Meanings, Mistakes and the Consumer Brand Relationship

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Abstract: *The current study seeks to explore the link between different forms of brand meanings that characterize consumer brand relationships, and the role played by these meanings and their relative importance in situations where brands violate the expected norm of the said relationship. We undertake a study of the recent Facebook data breach and evaluate the impact it had on the various consumer-accepted brand meanings basis which we propose that the impact of a brand transgression will depend upon the originally held brand meaning and the extent to which this meaning has been altered by the brand transgression.*
Keywords: Brand Meaning, Brand Transgression, Consumer brand relationship

I. Brand Meaning

Brand meaning has been considered by scholars as a requisite in the creation of a brand itself. For instance, Schultz and Barnes (1999) proposed that a brand was created mainly through the different forms of communication that transferred meaning. This is similar to an earlier view held by Gardner and Levy (1955) that for brand management to be successful, the operationalization of a particular brand meaning and its reinforcement thereon were imperative. In 1984-5, Plummer proposed that in a social context, a brand's meaning was required to possess consistency and agreement on its physical makeup, functional characteristics, and characterization, that is personality (Plummer, 1985; Sayin & Gurhan-Canli, 2015).   Kenny (1994) presented brand meaning as a communication mode- a way of recognizing the product/brand. Just like the tendency of individuals to perceive others based on their socially exhibited qualities and characteristics (Kenny, 1994), Aaker (1997) extended the notion to brands and their use in social situations.

In alignment with these earlier notions, Ligas and Cotte (1999) proposed that the efficiency of a marketer's construction and presentation of a brand to a specific consumer segment would be low if the brand had various meanings. Even if there existed an implied meaning, a consumer might find it difficult to convey this implied meaning to others, if such a meaning were to be undefined/ambiguous or inconsistently recognized. They further outlined what implied agreement on three components of brand meaning, as outlined by Plummer (1985). According to Ligas and Cotte (1999), the physical makeup or physical attributes of a brand allowed various consumers to easily identify a brand over others, such as the unique shape of a product or brand logo, then the brand meaning would be consistent in the physical makeup. Similarly, it was easy to identify and validate the agreement on the functionality of a brand, for instance, through repeated consumption of the product/service with the same objective/ for the same task. The last component, characterization or brand personality was difficult to agree upon, as the brand could mean different things to different people, depending upon the role played by the brand in someone's life and thus, while this component had the potential to draw in an individual consumer, it also offered opportunity to explore shared meaning.

The roots of this school of thought which focusses upon the need for a consistent and clear brand meaning has been explained by Berthon et al. (2009) in the belief that when the communication around a brand offers a consistent and clear meaning of what the brand represents, consumer learning is likely to be facilitated, and an alignment of a consumer's meaning of the brand with the firm's would result in the success of the brand (Berthon, Leyland, & Campbell, 2009). This view, therefore, implies that brand meaning was a part of brand management and the interactions between the organization and its customers, with the control lying with brand managers (Schultz and Barnes, 1999).

However, explorations in the understanding of brand meaning in the post-modern era present a different structure, where the control over the meaning of a brand rests not just with the managers. Instead, the brand meaning is co-created by both managers as well as brand users, through ongoing interactions (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009). Therefore, when consumers interact with one another and the organization, they create a loyalty sustaining and mutually beneficial meaning (Holt, 2004). However, consumers can offer significant backlash or disapproval if they perceive the brand as deviating from this core promise and in light of increased

connectivity, it becomes imperative to understand and evaluate the meanings that consumers may ascribe to a brand (Campbell & Keller, 2003).

II. Different Types of Brand Meanings

Similar to the theory of the components of brand meaning, namely- physical makeup, functional characteristics and characterization or personality (Plummer, 1985; Ligas and Cotte, 1999), it was suggested by Park et al. (1986), that brand could assume various meanings, namely, symbolic, functional and/or experiential meanings (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). According to Sayin and Gurhan Canli (2015), the functional meaning of a brand is related to functional performance, i.e., the brand fulfills a functional need for the consumer (Sayin and Gurhan Canli, 2015). A brand with an experiential meaning, according to Park et al. (1986) is one that has been designed to provide 'sensory pleasure, variety and cognitive stimulation to its consumer' (Park et al. 1986). According to Solomon et al., the symbolic meaning of a brand is instrumental in fulfilling an intrinsic consumer need as it reduces the gap between a consumer's desired and actual self (Solomon, Zaichkowsky, & Polegato, 2008). A brand's symbolic meaning has also been seen as manifested in brand personality/characterization which may then define the consumer brand relationship. For example, consumers may choose brands whose symbolic meaning is either suitable to their self- concept or allows them to reveal a specific image of the self (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), serving as a communication tool when it comes to expressing their self- concept to the social environment (Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). Infact, the brand may also be incorporated in the self- concept of the consumer, becoming a part of her/his extended self (Belk, 1988).

III. Brand Meaning and Consumer Brand Relationships

Having established a brand meaning, it becomes possible to differentiate a brand from others, insulate from competitors and enhance the performance of the brand (Shocker & Srinivasan, 1979). It is to be noted here, that a consumer will accept or recognize a brand meaning if it is in alignment with certain needs or holds relevance. Once the understanding/ meaning becomes shared, consumers may then use this shared meaning to express their self-concept to others (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998). It is in this transference of meaning that can have a significant impact on the consumer's selection of a brand, and the genesis of a consumer brand relationship may take place. More importantly, based on the meaning of the brand for the consumer, the nature of the consumer brand relationship may get affected. Thus, it becomes crucial to understand what the brand means to a consumer to grasp the consumer brand relationship. Also, consumer brand relationship can be treated as similar to interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998).

Further, for a relationship to exist in true form, there must be evident interdependence between the partners in terms of affecting, defining or redefining the relationship (Hinde, 1979). Given the similarity of consumer brand relationships with interpersonal relationships, it may so happen that a partner particularly the brand, may engage in behavior that violates the rules, implicit or explicit, of this relationship. That is, a partner may sometimes engage in damaging behaviors that violate implicit or explicit rules of the relationship, known as transgressions (Metts, 1994). It then becomes a question of interest as to how can consumers be expected to react if a brand behaves in a way that breaches the norms underlining their brand relationship?

IV. Brand Transgressions and their impact on brand meaning and consumer-brand relationships

As defined by Aaker et al., brand transgressions are any violation of the explicit or implicit rules that guide the brand-consumer relationship (Metts, 1994; Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). This broad definition is inclusive of various brand behaviors, ranging from product failures to inappropriate acts of spokespersons (Sayin & Gurhan-Canli, 2015). A typically held view regarding a transgression is that they are inherently devastating because they present negative influences that may threaten the relationship (Buysse, De Clercq, Verhofstadt, Heene, Roeyers, &Van Oost, 2000). Thus, Aaker et al. (2004) propose that though they may vary in the causes and/or severity, all transgressions possess the ability to affect relationships and may be treated as hallmarks or most significant event in the relationship.

In the current paper, we propose that the extent to which a transgression has the potential to negatively influence a consumer brand relationship is based on the impact of such transgression on the brand meaning. That is, if a transgression has limited or no impact on the consumer-created and accepted brand meaning, it will have a weaker impact on the consumer brand relationship as compared to a transgression that directly impacts the commonly perceived brand meaning. Further, drawing from the proposition described by literature that the consumer brand relationship is based on the meaning of the brand for consumers, we propose that if a transgression impacts the meaning most crucial to a consumer brand relationship, it will have the maximum impact on the said relation. However, if the transgression affects a meaning that does not form the primary basis of the consumer brand relationship, the impact will be relatively lower on the relationship. For the analysis in

this paper, we consider the three different brand meanings offered by Ligas and Cotte (1999). We further seek to explore the impact that brand transgressions can have on the three different types of brand meaning and the overall brand relationship through a case study of a recent brand transgression, namely the Facebook breach of consumer data, 2018.

V. The Facebook Data Breach Crisis, 2018

The origin of the data breach at Facebook dates back to 2013 when an app named 'This Is Your Digital Life', a personality quiz which was created by Cambridge University professor Aleksandr Kogan. The app, which had been used by over three million users on Facebook allowed Kogan to not only access the data of the users but of those as well who were friends with the users of the app. However, in 2014, Facebook enforced limitations on developer access to user data. Hereon, a developer would be unable to access the data of a user's friend unless she/he also gave permission. The data that had been collected by developers in general and Kogan in particular thus far, however, had not been deleted by the said developers. The first report of a data leak from Facebook came in December 2015. It was reported by the Guardian that Cambridge Analytica was involved in assisting the presidential campaign of Ted Cruz using the data obtained from Kogan's app. According to Facebook, in response to the data leak, they banned the app and further required the deletion of this data by both Kogan and Cambridge Analytica. As per Facebook, both parties had certified that the said data had been deleted. However, it was not until whistleblower Christopher Wylie's revelation followed by reports in the New York Times and Observer on 17th and 18th March 2018 respectively that the news of data leak of over fifty million user profiles made headlines across the world. The data leak had been used to assist in political campaigns such as Pro- Brexit and the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. Wylie revealed that the data had been collected from Kogan's app and later utilized to target voters based on profiling, misleading users, and planting fake news.

In response to the crisis, Facebook announced the suspension of Facebook then announced it Cambridge Analytica and its parent group, Strategic Communications Laboratory for its platform, followed by an independent audit to examine Analytica's claims. While the news resulted in mounting pressure on Facebook from both governments and businesses, with the US Congress and the Parliamentary committee of the United Kingdom on Digital, Culture, Media, and Sports asking Facebook Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg to testify, consumer disapproval became a crucial pain point for Facebook with the hashtag #DeleteFacebook gaining traction. Finally, Zuckerberg admitted to Facebook having "failed its users" and agreed to testify before the United States Congress. While the news resulted in widespread criticism of its data practices, Facebook also assured of a commitment to enforcing robust policies to prevent any potential data violations.

VI. Understanding the Brand Meaning of Facebook

According to studies conducted by Ariyachandra and Bertaux (2010), it was reported that the major factors which influenced the intensity of usage of social networking were the desire to get information and the enjoyment gained from the activity- similar to the functional and experiential brand meanings (Ariyachandra and Bertaux, 2010; Park et al., 1986; Sayin & Gurhan Canli, 2015). Similar findings were reported by Ariyachandra and Bertaux (2009), who found, based on qualitative and open-ended questions, the emphasis placed by respondents on the utilitarian and fun aspects of using social networking sites. Theoretically, one may expect these results based on behavioral models like the rational utility maximizing behavior. The other factors influencing usage and intensity of use are based on social norms and the web experience. These factors can also be justified based on behavioral models because experience provides an individual with skills that make social networking an easier exercise, reducing time and energy costs. Finally, if the social norms, in alignment with the symbolic meaning (Park et al., 1984), encourage usage of social networking, it implies social approval which in turn reduces the reluctance and increases the perception of benefits through such usage (Ariyachandra and Bertaux, 2010). Another notable observation from the studies by Ariyachandra and Bertaux (2010), notably in the case of Facebook, was that the there was no significant correlation between social networking usage and concerns for trust, privacy, and security. Similarly, it was reported by Knox (2010) that young individuals appeared to place little concern in the risks and dangers that may be associated with disclosing personal information on social media (Knox, 2010). A plausible explanation offered by Knox is that young individuals may display less concern regarding for information protection because of the value placed by them on the utility served by the platform like information received/sent.

Among other variables that displayed little significance, however, were linked with the concept of symbolic brand meaning such as self-esteem and the desire to give information. In other words, individual psychological motivators held less proportionate importance in the usage of social networking (Ariyachandra and Bertaux, 2010).

VII. Consumer Reaction to Facebook's Transgression

While there was little or no change in the functional aspects of Facebook and its usage, there was a significant change in the symbolic elements associated with its use. Strongest hit was the trust element in the consumer- brand relationship. For instance, according to a survey by Ponemon Institute, an independent research firm with specialization in data protection and privacy, it was found that while 79 per cent users believed in the company's commitment to privacy a year before the news of data breach, the trust was down to 28 per cent post Zuckerberg's testimony. Based on a survey of 3000 American Facebook users, the institute however also reported that most people realized that their information was being collected or shared. However, over 65 per cent respondents believed that Facebook should disclose how it used their personal information. However, even though about nine per cent respondents reported that they stopped using Facebook, the institute predicted that the likelihood that users would stop using Facebook was low. This prediction was eventually realized, when Facebook experienced a complete recovery in share prices (Business Insider, 2018) with a Goldman Sachs report citing a seven percent year on year growth in unique users on mobile (as quoted in Business Insider, 2018).

VIII. Discussion

While the data debacle had been billed as the biggest crisis for Facebook, it appears to have left the company unscathed. At this junction, the authors offer the following explanation for the same. While the scandal significantly affected the symbolic meaning of Facebook, it had no impact on the functional meaning of the brand and little or no impact on the experiential meaning; while the data breach may have resulted in Facebook initiating various efforts to ensure greater privacy, the changes did not impact or alter the utility or front-end user experience of the platform. That is, the most significant meaning that defined the consumer brand relationship remained intact.

While there was a significant impact on the symbolic meaning, particularly consumer trust, the brand relationship was able to survive the transgression on an aggregate level due to the relatively lower importance ascribed to this meaning by consumers while forming the consumer brand relationship.

The study has various implications. When analyzing the impacts of a transgression or failure, it is essential to understand what the brand means to the consumer. While various studies study the mediating role played by singular factors such as trust or brand personality, we propose that an essential element in the consumer brand relationship, that is, brand meaning, may play a crucial role in assessing and navigating the aftermath of a transgression. Thus, the study of the Facebook data breach crisis brings to attention the observation that when a transgression does not alter the core consumer defined brand meaning, the brand will be able to survive a transgression that is, the consumer will be more forgiving and in some cases even indifferent.

VIII. Future Research

The current study is based on a single, recent transgression of a popular brand. The study can be further enriched by analyzing the role played by culture in understanding the consumer response to brand transgressions and the mediating role of brand meaning. Further, the study can be compared with other brand transgressions to assess the validity of this paper's proposition and if changes in the brand meaning due to a transgression will necessarily impact the consumer brand relation. A future research proposition can also be along the lines of evaluating if there is a hierarchy of effects within the different brand meanings, that is if any brand meaning holds greater significance over the others across transgressions or is context a variable that impacts relationships from brand to brand.

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