

Research Report

# The effects of self-brand connections on responses to brand failure: A new look at the consumer–brand relationship

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## Abstract

We argue that consumers with high self-brand connections (SBC) respond to negative brand information as they do to personal failure — they experience a threat to their positive self-view. After viewing negative brand information, high (vs. low) SBC consumers reported lower state self-esteem. Consumers with high SBC also maintained favorable brand evaluations despite negative brand information. However, when they completed an unrelated self-affirmation task, they lowered their brand evaluations the same as low SBC consumers. This finding suggests that high SBC consumers' reluctance to lower brand evaluation might be driven by a motivation to protect the *self* rather than the brand.

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*“My BMW is my wingman, my twin. I would never diss it for another car because that would be like dissing my twin brother or worse, dissing myself [laughs].” (32 year-old man)*

The value of building strong consumer–brand relationships has been well documented in the marketing literature (e.g., Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). Among other positive outcomes, relationship strength and commitment have been linked to more positive and forgiving reactions following brand failure (e.g., objectively negative brand performance or information). Indeed, research has shown that failures can have significant implications for overall brand evaluations and relationship strength (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). This literature converges on the notion that consumers with stronger (versus weaker) brand relationships are relatively “insulated” from the impact of negative brand information and are more forgiving, benevolent and “immune” to brand failure (Ahluwalia & Gurhan-Canli, 2000; Ahluwalia,

Unnava, & Burnkrant, 2001; Chandler & Schwarz, 2010; Hess, Ganesan, & Klein, 2003; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998).

Much of the existing research on consumer–brand relationships has focused on consumers' reactions to brands that are treated as either their *friends* or *business partners* (Aggarwal, 2004; Aggarwal & Law, 2005; Fournier, 1998). However, in some cases, as suggested in the quote above, consumer–brand relationships are such that brands are highly connected to the consumer's *self*-concept; they are symbolically representative of who consumers believe they are or want to be (Chaplin & John, 2005; Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998). The linkage between the brand and consumers' self-concept has been proposed as an important driver of emotional experience with the brand (Ferraro, Escalas, Bettman, 2011; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010).

Surprisingly, given how common it is for consumers to incorporate brands into their self-concept (i.e., form self-brand connections), researchers have not examined how brand failure might *personally* impact consumers with high self-brand connections. Moreover, to our knowledge, the possibility of brand failure weakening consumers' high SBC has not been studied.

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Previous research would imply that high SBC consumers are more forgiving of brand failure and that the strength of SBC is unaffected by a single instance of brand failure. However, we offer a new way to understand consumer–brand relationships that challenges the basic assumption that relationship strength and commitment lead to more positive and forgiving reactions following brand failure. Specifically, we propose that when consumers perceive a high self-brand connection (SBC), consumer–brand interactions manifest the principles that govern self-processes. As a result, consumers with high SBC respond to negative brand information as they do to personal failure — they experience a threat to their positive self-view. Consequently, high SBC consumers' tendencies to maintain favorable brand evaluations following brand failure are *not* the result of dismissing or re-interpreting negative brand information, but are instead the result of a need to restore self-evaluations. In support of this premise, we demonstrate that, rather than dismissing negative brand information, high SBC consumers reported lower self-evaluations after seeing objective evidence of brand failure. Thus, rather than being *less* affected by brand failure, high SBC consumers were actually *more* affected. Moreover, when given an opportunity to self-affirm following brand failure, high SBC consumers did not maintain favorable brand evaluations, but were instead more likely to *reduce* their brand evaluations following brand failure. In fact, self-affirming at least temporarily reduced SBC.

In summary, our “brand as self” conceptualization challenges important assumptions in the current literature, and therefore has the potential to change the way researchers approach the study of consumer reactions to negative brand information, as well as the way researchers examine defensive behaviors of high SBC consumers.

In the section below, we discuss existing literature on consumers' reactions to brand failure and how this relationship is moderated by relationship strength. We also explain how and why our “brand as self” theoretical perspective leads to a different prediction about high (vs. low) SBC consumers' reactions to brand failure than currently exists in the literature. We then discuss two experiments that support our conceptualization and conclude with a discussion of the contributions of our findings and possible areas for future research.

### Consumer reactions to brand failure

Several theoretical models have been used to understand consumers' reactions to negative brand information and how consumer–brand relationships moderate these reactions. First, the attitude commitment model has been used to explain reactions to negative brand publicity. Commitment, a major dimension of attitude strength (Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993), has been shown to attenuate the effect of negative information on attitude change (Ahluwalia, 2000). That is, highly committed consumers are more inclined to question the validity of the information source or generate counterarguments that neutralize the impact of negative brand publicity (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Swaminathan et al., 2007). Second, judgment-updating models have been used to under-

stand consumers' reactions to failed new products of otherwise successful brands. The model posits that the impact of negative information depends on its diagnosticity and accessibility (Gurhan-Canli & Maheswaran, 1998; Loken & John, 1993). Consumers with stronger brand relationships, who tend to have more extensive brand experience, possess more nuanced information about what is or is not typical of the brand and are, therefore, less likely to consider any given piece of information as diagnostic (or reflective of) the brand's core competence. Extensive prior knowledge has also been shown to bias information processing—new information is more likely to be discounted rather than used to update a priori judgments (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Smith, 1993). Consequently, negative product performance is less likely to spillover to adversely affect overall brand evaluations for consumers with stronger brand relationships (Milberg, Park, & McCarthy, 1997). Lastly, attribution models have also been used to understand reactions to service failure. The general finding is that service failure affects satisfaction [only] if the failure is attributed to a company's internal, controllable factors (Folkes, 1984; Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Monga & John, 2008; Tax et al., 1998). Because consumers with longer and more satisfactory prior brand interactions are more likely to attribute failure to external, rather than internal, causes (Hess et al. 2003), they tend to be more forgiving following service failure.

In sum, prior research suggests that consumers with strong brand relationships are more likely to counter-argue negative brand information, use prior brand knowledge to buffer its negative impact, and to make more brand-favoring attributions following brand failure. These findings suggest that consumers with stronger brand relationships are more forgiving and benevolent in their brand evaluations following failure. In the next section, we discuss an alternative theoretical perspective on why and how consumers defend their self-connected brands and make predictions based upon its implications.

### Brand failure as personal failure

Our theoretical framework is based upon the premise that if consumers' self and brand concepts are connected, then brand performance reflects on the consumer's self-concept. Researchers have argued and demonstrated that consumers use brands and products to create, communicate and maintain a positive self-concept (Aaker, 1999; Chaplin & John, 2005; Fournier 1998; Sirgy 1982). In fact, to the extent that brand associations are instrumental in helping consumers to communicate and even construct their self-concepts, self-brand connections are formed (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). We suggest that an important implication of a strong connection between a brand and a consumer's self-concept is a tight coupling between the brand's performance and high SBC consumers' interpretation of their *own* performance (or performance capabilities). The psychological literature has documented that people feel threatened when they fail to perform as well as they expect, especially in comparison to others (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Fein & Spenser, 1997; Tesser, 2000; Wood, Giordano-Beech, & Ducharme, 1999). Thus, we predict that – relative to low SBC

consumers, high SBC consumers' response to brand failure will be similar to their response to personal failure—they will experience a threat to their positive self-evaluation. Specifically, in our first experiment, we test the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Following negative (versus non-negative) brand performance, consumers with higher SBC will exhibit a decrease in their self-evaluation. However, brand performance will not affect the self-evaluations of consumers with lower SBC.

### The effect of self-affirmation

We have argued that, because high SBC consumers' brand performance evaluations are strongly associated with their self-evaluations, they experience a threat to their self-evaluation when a brand to which they are highly connected fails. In response to self-evaluation threats, individuals are highly motivated to restore a positive self-evaluation and readily engage in defensive behaviors in order to achieve this goal (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Steele, 1988). For example, after receiving (false) negative feedback on task performance, participants selectively neglected negative self-referent information (Sedikides & Green, 2000), committed to more difficult task goals (Baumeister et al., 1993), and derogated members of stereotyped groups (Fein & Spenser, 1997). Importantly, this ego-defensive motivation extends to the people, places and events that are associated with one's self-concept (Baumeister, 1998; Gramzow & Gaertner, 2005; Sherman & Kim, 2005).

Given the above, consumers may be reluctant to lower their brand evaluations following brand failure. However, we argue that this reluctance is not because they are more benevolent or forgiving toward the brand as the consumer behavior literature suggests. Instead, we believe that such a defensive reaction is motivated by self-focused, rather than brand-focused considerations. Specifically, high SBC consumers' motivation to maintain favorably high brand evaluations following brand failure stems from a desire to protect the self-concept rather than the threatened brand.

Following this line of reasoning, we suggest that engaging in self-affirming activities (e.g., elaborating on one's most important personal values) should reduce high SBC consumers' tendencies to defend the self-connected brand. This is because self-affirmation shifts individuals' focus to "maintaining an overall conception of self-integrity," rather than the resolution of "*specific* self-concept threats," (Steele, 1988; p. 267; *italics added*). For example, recent research has shown that self-affirmation is associated with a tendency to construe the self in terms of one's overall self-worth (e.g., one's long term values), rather than short-term performance (e.g., a short term brand and/or personal failure) (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009). If our self-threat account is accurate, then, if given the opportunity to self-affirm (and thereby restore an overall positive self-view), high SBC consumers who would typically evaluate their brands favorably despite failure should no longer feel the need to defend the failed brand in this way. As a result, they should lower their brand evaluations when the brand fails.

In addition, because high SBC consumers who self-affirm following brand failure are expected to focus more on the self than the brand, we argue that these individuals are at least temporarily more likely to see themselves as separate from, rather than highly connected to, the threatened brand. Thus, high SBC consumers' perceived self-brand connection with the "failed" brand should be weaker following a self-affirmation task. In contrast, since low SBC consumers are not expected to experience a threat to their self-concept following exposure to negative brand information, engaging in a self-affirmation task is not expected to affect their brand evaluation or self-brand connections. In summary, we hypothesize:

**H2.** Self-affirmation moderates the effect of negative information on brand evaluations for those with higher SBC (but not for those with lower SBC). That is, when consumers with higher SBC have the opportunity to self-affirm, they will lower their brand evaluations in response to negative (vs. non-negative) information. In contrast, high SBC consumers will not lower their brand evaluations if they do not have the opportunity to self-affirm.

**H3.** Self-affirmation moderates the effect of negative information on self-brand connections for those with higher SBC (but not for those with lower SBC). That is, when consumers with higher SBC have the opportunity to self-affirm, they will lower their SBC with the brand in response to negative (vs. non-negative) information. In contrast, negative (vs. non-negative) information does not influence their SBC if they do not have the opportunity to self-affirm.

## Experiment 1

### Method

#### Participants and design

Seventy-five undergraduates (30 women) participated in exchange for extra credit for a course. The experiment was a between-subjects design with two conditions (Product Performance: Fair or Poor).

#### Procedure

The experiment consisted of two parts. The first was an ad evaluation study in which participants evaluated a TV commercial for the focal brand BlackBerry. We chose BlackBerry as the target brand because it is familiar to college students and we expected a wide range of SBC towards the brand. After viewing the TV commercial, participants completed 7-point scales rating the advertisements along several dimensions (e.g., unfavorable/favorable, dislike/like). We then measured SBC using the 7-item scale developed by Escalas and Bettman (2003), which includes items such as "BlackBerry reflects who I am" and "I think BlackBerry could help me become the type of person I want to be" ( $-1 = \text{Strongly disagree}$  to  $1 = \text{Strongly agree}$ ;  $\alpha = .93$ ).

The second part of the experiment began after an unrelated 20-minute filler task. This part was presented to the participants as a separate study unrelated to the previous tasks they

completed. It was described as “a study on the impact of others’ opinions on new product adoption.” Participants viewed an advertisement containing a product comparison table for five brands of smart phones. The tables compared five brands, including a fictitious BlackBerry brand extension, on overall performance as well as three attributes that were specific to the product category. Extension performance was manipulated by the evaluation information in the product comparison table. Whereas the four filler brands had overall ratings from “Fair” to “Excellent,” the overall rating for the BlackBerry brand extension was either “Poor” (poor performance) or “Fair” (i.e., non-negative performance).

Next, we measured participants’ ratings of the BlackBerry brand extension as a manipulation check using Maoz and Tybout’s (2002) 3-item scale product evaluation scale (i.e., The BlackBerry new product was... very undesirable/very desirable, very bad/very good, was a failure/was a success  $\alpha=.93$ ).

Finally, we measured participants’ self-evaluations. We operationalized self-evaluations in this research by capturing participants’ state self-esteem. Self-esteem is a measure of how positively people evaluate themselves (Tesser, 2001). Although self-esteem has been described as a “relatively enduring disposition” (Rosenberg, 1986), extensive research suggests it can also vary situationally, particularly in response to negative social comparisons (e.g., after learning that one has not performed as well as others) (Tesser, 1988). Consequently, we administered Heatherton and Polivy’s (1991) 20-item state self-esteem scale. This scale was developed to capture individuals’ feelings of self-worth on three dimensions, social state self-esteem ( $\alpha=.75$ ), appearance state self-esteem ( $\alpha=.78$ ) and — most relevant to this research — performance state self-esteem ( $\alpha=.85$ ). If hypothesis 1 is supported, we should find lowered evaluations on performance state self-esteem in response to negative (vs. non-negative) brand performance. However, since brand performance is not posited to influence consumers’ perceptions of their appearance or social value, these measures should not be affected by brand performance.

## Results

### Manipulation check

We performed an Extension Performance (Fair or Poor) x SBC (mean-centered) GLM on evaluations of the fictitious brand extension (hereafter extension evaluations). As expected, extension evaluations were significantly lower when extension performance was poor versus when it was unknown ( $\beta=-2.04$ ,  $t(71)=-7.30$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Neither the SBC main effect ( $t<1$ , *ns*) nor the Extension Performance x SBC interaction effect was significant ( $t(71)=1.06$ ,  $p=.292$ ). This result suggests that regardless of SBC level, respondents agree that the BlackBerry extension performed poorly (Higher SBC (+1SD):  $M_{\text{poor}}=2.75$ ,  $SE=.26$  vs.  $M_{\text{fair}}=5.10$ ,  $SE=.31$ ; Lower SBC (−1SD):  $M_{\text{poor}}=2.94$ ,  $SE=.30$  vs.  $M_{\text{fair}}=4.67$ ,  $SE=.26$ ). This confirms that the negative brand information was objectively and uniformly perceived as such by both high and low SBC participants.

### State self-esteem

We performed an Extension Performance (Fair or Poor) x SBC (mean-centered) GLM on each of the subscales of state self-esteem. As predicted, we found a significant Extension Performance x SBC interaction effect on performance state self-esteem ( $\beta=-.64$ ,  $SE=.28$ ;  $t(71)=-2.32$ ,  $p=.024$ ). H1 predicts that exposure to negative (vs. fair) extension performance decreases SSE for high SBC consumers but not for low SBC consumers. Consistent with this prediction, simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991; Fitzsimons, 2008; Irwin & McClelland, 2001; Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006) revealed that, as predicted, poor (vs. fair) extension performance was associated with lower performance state self-esteem for those with higher SBC ( $M_{\text{poor}}=4.54$ ,  $SE=.30$  vs.  $M_{\text{fair}}=5.37$ ,  $SE=.26$ ;  $t(71)=2.13$ ,  $p=.037$ ). However, poor (vs. fair) extension performance did not affect state self-esteem of those with lower SBC ( $M_{\text{poor}}=5.18$ ,  $SE=.25$  vs.  $M_{\text{fair}}=4.72$ ,  $SE=.28$ ;  $t(71)=1.18$ ,  $p=.243$ ). Moreover, as expected, the above effects were specific to performance self-esteem; Extension Performance, SBC, and their interaction effect were not significant on social or appearance state self-esteem.

## Discussion

Experiment 1 provided support for H1. Specifically, participants with high SBC reported significantly lower self-evaluations following negative brand information than those with low SBC. This result challenges existing views that high SBC consumers, who have more extensive knowledge and experience of the brand, are less impacted by incidents of brand failure. Rather, we find that these consumers appear to be *more* personally impacted by the failure than those who perceive little, if any, SBC.

Our results shed a new light on an existing finding that high SBC consumers are more resistant to negative brand information (e.g., Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Swaminathan et al., 2007). According to our proposed model, high SBC consumers are reluctant to lower brand evaluations not because they are particularly benevolent or forgiving. Rather, they are reluctant because their self-esteem is at stake. If this conceptual model is valid, then one can reduce such reluctance by providing these consumers an opportunity to self-affirm. In Experiment 2, we test the hypothesis that self-affirmation can mitigate high SBC consumers’ reluctance to lower brand evaluation (H2) and reduce their connection to the failed brand (H3).

## Experiment 2

### Method

#### Participants and design

One hundred and seventy undergraduates (86 women) participated in exchange for extra credit for a course. The experiment was a 2 (Extension Performance: Fair/Poor) x 2 (Self Affirmation: Affirmation/No Affirmation) x SBC (measured) design.



### Procedure

The procedure of the current study was similar to that of study 1, with the addition of a self-affirmation manipulation and additional measures. After responding to the self-brand connection measure (in an advertisement evaluation task) and reading a product comparison table (extension performance manipulation), participants were randomly assigned to either the self-affirmation or no affirmation condition. In the self-affirmation condition, participants completed a self-affirmation task asking them to briefly describe their most important personal values immediately before providing brand evaluations (Steele & Liu, 1983). In the no-affirmation condition, participants recalled what they had eaten in the last 72 h. This control condition allowed participants to consider the self without affirming important life values. After the self-affirmation manipulation, participants responded to measures of performance state self-esteem measure, brand evaluations, and lastly self-brand connection. Note that self-brand connection was measured twice in the current study: the first measure was used as a predictor in the analysis whereas the second measure was used as a dependent variable to test hypothesis 3.

### Results

#### Manipulation check

An Extension Performance (Fair or Poor)  $\times$  SBC (mean-centered) GLM on extension evaluation revealed only a significant main effect of Extension Performance,  $\beta = -2.56$ ,  $t(166) = -13.93$ ,  $p < .001$ . As expected, extension evaluations were significantly lower when extension performance was poor than when it was unknown ( $M_{\text{poor}} = 2.75$ ,  $SE = .12$  vs.  $M_{\text{fair}} = 5.25$ ,  $SE = .14$ ). Neither the SBC main effect ( $t(166) = 1.51$ ,  $p = .134$ ) nor the Extension Performance  $\times$  SBC interaction effect was significant ( $t(166) = 1.22$ ,  $p = .223$ ). In other words, regardless of SBC, participants in the poor (vs. unknown) extension performance condition saw that the BlackBerry brand extension performed poorly.

#### Performance state self-esteem

To confirm that self-affirmation attenuated the effect of brand failure on high SBC participants' self-view, we performed an Extension Performance (Fair or Poor)  $\times$  Self Affirmation (Affirmation or No Affirmation)  $\times$  SBC (mean-centered) GLM on performance state self-esteem. As expected, the analysis revealed a significant 3-way interaction,  $\beta = .83$ ,  $SE = .38$ ,  $t(162) = 2.21$ ,  $p = .029$  (Fig. 1).

For high SBC participants, the Extension Performance  $\times$  Affirmation 2-way interaction effect on performance state self-esteem was significant,  $\beta = 1.09$ ,  $SE = .53$ ,  $t(162) = 2.04$ ,  $p = .043$ . The results in the No Affirmation conditions replicate the effect obtained in Experiment 1. Specifically, when high SBC participants did not self-affirm, they reported lower levels of state self-esteem when extension performance was poor ( $M_{\text{poor}} = 4.09$ ,  $SE = .31$ ) versus fair ( $M_{\text{fair}} = 5.25$ ,  $SE = .28$ );  $t(162) = 2.77$ ,  $p = .006$ . However, the effect of Extension Performance was insignificant in the Affirmation conditions ( $t < 1$ ,  $ns$ ). This result confirmed that self-affirmation attenu-

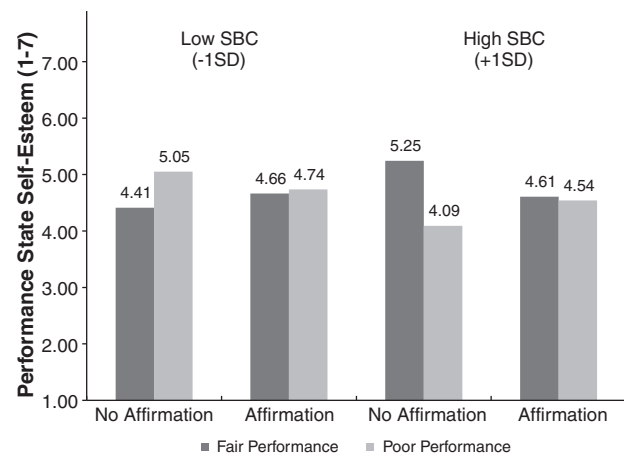


Fig. 1. Experiment 2—Performance state self-esteem for consumers with high (+1sd) and low (–1sd) SBC across conditions.

ated the effect of extension performance on high SBC participants' performance self-esteem. Note that high SBC participants' performance self-esteem was higher in the no-affirmation than in the affirmation conditions (combined across performance levels, i.e.,  $M_{\text{affirm}} = 4.58$ ,  $SE = .17$ ),  $t(162) = 2.05$ ,  $p = .042$ . This is consistent to prior findings that self-affirmation promotes a construal of the self in terms of overall self-worth rather than short-term performance (in this case a favorable brand extension).

For low SBC participants, as expected, their state self-esteem did not depend on Extension Performance, Affirmation, or their interaction (main effects:  $ts < 1$ ,  $ns$ ; interaction:  $t(162) = 1.11$ ,  $p = .270$ ).

#### Brand evaluations

As predicted, an Extension Performance (Fair or Poor)  $\times$  Self Affirmation (Affirmation or No Affirmation)  $\times$  SBC (mean-centered) GLM on brand evaluations revealed a significant 3-way interaction effect,  $\beta = .95$ ,  $SE = .31$ ,  $t(162) = 3.11$ ,  $p = .002$  (Fig. 2). Critical to H2, which predicts that self-affirmation attenuates high SBC participants' reluctance to lower brand evaluations, the Extension Performance  $\times$  Affirmation 2-way interaction effect on brand evaluation was significant among high SBC participants,  $\beta = 1.20$ ,  $SE = .44$ ,  $t(162) = 2.74$ ,  $p = .007$ . Specifically, in the No Affirmation conditions, Extension Performance did not affect high SBC participants' evaluation of the brand ( $M_{\text{poor}} = 6.32$ ,  $SE = .25$  vs.  $M_{\text{fair}} = 5.99$ ,  $SE = .23$ ;  $t < 1$ ,  $ns$ ). This result is consistent with effects shown in prior studies: high SBC consumers are reluctant to lower brand evaluations despite negative product information. However, in the Affirmation conditions, negative product information significantly decreased high SBC participants' brand evaluations ( $M_{\text{poor}} = 5.35$ ,  $SE = .17$  vs.  $M_{\text{fair}} = 6.21$ ,  $SE = .21$ ;  $t(162) = 3.14$ ,  $p = .002$ ). These results support H2.

For low SBC participants, there was only a significant main effect of Extension Performance on brand evaluation,  $\beta = -.77$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $t(162) = 3.67$ ,  $p < .001$ . That is, negative product

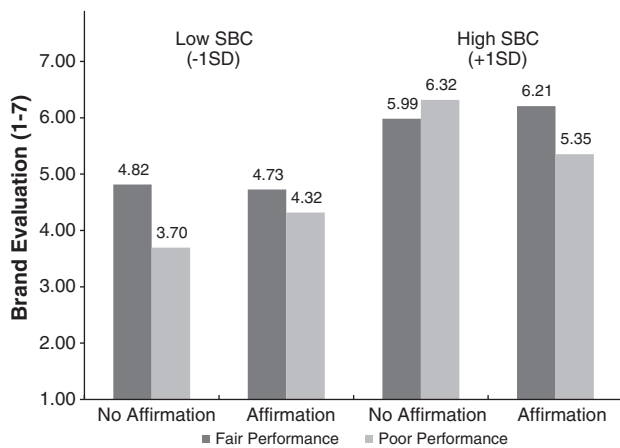


Fig. 2. Experiment 2—Brand evaluations for consumers with high (+1sd) and low (–1sd) SBC across conditions.

information significantly decreased low SBC participants' brand evaluations ( $M_{\text{poor}}=4.01$ ,  $SE=.15$  vs.  $M_{\text{fair}}=4.77$ ,  $SE=.14$ ;  $t(162)=3.14$ ,  $p=.002$ ). This result replicated prior findings that a poorly performed brand extension can dilute evaluation of an established brand (Loken & John 1993). Neither the Affirmation main effect ( $t(162)=1.29$ ,  $p=.200$ ) nor Affirmation  $\times$  Extension Performance interaction effect was significant ( $t(162)=1.70$ ,  $p=.092$ ). The marginal Affirmation  $\times$  Extension Performance effect suggests that the Extension Performance effect on brand evaluation seemed have weakened in the affirmation condition. This comes with no surprise because the self-affirmation task, which arguably is more engaging than the

food-recalling task, may have reduced the accessibility of the negative information, rendering it less influential to the brand evaluation judgment (Ahluwalia & Gurhan-Canli, 2000).

### Self-brand connections

An Extension Performance (Fair or Poor)  $\times$  Self Affirmation (Affirmation or No Affirmation)  $\times$  SBC (mean-centered) GLM on SBC measured after participants responded to brand evaluations revealed a significant 3-way interaction effect,  $\beta=.52$ ,  $SE=.25$ ,  $t(162)=2.09$ ,  $p=.039$  (Fig. 3). Critical to H3, negative extension performance significantly decreased SBC among high SBC participants in the Affirmation conditions ( $M_{\text{fair}}=1.54$ ,  $SE=.17$  vs.  $M_{\text{poor}}=.94$ ,  $SE=.14$ ),  $t(162)=2.73$ ,  $p=.007$ . In contrast, negative extension performance did not influence SBC of low SBC participants or high SBC participants in the No Affirmation condition ( $ts < 1$ ,  $ns$ ).

### General discussion

Our findings challenge important assumptions in the current literature. The consumer–brand relationship is assumed to act as an interpersonal relationship, and SBC has been treated as simply an indicator of relationship strength. As such, prior studies view relationship strength as a buffer for consumers to deal with negative information. We challenge this baseline assumption about the interpersonal nature of the consumer–brand relationship and offer a new way to understand consumer–brand relationships—brands are treated similarly to how one treats the self. Importantly, our “brand as self” conceptualization yields a different prediction with regard to consumer reactions to brand failure than the literature currently

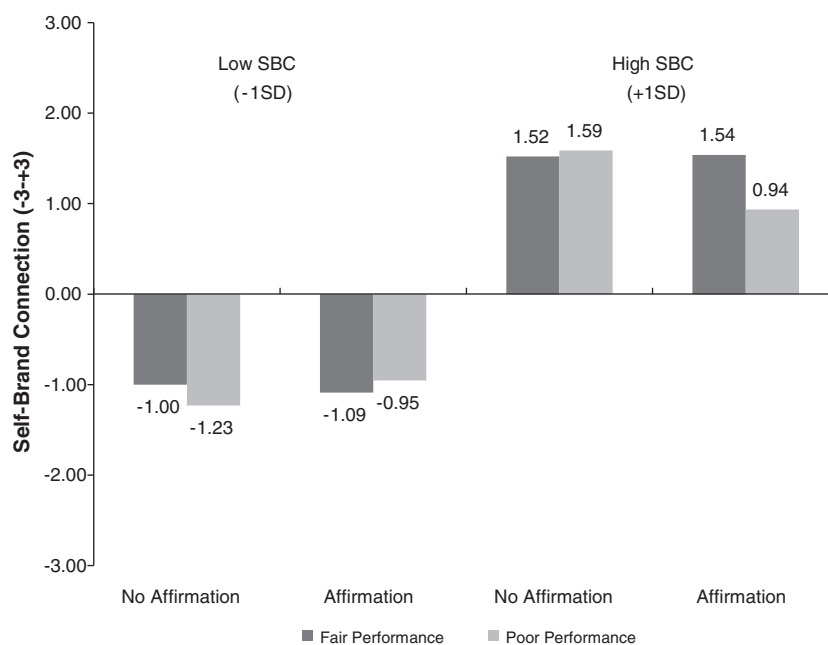


Fig. 3. Experiment 2—Self-brand connection measured after brand failure for consumers with high (+1sd) and low (–1sd) SBC across conditions.

predicts. Specifically, rather than being *less* affected by brand failure, we predicted and found that high SBC consumers are *more* affected. Additionally, being more affected by brand failure leads to two important consequences that have been overlooked in the literature: 1) high SBC consumers defend the brand when it fails, similarly to how they defend themselves when they fail, as a way to maintain a positive self view; and 2) if high SBC consumers can find a way to defend themselves without defending the failed brand, however, their brand evaluations will be lowered despite being highly connected and committed to the brand. We discuss our contributions in detail below.

#### *Why do self-brand connections affect responses to brand failure?*

We argue that consumers with high (vs. low) levels of self-brand connections evaluate the brand more favorably when the brand fails because the failure is viewed as a direct threat to their positive self-view. Because the brand is seen as a part of the self by virtue of being intimately tied to the self, failure on the part of the brand is experienced as a personal failure. Therefore, in an effort to maintain a positive self-view, high SBC individuals react defensively to brand failure by evaluating the brand favorably despite the poor performance. Our results are consistent with this argument. First, we found that high SBC participants reported lower levels of state self-esteem following negative (vs. non-negative) brand information. This effect was absent among participants with lower self-brand connections. Second, consistent with our argument that high SBC consumers' motivation to maintain favorable brand evaluations following brand failure may stem from a desire to protect the self-concept rather than the failed brand, we also demonstrated that, despite being highly committed to their self-connected brands, when high SBC consumers are given the opportunity to self-affirm, they lowered their brand evaluations as well as their self-brand connections in response to negative (vs. non-negative) information.

#### *Theoretical contributions*

Our research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the growing body of literature on self-brand connections. Whereas previous research has focused on the formation of self-brand connections (Chaplin & John, 2005; Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005; Ferraro et al., 2011), our research is among the first to investigate the consequences of self-brand connections. To our knowledge, Swaminathan et al. (2007) have been the only researchers who have embarked on this endeavor. These researchers examined the effect of self-construal activation on brand evaluation, and found that brand evaluations depend on how much the brand is connected to the self-concept that is consistent with the activated self-construal. Whereas their focus was on the moderating role of self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) activation, our research focused on testing self-threat as a theoretical account of the effect of self-brand connections on brand evaluations.

Second, our findings augment existing research on consumer-brand relationships, which has primarily focused on relationships in which consumers regard brands as friends or business partners (Aggarwal & Law, 2005; Fournier, 1998). We examined consumer-brand relationships in which the brand and the self are connected, that is, consumers regard brands as their *self*. In contrast to other types of consumer-brand relationships (e.g., brands as friends or brands as business partners), this type of relationship (i.e., self-brand connections) is subject to self-related motivations and mechanisms (e.g., maintenance of positive self-view). Specifically, our results suggest that, whereas brand failure may threaten the strength or quality of consumer-brand partnerships if consumers treat the brand as their friends or business partners, consumers who treat the brand as self actually defend the brand when it fails, just as they would defend themselves if they failed. Importantly, our findings revealed that consumers with higher levels of SBC defend the brand not because they have more brand knowledge or because they trust the brand more than their counterparts, but seemingly as a way of maintaining a positive self-view when they feel a threat to their self-concept. Interestingly, this defensive reaction is absent when consumers have other ways to maintain their positive self-view.

Third, our self-affirmation findings challenge how researchers study consumers' responses to brand failure. According to the literature, one should predict that self-affirmation would have either no effect on brand evaluations or effects that are opposite to those we demonstrate. More specifically, judgment-updating models would predict that self-affirmation should reduce the effect of negative brand information on overall brand evaluations (i.e., prompt consumers to forgive or be benevolent towards the brand) since performing a self-affirmation task after receiving negative brand information should decrease accessibility of the negative information, rendering it less influential when participants respond to the brand evaluation task (Ahluwalia & Gurhan-Canli, 2000). Similarly, it has been shown that self-affirmation positively enhances mood, which in turn distorts negative brand information in support of the brand (Meloy 2000). If the reluctance to lower brand evaluations were only driven by a strong attitude commitment, the positive mood generated from the self-affirmation task should prompt high SBC consumers to maintain their favorable brand evaluations. However, consistent with our "brand as self" conceptualization and in contrast to the current literature, we found that high SBC consumers' brand evaluations were decreased, rather than maintained, following the self-affirmation task.

#### *Future research directions and conclusion*

There are several future research ideas that would be worthwhile to investigate. For example, practically speaking, our results regarding the impact of self-affirmation on high SBC consumers' brand connections (i.e., H3) suggest that, if high SBC consumers encounter alternative means of self-affirming, firms cannot be sure that high SBC consumers will remain connected to their brands following brand failure. It is important to acknowledge that the decrease in SBC that we demonstrated

is relative in nature. Specifically, whereas the SBC decreased significantly for high SBC consumers who completed the self-affirmation task (vs. high SBC consumers who did not complete this task), their SBC were still significantly higher than those of low SBC consumers. Thus, our findings are arguably more useful in demonstrating the relationship between brand performance and high SBC consumers' self-evaluations in the absence of self-affirmation than in providing definitive evidence that self-affirmation weakens SBC. Future research on drivers of self-brand disconnections would contribute meaningfully to our existing understanding of consumer brand relationships in general and SBC in particular.

Second, researchers could use Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997) to examine how self-preservation motives are manifested in consumer–brand relationships. TMT posits that management of anxiety associated with awareness of mortality is a powerful motivator of human cognition and behavior. Moreover, the awareness of mortality is believed to be the ultimate anxiety that human beings seek to regulate (Greenberg et al., 1997). Given that anger and sadness are common affective responses when consumers learn that their favorite products are discontinued (Martin, 2002), researchers could examine how such affective responses to the loss/discontinuity of self-connected possessions may affect consumers' overall brand evaluations.

Third, examining the interplay between SBC and consumers' long term goals would be another interesting avenue for future research. For example, to what extent are SBC malleable? The theories on self-motives posit that people pursue a number of desirable states of self (e.g., self-esteem). Our research suggests that SBC may be malleable to the extent that such connections facilitate or hinder the attainment of desirable states of self. That is, SBC appears to be at least temporarily reduced when high SBC consumers are given a chance to self-affirm before evaluating the failed brand. Moreover, if SBC are indeed malleable, how might they contribute to, or conflict with, consumers' long term goals? To answer this question, examining possible moderators of the relationship between SBC and brand evaluations such as materialism (since SBC may be considered materialistic in nature) would be a good starting point.

Given our new self-affirmation findings, which call into question what we currently know about consumers' responses to brand failure, more research is warranted to better understand the role of self-affirmation in the relationship between SBC and brand evaluations. It is possible that self-affirmation may attenuate the effect of SBC on brand evaluations only for high SBC consumers who have an internal locus of control (LOC) (versus external LOC). Because those with an internal LOC believe they have control over outcomes in their lives (including personal failures), self-affirmation should be quite meaningful to them after experiencing brand failure and therefore, should have a significant effect on their brand evaluations. In contrast, because individuals with an external LOC do not believe they have much control over events in their lives, it is unlikely that any form of self-affirmation will have a significant effect on the relationship between SBC and brand evaluations for these individuals.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine how brand failure affects self-affirming behaviors on different levels of self-representation. According to Burris and Rempel (2004, p. 21), the symbolic representation of self includes anything (e.g., objects, places) that “symbolize[s] who people are, where they have come from, where they belong, and why they are here” (bracket added). Consequently, they argue that people are sensitive to threats to the bodily, social, and symbolic boundaries of the self. In line with this argument and as an extension of our work, researchers could examine how (and under what circumstances) experiencing a threat on one level of self-representation (e.g., threat associated with a self-connected brand) might have consequences on another level of self-representation (e.g., physical or social self). For example, how might the self-threat resulting from brand failure affect interpersonal relationships?

In conclusion, our research contributes theoretically and empirically to the existing research in the areas of consumer–brand relationships and self-brand connections. The results of two experiments reveal that when brands become highly symbolic of consumers' self-concepts, consumers defend their self-connected brands much as they would defend themselves when they experience personal failure. However, such defensive reactions are out of a motivation to protect the self, rather than a general “immunity” that has been portrayed in the literature.

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