of discounting the meaning of the brand's

unethical action to support the transgressor as moral rationalization.

However, how can we explain consumers who do not want to change their current

relationship with the brand even though they do not forgive the brand's transgression?

Bhattacharjee et al. (2012) suggested that some consumers may experience a different

thought process, called the *moral decoupling process* that allows them to support an unethical

brand without condoning its act. This process allows consumers to place a psychological

distance between themselves and the brand's unethical act by separating judgments of

morality (of the act) from judgments of performance of the transgressor (Bhattacharjee et al.

2012). In other words, some consumers may attempt to rationalize their continued support for

a transgressor brand by cognitively divorcing the immorality of the transgression from the

performance of the company's products and services.

The present study seeks to understand such moral decoupling processes undertaken by

consumers, particularly those who are highly committed to the brand, given that few studies

have sought to investigate consumers' support for a transgressor brand after moral

decoupling. We draw upon communication and consumer psychology literature on identity to

articulate a theoretically grounded framework to unpack how consumer publics' moral

reasoning processes give rise to intentions to support the brand in the form of buycotting.

Buycotting refers to customers' deliberate purchasing behavior toward a company (Krishna

and S. Kim 2019). Buycotting can manifest either in the form of support for a company by

deliberately purchasing the company's products or services, or as a punishment for a

company by buying the competitor company's products or services. Meanwhile the concept

of organizational identity has been tied to corporate reputation (e.g., B. L. Sha, Tindall, and

T. L. Sha 2012) as well as publics' reactions to crises (e.g., Ma 2018) in communication

literature.

Specifically, to capture the dynamics between consumers and brand, we draw upon

literature on *brand identity fusion*[1] (Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, and Huici 2009) and

brand immunity (Lin and Sung, 2014; Saju et al., 2018) to explore customers' cognitive and

behavioral reactions to the alleged brand misconduct. Brand identity fusion refers to strong

feelings of connection and oneness perceived by customers between themselves and a brand

(Lin and Sung 2014), which has been shown to make them immune to negative brand

information (Saju et al. 2018, 135), and as a result exhibit defensive information processing

(Lin and Sung 2014).

The present study seeks to extend our understanding of consumers' behavior by

linking the concepts of brand identity fusion and brand immunity (Lin and Sung 2014) to

Bhattacharjee et al.'s (2012) theoretical framework of moral decoupling. In so doing, we

present an explication of how and why consumers' emotional bonding with a brand, i.e.,

---

[1] The term *brand identity fusion* is distinct from similar-sounding terms, such as brand identity, organizational identity, among others. The distinction between these terms is articulated in later sections.

brand identity fusion, may make them immune to brand transgressions, and even encourage rationalized interpretations of alleged misconduct, eventually resulting in buycott intentions (Nielson 2010). This study, therefore, seeks to shed light on the cognitive and behavioral reactions of consumers to allegations of brand misconduct.

More importantly, this study contributes to marketing communication theory building by advancing a theoretically grounded investigation into consumer behaviour following allegations of misconduct. As the need for marketing communication campaigns as part of crisis recovery grows, so too does the need for theoretically grounded models of consumer behavior to inform such efforts. The present study builds on marketing communication scholarship that offers insights into consumer behavior following crises and corporate misconduct (e.g., Kanso, Allen & Kitchen, 2020; Wei, Wang, Yu and Zhao 2019). Although two theories, expectancy violations (EV) theory (Burgoon and LePoire 1993; Burgoon, Le Poire, and Rosenthal 1995) and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) have shown conflicting positions in predicting loyal customers' reactions to brand misconduct, neither explain how and why certain loyal customers experience moral decoupling, and in turn are willing to support the transgressor brand, despite not forgiving the misconduct itself. The sections that follow present a review of the literatures upon which our arguments are grounded.

Literature Review

Customers' reactions to brand transgressions have been examined by both marketing and crisis communication scholars. There are arguably two competing views on how consumer-brand relationship influences consumers' reactions to brand transgressions. Some scholars contend that consumers with strong consumer-brand relationships would feel disappointed with and betrayed by the brand upon learning of their favorite brand's misconduct (e.g., Grégoire and Fisher 2008). Consumers with strong consumer-brand

relationships may experience amplified feelings of betrayal, resulting in unfavorable responses to brand transgressions (Grégoire and Fisher 2008; Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009).

Such disappointment may result from expectancy violations (Burgoon and LePoire 1993; Burgoon, Le Poire, and Rosenthal 1995: Sohn and Lariscy 2015), as advanced by some scholars. According to expectation violation (EV) theory (Burgoon and Le Poire 1993; Burgoon 1993), people expect relational partners to behave in certain ways (Burgoon and Hubbard 2005) and expect them to conform to their expectations. Extending this logic, we can safely say that publics have expectations of organizations to behave in certain ways, and the violations of such expectations may trigger negative reactions from these publics. Individuals would feel particularly betrayed by an organization/brand that has a strong pre-existing reputation, as brand transgressions cause the violations of their expectancy (Sohn and Lariscy 2015). Such a violation of expectation would arguably trigger punishment from disappointed consumers (Grégoire and Fisher 2008; Sohn and Lariscy 2015).

In contrast, the approach using Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people are motivated to maintain their internal consistency (Sohn and Lariscy 2015). Brand misconduct creates an inconsistency with their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes toward the brand they love. Therefore, people are motivated to reduce this cognitive dissonance by engaging in selective, biased information processing (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnana 2000; Sohn and Lariscy 2015). As a result, negative information related to the crisis will likely be dismissed by those people. In this moral rationalization process, individuals may need to compromise their moral standards to support the transgressor brand or the transgression may cause dissonance and tension for them (Bhattacharjee et al. 2012).

Although these two competing views have been examined and challenged extensively over the years, how customers' strong emotional attachment to brands may impact their

moral processing in the context of brand misconduct has not yet been examined fully. How does customers' special bond with a brand affect their cognitive and behavioral reaction to a brand transgression? In the sections that follow we articulate our hypotheses to answer this question.

Brand Identity Fusion and Brand Immunity

Consumer psychology scholars have increasingly begun to pay more attention to customers' emotional attachment to brands (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, and Nyffenegger 2011; Saju et al. 2018) and strong ties between consumers' self-identity and brand identity (i.e., *brand identity fusion*, Lin and Sung 2014). Some consumers who report strong relationships with a brand are more tolerant of brand transgressions and even resistant to negative information about their beloved brand (Saju at al. 2018). As a result, they are unlikely to change their attitude toward and support the brand they love. How they rationalize continuing their relationship with the brand without compromising their moral standards, however, is a key question. For crisis communication scholars and brand managers, it is important to understand what moral reasoning process these consumers undertake to continue to support the transgressor brand without feeling guilty for doing so, and which consumers are most likely to engage in such rationalizing processes.

To answer these questions, we turn to the identity-related research in communication and consumer psychology. An individual has both a personal identity and social identity (Harwood, Giles, and Palomares 2005; Oetzel 2009). The personal identity refers to "a perception of self as a unique individual with particular traits, preferences, etc." (Harwood, Giles, and Palomares 2005, 2-3) while the social identity is understood as "a perception of self as a member of particular groups, along with the associations relevant to those groups" (Harwood et al. 2005, 3). When individuals see themselves as a part of a group of organizational members which forms a "part of who I am" (Ma 2018, 51), this social identity

is called an organizational identity. An individual can have multiple social identities, where certain identities may become more salient than others depending on a specific situation an individual faces (Hogg and Terry 2000).

Communication scholars have explored several areas including (a) cultural identity (B.-L. Sha 1995; 2006); (b) organizational/corporate identity (Henderson, Cheney, and Weaver 2015; He and Mukherjee 2009; Melewar 2010; B.-L. Sha, Tindall, and T.-L. Sha, 2012; B.-L. Sha 2009; Stiart and Kerr 1999); (c) identity and power (Curtin and Gaither 2005); (d) intercultural identity (Ni, Wang and Gogate 2018); (e) professional identities (Macnamara 2016); (f) non-profit organization's cause identity (Lellis 2012); (g) social or national identity (Choi and Cameron 2005; Henderson 2005) (h) corporate identity and consumer attitude (Panigyrakis, Panopoulous, and Koronaki 2020) and (i) political brand identity (Pich, Dean, and Punjaisri 2014).

Among all above, the construct of corporate identity has received significant attention from scholars and practitioners for decades due to changes in consumer values and behavior (Melewar 2010). Recent studies have taken relational perspectives (i.e., organization-public relationship focused). For instance, research has examined the impact of organizational identity on publics' reactions to an organizational crisis (e.g., Ma 2018), and have proposed theoretical frameworks of managing relationships and conflicts with strategic publics where the identity plays a crucial role (e.g., Ni, Wang, and Sha 2019). The concept of identity is thus becoming important for organizations' relationship building and branding efforts as well as for the related research that attempts to explicate consumers' sense of connectedness to an organisation or a brand.

A social identity perspective is useful for research that focuses on organization-public relationships (He, Li, and Harris 2012). The social identity perspective in the context of customer-brand relationships suggests that customers identify with a specific brand or a

specific organization, and as a result they engage in pro-brand or pro-organization behavior

(He, Li, and Harris 2012). For example, in times of organizational crisis, the organizational

identity becomes salient to internal publics (Ma 2018). As organizational crises can pose an

identity threat to these social groups, they are willing to protect or defend the organization,

engage in less negative word of mouth behaviors, and even feel guilt for organizational

misconduct (Ma 2018).

Communication research on external publics' identity perceptions with respect to

organizations and brands is relatively underexplored. In consumer psychology literature,

however, the interplay of consumers and their identities, especially related to brands, has

been examined (e.g., Lin and Sung 2014). Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales and Huici (2009)

pointed out that individuals' personal and social identities can interact, and rather than

competing with, they can relate to and inform each other. Swann, Jetten, Gómez,

Whitehouse, and Bastian (2012) suggested that individuals may feel *fused* with a social

group, developing a strongly fused social identity with a group while retaining a strong

personal self-identity. These identities may work together to generate pro-group and

relationship sustaining behaviors (Swann et al. 2012). Considering the existing research on

the role of identity fusion in triggering radical actions to support their social group (e.g.,

Gómez, Morales, Hart, Vázquez, and Swann 2011), scholars have tested the potential role

played by *brand identity fusion* to better understand consumers' supportive behaviors for

brands and organizations with whom they feel a strong attachment (e.g., Lin and Sun 2014).

Accordingly, drawing from the idea of identity fusion (Swann, Gomez, Seyle,

Morales, and Huici 2009; Gómez, Brooks, Buhrmester, Vázquez, and Jetten 2011), Lin and

Sung (2014) posited brand identity fusion as "a distinct form of allegiance to brands, which

entails the merger of a consumer's personal and social identities (i.e., brand identity) in brand

relationships" (p. 58). According to Lin and Sung (2014, 55), brand identity fusion is a

"stronger predictor of consumer relationship-sustaining behaviors" and represents "a powerful union of the personal and social self" (Lin and Sung 2014, 57). For highly fused consumers, the distinctions between self and brand identities are blurred and highly permeable (Lin and Sung 2014; Swann et al. 2009). In the context of customer-brand relationship, brand identity fusion refers to the strong feelings of connection and oneness between customers and a brand and serves as "the ultimate destination for consumer-brand relationships" (Lin and Sung 2014, 55). In other words, brand identity fusion represents the ultimate outcome of customer-brand relationships, encompassing both extreme commitment and emotional connection to the brand.

Given the strong emotional attachment fused customers feel with the brand (i.e., oneness with the brand), they tend to associate the brand's performance with their interpretations of their own performance (Cheng, White, and Chaplin 2012). Brand failures may therefore be perceived as their own failure, and threats to brand identity (i.e., brand transgressions) as threats to one's own identity (Cheng et al. 2012). Customers' brand identity fusion therefore may trigger supportive behaviors toward the brand to ensure no damage is done to brands' identity, and by extension, their own personal identities.

In communication literature, a concept similar to fused publics is fan publics. Krishna and S. Kim (2016) defined fan publics as "publics who evaluate their relationship with an organization positively and support the organization by engaging in positive word-of-mouth behavior" (23). In conceptualizing external supportive stakeholders, Dodd and Kinnally (2015) argued that communication scholarship on such publics is relatively underdeveloped. They proposed a typology of fan publics presented on a continuum from most supportive to least supportive publics for the organization as follows: champion, agnostic, cynic, and saboteur. Among these four segments, champions are defined as the most supportive publics for the organization, who actively engage in communicative action about the organisation in a

positive way (Dodd and Kinnally 2015). Although Dodd and Kinnally's (2015) idea of a brand champions indicates the strongest level of support for the brand among the four segments, the concept of brand champions does not capture the nature of customers with brand identity fusion who feel *oneness* with the brand and have merged their own identities with that of the brand.

A concept that has discussed alongside brand identity fusion is brand immunity. Lin and Sung (2014) suggested that fused consumers' decisions are influenced by their biased beliefs and rules and as a result, they exhibit "selective thinking as well as defensive information processing to counter argue negative brand information and to make more brand-favoring attributions, even at the cost of accuracy" (Lin and Sung 2014, 59). Ahluwalia, Burnkrant and Unnava (2000) found that low-commitment consumers report attitude change toward a brand when presented with negative brand information, whereas high-commitment consumers exhibit no such attitude change, pointing to brand immunity among high-commitment consumers.

Saju at el. (2018) characterized brand immunity as "deeper brand knowledge and expertise," and "supreme attitudinal loyalty and unflinching faith in the brand" (135). They defined brand immunity as "a nonchalant commitment to the favorite brand as one is very sure about the functional and emotional benefits and value congruence the brand offers" (135). These highly committed and devoted consumers discount or dismiss negative brand information as they are already biased and confident about the brand's capability or righteousness (Pimental and Reynolds 2004). For this study, we conceptualize brand immunity as a customer's confidence in their relationship and commitment toward a brand that is unlikely to be affected by negative information about the brand.

The literature on brand devotion informs us that extreme brand commitment may make consumers immune to negative brand information (Arruda-Filho et al. 2010; Ortiz et al.

2013; Pimental and Reynolds 2004; Mikulincer and Shaver 2001; Park et al. 2010). Saju at el. (2018) found that consumers who are emotionally attached to a brand and who perceive the brand trustworthy also report brand immunity. Furthermore, Lin and Sung (2014) found that highly fused consumers exhibit higher levels of brand immunity than weakly fused consumers upon learning of brand transgression. Following Lin and Sung's (2014) logic, we posit the following hypothesis:

H1: Brand identity fusion positively influences brand immunity.

Buycott Intention

In response to brand misconduct or a service failure, people can engage in retaliatory behaviors to punish companies in a variety of ways, such as negative word of mouth communication, vindictive complaining, and marketplace aggression (Grégoire and Fisher 2008; Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010; Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009; Lindenmeirer, Schleer, and Pricl 2012). Boycott behavior has been noted as one way in which customers can express their displeasure with corporate action and punish them by refusing to purchase their product or services (Lindenmeirer, Schleer, and Pricl 2012; Neilson 2010; Yuksel and Mryteza 2009). By choosing to enact boycott behavior, customers either forgo or withhold their consumption until a target company addresses a specific issue or a flaw that customers want resolved (Yuksel and Mryteza 2009).

Compared to the extensive attention given to the boycott behavior has received, relatively less attention has been paid to customers' *buycott* intention (Friedman 1996; Nielson 2010). Buycotting is in general known as an activist strategy calling for consumers to participate in the activist's initiatives to either support companies by purchasing more of their products and services or to punish companies' irresponsible or undesirable behaviors by rewarding their competitors whose behaviors are considered responsible or desirable (Krishna and S. Kim 2019). Operationally the opposite of boycotting, buycotting refers to customers'

deliberate purchasing behaviors directed at companies. Buycotting can be used either to punish companies by deliberately buying competitor companies' products or to support companies by buying the companies' products. The present study adopts the latter operationalization of buycotting. Why customers may choose to buycott brands that have been accused of misconduct then may be an important question for communicators to answer, given that such behaviors serve to mitigate the negative impact of brand transgressions or misconduct.

As noted earlier, upon learning of corporate misconduct, customers whose identities are highly fused with a brand report higher levels of brand immunity than those with are weakly fused (Lin and Sung 2014). Such devoted and fused publics are unlikely to change their attitudes toward the brand despite learning of misconduct (Ahluwalia et al. 2000), meaning they will continue to support the brand by continuing to stay in their relationship with the brand. Indeed, given that threats to a brand also represent threats to one's own identity (Lin and Sung 2014), consumers exhibiting brand identity fusion would be motivated to remove such a threat and preserve the identity of the brand. People who are fused with their group/society/organization are more likely to endorse and enact supportive behavior toward the group/society/organization (Gómez, Brooks, Buhrmester, Vázquez, Jetten, and Swann Jr, 2011; Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales and Huici 2009; Swann, Gómez, Huici, Morales and Hixon 2010; Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse and Bastian 2012; Swann and Buhrmester 2015). For example, Gómez et al. 2011 suggest that highly fused people's perceived connectedness and familial attachment to the group/society may create a strong desire to act on behalf of the group/society, even if it means engaging in extreme group behavior.

Furthermore, Krishna and S. Kim (2020) demonstrated power of brand identity fusion in shielding an organization from backlash when accused of misconduct and found support

for brand identity fusion increasing customers' intentions to buycott a brand accused of misconduct. Therefore, we replicate and extend Krishna and Kim's (2020) findings and hypothesize that consumers with high levels of brand identity fusion will exhibit strong supportive behavior in the form of buycott intention. In other words, we posit that customers' brand identity fusion will positively predict their intentions to buycott the company despite allegations of misconduct. Additionally, we posit that customers' support for a brand may be predicted by the extent to which the customers are confident in their commitment to the brand, i.e., their perceived brand immunity. We follow Lin and Sung's (2014) supposition and posit that brand immunity will also increase buycott intentions:

H2: Brand identity fusion positively influences buycott intention.

H3: Brand immunity positively influences buycott intention.

Moral Decoupling

How customers, particularly those who are committed and emotionally attached to a brand, process negative information about it, especially in the context of corporate misconduct is a relatively under-studied area of inquiry. Theories such as cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) and expectancy violation theory (Burgoon and LePoire 1993; Burgoon, Le Poire, and Rosenthal 1995) have been applied to explain individuals' moral reasoning behind their decisions to forgive or punish the transgressor brand. However, these theories do not explain consumers' continued support for the product/services of the brand while distancing themselves from the brand's act. Such investigations into consumer behavior do not account for customers who continue support a brand despite its actions violating their notions of morality.

Bhattacharjee et al. (2012) sought to explain such behaviors by examining publics' reactions to public figures' scandals, including President Clinton's and Tiger Woods's alleged extra-marital affairs, and suggested that certain moral reasoning processes allow

individuals to continue to support such public figures who have committed acts that go against one's moral norms. Bhattacharjee et al. (2012) refer to this process as moral decoupling. Moral decoupling refers to "a psychological separation process by which people selectively dissociate judgments of performance from judgments of morality" (Bhattacharjee et al. 2012, 1169). In other words, consumers separate their support for the brand's products and services from the brand's unethical act. By doing so, they can continue to be consumers of the brand without compromising their moral beliefs. This process provides psychological benefits to consumers, as they are able to rationalize their continued relationship without experiencing an ethical dilemma. Bhattacharjee et al. (2012) suggest that this moral decoupling strategy makes it easy for individuals to justify their decision to support for the transgressor brand.

Such moral decoupling process may explain how brand-fused customers may continue to support a brand despite it being accused of misconduct. Given that fused customers feel an emotional attachment and oneness with a brand, and threats to the brand's identity threatens their self-identity (Cheng et al. 2012), we argue that they are likely to be motivated to find ways of rationalizing their support for the brand. Such rationalizing would reduce the threat to the brand's identity, and by extension, to the self, and justify fused customers' support for the brand without compromising their own moral standards.

The best strategy for brand-fused publics to support the brand without feeling guilty about doing so may be to decouple their judgment of brand performance from their judgment of morality for the brand's unethical act. As they are already immune to negative information about the brand and prone to selective information processing (Lin and Sung 2014), it may be easier for such customers to dissociate themselves from the morality of the brand transgression. By prioritizing judgment of brand performance without worrying about

judgment of morality, they can continue to stay in their (customer-brand) relationship with the brand. The following hypotheses are therefore posited:

H4: Brand immunity positively influences moral decoupling.

H5: Moral decoupling positively influences buycott intention.

H6: Moral decoupling mediates the relationship between brand immunity and buycott intention.

Method

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected using an online survey conducted through Qualtrics' online platform in October 2018. Participants were recruited from among Qualtrics' research panels and were limited to Australian citizens. Age- and gender-related quotas were instituted to ensure that the sample mirrored the population of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016) as closely as possible. The age distribution of the sample is reported in Table 1. Of the participants, 262 self-reported being male and 263 said they identified as female (N = 525).

[Insert Table 1]

Survey Procedures and Measures

This study focused on consumers of the cellphone industry; therefore, at the beginning of the survey participants were asked whether they own their own cellphone. Those who responded yes and identified the brand that they used were allowed to continue the survey whereas those who responded "I don't have my own mobile phone" were prevented from completing it. Respondents then answered questions about their identity fusion with their cellphone brand as well as demographic questions.

All items related to the survey participants' specific perceptions or behavioral intention toward their mobile brand, i.e., brand identity fusion, brand immunity, moral

decoupling, and buycott intention toward the mobile brand the currently use were

programmed in Qualtrics to be customized with the cellphone brand name reported to be used

by the participants. For example, if a participant reported that their current cellphone was a

Samsung model, the survey item "I have a deep emotional bond with [mobile brand name]"

would be displayed to that participant as "I have a deep emotional bond with Samsung."

The cellphone industry was chosen for this study because of the emotional attachment

that they engender in their consumers ("People emotionally" 2015) as well as their popularity

not just in Australia but globally. Indeed, over 91% of the Australian population reports using

a cellphone ("Mobile Consumer Survey" 2019). Furthermore, smartphone brands such as

Apple and Samsung have attained consumers' loyalty and allegiance over years. Factors such

as customer satisfaction, brand trust, and brand familiarity have contributed to brand loyalty

to mobile brands (Khundyz 2018).

The survey was designed based on the operationalizations of various constructs

suggested by extant literature. A 5-point Likert scale, running from one (strongly disagree) to

five (strongly agree), was used to measure all items. The measures for brand identity fusion

and for brand immunity were adopted from Lin and Sung (2014), whereas moral decoupling

was measured using Bhattacharjee et al.'s (2012) three items. Buycott intention was

measured by three items adapted from Paek and Nelson (2009).

To measure the participants' brand immunity, moral decoupling, and buycott intention

in the context of brand misconduct, a vignette was presented to the survey participants after

they were asked to respond to statements about their existing perceptions about the brand (see

Appendix 1 for the vignette). Degree of brand identity fusion was assessed prior to exposure

to the vignette. Upon completion of the survey participants were reminded of the fictitious

nature of the allegations presented in the vignette. All measurement items have been provided

in Table 2. Using IBM SPSS version 25 Cronbach's alpha, means, and standard deviations

were analyzed and are also provided in Table 2. All were found to be reliable based on

Cronbach's alpha calculations (see Table 2). Bicorrelations among variables are also

provided in Table 3.

[Insert Tables 2 and 3]

Data Analysis

For hypothesis testing, structural equation modelling (SEM) was used. All data

analysis was conducted using IBM AMOS version 26. To assess data fit, Hu and Bentler's

(1999) joint-criteria was used, whereby CFI > .95, SRMR ≤ .10, or RMSEA ≤ .06 and

SRMR ≤ .10 is considered a good model. Standardized coefficients are reported. To test the

mediation hypothesized in H6, Holmbeck's (1997) procedure was adopted, such that three

models were tested. The first model did not contain the mediator at all (Figure 1); the second

model contained a full mediation (Figure 2), while the third model was a partial mediation

model (Figure 3).

[Insert Figures 1, 2, and 3]

Results

Kline's (1998) two-step procedure was utilized to test the hypotheses. First, the

measurement model including all studied variables was tested. The measurement model was

found to have acceptable fit with CFI = .988, SRMR = .027 and RMSEA = .044 ($\chi2(96) =$

193.037, $p < .001$).

Then, Holmbeck's (1997) procedure for testing mediation was used to test a

hypothesis positing mediation between variables (H6). The first model (Figure 1), without

moral decoupling as the mediator, was tested and resulted in good fit ($\chi2(60) = 103.606$, p

$< .001$; CFI = .993, RMSEA = .037, SRMR= .022). The second model proposing full

mediation (Figure 2) was tested and found to have good fit ($\chi2(98) = 196.038$, $p < .001$; CFI

= .988, RMSEA = .044, SRMR = .028). Finally the third model (Figure 3) containing a

partial mediation was tested and also was found to have good model fit ($\chi^2(97) = 193.053$, p < .001; CFI = .988, RMSEA = .043, SRMR = .027). The fit indices for the model in Figure 3 were slightly better than the one in Figure 2, and was therefore accepted for hypothesis testing. However, in the partial mediation model the direct path between brand immunity and buycott intention was found not to be significant, the importance of which is discussed as part of H5.

H1 predicted a positive relationship between brand identity fusion and brand immunity and was to be found significant ($\beta = .402$, $p < .001$). H2, predicting a positive relationship between brand identity fusion and buycott intention, was supported ($\beta = .226$, p < .001). H3, however, was not supported, as the relationship between brand immunity and buycott intention was found not to be significant. In H4 a positive relationship between brand immunity and moral decoupling was predicted, and support was found for the hypothesis ($\beta = .937$, $p < .001$) (H4). H5 too was supported as moral decoupling was found to be positively associated with buycott intention ($\beta = .345$ p=.035). To examine H6, per Holmbeck's procedure, the paths between brand immunity, moral decoupling and buycott intention were analysed. Given that the direct path between brand immunity and buycott intention was not significant, we conclude that moral decoupling fully mediates the relationship between brand immunity and buycott intention.

[Insert Figure 4]

Discussion and Implications

This study explored the dynamics behind customers' supportive behavior for the transgressor brand. The results showed that customers exhibiting brand identity fusion remain relatively immune to allegations of misconduct against their favorite brands. Furthermore, we demonstrated the moral decoupling processes that such customers undertake in order to justify their continued support of transgressing brands: such customers' inherent immunity

was found to contribute to their separating their judgment of the brand's performance from the allegations of misconduct (moral decoupling). Moral decoupling as well as consumers identity fusion with the brand was found to encourage their buycott intentions to support the transgressor brand. By explicating a theoretically grounded model of customers' responses to brand misconduct, this study helps advance marketing communication theory building in two key ways, as discussed next.

Explicating Customers' Moral Decoupling Processes

The results of this study shed light upon the moral reasoning processes that customers may undergo, particularly upon first learning of a brand transgression. Although much crisis communication scholarship focuses on stakeholders' reactions to an organizational crisis response (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, and Vyncke 2010; Sisco 2012), how customers react to first learning of a crisis, in the case of the present study, misconduct allegations, has not yet been explored fully. In particular, few research endeavors investigate customers' moral reasoning processes that trigger their subsequent action toward the brand. This study served to advance our understanding of customers' cognitive and behavioral responses to a misconduct allegation by linking concepts of consumer psychology and behavior, from brand identity fusion, brand immunity, to moral decoupling, to understanding consumer behavior.

To the authors' knowledge, the present study is one of the first attempts to explicate the unique moral reasoning process consumers go through when they want to continue their relationship with the transgressor brand without compromising their moral stances: by dissociating the brand's transgression from their product/service performance. Previous research has been concerned primarily with relational (e.g., Moon and Yang 2015) or reputational outcomes of corporate crises (e.g., Coombs 2007) based on how companies respond to crises. The results from this present study help advance such scholarship by providing an explanation of the moral reasoning processes that underpin consumers'

intentions to continue or dissolve their relationships with the transgressing brand. Could such moral decoupling explain why employees choose to remain in organizations accused of unethical behavior, or why voters choose to support candidates whose behavior outside of office may be questionable? Future scholarship may seek to connect moral decoupling specifically and moral rationalization processes in general with publics' relationship continuance or dissolution intentions to advance marketing communication theory building by adding nuance to our understanding of consumer behavior.

Extant literature on the topic suggests that not all consumers deal with ethical dilemma brought on by brand transgressions in the same way (Saju et al. 2018), as some consumers may decouple themselves from the brand misconduct. The moral decoupling process allows consumers to distance themselves from the brand's unethical act while continuing to support the brand by focusing on the brand performance, rather than the brand's unethical act (Bhattacharjee et al. 2012). Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people try to keep their internal consistency and engage in selective, biased information processing (Sohn and Lariscy 2015). Consumers who exhibit high levels of identity fusion with the brand, however, and display high levels of brand immunity may also exhibit selective information processing to favor the brand (Lin and Sung 2014). However, moral decoupling explains the case where some committed customers may not dismiss the negative information and instead acknowledge the brand's unethical act, while staying in the relationship with the brand.

The mediation test revealed key points of interest for marketing communication scholars. The results show that consumers go through a moral decoupling process to decide to support the transgressor brand, and that brand immunity by itself does not influence supportive purchasing intentions. In the past, scholars (e.g., Sohn and Lariscy 2015) have suggested a buffering effect that loyal customers may create for the brand in times of a crisis,

based on Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. Our findings imply that consumers' moral reasoning process is complicated, particularly when brand identity fusion is involved, and that consumers' strong emotional attachment with the brand does not always mean that they are going to compromise their moral standards to support the brand they love or they feel oneness with. Moral decoupling may be one cognitive strategy fused consumers may adopt to fulfil their desire of protecting the brand's identity, and by extension, their own identities, and without sacrificing their morals.

Additionally, the insignificant path between brand immunity and buycott echoes the findings of previous studies (e.g., Füller et al. 2008), and the present study may present an explanation for this lack of relationships. Scholars have found that consumers with high level of brand immunity do not always voluntarily engage in supportive behavior (Füller et al. 2008) or exhibit "open defense of the brand which is under attack" (Saju et al. 2008, 135), even though they have strong belief in and commitment to the brand. As this study found, these committed consumers' moral decoupling process may have the answer for why. Although fused customers may be immune to attacks on their favorite brand, such immunity may not necessarily translate to supportive behaviors without a moral reasoning, and in the case of the present study, moral decoupling.

However, our research findings on moral decoupling should be carefully construed. From the viewpoint of an organization/brand accused of misconduct, moral decoupling may potentially mitigate the negative impact of allegations of misconduct or other crises. However, this short-term effect should not be interpreted as customers' acceptance of their wrongdoings, because although customers may separate their judgement of performance from judgment of morality, such an effect may not last. Specifically, the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs, 1992) demonstrates that a history of crises does not bode well for organizations, making stakeholders less likely to accept crisis responses. Future

research may serve to investigate the role of crisis history as well as prior reputation in affecting these moral reasoning processes, thus integrating SCCT with moral decoupling scholarship and extending marketing communication theory.

Furthermore, as more Millennial and Gen-Z consumers focus on encouraging ethical consumption and being ethical and sustainable in their purchasing behaviors (Heo and Muralidharan 2019) to encourage positive social change, these findings should be carefully considered. Being an ethical consumer should mean not only buying (or buycotting) ethically produced products but also avoiding transgressor organizations that are harmful to our society. The normative consensus should be built and shared among consumers that immoral acts of organizations should be discouraged by dissociating emotionally as well as *financially* with the transgressor organizations. However, considering the nature of identity-fused publics' strong emotional attachment as well as feeling of oneness with the brand, this normative direction to punish the transgressor while rewarding ethical brands/organizations may be a long way to go. People who go through moral decoupling feel less wrong about supporting the transgressor organization as they believe they did not compromise their moral standards (Bhattacharjee et al., 2012), thus providing a moral justification for continuing to consume products from transgressor brands. How these processes unfold among Millennial and Gen-Z consumers specifically may be a fruitful area of future research.

Brand Identity Fusion as a Mitigator against Backlash

In addition to examining the role of moral rationalization processes, this study also examined how brand identity fusion perceived by customers may help shield a brand from backlash when accused of misconduct. The results of this study demonstrated that not only does brand identity fusion perceived by customers influence their brand immunity, in line with Lin and Sung's (2014) finding, such fusion also contributes to customers' intentions of continuing to support the brand in the form of buycott intentions. In so doing, this study

introduces the concept of brand identity fusion to communication scholarship and extends the

discussion on the role of identity in understanding consumers' cognitive process and

behavioral intention. Consumers' emotional bonding or emotional attachment has been

studied in consumer psychology and marketing (e.g., Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, and

Nyffenegger 2011; Saju et al. 2018); however, communication scholarship has not yet paid

attention to the power of identity fusion as an outcome of organization-public relationships.

Understanding the role that consumers' personal identity in conjunction with social

identity plays in predicting organizational outcomes, particularly in times of crisis, as well as

understanding the linkages between consumer-brand relationship and consumers' identity

fusion with organization may help provide more nuanced explanations of consumers'

behavior. As Lin and Sung (2014, 55) noted, brand identity fusion is a "stronger predictor of

consumer relationship-sustaining behaviors" and serves as "the ultimate destination for

consumer-brand relationships" (Lin and Sung 2014, 55). It may behoove communication

scholars to further investigate the concept of *identity fusion* as it relates to consumer-brand

relationships, thus integrating social psychology and communication literature to provide

robust explanations for consumer behavior. The notion of identity fusion holds promise not

just for customers but also for other key organizational publics, such as employees, voters,

and citizens, among others; we call upon scholars to undertake investigations to help

conceptualize and empirically test the power of these concepts in understanding consumer

behavior and organizational outcomes.

Limitations

There are a few limitations associated with this study. First, we used real brand names

in the vignette which may have caused confusion among the participants. We provided a

debriefing statement before participants exited the survey and asked participants if they

understood the situation described in the vignette was hypothetical. The findings of the study

should be considered accordingly. The use of real brand names in the survey were necessary to gauge consumer-brand relationships including the level of brand identity fusion and the level of brand immunity. Second, we acknowledge that there may exist other factors that may affect consumers' intentions toward the selected brand, such as duration of the relationship (Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes, and Vogel 2010) and quality and availability of alternatives. We did not include these potential variables in the survey. Additionally, the claims made in this study are limited to Australian cellphone users who are part of Qualtrics' online panels and are limited by the issues associated with collecting data online. Further investigation is needed to understand the processes examined in this study further, across cultures, contexts, and types of misconduct. Finally, this study's findings are limited only to one product category (i.e., cellphone). Therefore, these findings may not be applicable on other product categories. Future research may seek to explore the dynamics of identity fusion, moral decoupling, and supportive behavior across different categories.

Research Directions and Conclusion

In conclusion, this study presented several interesting findings for communication scholars who strive to understand consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to issues and crises. The findings of this study demonstrate how extreme commitment to a brand, i.e., brand identity fusion, and the moral rationalization process of moral decoupling together explain why customers may continue to support brands accused of misconduct without compromising their morality. In so doing, this study contributes to our understanding consumers' reactions to corporate misconduct, i.e., consumer publics. Future research may include the concepts of exchange and communal relationships to substantiate the notion of moral decoupling process that committed consumers' experience. Combining the relationship management perspective of communication (Ledingham and Brunig 1998) with the consumer

psychology literature reviewed in the present study may help in the development of more robust, trans-disciplinary explanations of public behavior.

Furthermore, moral decoupling may not be applicable to all product/service categories. In other words, it depends on the nature of the organization and its products/services under discussion as well as on the nature of the misconduct. Research on moral decoupling (e.g., Bhattacharjee et al. 2012) has suggested that it is easier for customers or other stakeholders to engage in moral decoupling behavior when the distance between the object's misconduct (brand, organization, or public figures) and its performance is large. However, if the misconduct is directly related to the object's performance (or high transgression relevance), it is unlikely for customers or other stakeholders to engage in moral decoupling process, and it is more likely to reduce consumer support (Bhattacharjee et al. 2012). Having considered this nature of moral decoupling, it may be necessary for future study to do experimental studies that test the effects of product/service types and nature of transgressions on predicting moral decoupling and consumer support.

Future scholarship may also incorporate the recommendations of the situational crisis communication theory (Coombs 2007) and the roles of personal and social identities to understand the differences in consumers' moral rationalization across crisis types (scenarios) (i.e., product/service failure vs unethical act), and how identity fusion may play a role in customers' reactions in accepting or rejecting corporate responses to crises. Furthermore, whereas the present study considered associations between variables by interpreting path coefficients, future research may specifically focus on highly fused versus weakly fused customers' reactions and provide more robust explanations for the role of identity fusion and brand immunity in better understanding publics' responses to a brand misconduct.

References

"Mobile Consumer Survey." 2019. *Deloitte*. Accessed 20 June 2020.

https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/technology-media-and-

telecommunications/articles/mobile-consumer-survey.html

"People emotionally attached." 2015. *The Economic Times,* January 29.

https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/people-emotionally-

attached-to-their-smartphone-says-study/articleshow/46054090.cms?from=mdr

Ahluwalia, R., Burnkrant, R. E., and Unnava, H. R. 2000. "Consumer response to negative

publicity: The moderating role of commitment." *Journal of Marketing*

Research 37(2): 203-214. doi:10.1509/jmkr.37.2.203.18734.

Arruda-Filho, E. J., Cabusas, J. A., and Dholakia, N. 201). "Social behavior and brand

devotion among iPhone innvoators." *International Journal of Information*

Management 30: 475-480. doi: 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2010.03.003.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2016. "*2016 Census QuickStats."* Accessed 7 September

2018.

https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quic

kstat/036

Bhattacharjee, A., Berman, J. Z., and Reed II, A. 2012. "Tip of the hat, wag of the finger:

How moral decoupling enables consumers to admire and admonish." *Journal of*

Consumer Research 39: 1167-1184. doi: 10.1086/667786.

Burgoon, J. K. 1993. "Interpersonal expectations, expectancy violations, and emotional

communication." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 12: 30–48.

doi:10.1177/0261927X93121003.

Burgoon, J. K., and Hubbard, A. E. 2005. "Cross-cultural and intercultural applications of expectancy violations theory and interaction adaptation theory". In *TheorizingAaboutI Intercultural Communication, edited by* W. B. Gudykunst, 149–171. London: SAGE.

Burgoon, J. K., and Le Poire, B. A. 1993. "Effects of communication expectancies, actual communication, and expectancy disconfirmation on evaluations of communicators and their communication behavior." *Human Communication Research* 20: 67–96. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2958.1993.tb00316.x.

Burgoon, J. K., Le Poire, B. A., and Rosenthal, R. 1995. "Effects of preinteraction expectancies and target communication on perceiver reciprocity and compensation in dydadic interaction." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 31: 287–321. doi:10.1006/jesp1995.1014.

Cheng, S. Y. Y., White, T. B., and Chaplin, L. N. 2012. "The effects of self-brand connections on responses to brand failure: A new look at the consumer-brand relationship." *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 22: 280–288. doi: 10.1016/j.jcps.2011.05.005.

Choi, Y., and Cameron, G. T. 2005. "Overcoming ethnocentrism: The role of identity in contingent practice of international public relations." *Journal of Public Relations Research* 17: 171–189. doi:10.1207/s1532754xjprr1702_6

Claeys, A. S., Cauberghe, V., and Vyncke, P. 2010. "Restoring reputations in times of crisis: An experimental study of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the moderating effects of locus of control." *Public Relations Review 36*(3): 256-262. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.05.004.

Curtin, P. A., and Gaither, T. K. 2005. "Privileging identity, difference, and power: The circuit of culture as a basis for public relations practice." *Journal of Public Relations Research* 17: 91-115. doi: 10.1207/s1532754xjprr1702_3.

Dawar, N., and Pillutla, M. M. 2000. "Impact of product-harm crises on brand equity: The

    moderating role of consumer expectations." *Journal of Marketing Research* 37:215-

    226. doi:10.1509/jmkr.37.2.215.18729.

Dodd, M. D., and Kinnally, W. 2015. "'Fan publics': An interdisciplinary conceptualisation

    of external supportive stakeholders." *Prism 12*(1): 1-12.

    https://www.prismjournal.org/uploads/1/2/5/6/125661607/v12-no1-a1.pdf

Festinger, L. 1957. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University

    Press.

Friedman, M. 1996. "A positive approach to organized consumer action: The "buycott" as an

    alternative to the boycott." *Journal of Consumer Policy* 19: 439-451.

    doi:10.1007/BF00411502.

Gibbs, S. 2018. "Apple and Samsung fined for deliberately slowing down phones."

    Guardian, October 24. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/oct/24/apple-

    samsung-fined-for-slowing-down-phones

Gómez, A., Brooks, M. L., Buhrmester, M. D., Vázquez, A., Jetten, J., and Swann, W. B.

    2011. "On the nature of identity fusion: Insights into the construct and a new

    measure." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100(5): 918-933.

    doi:10.1037/a0022642.

Gómez, ´A., Morales, J. F.,Hart, S., Vázquez, A., and Swann, W. B. Jr. (2011). "Rejected and

    excluded forevermore, but even more devoted: Irrevocable ostracism intensifies

    loyalty to the group among identity fused persons." *Personality and Social*

    Psychology Bulletin 37:1574–1586. doi:10.1177/0146167211424580.

Grégoire, Y. and Fisher, R. J. 2008. "Consumer betrayal and retaliation: When your best

    customers become your worst enemies." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing*

    Science 36:247-261. doi:10.1007/s11747-007-0054-0.

Grégoire, Y., Laufer, D., and Tripp, T. M. 2010). "A comprehensive model of customer direct and indirect revenge: understanding the effects of perceived greed and customer power." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 28:738-758. doi: 10.1007/s11747-009-0186-5.

Grégoire, Y., Tripp, T. M., and Legoux, R. 2009. "When consumer love turns into lasting hate: The effects of relationship strength and time on customer revenge and avoidance." *Journal of Marketing* 73: 18-32. doi:10.1509/jmkg.73.6.18.

Griffiths, J. and Wang, S. 2018. "Man filmed being dragged off United flight causes outrage in China." *CNN*, April 10. https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/11/asia/united-passenger-dragged-off-china-reaction/index.html

Harwood, J., Giles, H., and Palomares, N. 2005. "Intergroup theory and communication processes". In *Intergroup communication: Multiple perspectives,* edited by J. Harwoord, and H. Giles, 1–17. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

Heo, J., & Muralidharan, S. 2019. "What triggers young Millennials to purchase eco-friendly products?: the interrelationships among knowledge, perceived consumer effectiveness, and environmental concern." *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 25(4): 421-437.

He, H., Li, Y., and Harris, L. 2012. "Social identity perspective on brand loyalty." *Journal of Business Research* 65(5): 648-657. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.03.007.

He, H-W. and Mukherjee, A. 2009. "Corporate identity and consumer marketing: A process model and research agenda." *Journal of Marketing Communications* 15(1): 1-16. doi: 10.1080/13527260802018041.

Henderson, A. 2005. "Activism in "paradise": Identity management in a public relations campaign against genetic engineering." *Journal of Public Relations Research* 17: 117–137. doi:10.1207/s1532754xjprr1702_4.

Henderson, A., Cheney, G., and Weaver, C. K. 2015. "The role of employee identification and organizational identity in strategic communication and organizational issues management about genetic modification." *International Journal of Business Communication* 52: 2–41. doi:10.1177/2329488414560278.

Hogg, M. A., and Terry, D. J. 2000. "Social identity and self-categorization processes in organisational contexts." *Academy of Management Review* 25(1): 121-140. doi:10.2307/259266.

Holmbeck, G. M. 1997. "Toward terminological, conceptual, and statistical clarity in the study of mediators and moderators: Examples from the child-clinical and pediatric psychology literatures." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 65: 699-710. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.65.4.599

Hu, L. T., and Bentler, P. M. 1999. "Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives." *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 6*(1): 1-55. doi:10.1080/10705519909540118

Kanso, A. M., Nelson, R. A., and Kitchen, P. J. 2020. "BP and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill: a case study of how company management employed public relations to restore a damaged brand." *Journal of Marketing Communications, 26*(7):703-731.

Khundyz, Z. 2018. "The influence factors of brand loyalty: mobile phone industry." *American Journal of Industrial and Business Management* 8 (6): 1624-1633. doi:10.4236/ajibm.2018.86108.

Kline, R. B. 1998. "Software review: Software programs for structural equation modeling: Amos, EQS, and LISREL." *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment 16*(4): 343-364. doi:10.1177/073428299801600407.

Krishna, A. and Kim, S. 2020. "Understanding customers' reactions to allegations of corporate environmental irresponsibility." *Journalism and Mass Communication*

Quarterly, 1-24. doi: 10.1177/1077699020958756

Krishna, A., and Kim, S. 2019. "Treating Ivanka unfairly: Understanding the Impact of presidential tweeting on publics' perceptions and intentions to boycott corporations." *Corporate Communication: An International Journal 24*(4): 636-652. doi:10.1108/CCIJ-10-2018-0109.

Krishna, A., and Kim, S. (2016). "Encouraging the rise of fan publics: Bridging strategy to understand fan publics' positive communicative actions." In *Public Relations and Participatory Culture: Fandom, Social Media, and Community Engagement,* edited by A. Hutchins and N. Tindall, 21-32. London and New York: Routledge

Ledingham, J. A., and Bruning, S. D. 1998. "Relationship management in public relations: Dimensions of an organization-public relationship." *Public Relations Review* 24(1): 55–65. doi: 10.1016/S0363-8111(98)80020-9.

Lellis, J. C. 2012. "Cause identity: A measurement of disability organizations' communicated values." *Public Relations Review,* 38(3): 508–510. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.02.005.

Lin, J. S., and Sung, Y. 2014. "Nothing can tear us apart: The effect of brand identity fusion in consumer–brand relationships." *Psychology and Marketing* 31:54-69. doi:10.1002/mar.20675.

Lindenmeier, J., Schleer, C., and Pricl, D. 2012. "Consumer outrage: Emotional reactions to unethical corporate behavior.*" Journal of Business Research 65*: 1364-1373. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.09.022

Ma, L. 2018. "I am one of them: Examining crisis communication from an intergroup communication approach." *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 27(1): 50-60. doi:10.1111/1468-5973.12232

Maidenberg, M. (2017). "United Airlines profit rises despite boycott threats over passenger treatment." *The New York Times,* July 18.

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/18/business/united-airlines-profit-earnings.html

Malär, L., H. Krohmer, W.D. Hoyer, and B. Nyffenegger. 2011. "Emotional brand
  attachment and brand personality: The relative importance of the actual and the ideal
  self." *Journal of Marketing 75*(4): 35–52. doi:10.1509/jmkg.75.4.35.

Macnamara, J. 2016. "The continuing convergence of journalism and PR." *Journalism and
  Mass Communication Quarterly 93*: 118–141. doi:10.1177/1077699015605803.

Martin, H. 2017. "United Airlines' passenger-dragging incident hasn't hurt the bottom line."
  LA Times, May 8. https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-united-finances-20170508-
  story.html

Mazar, N., Amir, O., and Ariely, D. 2008. "The dishonesty of honest people: A theory of
  self-concept maintenance." *Journal of Marketing Research 45* (6): 633–644. doi:
  10.1509/jmkr.45.6.633.

McCurry, J. 2017. "Samsung's acting head indicted on bribery charges as scandal grows."
  Guardian, March 1. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/28/samsung-head-
  indicted-on-bribery-charges-as-scandal-grows

Melewar, T. C. 2010. "Determinants of the corporate identity construct: a review of the
  literature. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 9(4): 195-220.

Mikulincer, M., and Shaver, P. R. 2001. "Attachment theory and intergroup bias: Evidence
  that priming the secure base schema attenuates negative reactions to out-groups."
  Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 81(1): 97-115. doi: 10.1037/0022-
  3514.81.1.97

Moon, B.B., and Yang, S.-U. 2015. "Why public terminate their relationship with
  organizations: exploring antecedents of relationship dissolution in South Korea."
  Asian Journal of Communication 25(3): 288-306.
  doi:10.1080/01292986.2014.960876

Ni, L., Wang, Q., and Gogate, A. 2018. "Understanding immigrant internal publics of organizations: Immigrant professionals' adaptation and identity development." *Journal of Public Relations Research 30*(4): 146-163. doi:10.1080/1062726X.2018.1490289

Neilson, L. A. 2010. "Boycott or buycott? Understanding political consumerism." *Journal of Consumer Behavior* 9: 214-227. doi:10.1002/cb.313.

Oetzel, J. G. 2009. *Intercultural Communication: A Layered Approach*. New York, NY: Vango Books.

Ortiz, M. H, Reynolds, K. E., and Franke, G. R. 2013. "Measuring consumer devotion: Antecedents and consequences of passionate consumer behavior." *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice 21*(1): 7-30. doi: 10.2753/MTP1069-6679210101.

Paek, H. J., and Nelson, M. R. 2009. "To buy or not to buy: Determinants of socially responsible consumer behavior and consumer reactions to cause-related and boycotting ads." *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising* 31: 75-90. doi: 10.1080/10641734.2009.10505267.

Panigyrakis, G., Panopoulous, A, & Koronaki, E. 2020. "Looking for luxury CSR practices that make more sense: The role of corporate identity and consumer attitude." *Journal of Marketing Communications* 26(6): 666-684. doi: 10.1080/13527266.2018.1556317

Pich, C., Dean, D., & Punjaisri, K. 2014. "Political brand identity: An examination of the complexities of conservative brand and internal market engagement during the 2010 UK general election campaign." *Journal of Marketing Communications 22*(1): 100-117.

Pimental, R. W., and Reynolds, K .E. 2004. "A model for consumer devotion: Affective commitment with proactive sustaining behaviors." *Academy of Marketing Science Review 5*: 1-45.

Saju, B., Harikrishnan, K., and Anand, S. J. J. 2018. "Modeling brand immunity: the moderating role of generational cohort membership." *Journal of Brand Management* 25: 133-146. doi: 10.1057/s41262-017-0063-3.

Sha, B.-L. 1995. "*Intercultural public relations: Exploring cultural identity as a means of segmenting publics.*" PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park.

Sha, B.-L. 2006. "Cultural identity in the segmentation of publics: An emerging theory of intercultural public relations." *Journal of Public Relations Research* 18(1): 45–65. doi:10.1207/s1532754xjprr1801_3.

Sha, B.-L. 2009. "Exploring the connection between organizational identity and public relations behaviors: How symmetry trumps conservation in engendering organizational identification." *Journal of Public Relations Research* 21(3): 295–317. doi:10.1080/10627260802640765.

Sha, B.-L., Tindall, N. T. J., and Sha, T.-L. 2012. "Identity and culture: Implications for public relations." In Culture and public relations: Links and implications, edited by K. Sriramesh and D. Vercic, 67–90. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis/Routledge.

Sisco, H. F. 2012. "Nonprofit in crisis: An examination of the applicability of situational crisis communication theory." *Journal of Public Relations Research 24*(1): 1-17. doi: 10.1080/1062726X.2011.582207.

Sohn, Y. J., and Lariscy, R. W. 2015. "A 'buffer' or 'boomerang?' – The role of corporate reputation in bad times." *Communication Research 39*: 701–723. doi:10.1177/0093650212466891.

Stuart, H., & Kerr, G. 1999. "Marketing communication and corporate identity: Are they integrated?" *Journal of Marketing Communications* 5(4): 169-179. doi: /10.1080/135272699345572.

Swann Jr, W. B., Gómez, Á., Seyle, D. C., Morales, J., and Huici, C. 2009. "Identity fusion:

The interplay of personal and social identities in extreme group behavior." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96(5): 995-1011. doi:10.1037/a0013668

Swann, W. B. Jr., Gómez, A., Huici, C., Morales, F., & Hixon, J. G. 2011. "Identity fusion and self-sacrifice: Arousal as catalyst of pro-group fighting, dying and helping behavior." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99: 824–841. doi: 10.1037/a0020014

Swann, W. B. Jr., Jetten, J., Gómez, A., Whitehouse, H., and Bastian, B. 2012. "When group membership gets personal: A theory of identity fusion." *Psychological Review* 119(3):441– 456. doi:10.1037/a0028589.

Swann, W. B. Jr., Buhrmester, M. D. 2015. "Identity fusion." Current Directions in *Psychological Science* 24(1): 52-57.

Shu, L. L., Gino, F., and Bazerman, M.H. 2011. "Dishonest deed, clear conscience: When cheating leads to moral disengagement and motivated forgetting." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 37* (3): 330–349. doi:10.1177/0146167211398138

Tuškej, U., Golob, U., and Podnar, K. 2013. "The role of consumer-brand identification in building brand relationships." *Journal of Business Research* 66(1): 53-59. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.07.022.

Wei, J., Wang, Q., Yu, Y., and Zhao, D. 2019. "Public engagement in product recall announcements: an empirical study on the Chinese automobile industry." *Journal of Marketing Communications* 25(4): 343-364.

Yuksel, U., and Myrteza, V. 2009. An evaluation of strategic responses to consumer boycotts. *Journal of Business Research 62*: 248-259. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.01.032

Zainol, Z., Yasin, N. M., Omar, N. A., and Hashim, N. M. H. N. 2014. "Determining the key factors of customer-brand relationship investment dimensions: Insights from Malaysian mobile phone users." *Journal of Relationship Marketing* 13(4): 318-342.

Tables

Table 1

Distribution of Sample by Age

Age Group	Frequency
18-24	65
25-34	102
35-44	91
45-54	86
55-64	78
65 and older	103

Table 2

Summary of Measurement Items, Reliability Metrics, Means, and Standard Deviations

Variable	Item	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha if item deleted	Mean	Standard Deviation
Brand identity fusion (Lin and Sung 2014)	I am one with [mobile brand name]	.956	.948	2.71	1.292
	I feel immersed in [mobile brand name]		.947	2.63	1.257
	I have a deep emotional bond with [mobile brand name]		.946	2.51	1.273
	[mobile brand name]is me		.945	2.56	1.312
	I will do for [mobile brand name] more than any of the other mobile brand fans would do		.951	2.43	1.252
	I am strong because of [mobile brand name]		.952	2.29	1.233
	I make [mobile brand name] strong			2.48	1.271
Brand immunity (Lin and Sung 2014)	My relationship with this brand is not affected by this situation.	.884	.835	2.30	1.207
	This situation does not change my general view of the brand.		.856	2.25	1.221
	I will NOT change my relationship with this brand based on this situation.		.817	2.35	1.232

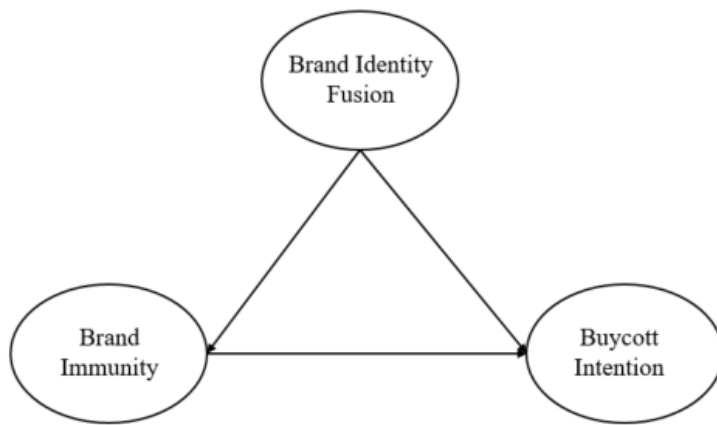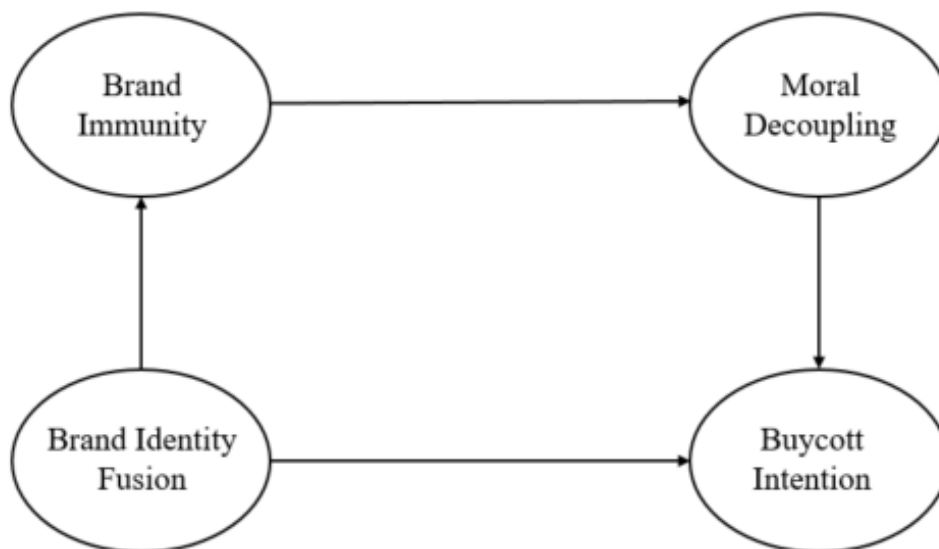|				
Moral decoupling (Bhattacharjee, Berman, and Reed II 2012).	The method of production does NOT change my assessment of the company's performance.	.867	.836	2.30	1.195
	Judgments of performance should remain separate from judgments of morality.		.800	2.44	1.255
	Reports of wrongdoing should not affect our view of the company's performance.		.802	2.16	1.180
Buycott intention (Paek and Nelson 2009)	I intend to make a special effort to buy from [the mobile brand]	.933	.911	2.22	1.173
	I intend to support [the mobile brand] by choosing it consciously over other brands		.893	2.25	1.237
	I intend to participate in collective movements in favour of [the mobile brand].		.904	2.14	1.159

Table 3.

Bicorrelations

	Brand identity fusion	Buycott intention	Brand immunity	Moral decoupling
Brand identify fusion	1			
Buycott intention	.456**	1		
Brand immunity	.375**	.651**	1	
Moral decoupling	.343**	.638**	.820**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Figures

Figure 1. Model with no mediator

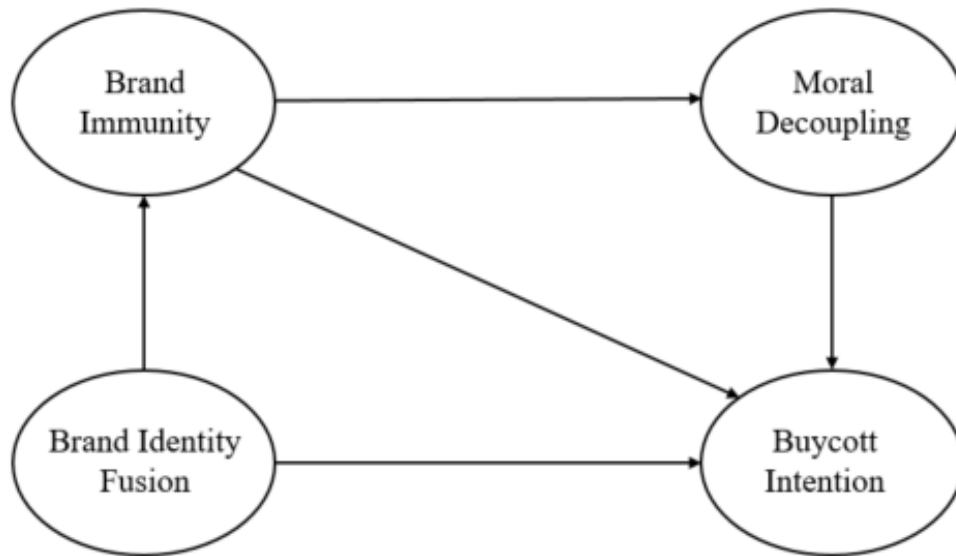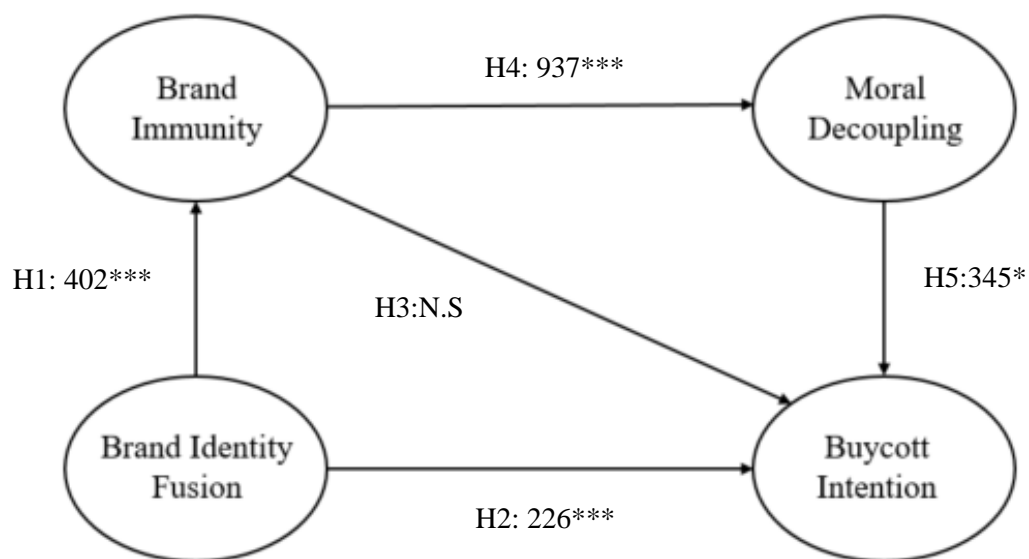*Figure 2.* Model with full mediation

Figure 3. Model with partial mediation

Measurement Model
Chi-square[df]=193.037[96]
CFI = .988
RMSEA = .044
SRMR = .027

Structural Equation Model
Chi-square(df)= 193.053[97]
CFI = .988
RMSEA = .043
SRMR = .027

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Figure 4. Results of hypothesis testing

Appendix 1. Vignette

You have come to a café to meet a friend for coffee. While waiting, you decide to check your social media feeds, and come across a news article stating that several global companies have reportedly been disposing of toxic waste from their production facilities in Australia into clean water sources, such as streams, rivers, and lakes, contaminating the water supply for several communities. Tens of thousands of Australians have been exposed to toxic waste through their water supply, and communities will be monitored by health officials for signs of poisoning, and other potential health risks, including cancer. Officials from the Department of the Environment and Energy estimate that the cleanup of these water sources could take decades and cost several millions of dollars. In the news article, Greenpeace Australia notes that these companies have been intentionally rejecting safe toxic waste disposal techniques to save money and maximize profits, opting instead for the cheaper route of disposing of toxic waste into water sources. One of the companies accused of unsafe toxic waste disposal is [brand name].