Nothing Can Tear Us Apart: The Effect of Brand Identity Fusion in Consumer–Brand Relationships

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ABSTRACT

While existing literature describes strong brand relationships along several dimensions, this research sheds light on the identity perspective of consumer–brand relationships through the lens of brand identity fusion. Specifically, this research examines the effect of brand identity fusion on consumers' responses to different brand transgressions. By comparing brand identity fusion with brand identification, this research also provides evidence that brand identity fusion is more predictive and enduring in explaining consumers' relationship-serving biases and prorelationship behaviors in the face of brand transgressions. The applicability of brand identity fusion for understanding connections between consumers and brand relationship partners in consumer–brand relationships is presented, followed by discussions of theoretical and managerial implications and directions for future research. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Ever since notions about brand personality (J. L. Aaker, 1997) and consumer–brand relationships (Fournier, 1998) were introduced in marketing and consumer psychology literature, numerous studies have examined and validated the applicability of treating brands as personified relationship partners in the context of brand consumption (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Because consumers tend to attribute human characteristics to nonhuman objects, brand personification can be linked to anthropomorphism and, therefore, comprehended by consumers (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011; McDougall, 1911).

The multifaceted relationships that have developed between consumers and brands have offered both academics and practitioners profound implications for understanding consumers' perceptions and behaviors (Belk, 1988; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Fournier, 2009). The importance of building strong consumer–brand relationships is more pronounced in today's marketplace, given that companies and their brands do not always behave according to consumers' expectations; thus, the relationship trajectory is highly susceptible to interruptions caused by negative events (J. L. Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). Examples over recent decades include the Exxon and BP oil spills, Johnson and Johnson's series of product recalls, and Nike's use of sweatshop labor, among others. Consequently, brand transgressions, ranging from product failure and poor service to companies' violations of social codes, may serve as defining moments that lead to significantly negative financial and psychological consequences (J. L. Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004).

Even though brand transgressions may challenge brand integrity, research has shown that strong brand relationships may mitigate destructive effects (e.g., Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaran, 1998). Specifically, some studies have followed the tradition of the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to characterize the intensity of strong consumer–brand relationships. This line of research has documented the buffering effects of identification—one of social identity perspective's key constructs—on consumers' coping responses to brand transgressions (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006).

Recently, Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, and Bastian (2012) have argued that use of the social identity approach may overlook the interplay of personal and social identities in analyses of group processes. Theoretically speaking, when individuals feel identified with a social group, they undergo a cognitive process of depersonalization which minimizes the influence of the personal self on group behavior. That is, highly identified people may robotically follow group norms yet fail to fully engage their salient personal selves in the service of the group (Gómez, Brooks et al., 2011; Swann,}
Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009). In contrast, fusion theory holds that individuals’ personal selves may remain agentic when they feel fused with a social group (Swann et al., 2012). Their personal and social selves may relate to, rather than compete with, each other. Existing empirical evidence has shown that identity fusion provides the motivational machinery needed for individuals to work for the benefit of the social group and to undertake radical actions on behalf of the group (e.g., Gómez, Morales, Hart, Vázquez, & Swann, 2011). Considering that a more complete understanding of consumers’ self-brand connections requires a grasp of the underlying mechanism of such relationships, this research—which applies identity fusion—attempts to offer a richer understanding of consumers’ sense of being interconnected with brands and their behavior in response to brand transgressions.

Although there have been growing concerns about consumer responses to brand transgressions, the efficacy of various coping strategies, and factors that can moderate the process (e.g., Ahluwalia, Unnava, & Burnkrant, 2001; Klein & Dawer, 2004), there continues to be a relatively scant research on how and why some consumers in strong brand relationships are more tolerant of the negative impact of brand transgressions. Therefore, this research sheds light on the identity perspective of brand relationships and seeks to disentangle the motivational consequences of consumers’ feelings of oneness with brands in the face of brand transgressions. Specifically, this research brings to light the conceptual properties of brand identity fusion that distinguish this construct from brand identification, arguing that brand identity fusion is a stronger predictor of consumers’ relationship-sustaining behaviors.

Besides being of theoretical interest, the results of this research have significant managerial implications for marketers, suggesting that brand identity fusion may serve as the ultimate destination for consumer–brand relationships. Given that brands are increasingly personified around consumers’ need for belonging and that consumers’ ownership of certain brands may serve to craft, affirm, and manage consumers’ self-identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995), the current research helps illuminate the dynamics of self-brand connections and expands the scope and depth of work on research and practice pertaining to strategic development and maintenance of consumer–brand relationships.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brand Personification and Consumer–Brand Relationships

With the introduction of the concept of consumer–brand relationship in marketing and consumer research, the anthropomorphization of brands has been taken to its logical conclusion (Bengtsson, 2003). Anthropomorphism refers to the universal human tendency to ascribe human characteristics to nonhuman entities (McDougall, 1911; Messent & Serpell, 1981). These human characteristics can include any perspective of “intelligent, animated beings, like beliefs, desires, intentions, goals, plans, psychological states, powers, and will” (Turner, 1987, p. 175). Although anthropomorphic qualities are most commonly associated with living creatures (e.g., animals; Hirschman, 1994), they are also associated with inanimate entities (e.g., automobiles; Levy, 1959). For example, more than three decades ago, Weizenbaum (1976) characterized the computer as not just an object but as personified intelligence. He described computers as follows: “They are) bright young men of disheveled appearance, often with sunken glowing eyes . . . They work until they nearly drop, twenty, thirty hours at a time. Their food, if they arrange it, is brought to them: coffee, Cokes, sandwiches” (Weizenbaum, 1976, p. 116). Since the computer can convincingly stimulate human conversation, it is not surprising that operators of computers should act at times as if the computer were truly another person (Schieibe & Erwin, 1979). This shows a typical conceptual metaphor as well as the underlying process of personification: “computers are people.”

The idea that consumers can have a relationship with a brand as an extension of the brand-as-person metaphor is evidenced by the concept of brand personality. According to brand personality theorists (e.g., J. L. Aaker, 1997), a brand can become associated with a set of personality traits, and this personality can differentiate a particular brand from its competitors. Consumers form trait inferences from any direct and indirect contact that they experience with brands, and these trait inferences can then form the basis for their evaluative conceptions of the brands (Sung & Kim, 2010). As a result, people think of brands as having human characteristics and personalities and interact with brands in ways that parallel social relationships; further, their interactions may be guided by norms that govern social relationships (Aggarwal, 2004). With this in mind, as part of the overall marketing strategy, marketers often design an anthropomorphized representation of a brand (e.g., Apple’s “I’m a Mac” advertising campaign), imbue brands with images and distinct personalities, or present a product itself in human terms (J. L. Aaker, 1997; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Lau & Phau, 2007). These marketing efforts have been found to impact consumer evaluation of products (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007), affect brand perceived credibility (Keller, 2003), and foster consumer–brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001).

The fruitful theoretical background of a brand relationship perspective provides researchers with abundant opportunities to explore and examine bonds between consumers and brands along with roles that brands play in consumers’ daily lives (Breivik & Thorbjørnsen, 2008). Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been employed to study a wider range of topics, such as the nature and properties of different...
types of consumer–brand relationships (e.g., J. L. Aaker & Fournier, 1995; Miller, Fournier, & Allen, 2012), goals and motivations that foster these relationships (e.g., Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Reimann & Aron, 2009), factors responsible for the dissolution of these relationships (e.g., J. L. Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004), and the psychological and behavioral effects of strong brand relationships (e.g., Ahuvia, Betra, & Bagozzi, 2009; Wegner, Sawicki, & Petty, 2009). Those studies converge on the findings that some consumers form brand relationships akin to their interpersonal relationships (Aggarwal, 2004): that is, consumers care not only about brand function benefits, but also about relational (and symbolic) aspects of brand perception (Fournier, 2009) along with the emotional makeup of brand relationships (Ahuvia, 2005; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005).

Transgressions in Consumer–Brand Relationships

Considering the dynamic and interdependent nature of consumer–brand relationships (Fournier, 2009), it is reasonable to expect that fluctuations in person, brand, and environmental factors may trigger the evolution of relationships or precipitate a decline. Along this line of reasoning, prior research has suggested that one factor often singled out for its determinant effects on consumer–brand relationships is the commission of a transgression (J. L. Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004), which is a violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluation (Mets, 1994). Akin to social relationships, relationship transgressions may range from preference conflicts to acts that are inconsiderate and irritating to acts of betrayal (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003); moreover, transgressions may result in consumers’ feelings of injury and resentment and adversely influence the stability of relationships (Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, & Davila, 2005). Although transgressions may vary in their severity and cause and may differ in their ultimate negotiations, all are considered significant in their ability to impact the relationship process (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002).

However, a growing body of work shows there are several contingencies that may mitigate the destructive influence of transgression incidents (e.g., Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Einwiller et al., 2006; Schmalz & Orth, 2012). For example, Berry (1995) noted that consumers who are involved in affective and social relationships with brands may exhibit greater tolerance for failures. Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran (1998) found that positive prior experience with brands may buffer the negative effects of poor service with regard to consumers’ commitment and trust toward brands. Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant (2001) further suggested that commitment is useful for marketers in limiting the impact of negative brand information on consumers. Einwiller et al. (2006) observed that the effect of negative brand information on consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions is moderated by consumers’ identification with a company but that when brand information is extremely negative, such buffering effects may be limited.

Taken together, scholarship concerning brand transgressions devotes itself to identifying the significance of negative events and factors that serve to buffer the negative effect of brand transgressions across various domains. This line of research converges on the notions that relationship-serving biases may dilute the negativity effects of brand transgressions and that past positives may cancel these effects in long-term relationships (Wiseman, 1986). Therefore, consumers in strong brand relationships are relatively insulated from negativity effects and are more forgiving and benevolent when brand perception is challenged by negative circumstances (Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2012). As Fournier and Brasel (2002) pointed out, only a few studies have investigated how consumers respond to breaches in the context of consumer–brand relationships. Because there is considerable variability in consumers’ predispositions to form relationships with brands (Price & Arnould, 1999), more research is needed to increase marketers’ sensitivities to distal factors that might moderate or qualify the effects of brand transgressions on brand relationship development dynamics. That need for more research offers a path for the current inquiry.

Social Identity Approach to Self-Brand Identity Connections

Ever since the term self-concept was applied to the consumer research domain, researchers have seemed to agree that self-concept denotes the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). This research stream has been insightful for describing, explaining, and predicting the role of consumers’ self-concepts in consumer attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Sirgy, 1982; Sung & Choi, 2012). As a facet of brand relationship quality, the self-brand connection reflects “the degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks, or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of self” (Fournier, 1998, p. 364). These connections may support relationship maintenance through the development of protective feelings of uniqueness and dependence (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992) and the encouragement of accommodation in the face of adversity (Lydon & Zanna, 1990).

While the identity perspective on consumer–brand relationships highlights the symbolic mechanisms of these relationships (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995), recent investigations have applied the social identity approach to understand the phenomenon. Because symbolic meanings can be transferred between brands and the self (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005;
Identity Fusion

In social psychology, identity fusion (Swann et al., 2012) is a form of alignment with a social entity that entails a powerful union of the personal and social self. Drawing on the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that lays the groundwork for understanding the role of the social self in a group context, and the self-verification theory (Swann, 1983) that offers insights into a highly agentic personal self in such contexts, Swann et al. (2009) noted that fused individuals feel strongly connected to a social group yet remain a potent personal self. Such feelings of connectedness involve relational ties and are relatively stable.

For fused individuals, social identities are intensely personal as they care as much about the outcomes of the social group as about their own personal outcomes. In that sense, identity fusion may be particularly important when facing challenges to one’s personal or social identities. The merger of the personal and social self does not undermine, but synergistically amplifies, tendencies to engage in progroup behaviors on behalf of the group associated with that social identity. Moreover, identity fusion is associated with beliefs that the group defines and provides meanings to the self and is like a “family” whose members are mutually obligated to each other. They possess strong commitments to the group and feel profound, familial connections to the group and in-group members (Swann et al., 2009). However, such relational ties are not essential for fusion to occur (Gómez, Brooks et al., 2011).

Swann et al. (2012) further underlined how identity fusion and identification differ, based on the above-mentioned agentic-personal-self principle, the identity synergy principle, the relational ties principle, and the irrevocability principle. Highly identified individuals feel collective ties to the group (Brewer & Gardner, 1996); they tend to cognitively categorize themselves as prototypical of the group and are interchangeable and undifferentiated with other in-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Their progroup actions are not motivated by their personal agency, but are regulated by a “depersonalized” social self that is associated with the group. However, highly identified individuals tend to remain identified with the group only when immediate contextual influences support their devotion; changes in contextual support may, thus, result in diminutions in levels of identification (Turner, 1999; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994).

Conversely, highly fused individuals feel relational ties to other group members (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) in addition to their bond to the collective. They retain salient personal as well as social identities, which may combine synergistically to motivate them to work for the benefit of all and take radical action on behalf of the group, even in the absence of intergroup comparisons (Swann, Gómez, Dovidio, Hart, & Jetten, 2010; Swann et al., 2009). The actual or imagined relational ties may buttress feelings of fusion so that fused individuals tend to stay fused despite changes in the...
context (Swann et al., 2012). Building on these principles that capture the nature of identity fusion, Swann et al. (2012) proposed that individuals may also experience feelings of oneness with an object of their devotion (e.g., products) even though there is no social group associated with the object (Trump & Brucks, 2012).

From that vantage point, Swann and colleagues focused on the nature and motivational consequences of the state of fusion and explicated that fusion with one’s country predicts a host of progroup behaviors, such as expressed willingness to fight and die for the group (Swann, Gómez, Dovidio et al., 2010; Swann et al., 2009), willingness to donate to the group, and increased speediness of motor responses enacted on behalf of the group (Swann, Gómez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010). Moreover, irrevocable social ostracism increases the likelihood that fused individuals will display three distinct types of compensatory activities: endorsement of extreme actions for the group, stiffened resolve to remain in the group, and increased charitable donations to the group (Gómez, Morales et al., 2011).

In sum, although there may be considerable variability in how people translate identity fusion into behavior, fused individuals are markedly more committed to enacting on behalf of the group compared to nonfused individuals (Swann et al., 2009). By applying identity fusion to the realm of consumer–brand context, it is our belief that identity fusion can address why complete commitment to a brand does not necessarily entail irrational loyalty to a brand that has gone out of control.

**Hypotheses**

Building on the theoretical underpinning of identity fusion (Swann, Gómez, Dovidio et al., 2010; Swann et al., 2009; Swann et al., 2012), brand identity fusion is conceptualized 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. As brands are often perceived as partners in socially constructed relationships and considered important to one’s self-concepts, the inclusion of close brands within the self can, therefore, function as resources, provide perspectives, and offer identities that fulfill consumers’ self-related motives (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Reimann & Aron, 2009; Trump & Brucks, 2012).

Extending from this view, highly fused consumers experience a visceral feeling of oneness with a brand. They are likely to possess a strong sense of personal identity, while the brand-related social identity is salient. The union with the brand is so strong among fused consumers that the self-brand distinction is blurred to them. The borders between their personal and their social self become highly permeable so that aspects of both constructs can readily flow into the other. As a result, the personal and social identities of fused consumers may reinforce, rather than compete with, one another (Swann et al., 2012). The interlocking processes of mutual influence may thus offer the motivational machinery needed for taking prorelationship behaviors (Swann et al., 2009), such as championing the brand, spreading positive WOM information to other consumers, derogating competing brands, and more.

Based on Swann and colleagues’ theorizing, it is important to note that brand identity fusion is considered related to, but distinct from, brand identification. Although both lines of research (e.g., Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Swann et al., 2009) have developed measurements similar to those of the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) paradigm (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), brand identity fusion complements prior research based on the social identity approach in that it emphasizes a form of interconnectedness that involves an agentic personal self working for the outcomes of the consumer–brand dyad. The identity synergy principle of fusion theory further suggests that fused consumers’ personal and social self may combine synergistically to promote prorelationship behaviors; the activation of either will activate the other and, therefore, amplify relationship-sustaining activities. Consequently, compensatory self-verification strivings of fused consumers (Swann, 2012) are expected to encourage them to remain fused regardless of threats to their personal or social identities (Swann et al., 2012). The main thesis that brand identity fusion is irrevocable and should discourage destructive responses (i.e., negative WOM) and encourage constructive reactions (i.e., brand immunity, relationship continuance, and repurchase intentions) is discussed further as follows.

**Brand Immunity.** Because highly fused consumers theoretically experience strong feelings of connection with the brand they consider having relationships with, it seems to be plausible that brand performance reflect on consumers’ self-perceptions (Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2012; Park et al., 2010). Prior research has demonstrated that consumers use brands to construct, maintain, and communicate a positive self-view (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Schembri, Merrilee, & Kristiansen, 2010). In that sense, strong self-brand connections may link brand associations and performance with consumers’ own interpretations of self. Their sense of who they are meshes with what they think the brand represents (i.e., brand identity) while a potent personal self is maintained. Therefore, fused consumers may perceive brand transgressions as threats to their personal identities (Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2012) and enact compensatory attempts to reaffirm their identities with whatever means are available (Swann, 1983, 2012).

Moreover, the motivated reasoning theory (e.g., Kunda, 1990) suggests that consumers may access only a biased subset of relevant beliefs and rules when they want to draw a particular conclusion (Ahluwalia, Unnava, & Burnkrant, 2001; Posovac, Sanbonmatsu, Kardes, & Fitzsimons, 2004; Schmalz & Orth, 2012). In doing so, cognitive processes play an important role in producing self-serving biases that provide mechanisms...
through which motivation influences reasoning. In that sense, highly fused consumers are likely to be prone to a confirmation bias (Klayman & Ha, 1987; Nickerson, 1998) that is exhibited by tendencies to engage in selective thinking as well as defensive information processing, to counterargue negative brand information, and to make more brand-favoring attributions, even at the cost of accuracy (Ahuwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Pomerantz, Chaiken, & Tordesillas, 1995). By contrast, because weakly fused consumers do not see relationships with brands as important to their sense of self, their judgments may be more strongly motivated by accuracy concerns. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1:** When facing a brand transgression, highly fused consumers will exhibit higher levels of brand immunity than weakly fused consumers, while controlling for brand identification.

**Relationship Continuance Intentions.** Results from numerous studies in social psychology and branding together suggest that brand identity fusion will promote tendencies to accommodate relationships with brands when brands do poorly (e.g., Gómez, Morales et al., 2011; Schmalz & Orth, 2012; Swann, Gómez, Dovidio et al., 2010; Swann et al., 2009). That is, following brand transgressions, highly fused consumers, compared to weakly fused consumers, will be more likely to undertake constructive responses to reaffirm their relationships with the affected brands. Given the irrevocable nature of fusion (Swann et al., 2012), highly fused consumers are likely to express greater intentions to maintain ties with brands in the future. Such intentions imply their willingness to stay committed to the relationships and to meet any conditions (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005). In contrast, because weakly fused consumers consider their selves as somewhat distinct from the brand, brand transgressions will not amplify the tendencies for them to undertake constructive prorelationship behaviors. The following hypothesis is, therefore, put forth:

**H2:** When facing a brand transgression, highly fused consumers will exhibit higher levels of relationship continuance intentions than weakly fused consumers, while controlling for brand identification.

**Repurchase Intentions.** Consumers’ repurchase intention is always part of marketers’ concerns (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008). While previous research on loyalty has examined the complex relationship between customer satisfaction and repurchase intention (e.g., Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Yi & La, 2004), recent research suggests that strong self-brand connections may lead to enhanced branding success by generating supportive consumer outcomes, such as repurchase (Park et al., 2010). Because highly fused consumers are expected to engage in selective information processing that is driven by confirmatory biases, to retain high brand preference, and to stay engaged in consumer–brand relationships at hand when facing brand transgressions (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Kunda, 1990), they may be more likely than weakly fused consumers to exhibit repeat purchase intentions (Ahuwalia, Unnava, & Burnkrant, 2001). In other words, highly fused consumers tend to overlook and downplay negative brand information and are likely to support relationship-sustaining behaviors in response to brand transgressions. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H3:** When facing a brand transgression, highly fused consumers will exhibit higher levels of repurchase intentions than weakly fused consumers, while controlling for brand identification.

**Negative Word-of-Mouth (NWOM).** Consumers frequently share with other consumers their consumption experiences, referred to as word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. It has been shown in the literature that strong self-brand connections have favorable impacts on WOM (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008). However, some research has argued that for some consumers with strong consumer–brand relationships their feelings of betrayal may be amplified, resulting in unfavorable responses to brand transgressions (e.g., Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). That is, the “love becomes hate” effect may occur among high relationship quality consumers. They may engage in negatively valenced, informal communication with their family and acquaintances when encountering unsatisfactory brand experiences (Chelmski & Coulter, 2011; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). Wetzer, Zeelenberg, and Pieters (2007) noted that consumers seem to pursue specific goals (e.g., take revenge, warn others) when spreading NWOM to others; those goals differ between specific emotions that are experienced. Generally speaking, NWOM behaviors are considered dangerous responses as they damage brand reputation so that marketers lose the opportunity to remedy the problem and retain consumers (Lapidus & Pinkerton, 1995). Considering that NWOM is more influential than positive WOM (e.g., Bone, 1995), this research also assesses consumers’ tendencies to undertake complaining behaviors subsequent to brand transgressions.

The current conceptualization suggests that consumers may experience a visceral feeling of connectedness with a brand and see the brand’s resources as their own (Mittal, 2006; Trump & Brucks, 2012); the union can be so strong among highly fused consumers that the boundaries that ordinarily distinguish the personal and brand-related social self become highly
permeable. The personal and the brand-related social self can readily flow into the other so that activating one will activate the other. For highly fused consumers, brand reputation damage is linked to their personal reputational loss. As a result, their personal and social identities may combine synergistically to motivate and amplify prorelationship behaviors to protect the brand in trouble. These prorelationship behaviors will then help reaffirm the identities that have been challenged and shore up feelings of brand identity fusion (Swann et al., 2012). As a result, the next hypothesis is presented:

**H4:** When facing a brand transgression, highly fused consumers will be less likely to give NWOM than weakly fused consumers, while controlling for brand identification.

**METHOD**

An experiment was conducted to investigate whether brand identity fusion would out-predict identification in estimating the tendency for consumers to endorse prorelationship maintenance behavior (i.e., brand loyalty, relationship continuance intentions, and repurchase intentions) and to protect consumer–brand relationships at hand (i.e., NWOM) with regard to brand transgressions. In an effort to enhance the generalizability of the study results, this research employs in its design both personal and societal related brand transgressions.

**Study Design**

A 2 (transgression types: personal-related vs. societal related) × brand identity fusion (measured) between-subjects design was employed. The degree of brand identity fusion was measured with real brands to capture an established real-life brand relationship, while the type of brand transgressions was manipulated. Each participant was presented with one of the two brand transgression reports, personal- or societal related.

**Stimuli**

Two vignettes were created in the form of consumer reports. This vignette-based experiment allowed personal or societal related manipulation to be more easily operationalized and enabled the researcher to control extraneous factors that might influence the results of the study. The base product category for this study was the consumer electronics type. First, the most common personal and societal related transgression incidents for consumer electronics brands were identified from consumer review Web sites. Next, professional writers were employed to craft stimuli for the purpose of the study. As a result, the two final vignettes were developed. The personal-related vignette reported that the brand of the participant’s personal computer had a display failure while the societal related vignette reported the brand of the participant’s personal computer had been accused of using underage workers for manual labor in assembling computer parts.

**Sample and Procedure**

A total of 156 participants (67.3% were female; age \( M = 20 \)) were recruited from a large southeastern university in the United States. The racial composition of the sample was 50.6% Caucasian, 28.2% Hispanic, 10.3% Asian, 7.7% African American, and 3.2% indicated they were either multiracial or chose “other.”

All participants were first asked to fill in the brand name of their primary personal computer. A total of 14 brands emerged from the sample: about 55.8% (or 87) were Apple, followed by HP (14.7%), Dell (6.4%), Toshiba (5.8%), and others. The participants reported they had used their computer for an average of 2.01 years, ranging from eight months to 9.33 years.

After responding to the brand identity fusion measure and brand identification items with reference to the brand of their primary personal computer, participants were then randomly assigned to either the personal or societal related condition. They received a vignette based on a report, allegedly released recently by Consumer Reports. Depending on the assigned condition, either a personal-related or a societal related brand misconduct was presented. Following exposure to the vignette, participants proceeded to answer questions concerning the main dependent variables relative to the negative brand-related information provided in the vignette. Upon completion, participants were debriefed and thanked.

**Measures**

**Brand Identity Fusion.** The fusion measure was adapted from Gómez, Brooks et al.’s (2011) verbal scale to examine consumers’ feelings of oneness with a brand. All items were modified in order to reflect the contextual differences of the consumer–brand dyad. The items were ranked along a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree.” A single index was formed by averaging the fusion items (\( \alpha = 0.95 \)).

**Brand Identification.** Similar to Kuenzel and Halliday’s study (2008), this research used Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) six-item measure to examine the extent to which consumers feel identified with a brand. All question items were modified to fit the current context and were measured along a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree.” The identification index score was created by averaging the corresponding items (\( \alpha = 0.89 \)).
Consumer Responses to Brand Transgressions. The main dependent variables of this study were participants' responses to brand transgressions, including brand immunity, relationship continuance intentions, repurchase intentions, and NWOM. All items were modified to suit the context of the study and examined along 7-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree.”

The brand immunity measure was formulated to examine whether consumers’ brand relationships would be affected by negative information about the brand as provided in the vignettes. In response to the given condition, participants’ levels of brand immunity were measured using four question items as follows: “My relationship with this brand is not affected by negative voice about the brand”; “Negative voice about this brand changes the way I think of the brand”; “Negative voice about this brand does not change my general view of the brand”; “I will change my relationship with this brand based on negative voice about the brand” (average index $\alpha = 0.77$).

The relationship continuance intention measure was employed using Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann’s (2005) membership continuance intention scale. This measure attempted to determine whether participants would be willing to stay in the relationship they had with a brand after reading a brand transgression report (average index $\alpha = 0.90$).

Consumers’ repurchase intention was adopted from Kuenzel and Halliday’s (2008) three-item scale. This measure was used to investigate whether the brand would remain preferred and be purchased again in the future (average index: $\alpha = 0.91$).

Finally, consumers’ tendencies to give NWOM to friends, family, and other acquaintances about the brand in trouble was measured based on Chelminski and Coulter’s (2011) and Grégoire and Fisher’s (2008) scales (average index $\alpha = 0.86$).

Covariate. This study also accounted for participants’ ethical orientation to minimize the potential confounding effect, given that consumers may use such global, abstract considerations to evaluate brands and to guide future behaviors, such as purchase intentions (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Whalen, Pitts, & Wong, 1991). The one-item measure, “it is impossible to conduct profitable business in this country and follow strict ethical standards,” adopted from Whalen, Pitts, and Wong (1991) was rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree.”

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

To assess whether the brand transgressions described in the two consumer reports were indeed perceived to be personal-related or societal related based on their corresponding manipulation, a four-item scale was constructed. Two items measured the extent to which the incident would cause a problem in participants’ lives or in society, whereas the other two items measured the extent to which the outcomes of the incident would be associated with the participants’ own interests or society’s interests (personal-related: $\alpha = 0.80$, societal related: $\alpha = 0.92$). In addition, the four-item believability measure was examined on a 7-point, semantic differential scale (not believable–believable, not credible–credible, not convincing–convincing, and unlikely—likely; average index $\alpha = 0.87$). To ensure the equality of the two vignettes, the four-item severity scale was adopted from Weun, Beatty, and Jones (2004) to assess participants’ perception of the severity of the presented brand transgression incident ($\alpha = 0.81$).

The results suggested that the fictitious consumer report used for the personal-related condition was perceived to be significantly more related to the participants’ personal interests ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.28$) than the one used for the societal related condition ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.24$; $t(154) = 5.35$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.86$). In contrast, the consumer report used for the societal related condition was perceived to be significantly more related to the society’s outcomes (personal $M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.41$; societal $M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.21$; $t(154) = 6.18$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.99$). The believability (personal $M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.20$; societal $M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.28$; $t(154) = -0.08$, $p = 0.93$, $d = -0.02$) and the perceived severity of the vignettes did not differ across the two conditions (personal $M = 5.06$, $SD = 0.84$; societal $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.09$; $t(154) = -1.45$, $p = 0.15$, $d = -0.23$).

Hypothesis Testing

To test our hypotheses, a series of multiple regression analyses, rather than ANOVAs, was employed as the latter would have required splitting the continuous variable data into subgroups, which would have wasted information and been inferior to the multiplicative model (Govindarajan & Fisher, 1990).

Prior to conducting multiple regression analyses, a centered version of brand identity fusion, brand identification, and ethical orientation was created by subtracting the mean scores ($M_{\text{fusion}} = 3.04$, $SD_{\text{fusion}} = 1.38$; $M_{\text{identification}} = 2.99$, $SD_{\text{identification}} = 1.25$; $M_{\text{ethical}} = 2.99$, $SD_{\text{ethical}} = 1.25$), respectively. A cross-product variable was created for testing the possible interaction effect between brand identity fusion and brand transgression types. Participants’ ethical orientation and brand identification were controlled for by entering data in the first step of the regression. Each outcome variable was then regressed onto brand identity fusion (centered), types of brand transgressions (coded 0 for personal-related and 1 for societal related), and the brand identity fusion $\times$ brand transgression types interaction term. Multicollinearity was examined in each regression model as brand identity fusion and brand identification were positively correlated ($r(154) = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$).
Table 1. Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brand Immunity Continuance Intention</th>
<th>Repurchase Intention</th>
<th>NWOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>β</strong></td>
<td><strong>SE</strong></td>
<td><strong>t</strong></td>
<td><strong>β</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical orientation</td>
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<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand identification</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model F</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand identification</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>−0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand identity fusion</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>2.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model F</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ΔR^2$</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incremental F</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand identification</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
<td>−0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand identity fusion</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>2.20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand transgression types</td>
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<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical orientation</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand identification</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand identity fusion</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>3.34***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand transgression types</td>
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<td>0.11</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion × Types</td>
<td>−0.29</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>−2.58*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model F</td>
<td>3.62***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$ΔR^2$</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incremental F</td>
<td>6.68*</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05; "p < 0.01; ""p < 0.001.

As Table 1 shows, the effect of ethical orientation (covariate) was not significant for any of the dependent variables. Brand identity fusion contributed incrementally to prediction after entering each regression model. Specifically, the brand immunity regression model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.11$, $F(5, 150) = 3.62$, $p < 0.01$). Neither the identification main effect ($β = 0.002$, $t(150) = 0.02$, $p = 0.98$) nor the main effect of transgression types ($β = 0.04$, $t(150) = 0.56$, $p = 0.58$) was significant. As predicted, the results showed a significant main effect of brand identity fusion ($β = 0.42$, $t(150) = 3.34$, $p < 0.001$), such that the levels of brand immunity increased with brand identity fusion, while controlling for brand identification. The main effect of fusion was qualified by a significant interaction effect between brand identity fusion and brand transgression types ($β = −0.29$, $t(150) = −2.58$, $p < 0.05$). As shown in Figure 1, highly fused participants exhibited higher levels of brand immunity than weakly fused participants in the personal-related condition (personal: $R^2 = 0.23$, $F(3, 72) = 6.99$, $p < 0.001$). Such effect was not significant in the societal condition (societal: $R^2 = 0.03$, $F(3, 76) = 0.88$, $p = 0.46$). The results lent support for H1.

The relationship continuance intention regression model was statistically significant as well ($R^2 = 0.31$, $F(5, 150) = 13.57$, $p < 0.001$). The main effect of transgression types ($β = −0.04$, $t(150) = −0.51$, $p = 0.61$) and interaction between brand identity fusion and brand transgression types ($β = −0.08$, $t(150) = −0.79$, $p = 0.43$) were not significant, while the main effect of brand identity fusion emerged ($β = 0.71$, $t(150) = 6.44$, $p < 0.001$). The results suggested that, regardless of the type of transgression, highly fused participants were more inclined to continue the brand relationship than...
weakly fused participants (personal: \( R^2 = 0.37, F(3, 72) = 13.99, p < 0.001 \); societal: \( R^2 = 0.25, F(3, 76) = 8.46, p < 0.001 \)), while controlling for brand identification. Thus, H2 was supported. In addition, there was a significant main effect of brand identification (\( \beta = -0.20, t(150) = -2.29, p < 0.05 \)), indicating that highly identified participants were less likely to continue the current brand relationships than weakly identified participants following brand transgression incidents.

The repurchase intention regression model was statistically significant (\( R^2 = 0.23, F(5, 150) = 9.00, p < 0.001 \)). Again, the main effects of brand identity fusion (\( \beta = 0.63, t(150) = 5.41, p < 0.001 \)) and brand identification (\( \beta = -0.27, t = -2.89, p < 0.005 \)) emerged. The results suggested that highly fused participants were more likely to buy from the brand again than weakly fused participants regardless of brand transgression types (personal: \( R^2 = 0.24, F(3, 72) = 7.48, p < 0.001 \); societal: \( R^2 = 0.23, F(3, 76) = 7.51, p < 0.001 \)), while controlling for brand identification. In contrast, repurchase intention decreased with participants’ levels of brand identification. Neither the brand identity fusion \times brand transgression types effect (\( \beta = -0.04, t(150) = -0.37, p = 0.71 \)) nor the transgression types main effect (\( \beta = 0.06, t(150) = 0.81, p = 0.42 \)) was found to be significant. The results supported H3.

Finally, the NWOM regression model was statistically significant (\( R^2 = 0.11, F(5, 150) = 3.63, p < 0.005 \)). The main effect of transgression type was not significant (\( \beta = -0.10, t(150) = -1.34, p = 0.18 \)) and neither was the brand identity fusion \times brand transgression types effect (\( \beta = 0.08, t(150) = 0.69, p = 0.49 \)). There was a significant main effect of brand identity fusion (\( \beta = -0.39, t(150) = -3.14, p < 0.005 \)), such that highly fused participants were less likely to spread NWOM than weakly fused participants regardless of the types of brand transgressions (personal: \( R^2 = 0.09, F(3, 72) = 2.45, p = 0.07 \); societal: \( R^2 = 0.12, F(3, 76) = 3.46, p < 0.05 \)), while controlling for brand identification. Conversely, the significant main effect of brand identification (\( \beta = 0.38, t(150) = 3.77, p < 0.001 \)) indicated that highly identified participants were more likely to spread NWOM than weakly identified participants in the face of brand transgressions. Taken together, the results showed support for H4.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Considering that strong consumer–brand relationships offer beneficial economic profits to marketers and provide meaningful resources to consumers, scholarship concerning the value and the underlying mechanism of strong consumer–brand relationships is growing in both size and sophistication (Fournier, 1998; Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2009). While existing literature describes strong brand relationships along several dimensions, the current research focuses on the identity perspective of brand relationships through the lens of brand identity fusion. This form of self-brand connection is particularly important when consumers encounter brand transgressions, given that their desire for stable self-views may trigger compensatory self-verification strivings (Swann, 2012) and defensive information processing (Kunda, 1990). These prorelationship behaviors will then reaffirm the identities that have been challenged due to brand transgressions and thus stabilize the connection between the affected brand and one’s self-view (Swann et al., 2012).

The findings of this study suggest that, while controlling for brand identification, highly fused consumers are more likely to be immune to negative effects of brand transgressions than weakly fused consumers, especially among those in the personal-related condition. Even though personal-related brand transgressions have been documented as having a more negative effect than societal related brand transgressions on consumers’ responses (Reuber & Fischer, 2010; Whalen, Pitts, & Wong, 1991), the buffering effect of brand identity fusion is proved to override such negative impact. Highly fused consumers tend to take personal-related brand transgressions as greater threats to their identities than societal related brand transgressions and, therefore, increase their tendencies to engage in biased information processing and motivated reasoning that confirms their positive beliefs about the brand (Klayman & Ha, 1987; Kunda, 1990).

Along with this logic, our findings show that highly fused consumers are more likely to continue the brand relationships at hand and to exhibit repurchase intentions than weakly fused consumers despite the types of brand transgressions. Moreover, highly fused consumers are less likely to endorse destructive responses, such as spreading negative information about the brand in trouble, than weakly fused consumers in both brand transgression conditions. Together, highly fused consumers tend to respond to brand transgressions with a bias toward verification of their self-brand connections (Klayman & Ha, 1987). As previous research has mainly focused on product-related aspects of brand transgressions (Schmalz & Orth, 2012), the results of this study contribute insights about the irrevocable nature of brand identity fusion with regard to an expanded set of brand transgression conditions.

Through a comparison with brand identification, the empirical findings show that brand identity fusion is more predictive and enduring in explaining both consumers’ biased assimilation and the mechanism through which they would actively engage in relationship-sustaining behaviors. The powerful effect of brand identity fusion surpasses the moderating effect of brand identification on consumer responses to brand transgressions, as previously documented in the literature (e.g., Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Einwiller et al., 2006; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008). Different from what Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) suggested, our findings indicate that relative to brand identification following brand transgressions, consumers’ intention of relationship continuance as well as intention to...
One explanation for these findings could be that some consumers develop relationships with a brand due to that brand’s contribution to the positive identities that consumers would like to obtain or maintain for themselves (Ashworth, Dacin, & Thomson, 2009; Einwiller et al., 2006). That is, “basking in the reflected glory” of the brand (Cialdini et al., 1976). Therefore, what was characteristically seen as relationship-serving behavior of identified consumers could originate from an attempt to compensate for more individual concerns regarding what they might be seen as (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Taken together, the two constructs seem complementary but mostly nonoverlapping forms of self-brand connection (Buhrmester et al., 2012). Highly fused consumers are capable of performing behaviors that differ from the group prototype assumed in social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979); their personal and social identities complement rather than compete with one another to promote attributional and cognitive biases when they encounter brand transgressions. In contrast, identity fused consumers are likely to “cut off reflected failure” (Snyder, Lassègare, & Ford, 1986) by engaging in destructive responses in the face of brand transgressions.

**Implications and Contributions**

Both academics and practitioners have highlighted the importance of relational ties between consumers and brand relationship partners. Following that logic, this research contributes to marketing, branding, and consumer research fields in that it provides a new perspective on self-brand connections, seeks to advance the current understanding and intensity of such connections, and offers insights into the formulation of consumer–brand relationship strategies.

The findings of this research together suggest that brand identity fusion is applicable for understanding connections between consumers and the brand relationship partner in consumer–brand relationships. Brand identity fusion is not a variant of brand identification, given its distinct theoretical assumptions (Swann et al., 2009, 2012) and empirical findings. Highly fused consumers tend to perceive the brand favorably when encountering a brand transgression incident, given that the failure is viewed as a direct threat to their own positive self-view. This appears to occur because the union between the personal self and the brand is so strong that the self-brand distinction is blurred to them. The borders between fused consumers’ personal self and social self are highly permeable so that aspects of both constructs may reinforce, rather than compete with, one another (Swann et al., 2012). In that sense, a failure on the part of the brand would be experienced as a personal failure among highly fused consumers. As a result, both constructs may combine synergistically to promote relationship-serving biases among highly fused consumers. The conceptualization of brand identity fusion, therefore, reveals a form of alignment that involves tethering individual agency to work for the outcomes of the consumer–brand dyad. Such alignments, thus, lock highly fused consumers into self-perpetuating interconnected bonds that stabilize the psychological structures that from the outset initiated such deeply committed brand relationships.

In addition, this research provides theoretical and empirical support for the argument that brand identity fusion is related to, but distinct from, brand identification. The conceptualization of brand identity fusion integrates the existing self-brand connection themes by considering new ways by which consumers perceive that their personal identity is thoroughly enmeshed with what the brand represents. Through the current examination, the findings are significant in determining how brand identity fusion differs from brand identification in terms of motivational implications and consequent behavioral manifestations following brand transgressions. Therefore, this research adds to the body of research observations about the moderating effect of strong consumer–brand relationships that may dilute the negativity effects of brand transgressions (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). Of particular interest, the controversial effect of brand identification resonates Johnson, Matear, and Thomson’s (2011) findings that there may also be a downside to consumers’ strong, self-relevant relationships with a brand.

While acknowledging contextual differences between consumer–brand relationships and social relationships, the current investigation focused on the consumer–brand dyad and is expected to further recognize the psychological implications of consumer–brand relationships that consumers develop and maintain. Following the literature on consumer–brand relationships that borrowed frameworks and typologies from the field of interpersonal relationships, this research applied the notion of identity fusion to the brand context and found unique and novel insights with regard to consumer–brand bonds. Considering the parallel findings across contexts, this research further legitimizes assumptions that brand relationships are akin to interpersonal relationships in multiple ways, extending well beyond a mere exercise in metaphor.

This research also has important implications for brand managers in that the conceptualization of brand identity fusion reflects and captures the concept of psychological oneness and offers a sustainable competitive advantage. For example, the findings of this research, which synthesized core elements needed for strong consumer–brand relationships, highlights several specific consumer profiles and demonstrates how and why some consumers would undertake prorelationship activities in the face of brand transgressions. Highly fused consumers tend to remain fused and be more tolerant of brand transgressions than weakly fused
consumers. In this regard, marketers need to develop strategies that help enhance consumers’ sense of connectedness and autonomy. Moreover, marketers should pay more attention to the creation of clear and coherent articulation and communication of their brand identities, images, and associations (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011). Besides the functional value proposition of a brand, a well-defined brand identity may engender brand identity fusion, immunize the brand from market disruptions, and lead to desirable consumer outcomes. Furthermore, to protect brands from the negative impact of brand transgressions, marketers may pursue strategies that, in the minds of consumers, will nourish and transform brands from transactional to long-term communal-based relationship partners.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the findings of this research are provocative, there are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting and applying the results. First, this research employed real brands with hypothetical transgression scenarios in an experimental setting. Though this approach helped control for confounding effects in relation to brand transgressions that happen in the real world, questions have been raised about the validity of such results as they do not mirror actual negative brand incidents and cannot capture consumers’ actual behaviors when encountering brand transgressions. It would be of great value, therefore, to determine whether the patterns observed in this study recur in field studies of brands used in this research. In addition, other research methods, such as an in-depth qualitative inquiry, may be employed to further illuminate the lived experience and formation of fusion and fused consumers’ behavioral intentions in response to brand transgressions.

Moreover, only brands of one product category were included in this study. With the intention of making the research findings generalizable, a larger set of product categories that offer a wide verity of relationship types is needed to determine whether the findings of this study are to be disproved or confirmed and extended. As for the samples used in the experiments, the lack of diversity in terms of gender may limit the understanding and application of the study findings. As the student samples may not accurately represent the general population, future research should draw on samples that are more diverse in their composition.

Since the notion of brand identity fusion was established and deemed desirable through the current investigation, the scope and depth of work on strong consumer–brand relationships was then further expanded. Given the utility of brand identity fusion in predicting prorelationship behaviors, more empirical research is needed to elucidate the nature and effects of brand identity fusion on the dynamics of consumer–brand relationships across different brands and product categories. The antecedents and consequences of brand identity fusion are also of focal interests regarding implications for the substantive marketing domain. Additionally, the current idiographic focus can be extended to study group-based brand relationships, such as brand communities, or be combined with other psychosociocultural contexts. Another important area of future research is to expand the existing analysis from a focus on a single consumer–brand relationship to multiple consumer–brand relationships, given that consumers may engage in multiple relationships that vary in length and depth with different brands.

In sum, findings along this line of research will contribute to existing empirical knowledge in the realm of advertising, branding, and consumer research and will advance theoretical and practical understanding of the process of relationship maintenance among consumers who hold strong relational ties to brands and offer an opportunity to consider strong consumer–brand relationships as a practical tool for better and more effective brand management.

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APPENDIX: MANIPULATION OF BRAND TRANSGRESSION TYPES

Personal-Related Brand Transgression

March 27, 2012

A recent consumer report has given attention to the possibility that your [BRAND] computer is incurring a display failure after consumers filed a number of complaints.

On Monday, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission issued a recall on the faulty LCD panels. Problems associated with the screen design flaw included intermittent display flickering, a number of artifacts that include single-pixel lines spanning the length of the screen, and display colors too light/washed out. Affected individuals find the display quality in this condition to be unusable, as many consumers spend a significant amount of time using their personal computers while engaged in multimedia work. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission urged a swift recourse to repair the defective screens.

No additional follow-up information was available at the time this article was published.

For more information, you may visit ConsumerReports.org/Reviews.

Societal Related Brand Transgression

March 27, 2012

A recent report has surfaced regarding unfair factory working conditions overseas for the [BRAND] computer you purchased in the last few years.

According to the Fair Labor Association, these electronic devices are commonly found in households across the world, with factories that produce such items located in Asian and European countries. Select factories, which names have yet to be disclosed, have reportedly employed underage workers for manual
labor in assembling computer parts. With rising complaints from human interest groups requiring action to be taken, an internal investigation was completed to find the offending factories violating labor laws. The underage laborers often work in harsh conditions, with problems ranging from excessive overtime to safety issues. The Fair Labor Association urged an ethical supplier code of conduct to correct such bleak working conditions.

No additional follow-up information was available at the time this article was published.

For more information, you may visit ConsumerReports.org/Reviews.