Brand Hypocrisy From a Consumer Perspective: Scale Development and Validation

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This research conceptualizes brand hypocrisy from a consumer perspective. A multiphase process generates a 12-item brand hypocrisy scale with four dimensions (image, mission, message, and social hypocrisy). Content, discriminant and predictive validity are supported. Findings enrich the understanding of negative brand-related inferences and conceptualize an understudied but increasingly relevant judgment.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although consumers develop mainly positive relationships with brands (Fournier 1998), there is increasing interest in understanding negative brand perceptions (Fournier and Alvarez 2013). This is particularly relevant in a context in which skeptical consumers scrutinize all manner of brand actions. Consumers accuse brands of being insincere (Maehle, Ones, and Supphellen 2011), inauthentic (Thompson and Arsel 2004) and dishonest (Lee, Motion, and Conroy 2009). Recently, criticism levied has resulted in the emergence of perceptions of brand hypocrisy. Volkswagen, for example, was accused by consumers of hypocritical behavior for deceiving the public and cheating on diesel emissions tests (Delacroix 2015). Brands such as Unilever, McDonald’s and Budweiser have also come under fire for corporate hypocrisy (Griner 2013; Northrup 2015; Kotz 2014). These examples raise important questions: Do consumers perceive brands as hypocritical? What are the factors underpinning this perception? What are the consequences of these perceptions? This study explores the meaning of brand hypocrisy from a consumer perspective and develops a measurement scale.

Saying one thing and doing another illustrates the nature of human hypocrisy (Martinie and Fointiat 2010). Researchers in psychology (Batson et al. 1997), philosophy (Grant 1997), management (Fassin and Buellens 2011), or organizational ethics (Fortin and Fellenz 2008) have studied significations and demonstrations of hypocrisy. In marketing, no research has focused exclusively on understanding the nature of brand hypocrisy from a consumer perspective. It is however increasingly relevant to study negative inferences towards brands (Fournier and Azarel 2013). Hypocrisy is said to be an important determinant of consumer firms’ evaluation (Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz 2009), but its exact nature remains unknown in a consumer-brand context. This study addresses this issue. The next paragraphs present the development of a brand hypocrisy scale across four studies (Churchill 1979).

Study 1: Item Generation

47 participants (mean age =43) from an online panel were asked to think and write about what a hypocritical brand would be and to list brands that they perceived as hypocritical. Answers provided by participants (e.g., “McDonald’s: Their salads are not as healthy as they claim to be”, “Coca-Cola: It promotes itself as fun and hip when it is actually bad for you”, “KFC: KFC and breast cancer… totally nonsensical!”) were analysed and enriched with the literature to develop an initial set of 142 items capturing the concept of brand hypocrisy (e.g., “This brand says and does different things,” strongly disagree/strongly agree).

Study 2: Content validity.

Four marketing experts indicated how representative each item is of hypocrisy as it relates to brands. An item was removed/modified if one expert rated it as poor or mentioned it was ambiguous, or two experts rated it as fair. A list of 94 items remained.

Study 3: Initial administration

285 adults (mean age =42) from an online panel were asked to think about a brand that they considered hypocritical and to rate it on the 94 items. A four-factor solution emerged following a principal component exploratory factor analysis. After removal of items (low loadings/high cross-loadings), 48 items remained and were interpreted in light of the items and the literature. The four dimensions are: image hypocrisy (a brand’s false appearances and failure to deliver on promises, e.g., “This brand pretends to be something it is not”), mission hypocrisy (a brand’s negative, unacknowledged impact on people or society, e.g., “This brand pretends to be good for people but it is not”), message hypocrisy (a brand promoting unrealistic values and unachievable goals through its communications; e.g. “This brand pushes consumers towards unrealistic goals), social hypocrisy (a brand’s social activities unconnected to brand essence and perspective, e.g., “This brand supports charitable causes for marketing purposes”). A confirmatory factor analysis (AMOS-20) was computed and model was improved (modification indices=3.84; Baggozzi and Yi 1998; model comparisons). The final model is a four-factor correlated model (12 items, 3/dimension) (NNFI=.97, CFI=.98, SRMR=.04, RMSEA=.07, χ2(48)=93.46, p<.001). Psychometric characteristics and discriminant validity between dimensions were satisfactory.

Study 4: Discriminant and predictive validity

180 adults from an online panel (mean age =43) were asked to think about a brand that is either hypocritical or non hypocritical and to evaluate it. The four-factor model showed good fit (NNFI=.98, CFI=.99, SRMR=.02, RMSEA=.06). Discriminant validity between the dimensions and related constructs was tested: image hypocrisy with corporate hypocrisy (Wagner et al. 2009), mission hypocrisy with integrity dimension of brand authenticity (reverse scale) (Morhart et al. 2009), message hypocrisy with symbolism dimension of brand authenticity (reverse scale) (Morhart et al. 2015), social hypocrisy with the integrity dimension of brand personality in a non-profit context (reverse scale) (Venables et al. 2005). Results (e.g., confidence intervals, Anderson and Gerbing 1988; average variance vs. squared correlation, Fornell and Larcker 1981) confirmed discriminant validity. An overall comparison of brand hypocrisy with corporate hypocrisy (Wagner et al. 2009), further supported discriminant validity. Regarding predictive validity, the impact of hypocrisy on negative word-of-mouth and brand distance (Grégoire, Tripp and Legoux 2009) was tested. Regression results indicate that three hypocrisy factors are predictors (p<.05) of negative word-of-mouth (image β=.26/mission β=.51/message β=.16/R2=.66) and two (p<.05) of distance (image β=.37/mission β=.47/R2=.63). Predictive validity was also verified through structural equations. The first-order factors loaded on a global hypocrisy variable and significantly predicted negative word-of-mouth (γ=83, p<.001) and distance (γ=.80, p<.001).

This research provides a comprehensive understanding of brand hypocrisy and develops a scale for measuring it. Results show that brand hypocrisy is a multidimensional construct comprising four dimensions. A brand can be perceived as hypocritical in instances of the following: i) If it fails to put words into actions (image hypocrisy), ii) If it negatively impacts society or consumer wellbeing (mission hypocrisy), iii) If it conveys images that are unrealistic or unattainable (message hypocrisy); and, iv) If it supports social responsibility activities for strategic considerations only (social hypocrisy). This research enriches the understanding of negative inferences attributed to brands by consumers, a neglected area in the literature (Fournier and Alvarez 2013). It contributes to the brand avoidance literature (Lee et al. 2009) by showing that perceptions of hypocrisy constitute an important determinant of negative behavior directly in-
volving consumers (i.e. brand distance) and the people around them (i.e. negative word-of-mouth).

REFERENCES


