Consumer Alienation By Brands: Examining the Roles of Powerlessness and Relationship Type

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The construct of alienation (i.e., perceived exclusion) is introduced within the domain of consumer-brand relationships. A process-model that maps the linkages between powerlessness (specifically, felt helplessness in changing unfavorable brand decisions) and consumer-brand relationship type (communal versus exchange) is conceptually developed. Results of three laboratory experiments suggest greater consumer alienation, and relationship transformation from communal to exchange, as perceived power over reversing unfavorable brand decisions declines. The moderating effects of perceived treatment meted out by the brand, and sincerity of apologies proffered are also examined. Insights into strategies for inoculating brands against consumer reactions to unpopular corporate decisions are intended.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14570/volumes/v36/NA-36

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theorist of gift, Mauss (1954) who proposed that gifts represent vessels that contain and transmit the gift giver’s spirit or hau. Across several studies, we investigate the gift giving effort effect. In studies 1a-1c, we demonstrate that perceived gift giving effort increases acts of reciprocity towards the gift giver in various everyday situations. We also seek to rule out alternative explanations of the gift giving effort effect. Specifically, our results show that neither gratitude, nor indebtedness, nor positive mood bias account for the gift giving effort effect. In study 2, we also examine gift giving effort effect in public (possibility of being evaluated by an audience) and private (no audience) situations. Consistent with social norm account, we find that gift giving effort increases reciprocation for high self-monitors in public but not in private situations. In private situations, social norm does not seem to account for our findings. In studies 3 and 4, we extend the underlying theoretical mechanism and the boundaries of the gift giving effort effect. We examine the role of reciprocation wariness and how it affects the gift giving effort effect. In study 3, we find that reciprocation wary participants are more likely to reciprocate in private as well as public situations. In study 4, we replicate and reverse the gift giving effort effect showing that gift giving effort may also backfire. Collectively, our findings speak to the importance of gift giving effort and particularly to the role of contagion in driving the gift giving effort effect. Our findings also show the boundaries of gift giving effort unaddressed in prior research on gifts more broadly.

References

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The development of relationship theory in consumer research, with brands being considered as quasi-human relationship partners (Fournier 1998), has provided the foundation for examinations of consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2004, 2005; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). The social relationship metaphor has been adopted in this domain and norms of human social ties have been found to govern consumption choices and behaviors (Fournier 1998; Aggarwal 2004). The negative fallout of human ties many times include felt alienation—i.e., a sense of exclusion that is experienced by one of the relationship partners when the other induces a relationship stressor (i.e., a circumstance that is unfavorable or perceived as such; Panksepp 2005; Seeman 1959, 1975). Though studied extensively within sociological contexts (e.g., for women abandoned by their husbands; Arokach 2006), felt alienation remains unexamined within the domain of consumer-brand relationships. In this paper, we develop a process model of consumer alienation induced as a consequence of negative brand decisions, and propose that existing consumers can feel alienated by a brand, when their consumer-brand tie is subjected to a managerially-imposed relational stressor (e.g., closing of a convenient retail location, pulling of a product line from the shelf, or abandonment of a sub-brand; Fournier 1998; Muniz and Schau 2005).

We investigate how powerlessness (i.e., the perceived inability to amend an unfavorable situation or outcome, encompassing a sense of helplessness), considered by many scholars as an aspect of and antecedent to alienation (e.g., Ashforth 1989; Blauner 1964; Seeman 1959), influences consumer emotions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions under stressful situations, and specifically propose that a greater sense of alienation or exclusion will be experienced amongst those consumers that perceive themselves to be powerless (vis-à-vis powerful) in influencing brand decisions. This relationship is expected to be moderated by the relationship type that exists between brand and consumer, the treatment meted out by the brand during consumer efforts at decision reversal, outcomes of this effort, and perceived sincerity of any apologies proffered. Consumer-brand relationship types can vary on perceptual dimensions where they are seen as
predominantly economic/transactional in nature (termed “exchange”, as seen amongst business people) or based on social bonds (termed “communal”, as seen amongst friends; Aggarwal 2004, 2005; Clark and Mills 1993). A change in perceived relationship type is expected once a stressor is introduced within a relationship—especially, one that transforms from communal to exchange amongst those consumers that feel powerless in influencing brand decisions.

Propositions of this research are tested within a series of laboratory experiments that use business undergraduate student samples. The service context of on-campus banking was used (found to be highly involving for the student sample, and used in prior research; Aggarwal 2004). Respondents were asked to imagine that they patronize the on-campus location of a hypothetical bank that then announces the intention to move far away off-campus (thus introducing a relational stressor). The first study examines the impact of variations in perceived powerlessness to change the bank’s decision to relocate (control, powerless, versus powerful) and pre-existing relationship type (communal versus exchange) on attitudes toward the bank/employees/decision, felt alienation, emotions, behavioural intentions, and relationship transformation. The second study builds on the first by examining the additional impact of positive versus negative treatment by the bank while dealing with consumer efforts to reverse its relocation decision. Finally, study three examines the impact of perceived sincerity of apologies made by the bank upon reversal of its original stressful decision.

Results indicate that the mere presence of the stressor causes consumers to feel powerless to change the bank’s decision and thus alienated by the brand. As the level of perceived power declines, consumers’ sense of powerlessness, felt alienation, and intensity of negative emotions increase, making attitudes toward the bank/employees/decision and behavioral intentions unfavorable, and causing consumers to transform their relationship with the brand to less social/friendly (communal) and more businesslike (exchange). Negative (positive) treatment of consumers by the bank is found to exacerbate (alleviate) the magnitude of perceived powerlessness, felt alienation, negative emotions, unfavorable attitudes and behavioral intentions. Attitude toward the decision (vis-à-vis bank/employees) is found to be most sensitive to perceptions of power, such that as perceived power declines, this attitude is least favourable—suggesting that consumers evaluate the stressor as a one-time negative event with the company and do not transfer negative emotions and cognitions generated from this event onto their more general attitudes toward the bank/employees. Felt alienation mediates the relationship between perceived powerlessness and consumer attitudes, which in turn mediate the impact of felt alienation on behavioural intentions.

This research has implications for both marketing theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, alienation and powerlessness find relevance and application within the domain of consumer-brand relationships, thereby, paving the way for interdisciplinary research. Our findings also support the stance of sociologists that consider powerlessness to be antecedent to alienation. Further, this research demonstrates that unlike human bonds, the perceived relationship dichotomy (communal and exchange) is not distinctive within consumer-brand ties, as the element of transaction/exchange is unavoidable here. From a managerial perspective, companies need to ensure that they avoid fostering feelings of powerlessness and perceptions of negative treatment amongst consumers while implementing unpopular brand decisions. Results found here also suggest that brands need not be overly anxious about overall equity dilution and consumer boycotts when a one-time negative decision has to be made.

Limitations and avenues for future research are also identified. Longitudinal data collection from real-life bank customers is planned to substantiate findings from student samples and to refine the process model. Future research is planned to evaluate the relevance of other aspects of alienation (delineated in sociology as—normlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement; Seeman 1959) to consumer-brand ties. Additional studies will also examine the impact of other relational stressors (e.g., breach of trust by company, presence of attractive alternatives) and contexts where relationship dichotomies are more distinct (e.g., high-risk investment banking, psychiatric counselling).

References