How Unethical Brands Motivate Self-Interested Behavior of Consumers

Abstract

Existing studies have documented that strong consumer-brand relationships can protect a brand from negative consequences of the brand's unethical behavior. The current research investigates another possible outcome for brands that engage in questionable ethical activities: the potential to influence a consumer's subsequent decisions. Across three studies, we provide support for our prediction that a strong connection to a brand that engages in unethical actions triggers consumers' self-interested conduct in a domain unrelated to the brand action. This occurs because the feeling of self-brand connection increases consumers' tendency to engage in moral justification efforts on behalf of the brand, which reduces self-deterrents to morally questionable behaviors and encourages self-interested conduct in a subsequent decision. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of this research.

Keywords: self-brand connection, brands' unethical behavior, self-interested behavior.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, media reports of companies' and brands' unethical behaviors have become common in the marketplace. Consumers are regularly exposed to stories of dishonest conduct of one type or another, such as human rights violations in factories contracted by Apple, Adidas, and Nike; the Volkswagen emissions scandal; and, more recently, the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal. These unethical behaviors[1] violate pre-established norms and principles of society (Haidt, 2012), and have important implications for brand attitudes and the consumer-brand relationship (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes, & Vogel, 2010).

Prior research has demonstrated that when brands commit unethical behaviors, it damages their image and reputation (Klein, Smith, & John, 2004) and can result in negative word of mouth (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997), boycotts (Klein et al., 2004), and lower repurchase intentions (Huber et al., 2010). At the same time, however, consumers with stronger brand relationships have been shown to be relatively immune to the effects of negative brand information, maintaining positive attitudes toward the brand (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Swaminathan, Page, & Gurhan-Canli, 2007).

Although prior research has uncovered essential insights regarding the effect of harmful and dishonest conduct on the brand itself, there is limited knowledge on the downstream consequences of a brand's unethical behavior on consumers and their subsequent decisions. Taking into account that individuals not only define their self-concept but also act consistently with the behavior of close others (Aron, Aron, Tunor, & Nelson, 1991; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007), and considering that brands can also be instrumental in helping individuals to develop their self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), it is interesting to question what might happen to consumers who feel a strong self-brand connection with a brand that engages in unacceptable behaviors.

To address this gap, we demonstrate in three studies that when exposed to a brand's unethical action, high self-brand connected consumers engage in self-interested behaviors in a subsequent decision unrelated to the brand action. Throughout the article, we refer to the self-

interested behavior those behaviors which individuals cheat or lie, benefiting from being dishonest (e.g., Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008).

Furthermore, we explore the mediating role of moral justification in determining the consumer's subsequent decision. Moral justification is a process through which people justify or excuse immoral actions to make them personally acceptable (Bandura, 1999). We show when a brand behaves unethically, consumers with high self-brand connections engage in moral justification of the brand's unethical actions. This justification process deactivates consumers' self-regulatory functions that rule their moral behaviors and encourages self-interested conduct in a subsequent unrelated decision.

This article makes several contributions. First, we extend the consumer-brand relationship literature by showing that a brand's unethical behavior not only impacts brand evaluation (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Swaminathan et al., 2007), but also drives consumers' subsequent decisions. In doing so, we expound a negative and aversive consequence of building a strong self-brand connection: its potential to influence consumer's self-interested behavior. Second, we add to vicarious self-perception theory (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007) by showing that people can infer their attitudes and behaviors not only through the behavior of close others but also through their connection to the brands. Third, we provide insight that moral justification is the mechanism through which consumer's self-interested behaviors may be motivated.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, we develop the theoretical framework of the study. We then present three empirical studies to test the proposed hypotheses. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical contributions, potential managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Theoretical background

Consumer Responses to Brands' Unethical Behavior

Considerable research in marketing has documented that consumers often perceive brands as active relationship partners, in ways that are analogous to their relationships with people (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998). Brands can also be strongly connected to individuals' self-concept, representing whom consumers believe they are or want to be (Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998). Similar to the concept of self-other overlap documented in the social psychology literature (Aron et al., 1991) and the notion that consumers view their possessions as extensions of the self (Belk, 1988), self-brand connection is conceptualized as the extent to which consumers "use brand associations to construct the self or communicate self-concept to others" (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, p. 339).

Building a strong and meaningful consumer-brand relationship, among other benefits (Escalas, 2004), can protect a brand from the negative consequences of unethical behaviors. Prior research has demonstrated that consumers with strong brand connections and commitment counterargue negative information about a brand, maintaining positive attitudes toward the brand following a transgression (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Swaminathan et al., 2007).

Cheng, White, and Chaplin (2012) investigated the reason why consumers maintain favorable brand evaluations after a failure. The authors found that connected consumers defend the brand to protect their own self-concept. They demonstrated that when exposed to a brand transgression, highly connected consumers exhibited a decrease in their self-evaluation and were more favorable to the brand attitudes despite the questionable behavior. Similarly, Lisjak, Lee, and Gardner (2012) found that individuals who identify with a brand defended the brand in a way similar to how they would defend the self under threat. The authors showed that, after receiving negative information about a brand, strongly brand-identified consumers with low implicit self-esteem demonstrated positive attitudes toward the brand when the self-concept

was activated. In contrast, those participants with high implicit self-esteem did not exhibit this defensive behavior.

The studies reported above are consistent with the idea that consumers with high self-brand connections are more benevolent in their brand evaluations in the face of a transgression to maintain a positive self-view (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). However, none of these researches considers the downstream implications for consumers who feel connected to a brand that engages in questionable ethical behavior. In the next sections, we propose an alternative theoretical perspective regarding the effect of a brand's unethical behavior on consumers and how it impacts their subsequent decisions in unrelated domains.

Consumer's Subsequent Decision Following a Brand's Unethical Behavior

Research in social psychology has shown that close relationships obscure the limits between the self and their partner. According to Aron and Aron's (1986) self-expansion theory, individuals are motivated to enter and maintain close relationships to expand their self-concept by incorporating resources, perspectives, and characteristics of the other in the self. The principle is that by "including others in the self," people act and think as if some or all aspects of others were their own, thereby expanding the self (Aron et al., 1991). Based on this view, Goldstein and Cialdini (2007) proposed that people sometimes infer their own characteristics and attributes by observing the actions of close others as if they were observing their own behavior. This vicarious self-perception process not only defines a person but can also lead individuals to behave in ways that are coherent with the observed behavior (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007).

This feeling of including others in the self-concept creates numerous vicarious possibilities. For example, Kouchaki (2011) showed that individuals who have established moral credentials through others' prior moral behavior were more likely to express biased attitudes in a subsequent behavior. In the context of brand relationships, a recent study demonstrated that a brand's past socially responsible behavior can influence the moral behavior of consumers who have integrated the brand's schema into themselves (Newman & Brucks, 2018). Specifically, the authors found that consumers who reported a high level of identification with socially responsible brand were less generous in a subsequent decision. In contrast, those with a high level of identification with a less socially responsible brand were marginally more generous after exposure to brand behavior. These findings can be explained by the ''compensatory ethics model'' proposed by Zhong, Ku, Lount, and Murnighan (2010). Consistent with this model, in a sequential ethical decision, individuals can present a strong motivation to equilibrate their behavior by making opposite choices from one ethical decision to the next.

Contrary to the compensatory ethics model, many theorists have demonstrated that individuals are motivated to maintain behavioral consistency by acting more ethically after an initial ethical decision and less ethically after a prior unethical decision (Gawronski & Strack, 2012; Gino, Norton, & Ariely, 2010). It was Gneezy, Imas, Brown, Nelson, and Norton (2012) who challenged the idea proposed by the compensatory ethics model. The authors showed that the compensatory effect was consistent only with relatively *costless* pro-social behavior (actions that benefit others without any costs to the agent). For *costly* pro-social behavior (actions that benefit others with some costs to the agent), people acted consistently with their previous pro-social action. Furthermore, in three classic psychology paradigms – cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), foot in the door (Freedman and Fraser, 1966), and self-perception (Bem, 1972) – the idea of behavioral consistency has been supported.

In line with Gneezy et al. (2012), Gunia, Sivanathan, & Galinsky (2009) argued and demonstrated that a psychological connection between two decision-makers led the second decision-maker to justify the actions of the first and to escalate their own commitment to these

decisions. In related work, Gino and Galinsky (2012) found that individuals were more likely to behave unethically in a subsequent situation after being exposed to dishonest behavior of a person they feel psychologically close.

In the present study, we explore the phenomenon of behavioral consistency in the context of consumer-brand relationships. Based on the literature presented above showing that individuals not only define their self-concept but also act consistently with the behavior of close others (Aron et al., 1991; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007), as well as the notion that consumers use brands to create and communicate their self-concept (Escalas & Bettmand, 2003), we suggest that unethical brand behavior may also affect consumers' subsequent unrelated decisions. We predict that a strong connection to a brand that engages in unethical actions can trigger consumers' self-interested conduct in a domain unrelated to the brand's unethical action. More formally, we hypothesize:

> *H1: After being exposed to a brand's unethical (vs. ethical) behavior, high self-brand connected consumers will engage (vs. not engage) in self-interested behaviors in a subsequent unrelated decision. In contrast, brand behavior will not affect the subsequent unrelated decision of low self-brand connected consumers.*

In the next section, we theorize about moral justification as a cognitive process that can explain why consumers exhibit morally consistent behavior following a brand transgression.

The Mediating Effect of Moral Justification

Moral justification refers to one of eight interrelated cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement proposed by Bandura (1986). As an extension of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999), moral disengagement is a process that can deactivate the self-regulatory functions that governs the moral conduct of individuals, allowing them to engage in unethical behavior, without guilt and self-censure (Bandura, 1999).

Specifically, through moral justification, people distort their understanding of their actions to perceive harmful behavior as personally and socially acceptable (Bandura, 1986). It comprises a cognitive reconstruction of the behavior itself, portraying what would generally be recognized as harmful behavior as having a good social or moral purpose (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008).

Moral justification provides relevant insights to understand why well-intentioned individuals engage in immoral actions on their behalf or of others without feeling distressed and can have significant consequences. For instance, Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996) experimentally found that the most influential predictor of harmful actions (e.g., violence, lying) was the "moral reconstruction of harmful conduct by linking it to worthy purposes'' (p. 364). Similarly, Aquino, Reed II, Thau, and Freeman (2007) demonstrated that the American public endorsed the many abusive actions taken by the United States during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as a punitive form of revenge for September 11th terrorist attacks. In this case, the terrorist attack against the US justified the practice of violence acts by describing them as serving a higher social purpose.

Gino and Galinsky (2012) provide evidence of the moral justification effect in the context of interpersonal relationships. These authors showed that feelings of psychological closeness to someone who engaged in selfish behavior increased moral justification of the selfish action, leading individuals to behave less ethically themselves. Moral justification has also been shown to influence unethical behavior in organizational contexts. Barsky (2011) showed that individuals with a greater tendency to morally justify their behavior were more likely to engage in unethical acts in the workplace. Paharia, Vohs, and Deshpandé (2013) demonstrated that people were more likely to endorse moral justifications for sweatshop labor

when contemplating desirable goods produced under this condition, compared to when they were observing the same product produced under more favorable working situations.

Drawing from the literature described above (Bandura 1986, 1999), we suggest that a strong connection to a brand that engages in unethical behavior can motivate consumers to justify the brand behavior, and this vicarious self-justification process deactivates consumers' self-regulatory processes that rule their moral conduct and encourages self-interested behaviors in a subsequent unrelated decision. Thus, we predict that moral justification will mediate the effect of the brand's unethical behavior on the consumer's subsequent decisions unrelated to the brand action. More formally, we hypothesize:

> *H2: Moral justification mediates the effect of a brand's unethical behavior on the consumer's subsequent decisions for those with a high self-brand connection. That is, after being exposed to the brand's unethical (vs. ethical) behavior, high self-brand connected consumers will justify the brand behavior and will engage (vs. not engage) in self-interested actions in a subsequent unrelated decision. In contrast, moral justification will not mediate the effect of a brand's unethical behavior on the consumer's subsequent unrelated decisions for those with a low self-brand connection.*

Overview of Studies

We conduct three experiments to test our hypotheses. Study 1 was run on Amazon Mechanical Turk using a geographic filter (non-U.S. participants were excluded). Studies 2 and 3 were run with undergraduate students from a University in South Brazil. Study 1 demonstrates that high self-brand connected consumers engage in self-interested behavior when exposed to brand failure. Specifically, this study finds that participants with a high self-brand connection to Nike and who were exposed to Nike's unethical behavior demonstrated lower intentions to point out a service mistake made in their favor in comparison to participants not exposed to a brand's unethical behavior. Study 2 provides further evidence that the brand's unethical actions drive consumers' self-interested behavior using a real decision setting. The findings from both studies provide support for hypothesis 1. Finally, study 3 utilizes a different brand (Adidas) and shows that moral justification is the underlying mechanism that accounts for brand-connected consumers' tendency to engage in self-interested actions after being exposed to the brand's transgression. This result confirms hypothesis 2.

Study 1

The goal of study 1 was to examine whether a strong connection to a brand that engages in questionable ethical actions increases a consumer's tendency to subsequently engage in self-interested behaviors unrelated to the brand action. We manipulated Nike's decision to ban (or not to ban) the exploitation of labor in the manufacture of its products. Nike was selected to enhance the credibility of the manipulation since the brand was accused of using sweatshop labor in the past (Paharia et al., 2013). We predicted that after being exposed to a brand's unethical (vs. ethical) behavior, high self-brand connected consumers would engage in self-interested acts in a subsequent decision (H1).

Method

Participants and Design. A total of 463 members of MTurk (50.8% male; M_{age} = 39.64, SD = 12.40) participated in this study in exchange for payment. The study employed a 2 (self-brand connection: high vs. low) x 2 (brand behavior: unethical vs. ethical) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were informed that they would participate in four unrelated studies. The first study consisted of the self-brand connection measure. All participants read an explanation of different types of relationships that people develop with brands. Specifically, they read:

> *Some consumer researchers highlight that people hold different types of relationships with brands. Some people have close relationships with certain brands and may think, "**I consider Brand X to be me,**" that is, it reflects whom I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others. Others, on the other hand, hold no relationship or even a negative relationship with a brand and may think, "**I don't consider Brand X to be me**".*

After reading the explanation, participants were asked to select the brand that best fit the concept of the "I consider Brand X to be me" from a list of six brands (e.g., Ray-Ban, The North Face, Puma, Beats by Dre, Samsung, and Nike - the brand presented in the manipulation). The order in which the six brands were presented to participants was randomized. For subsequent analysis, we grouped participants into high self-brand connection, i.e., those who selected Nike (n = 129), and low self-brand connection, i.e., those who did not select Nike and instead selected other brands (n = 308).

The second study was a filler task (i.e., product evaluation) to hide the association of the self-brand connection measure and manipulation task. In the third study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two brand behavior conditions. In each condition, they read a hypothetical news article about the Nike decision to ban (not to ban) the exploitation of labor in their factories. In the ethical brand behavior condition, participants read the text in brackets; in the unethical brand behavior condition, they read the text in parenthesis:

> *Nike chooses [to ban] (not to ban) the exploitation of labor in the manufacture of its products.*
> *Nike is the [first] (only) major apparel company [to join] (not to join) the Fair Labor Association – FLA, by [banning] (not banning) the manufacture of its products in Indonesian factories. As this country has lax human rights regulations, the vast majority of these factories work beyond legal limits, forcing their workers to work excessive daily hours, under poor working conditions, and in degrading hygiene situations. In extreme cases, there are reports that workers are physically and mentally abused and sexually harassed.*
> *As Nike does not technically control these factories, the company decided [to ban] (to keep) its production from these manufactures, [even though] (because) this work may be the main source of income for a large number of people living in extreme poverty. Nike's CEO explained that (even though) "there is strong evidence that the owners of these factories perpetuate violence against the workers [and the brand cannot be a part of this type of behavior."] (the brand cannot leave these people without any income.")*

In the last study, as a measure of self-interested behavior, participants read a scenario with a service bill error made in their favor and indicated their intention to point out the mistake (Schwabe, Dose, & Walsh, 2018). Precisely, we described a restaurant scenario in which consumers received a bill with missing items. Participants were told that they recognized the error and were asked to indicate whether they would point out the mistake on a 7-point scale anchored at 1 = Very likely to not point out the mistake to 7 = Very likely to point out the mistake.

After completing the dependent measure, participants responded to manipulation-check items (Newman & Brucks, 2018). They rated to what extent they considered their respective

news article to be wrong, morally inappropriate (reprehensible), and unethical on a seven-point scale anchored at 1 = Not at all to 7 = Very much. Next, participants rated the believability and interestingness of the news article on a seven-point scale (not at all believable/very believable, not at all interesting/very interesting). Then they provided demographic information and were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Following previous research (Chen, Lee, & Yap, 2017), we removed twenty-six participants from the study because they failed to follow the instructions in the manipulation task (e.g., they read the article in less than 3 seconds), leaving a sample of 437 participants.

Manipulation Check. As expected, compared with those participants in the brand's ethical behavior condition, participants in the brand's unethical behavior condition perceived the Nike news article as more wrong ($M_{unethical}$ = 5.12, $SD_{unethical}$ = 1.67, $M_{ethical}$ = 2.43, $SD_{ethical}$ = 1.79; $F(1, 435) = 262.20$, $p = .000$), morally inappropriate ($M_{unethical}$ = 5.07, $SD_{unethical}$ = 1.74, $M_{ethical}$ = 2.35, $SD_{ethical}$ = 1.81; $F(1, 435) = 255.64$, $p = .000$), and unethical ($M_{unethical}$ = 5.19, $SD_{unethical}$ = 1.73, $M_{ethical}$ = 2.39, $SD_{ethical}$ = 1.85; $F(1, 435) = 263.35$, $p = .000$). No significant effect of brand behavior was found on the believability ($M_{unethical}$ = 5.09, $SD_{unethical}$ = 1.74, $M_{ethical}$ = 5.33, $SD_{ethical}$ = 1.58; $F(1, 435) = 2.30$, $p = .129$) and interestingness ($M_{unethical}$ = 5.28, $SD_{unethical}$ = 1.34, $M_{ethical}$ = 5.43, $SD_{ethical}$ = 1.46; $F(1, 435) = 1.12$, $p = .290$) of the news article.

Consumer decision. We ran a two-way ANOVA with dummy variables representing the brand behavior conditions (0 = Unethical, 1 = Ethical) and the self-brand connection measure (0 = High, 1 = Low), and their interaction term as independent variable, and intentions to point out the mistake as the dependent variable. This analysis revealed a significant interaction between brand behavior and self-brand connection $F(1, 433) = 5.002$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .011$). Follow-up analyses demonstrated that participants with high self-brand connection to Nike and who were exposed to Nike's unethical behavior demonstrated lower intention to point out the service mistake in comparison to the participants in the ethical behavior condition ($F(1, 433) = 5.002$, $p = .041$; $M_{unethical}$ = 3.56, $SD_{unethical}$ = 2.38, $M_{ethical}$ = 4.40, $SD_{ethical}$ = 2.28). This difference was not significant for participants who did not feel a strong self-brand connection to Nike ($F(1, 338) = 3.047$, $p = .342$; $M_{unethical}$ = 4.28, $SD_{unethical}$ = 2.25, $M_{ethical}$ = 4.03, $SD_{ethical}$ = 2.37). These results supported Hypothesis 1.

Discussion

The findings of study 1 provided initial support for the prediction that the brand's unethical actions drive consumers' self-interested behavior. Specifically, study 1 demonstrated that high self-brand connected participants were less likely to point out a service error made in their favor after exposure to the brand's unethical behavior. This effect did not occur for those participants with low self-brand connection condition, proving that the strong identification with Nike was responsible for the self-interested behavior of the participants. These findings are consistent with prior research in social psychology which assumes that people sometimes behave in ways that are coherent with the behavior of close others (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007), and extend the vicarious moral consistency effect in the consumer-brand relationships (Gino and Galinsky, 2012). In the next study, we used a real decision setting as a measure of the dependent variable to establish a generalization of these findings.

Study 2

Study 2 aimed to replicate the findings of the previous study employing a real decision measure as the dependent variable. We allow participants to engage in self-interested behavior

by overstating their outcomes on a problem-solving task to obtain monetary incentives (adapted from Mazar et al., 2008).

Method

Participants and Design. A total of 158 undergraduate students (50.6% female; M_{age} = 22.62, SD_{age} = 4.86) from a University in South Brazil participated in this study. Participants did not receive any monetary compensation but had the opportunity to earn a maximum amount of R$ 5,00 during the study. The design was a 2 (self-brand connection: high vs. low) x 2 (brand behavior: unethical vs. ethical) between-subjects design. Eight distinct experimental sessions were conducted; each one had between 17 and 23 participants.

Procedure. This study followed the same procedure used in study 1, except for two differences. The list of brands used in the self-brand connection measure was adapted to the Brazilian context (e.g., Sony, Lenovo, Hollister, Puma, Calvin Klein, and Nike). The second change involved a problem-solving task under time pressure as a measure of self-interested behavior. At the beginning of the experiment, all participants received a four-digit numbered envelop contained R$ 5,00 (one two-real bills, two coins of one, and two coins of fifty cents) and a sheet of paper with 10 matrices, each based on a set of 12 three-digit numbers (taken from the Appendix of Amir and Lobel, 2010). As in the previous study, participants were informed that they would participate in four unrelated studies. Then they responded to the self-brand connection measure, evaluated a product offer (filler task), and read the hypothetical news article about the Nike decision to ban (not to ban) the exploitation of labor in their international manufacturing plants. Next, they were asked to enter the envelope number on the computer screen and to read the instructions for participating in the next task. The envelope number was used to match participants' performance in this task with the data filled in on the computer since the research was completely anonymous. Once the task started, participants had 2 minutes to find and mark two numbers per matrix that added up to 10 (see an example in figure 1). For each pair of numbers correctly identified, participants were allowed to keep $0.50 from their supply of money. At the end of the allotted time, they were asked to calculate the amount earned by the matrices they had solved and to return the sheet of paper and the unearned amount to the envelope. After completing a post-experiment questionnaire that included manipulation check and demographic questions, participants were thanked and debriefed and deposited the envelope in a recycling bin box located next to the exit of the room. We verified the difference between self-reported and real performance on the task with the total amount returned. Differences in this check demonstrated that participants overreported their performance to earn more money, indicating a self-interested behavior. For subsequent analysis, we grouped participants into those who overestimated their performance (n = 38) and into those who did not do it (n = 120)[2].

3,91	0,82	3,75
1,11	1,69	7,94
3,28	2,52	6,25
9,81	6,09	2,46

Figure 1. Problem-solving matrix.

Results

Manipulation Check. As expected, compared with those participants in the brand's ethical behavior condition, participants in the brand's unethical behavior condition perceived the Nike news article as more wrong ($M_{unethical}$ = 4.98, $SD_{unethical}$ = 1.81, $M_{ethical}$ = 3.00, $SD_{ethical}$ = 2.16; F(1, 156) = 39.065, p = .000), morally inappropriate ($M_{unethical}$ = 5.51, $SD_{unethical}$ = 1.86, $M_{ethical}$ = 3.10, $SD_{ethical}$ = 2.15; F(1, 156) = 56.731, p = .000), and unethical ($M_{unethical}$ = 5.06,

$SD_{unethical}$ = 2.07, $M_{ethical}$ = 3.05, $SD_{ethical}$ = 2.21; $F(1, 156) = 34.838$, $p = .000$). No significant effect of brand behavior was found on the believability ($M_{unethical}$ = 3.74, $SD_{unethical}$ = .85, $M_{ethical}$ = 3.58, $SD_{ethical}$ = .92; $F(1, 156) = 1.34$, $p = .248$) of the news article.

Consumer decision. We conducted a binary logistic regression analysis on the likelihood that respondents would report a self-interested behavior by overstating their performance on a problem-solving task (0 = Not Overestimated, 1 = Overestimated), using brand behavior (0 = Ethical, 1 = Unethical), self-brand connection (0 = Low, 1 = High), and the interaction between them as predictors. As expected, a significant interaction between brand behavior and self-brand connection on the consumers' self-interested behavior emerged (b = 1.63, SE = .77, Wald $\chi^2(1, n = 158) = 4.45$, $p = .035$; Odds Ratio = 5.15).

To clarify this interaction, we analyzed the simple slopes of self-brand connection in each brand behavior condition, which revealed a replication of the effects found in study 1. Participants with a high self-brand connection to Nike and who were exposed to Nike's unethical behavior were more willing to engage in self-interested behaviors by overstating their outcomes on the problem-solving task to earn more money than those in the ethical behavior condition (b = 1.42, SE = .56, Wald $\chi^2(1, n = 73) = 6.38$, $p = .012$). This difference was not significant for participants who did not feel a strong self-brand connection to Nike (b = -.21, SE = .53, Wald $\chi^2(1, n = 85)$ .156, $p = .693$).

Discussion

Study 2 provided additional evidence for the claim that a brand's unethical behavior can drive consumers' subsequent decisions if they feel connected to that brand. In addition, the study generalized the findings using a real decision task as a measure of self-interested behavior. In study 3, we extend this result by exploring a possible mechanism that can explain this effect.

Study 3

Study 3 aimed to replicate the previous findings and test moral justification as the mechanism that explains why consumers exhibit a vicarious moral consistency behavior following a brand transgression. Specifically, our conceptualization suggests that consumers tend to justify the unethical actions of the brand with which they feel connected, and this process reduces self-deterrents to morally questionable behavior and encourages self-interested conduct in a subsequent decision. Thus, we predicted that moral justification mediates the effect of the brand's unethical behavior on the consumer's subsequent decisions for those with a high self-brand connection (H2). Also, study 3 used a new brand in the manipulation (Adidas brand) and employed a different measure to test the self-brand connection.

Method

Participants and Design. A total of 114 undergraduate students (51.8% female; M_{age} = 24.8, SD_{age} = 6.11) from a University in South Brazil participated in exchange for course credit. The study employed a 2 (intentions to maintain the relationship: yes vs. not) x 2 (brand behavior: unethical vs. ethical) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were told that they would participate in a series of unrelated tasks. The first part of the study consisted of the manipulation of brand behavior. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In each condition, they read the same hypothetical news article from the previous studies, but now involving the Adidas brand decision to ban (not to ban) the exploitation of labor in their factories. Adidas brand was selected based on a pretest (n = 115), which determined the favorite brand of clothing, shoes,

or accessories for a sample of undergraduates from the same population. Next, participants rated the same measure of self-interested behavior used in study 1.

Following the dependent variable measure, participants were asked to indicate in a four-item measure their agreement with the moral justification scale (adapted from Eckhardt, Belk, & Devinney, 2010; Paharia et al., 2013; 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree): "Jobs that use exploitative labor conditions are the primary source of income for workers in poorer countries," "Jobs that use exploitative labor conditions are okay because otherwise, workers in poor countries would not have jobs," "Jobs that use exploitative labor conditions are okay because they help workers in poorer countries to have a better life," and "The use of exploitative labor conditions is okay because companies must remain competitive and all other companies do it." We averaged these four items into a single measure of moral justification for subsequent analysis (reverse-scored; $\alpha = .83$)[3].

Next, participants reported whether they were a customer of the Adidas brand, as well as their intentions to maintain their relationship with Adidas after exposure to the brand's questionable behavior. This constituted the measure of self-brand connection. For subsequent analysis, we grouped participants into high self-brand connection ($n = 47$) those who intended to maintain the relationship and into low self-brand connection ($n = 67$) those who did not intend to maintain the relationship. After that, participants responded to the same manipulation-check items used in study 1 and rated the believability of the news article. Then they provided demographic information and were thanked, debriefed, and dismissed[4].

Results

Manipulation Check. As expected, compared with those participants in the brand's ethical behavior condition, participants in the brand's unethical behavior condition perceived the Adidas news article as more wrong ($M_{unethical} = 5.54$, $SD_{unethical} = 1.86$, $M_{ethical} = 3.50$, $SD_{ethical} = 2.45$; $F(1, 112) = 24.831$, $p = .000$), morally inappropriate ($M_{unethical} = 5.54$, $SD_{unethical} = 1.82$, $M_{ethical} = 3.36$, $SD_{ethical} = 2.50$; $F(1, 112) = 28.110$, $p = .000$), and unethical ($M_{unethical} = 5.52$, $SD_{unethical} = 1.87$, $M_{ethical} = 3.43$, $SD_{ethical} = 2.49$; $F(1, 112) = 25.563$, $p = .000$). No significant effect of brand behavior was found on the believability ($M_{unethical} = 3.36$, $SD_{unethical} = .97$, $M_{ethical} = 3.56$, $SD_{ethical} = 1.01$; $F(1, 112) = 1.06$, $p = .304$) of the news article.

Consumer decision. We performed a two-way ANOVA with dummy variables representing the brand behavior conditions (0 = Unethical, 1 = Ethical) and the self-brand connection measure (0 = participants who intend to maintain the relationship, 1 = participants who do not intend to maintain the relationship with), and their interaction term as independent variable, and intentions to point out the mistake as the dependent variable. This analysis revealed a significant interaction between brand behavior and self-brand connection $F(1, 110) = 11.117$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .092$). Follow-up analyses demonstrated that participants with high self-brand connection (those who intend to maintain the relationship) and who were exposed to Adidas' unethical behavior demonstrated lower intention to point out the service mistake in comparison to the participants in the ethical behavior condition ($F(1, 110) = 4.185$, $p = .043$; $M_{unethical} = 5.27$, $SD_{unethical} = 1.98$, $M_{ethical} = 6.16$, $SD_{ethical} = 1.37$). In contrast, participants with low self-brand connection (those who did not intend to maintain the relationship) and who were exposed to the Adida's unethical behavior demonstrated higher intention to point out the mistake in comparison to the participants in the ethical behavior ($F(1, 110) = 7.57$, $p = .007$; $M_{unethical} = 6.68$, $SD_{unethical} = .52$, $M_{ethical} = 5.68$, $SD_{ethical} = 1.83$).

We ran a moderated mediation analysis (model 7; 5,000; Hayes, 2018) with brand behavior as the independent variable, intentions to point out the mistake as the dependent variable, intention to maintain the relationship as the moderator, and moral justification as the mediator (see figure 6). Consist with our prediction, we found that moral justification mediated the effect of brand behavior on the intention to point out the service bill error for participants

who intended to maintain the relationship with the Adidas brand (*Effect* = 0.2908, *SE* = 0.23, 95% CI [0.0041, 0.9124]), but not for those participants who did not intend to maintain the relationship (*Effect* = -0.0512, SE = 0.11, 95% CI [-0.3053, 0.1434]).

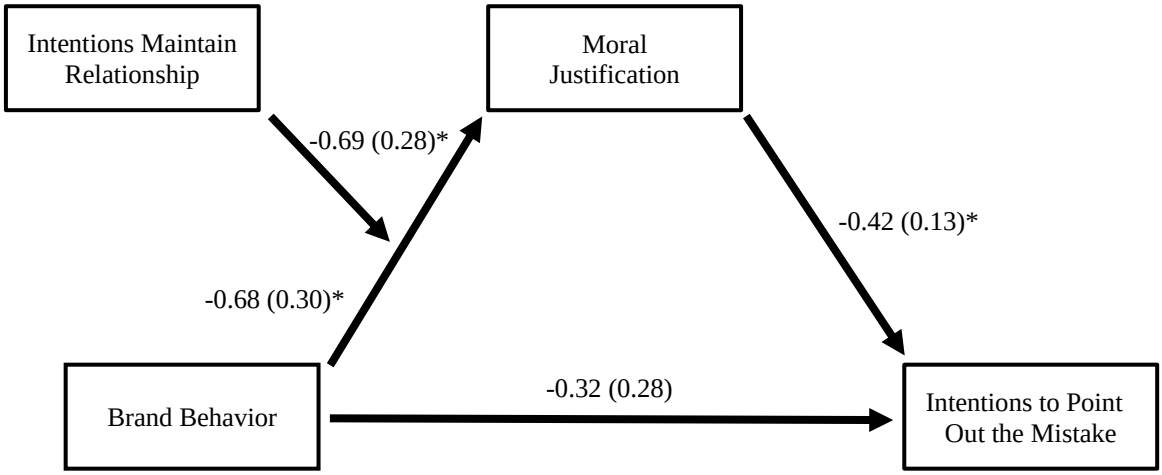


Figure 2. Graphical representation of study 3 moderated mediation.
Note: Coefficients are unstandardized and are shown in the format *b*(SE); *p < 0.05.

Discussion

Study 3 provided additional support for hypothesis 1 and also demonstrated that moral justification mediated the effect observed in the prior studies, supporting hypothesis 2. Participants who felt connected to the brand that engaged in unethical behavior judged this behavior to be socially acceptable, and it was this vicarious justification process that disabled their moral standards (Bandura, 1999), causing them to behave more selfishly in a subsequent decision[5]. These findings corroborate the view that mechanisms of moral disengagement reduce the moral rationalization that individuals use to preserve themselves from the consequences of harmful action (Bandura, 1999).

Surprisingly, study 3 showed that for low self-brand connected consumers higher intentions to point out the service mistake after exposure to the brand's unethical behavior. This finding provided further support for our prediction that behavioral consistency just occurs for strongly connected consumers. Furthermore, the current study showed the generalizability of findings using a different brand in the manipulation and measuring the self-brand connection after the brand's unethical behavior.

General Discussion

In this research, we investigated a different outcome for brands that engage in questionable ethical behaviors: the potential to influence the subsequent decision of a consumer who feels highly connected to the brand. Three studies demonstrated a consistent pattern of results. Study 1 provided initial evidence that high self-brand connected consumers engage in self-interested behavior after being exposed to a brand's unethical action. For low self-brand connected consumers, this pattern was not observed. Study 2 provided further support for the effect found in study 1. Also, in study 2, a real decision setting was used as a measure of the dependent variable. Finally, study 3 replicated the findings from the prior studies and showed that moral justification is the mechanism that explains the consumer's self-interested behavior following a brand transgression.

Theoretical Contributions

Consumer-brand relationship and brands' unethical behavior. Brands' unethical behaviors are a phenomenon increasingly reported in the marketplace. While prior research has revealed essential insights regarding brands' dishonest conducts and its downstream consequences for the brand itself (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Swaminathan et al., 2007; Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012), there is a shortage of research on the potential effects of brand's negative behaviors on its consumers and their subsequent decisions. The current research contributes to the consumer-brand relationship literature by showing that a strong connection to a brand that engages in unethical actions trigger consumers' self-interested behavior. To our knowledge, this study is among the first to demonstrate this effect. Although Newman and Brucks (2018) had investigated the effect of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) on consumer behavior outcomes, the current research can be integrated into a broader framework for a deeper understanding of the consumer-brand relationship by considering the domain of unethical behavior.

Self-brand connection. Prior research assumes that self-brand connection is instrumental in the formation of consumers' self-concept, to the extent which individuals use brands that represent who they are or want to be (Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998). This research extends these studies by examining the negative consequences of building a self-brand connection, including social and moral risks. Specifically, we show that a psychological connection to a brand that engages questionable ethical behavior is a powerful motivator for consumer's self-interested behavior. While research in behavioral psychology implies that unethical behaviors are sensitive to contextual factors (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Wiltermuth, 2011), we show that psychological factors such as self-brand connection can also influence individuals' unethical behavior.

Vicarious self-perception theory. Prior research suggests that people can infer their characteristics from and act similarly to the behavior of close others (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). Building on this work, Gino and Galinsky (2012) demonstrated that feeling connected to an individual who engages in selfish or dishonest behavior can cause people to behave unethically in a subsequent situation. The current research contributes to this literature by showing that people can infer their attitudes and behaviors not only through the behavior of close others (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007) but also through their connection with brands. Specifically, we show that a high self-brand connection to a brand that engages in unethical actions motivates consumers to behave more dishonest in a subsequent decision. Thus, we provide evidence that our relationships with brands can also motivate our vicarious self-perception.

Moral Justification. The current research identifies moral justification as a mechanism through which the brand's unethical behavior and self-brand connection relate to the consumers' self-interested conduct. We show that due to the oneness of the self and brand, consumers justify the brand's unethical behavior and this process deactivates self-regulatory functions that rule their moral codes (Bandura, 1999) encouraging self-interested conduct in a subsequent decision. In doing so, we situate moral justification in our conceptual framework as the mechanism through which consumers' self-interested behaviors manifest, providing a further explanation of why well-intentioned people cross ethical boundaries in the consumer brand-relationship context.

Managerial Implications

The findings of the current research suggest to brand managers that improving the objectivity of consumers' judgments about brands' unethical actions can be an effective way to avoid consumers' self-interested behavior in a subsequent decision. For instance, brands can adopt a robust communication strategy to recover from the negative consequences associated

with ethical failures. Apologizing quickly, expressing empathy with the aggrieved parties, and accepting responsibility for their actions are examples of strategies that can be used not only to improve the brand image but also to neutralize the harmful consequence of moral justification on the subsequent behavior of high self-brand connected consumers.

Engaging in recovery efforts to restore damaged reputations is another possibility that can be used by brands that are involved in ethical scandals. As an example, Starbucks closed more than 8,000 stores in the U.S. for several hours in May 2018 to conduct racial-bias training for its nearly 175,000 workers. This decision came after the arrest of two black men for "trespassing" while they were waiting for a friend in one of their stores in Philadelphia. Starbucks chief executive also condemned the arrests, calling them reprehensible and said he wanted to apologize to the men face to face.

Finally, brands can also use marketing activities to highlight their efforts on positive actions. Prior research has shown that positive Corporate Social Responsibility associations can lessen the adverse effects of brand misconduct (Klein and Dawar, 2004). Thus, brands can reduce the negative impact of behavioral consistency by presenting their consumers with information that emphasizing, for example, their pro-social actions.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations that reflect possible directions for further research. First, we did not demonstrate the factors that can eliminate the vicarious moral consistent effect when brands engage in unethical behaviors. Future research could investigate possible factors that may help reduce or even eliminate consumer's self-interested behavior. Improving the objectivity of consumer judgments on brand behavior through self-affirmation task (actions that restore a positive self-view) may be one way to mitigate consumers' selfish behaviors. Given that previous research has demonstrated that engaging in self-affirmation activities reduced the tendency of high self-brand connected consumers to defend the brand (Cheng et al., 2012), it would be interesting for future studies examine this possibility in terms of the downstream outcomes examined in this research. Increasing consumers' moral awareness may also lessen the influence of brand transgression on consumers' outcomes.

Second, the present research focused on a single type of brand's unethical behavior (e.g., exploitation of labor) in a single product category. Future studies may investigate other controversial situations that consumers encounter in their relationships with brands, and that can impact in their futures behaviors. Future studies may also extend the scope of this research to other contexts, such as technology and food products.

Third, an issue that still needs to be understood is related to the severity of the brand's unethical actions. We focused on a single ethical issue, but there are numerous possible types of brand transgressions. Will the moral justification always emerge as a motivator for self-interested conduct in high connected consumers? For example, Reimann, Macinnis, Folkes, Uhalde, and Pol (2018, p. 250) showed that "brand betrayal has the potential to harm consumers' sense of self by triggering experiences of self-directed blame and psychological loss, which are likely to motivate consumers to take actions that will restore their sense of identity". For these authors, both revenge-seeking behaviors and relationship dismissal might reestablish the consumer's identity. Future studies may consider testing whether brand betrayal would result in similar effects as those presented in the current research. Furthermore, exploring the distinctions between the brand's unethical behavior and brand betrayal would be worthwhile.

Finally, we identified moral justification as an underlying mechanism, but undoubtedly this effect, like most, is multiply determined. It would be interesting to find other mediators that help to deepen understanding of the process by which connected consumer engage in unethical actions after being exposed to brand transgressions. The literature offers several plausible

theoretical perspectives on this issue (Barky, 2011; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011), some of which have already been tested in the current research, but which deserve further investigation. For instance, Bhattacharjee, Berman, and Reed II (2013) showed that moral decoupling, a process in which judgment of morality is separated from judgments of performance, allowed consumers to support the performance of public figures while simultaneously condemning his or her transgression. Further research could investigate whether moral decoupling would trigger the same consequences for high self-brand connected consumers and their subsequent decisions.

Notes

1. We use Jones' conceptualization of unethical behavior as those that are "either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community," and that may have harmful consequences for others (Jones, 1991, p. 367). The brand's unethical behavior scenarios employed in the experiments of this research involve violations of ethical norms and fall into the concept proposed by Jones.
2. In this study, no participants were removed for failing to follow instructions.
3. A factor analysis confirmed that these four items loaded onto a single factor with an eigenvalue = 2.91 and explained variance = 72,82%.
4. In this study, no participants were removed for failing to follow instructions.
5. We ran a follow-up test using the same procedures employed in study 1 to examine whether several related, but alternative mechanisms—namely moral decoupling, moral disengagement, and self-protection—could explain the consumer's subsequent decision. None of these additional variables emerged as a significant mediator.

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