Cobrand Harm Crisis and Consumer Attributions of Responsibility

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This research investigates responsibility attributions to a cobrand in neutral and negative situations. The authors find evidence that cobrand integration and partner brand strength affect consumer attributions of responsibility for performance and subtyping, or exception, judgments. The results also show asymmetric effects of cobrand integration on product and retailer attributions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although product-harm crises are addressed in solo-brand contexts (e.g., Lei, Dawar, & Gürhan-Canli 2012) and cobrand research is growing, consumer response to negative cobrand events is not well understood. To address this gap, we focus on how consumers assign responsibility for retail cobrand performance (e.g., Chili’s Baby Back Ribs with Shiner Bock Beer BBQ Sauce, Cuisinart products made for Williams-Sonoma) in both a neutral and negative product-harm context.

Attribution theory explains how individuals assign credit or blame for observed performance (Folkes 1988). In retail cobrands, customers may identify as the source of good or bad performance the product brand, retailer, both brands jointly, or neither brand due to some extraneous factor. We propose that consumers’ perception of cobrand integration affects attributions of responsibility for product performance. Cobrand integration is how tightly the partnering brands are fused together in form, function, and service delivery. In low integration, consumers will perceive each brand’s contribution to the offering as relatively distinct (e.g., Disney toys in a McDonald’s Happy Meal). In high integration, each partner’s contribution to the offering is intertwined (e.g., Dairy Queen Oreo Blizzard). In high integration, we expect that joint responsibility will increase because the offering’s utility is dependent on both brands. For low-integration offerings, consumers are expected to attribute performance responsibility largely to the product brand. As joint responsibility increases, consumer perceptions of the product brand’s responsibility are expected to decrease and retailer responsibility to remain unchanged due to different roles played by retailers versus product brands (e.g., retailers gather an assortment of product brands).

Brand strength can affect responses to cobrands (e.g., Simonin & Ruth 1998). Based on research on attribution, branding, and retailing, we hypothesize that a strong versus weak product (retailer) brand will increase product (retailer) brand responsibility and that as product brand strength increases, consumers’ attributions of joint responsibility will decrease. In contrast, an increase in retailer brand strength will not affect consumers’ attributions of joint responsibility or product brand responsibility.

In neutral contexts (e.g., cobrand announcements), a pilot study which used real brands in a coffee shop and bookstore scenario showed that consumers are sensitive to cobrand integration: as expected, as cobrand integration increased, joint responsibility increased, product brand responsibility decreased, and retailer responsibility was unchanged.

Extending the theorizing and pilot study findings into a negative cobrand-harm event, we expect that the relationship of cobrand integration to joint, product brand, and retailer responsibility attributions will hold. Product brand strength and retail brand strength are expected to affect the same responsibility attributions but will reverse signs because of the shift to blame assessments (e.g., strength insulates brands from harm; Gürhan-Canli & Maheswaran 1998). We also examine subtyping judgments, or the extent to which a negative event is considered an exception because it is inconsistent with the brand’s existing schema. In solo-brand product-harm contexts, subtyping occurs more often for strong brands, because consumers have high expectations of the brands’ performance and quality (Lei et al. 2012). Because brand strength contains a signal about quality and, by implication, likelihood of a negative event, a cobrand-harm event will be perceived as more of an exception to the schema of a strong versus weak brand. These effects are expected to be more (less) evident in high (low) integration because a high-integration (low-integration) cobrand will be less (more) similar than the brand’s parent product and its original schema. In sum, consumers may consider a brand at fault for the cobrand-harm event, but not incorporate that information into brand beliefs because it is considered outside of the brand’s typical behavior.

We designed two experiments to test the effects of integration and brand strength in a cobrand-harm context. The first experiment manipulated integration and product brand strength and the second manipulated retailer brand strength and integration. Participants read information about a new cobrand involving a Greek yogurt brand and a restaurant retailer and were told that after eating the yogurt some customers became ill. The results showed that higher integration increased joint blame attributions but did not reduce consumers’ attribution of blame to the product brand, suggesting that integration is not protective for a product brand when a cobrand-harm event occurs. Further, as expected, consumers perceived the negative event as more of an exception for a strong product brand, especially in high integration.

In the second experiment, when retail brand strength information was available and a cobrand-harm event occurred, a stronger (weaker) retail brand lowered (increased) joint blame. Further, as expected consumers tapped into retail brand strength to make subtyping judgments, especially in high integration.

Our research extends previous research by considering multiple players in product-harm crises. While cobrand integration affects responsibility judgments, consumers rely on a strong versus weak brand to determine whether the event is an exception for both brands, the product brand, and the retailer. Our results indicate that consumers are more likely to “excuse” the brand for a crisis when the brand is strong and in a high-integration partnership. In high integration, both partners share rewards that come with good performance and risks associated with bad performance. Moreover, for high-integration cobrands, consumers are less likely to single out product brands for credit for good performance or shield them from blame for bad performance.

REFERENCES


