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## Impact of Social Media Brand Blunders on Brand Trust and Brand Liking

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# IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA BRAND BLUNDERS ON BRAND TRUST AND BRAND LIKING

## **Abstract**

More companies are engaging with consumers in real-time on digital platforms, which may lead to accidental or unintentional sharing of messages. Accordingly, how to manage online brand crises has become an increasingly important issue for marketing managers. The present research explores how online brand blunders influence consumers' trust and liking toward the blunderer brand, and the role of brand commitment in this relationship. Three studies show that consumers evaluate online brand blunders differently than they do product performance problems. Specifically, upon receiving negative brand blunder information, high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' brand trust and brand liking decrease to a higher extent due to finding the blunder less humorous and more offensive. On the contrary, upon receiving negative product performance information, low (vs. high)-commitment consumers' brand trust and brand liking decrease to a higher extent, which supports previous literature. Our findings suggest that managers should prioritize high and low-commitment consumers differently and tailor blunder communication in handling online brand crises.

*Keywords: brand blunder, product performance problem, product-harm crisis, product failure, brand trust, brand liking, brand commitment, social media*

## INTRODUCTION

Advances in communication technology and the transition from traditional to digital marketing platforms have led companies to engage with consumers interactively in real-time. One consequence of this digital communication transformation is brands sharing inadvertent accidental messages on digital channels. Especially with social media being an indispensable tool for brands to build customer relations, online brand blunders are becoming increasingly prevalent, drawing attention to the importance of managing communication on these channels (CBInsights, 2017; Twigg, 2021). Blunder, also referred to as a gaffe, mishap, or pratfall, indicates a “stupid or careless mistake” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021). More specifically, a business blunder indicates a management problem that was foreseeable, but a solution was either poorly prepared or entirely overlooked leading to a negative result (Ricks, Fu, & Arpan, 1974). In the context of social media, some publicized brand blunders include the unfortunate tweet sent from Chrysler Autos Twitter account “I find it ironic that Detroit is known as the #motorcity and yet no one here knows how to f\*cking drive” in 2011. Chrysler announced that the tweet came from an employee of their social media agency and was meant to be sent from his personal account. In 2014, US Airways reacted to a complaint posted on Twitter by accidentally tweeting a statement that included an image of a naked woman with a toy plane. By the time the company management realized the gaffe, it had already gone viral. In another incident, one of RedCross employees inadvertently sent a tweet from the @RedCross twitter account, that was meant for her personal account: “Ryan found two more 4 bottle packs of Dogfish Head’s Midas Touch beer... when we drink we do it right #gettnngslizzerd”. Another recent blunder came from Uber’s Twitter account in 2019. A customer tweeted Uber's customer service account about a negative experience he had while using the platform. In response, Uber tweeted "We're so sorry about that N\*\*\*\*\*!" Apparently, Uber used an automated response without a filter and did not censor the N-word. This racial slur created negative public reaction despite the apologies sent out from the brand account.

Effective management of brand blunders has become crucial for firms. Nevertheless, scarce academic research has explored blunders in managerial context. Early work by Ricks et al. (1974) and Ricks (1983) discussed cases of real-life international business blunders and revealed that blunders made in foreign markets mostly resulted from adoption, name, promotion,

translation, strategy, and market research related problems. They described cases where brand names and adverts were translated into other languages, or strategies were adapted to other cultures, with damaging and hilarious results (e.g., a laundry soap brand sold in French speaking Quebec labelled as "les parts de sale", which meant "private parts"; Ricks et al., 1974). Following work by Makridakis (1991), which evaluated different types of corporate failures and outlined lessons to be learned, indicated blunders as less serious failures than complete bankruptcies. Dalgic and Heijblom (1996) further compiled cases of marketing blunders and suggested macro-environmental factors (e.g., failure to understand the local culture) and factors that relate to firms' international business strategies (e.g., selection of wrong modes of entry) as main causes of international business blunders. They also highlighted the costly nature of blunders with embarrassment, lost customers, legal and ethical consequences, missed opportunities, and damaged firm reputation as potential consequences.

Importantly, this limited line of work explores blunders in the offline context and from a managerial point of view. It discusses blunder cases that occurred due to maladaptation of firm strategies to different cultures or value systems and provides managerial insights to help firms avoid similar business mistakes in international markets. Despite its growing ubiquity, to the best of our knowledge, no prior work has explored brand blunders in the digital realm. Neither did previous research explore brand blunders from the perspective of consumers.

Addressing these gaps, our research constitutes an initial attempt to understand online brand blunders and adopts a consumer behavior perspective. Our contributions can be summarized as two-fold. First, we extend the early academic work on business blunders (Ricks, 1983; Ricks et al., 1974) by exploring a novel form of online blunder; a phenomenon that has become prevalent in today's digitalized marketing environment, yet untapped by academic work. Different than previous research that focused on managerial consequences of business blunders, we focus on consumer-level outcomes; change in consumers' trust and liking of the blunderer brand as consequential effects. Our findings are expected to develop a better understanding of how to manage digital brand blunders and adapt firm response strategies to different consumer groups.

Second, we contribute to the literature on negative brand actions. Research on negative brand actions distinguishes between product performance-related misconducts that arise from functional product defects (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000) and ethically debatable brand misconducts

that are related to individuals' values (Pullig et al., 2006), both attracting negative publicity to a brand. We show that online brand blunders are perceived as humorous but offensive mistakes, hence are ethically debatable, values-related brand misconducts that fall into the latter category. In exploring consumers' evaluations of online blunders, we specifically focus on two key outcomes; how brand trust (i.e., consumer's confidence that a brand will fulfill its stated function; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992) and brand liking (i.e., overall attitudes and feelings toward a brand; Aaker, 2008) change upon encountering blunder information. We also investigate the role of brand commitment (i.e., consumer's psychological attachment with the brand; Kiesler, 1971) in this relationship. Extending previous findings on negative brand actions, we show that brand commitment affects consumers' brand trust and liking differently upon receiving blunder versus product performance-related information. Taken together, brand trust, brand liking, and brand commitment are crucial components of brand equity and loyalty, hence are important to understand in building strong consumer-brand relationships.

The rest of the manuscript proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature on consumers' responses to negative brand actions, present our conceptual framework and hypotheses. Then, we test our predictions across three online experimental studies using realistic social media blunders and product performance problem scenarios. We discuss our results and provide directions for future research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

### **Consumers' attitudes toward negative brand actions**

How consumers evaluate negative brand actions, i.e., product or brand wrongdoings, has been broadly explored in academic research. Much of the initial work focused on understanding the marketing consequences of product performance problems, also referred to as product-harm crises or product failures. Product-harm crises indicate a firm's product or service being damaged, defective or harmful to consumers, thereby attracting negative publicity to a brand (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). Salmonella contamination of Cadbury chocolates in 2006, the melamine contamination of several Chinese baby products in 2008, more recent Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 mobile phone, and HP laptop recalls due to battery overheating are some of the

highly publicized examples. Product-harm crises may lead to severe consequences such as consumers' feelings of stress, annoyance, or anger, as well as firm market share losses, drops in stock price, damage in brand equity and firm reputation (Chen, Ganesan, & Liu, 2009; Cleeren, Van Heerde, & Dekimpe, 2013; Van Heerde, Harald, & Dekimpe, 2007).

This early line of work on product performance problems mainly studied incidents that took place in the offline environment. In the pre-digital age, information about negative brand actions spread through traditional mass media tools, taking relatively a longer time and a more limited consumer reach. It was also substantial misconducts, perceived as crises, as depicted by the examples above, which made it to the news and triggered public reaction rather than minor consumer frustrations or dissatisfactions (Coombs, 2007). However, in the modern marketing era, negative brand actions inevitably reflect on digital space. The transition from traditional to digital marketing communication channels and the rise of social media have led to rapid and wide spread of negative information to a large number of consumers, amplifying its effects (Hansen, Kupfer, & Hennig-Thurau, 2018; Javornik, Filieri, & Gumann, 2020). Relatedly, a growing body of research attempts to understand how offline negative brand actions create online negative word-of-mouth through consumers' vocalizing criticism and complaint on online channels (Borah & Tellis, 2016; Hsu & Lawrence, 2016). Subtler consumer dissatisfaction and anger can be voiced on social media and reach masses instantly harming the respective brand. Also, with the shift of power from firms to consumers in new media, consumers can easily take collective action toward brands (Labrecque et al., 2013; Rauschnabel, Kammerlander, & Ivens, 2016). They can more easily punish or pressure brands to act, and many brands indicate suffering from this rising consumer power on online platforms.

Importantly, we examine negative brand actions that take place in the online environment, hence are virtual in nature, a different form of digital brand crisis untapped by previous research. Specifically, we attempt to understand the change in consumers' trust and liking toward brands that commit a blunder on social media.

### *Role of brand commitment*

Extant work shows that consumer-brand relationships play an important role in how individuals evaluate negative brand actions. Commitment, a close antecedent of consumer loyalty, is an important indicator of consumer-brand relationship strength. It refers to consumer's

psychological attachment with the brand (Kiesler, 1971). Previous work has revealed that high brand relationship strength and commitment result in consumers being more forgiving and positive toward brand wrongdoings. Upon receiving negative product information (e.g., learning about defective products of a brand), high-commitment consumers are less affected and are more likely to purchase a brand in the future compared to low-commitment consumers (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). Because of their high level of brand attachment, high-commitment consumers tend to counterargue the negative information about a brand that is against their preheld attitudes. They are likely to forgive the brand and resist attitude change. Evidence that matches individuals' prior expectations influence their judgments and result in processing incoming information in a biased manner (Darley & Gross, 1983; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002). Other research proposes self-defending motivations for this buffering effect. That is, highly committed consumers resist decreasing their brand evaluations not because they are forgiving, but because they are personally affected by a negative brand action, and they want to protect themselves (Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2021; Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner, 2012). These connected consumers perceive threat to the relevant brand as a threat to the self and attempt to relieve it to protect themselves. Trump (2014) provided a boundary condition for these findings; that they hold true in the product, but not ethical, context. Specifically, he showed that if negative brand information is of an ethical nature related to individuals' values (e.g., brand being involved in gender discrimination) rather than product performance-related, and if it is personally relevant, highly connected consumers respond negatively. A brand's moral misconduct harms consumer-brand relationships more when the consumer has a higher (vs. lower)-quality relationship with the brand (Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes, & Vogel, 2010). In this case, the committed consumers are not forgiving, but evaluate the brand unfavorably. Taken together, these findings suggest that there is a limit to consumers' tendency to defend the brand they are committed to.

We argue that brand blunders are also ethically debatable, values-related brand misconducts in nature (Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Huber et al., 2010). They are clearly distinguished from performance-related misconducts, which refer to product defects that pose risk to consumers upon usage. Committed consumers of a brand are regular users with positive prior product experiences and expectations. This justifies their tendency to forgive and defend the brand upon encountering negative product performance information, which contradicts their prior usage

experiences (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). Nevertheless, a brand blunder is not related to the functional attributes of a product, but concerns the moral issues surrounding it (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). This makes blunder information less likely to align with preexisting product experiences and brand associations in one's memory. Negative blunder information may in fact violate the ethical and moral values of the committed consumer. This makes the committed consumer less likely to counterargue the negative blunder information in a biased manner, and to defend previously established positive attitudes toward the blunderer brand. Therefore, we expect highly committed consumers to respond to negative blunder information unfavorably unlike they do to product performance problems. On the other hand, we predict low-commitment consumers to be less attentive to brand publicity, and hence, find the blunder information less diagnostic in decision making. Accordingly, we predict that they will react less unfavorably than high-commitment consumers.

#### *Brand trust and brand liking as consequences*

In studying consumers' attitudes toward brand blunders, we specifically focus on brand trust and brand liking as individual brand effects. Trust indicates the belief in the reliability and honesty of an exchange partner (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Brand trust, in particular, refers to the belief that the brand will fulfill its stated function (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992). Brand trust is shown to be a key component of brand equity (Dyson, Farr, & Hollis, 1996) together with loyalty and purchase intentions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and helps consumers refrain from alternative relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Brand liking is another important predictor of purchase intent and a crucial component of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Ye & Van Raaij, 2004). It refers to consumers' overall feelings and attitudes toward a brand and depends on the favorability of associations that are linked in memory to a brand (Aaker, 2008). High level of brand liking leads to consumer loyalty and represents a competitive advantage for a brand.

Given that brand commitment, brand trust, and brand liking are critical aspects in maintaining lasting consumer-brand relationships, we are specifically interested in understanding how the level of brand commitment influences consumers' brand trust and liking upon encountering a blunder. We predict that negative blunder information will lower brand trust and



liking more for high-commitment (vs. low-commitment) consumers, leading to the following hypothesis:

**H1a:** High (vs. low)-commitment consumers' brand trust and brand liking will decrease more upon receiving negative brand blunder information.

On the contrary, supporting previous research (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Ahluwalia, Unnava, & Burnkrant, 2001; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000), we expect that negative product performance information will lower brand trust and liking more for low-commitment (vs. high-commitment) consumers, leading to the following hypothesis:

**H1b:** Low (vs. high)-commitment consumers' brand trust and brand liking will decrease more upon receiving negative product performance information.

Due to lack of research on consumers' evaluations of brand blunders, we initially conducted a pilot study to understand how individuals interpret negative brand blunder information relative to product performance information. We measured consumers' interpretation of blunders on a set of adjectives (humorous, funny, severe, important, and offensive) based on media pieces that elaborate on real life social media brand blunders (e.g., CBI Insights, 2017; Gollin, 2020; Schenker, 2015). We explicitly measured participants' perceptions of negative blunder versus product performance information based on the respective adjectives. This exploratory pilot study aims to provide a preliminary understanding of how consumers interpret negative brand blunder information, and accordingly, what may be the underlying reasons for the hypothesized effects. Because we aimed to have a general understanding of how people interpret blunder information, we conducted the initial study on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) online survey platform, which enables access to a relatively large and diverse population of respondents. Despite some concerns raised over the quality of data collected from crowdsourcing platforms, online paid samples are extensively used in behavioral research. Notably, MTurk is shown to have data quality comparable to those of student samples and professional panels by many researchers (e.g., Kees et al., 2017; Walter et al., 2018).

## Pilot Study – Evaluations of negative brand blunder versus product performance-related information

### Method

Respondents from MTurk (264 participants, 51% female,  $M_{age} = 36.28$ ) participated in the study. The participants were 20 to 69 years old and lived in the U.S. They were randomly assigned to negative product versus blunder information conditions. In line with real-life examples and the stimuli used in previous research (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Passingham, 2019), we chose a laptop battery heating problem as the product performance-related problem. Participants in the negative product information condition read an article about the defective laptops of an electronics brand, of which the batteries could overheat and cause fire under some conditions. Based on real-life blunder incidents, participants in the blunder condition read an article about an electronics brand posting an obscene pornographic image by mistake in response to a customer comment on Twitter (Halliday, 2014; see Appendix for stimuli). Because individuals generally learn about negative brand actions from news, it was ecologically valid to provide blunder and product information to participants in the form of written news articles, in line with previous research (Lee, Lee, & Choi, 2020). Then, participants evaluated the incident on the chosen set of adjectives: humorous, funny, severe, important, and offensive on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

### Results

ANOVA results revealed that the blunder was found more funny ( $M_{blunder} = 4.02$  vs.  $M_{product} = 2.05$ ;  $F(1, 262) = 66.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and humorous ( $M_{blunder} = 4.01$  vs.  $M_{product} = 1.98$ ;  $F(1, 262) = 73.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ); also more offensive ( $M_{blunder} = 4.62$  vs.  $M_{product} = 2.50$ ;  $F(1, 262) = 80.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but less severe ( $M_{blunder} = 4.02$  vs.  $M_{product} = 5.42$ ;  $F(1, 262) = 39.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and important ( $M_{blunder} = 3.32$  vs.  $M_{product} = 5.76$ ;  $F(1, 262) = 118.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than the product performance problem (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Evaluations of negative brand blunder and product performance-related information, ANOVA results (Pilot Study)

	Blunder	Product performance problem	

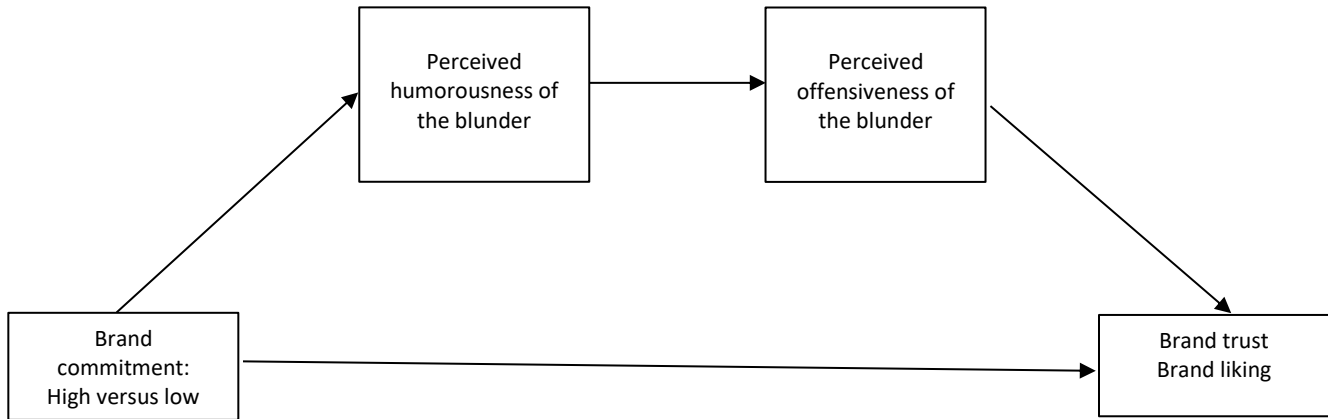
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>F</i>
Funny	4.02	1.99	2.05	1.93	66.54**
Humorous	4.01	2.03	1.98	1.78	73.93**
Offensive	4.62	1.91	2.50	1.94	80.88**
Severe	4.02	2.01	5.42	1.56	39.22**
Important	3.32	2.08	5.76	1.52	118.23**

*Note.* \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

These preliminary findings indicate that individuals perceive brand blunders as more funny and humorous, but also more offensive mistakes than product performance problems. Comparatively, they perceive product performance problems as more important and severe incidents. While these evaluations pertain to the general audience, this study did not account for the effect of consumers' brand commitment.

Individuals' brand evaluations influence the effect of humor (i.e., a laugh-inducing fun stimulus; Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018) on their brand attitudes. Generally, humor elevates positive attitudes toward a brand when one's prior brand evaluations are favorable (Chattopadhyay & Basu, 1990). Nevertheless, humor arises when a stimulus is found benign (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Depending on the content, humorous appeals might actually be perceived as threatening and offensive (i.e., rude, irritating, or creating resentment and displeasure; Alwitt & Prabhaker, 1994; Beard, 2008) rather than benign. Based on our prediction for more negative evaluations of blunderer brands by high (vs. low)-commitment consumers (H1a), we expect highly committed consumers of a brand to be less likely to perceive the brand blunder as a benign misconduct. Therefore, we hypothesize that high-commitment consumers will find the blunder less humorous, and will evaluate it as a more offensive incident. As negative emotional reactions toward brand-related stimuli play an important role in shaping brand attitudes (Warren, Carter, & McGraw, 2019), we contend that finding a blunder less humorous and more offensive will lower high-commitment consumers' brand trust and liking of the blunderer brand (see Figure 1 for the conceptual model). More formally, we hypothesize that:

**H2:** The effect of negative blunder information on high-commitment consumers' reduced brand trust and brand liking will be mediated by their perceptions of the blunder information as less humorous and more offensive.



**Figure 1** Conceptual model of the brand blunder effect on brand trust and brand liking

Next, we test our hypotheses with three online experimental studies. Specifically, Study 1 tests H1a by examining the effect of a realistic blunder incident on consumers' brand trust and liking based on the level of brand commitment. Study 2 replicates the results of Study 1 by using a different realistic blunder incident and also tests H2 by conducting serial mediation analyses. Finally, Study 3 tests H1b by investigating the effect of a realistic product performance problem on consumer's brand trust and liking based on their level of commitment.

All studies were created by using Qualtrics online survey tool. Participation in the studies was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. While the pilot study was conducted on MTurk online survey platform with participants aged between 20 and 69 years to understand general attitudes toward blunders and product performance problems, the main studies (Study 1, 2 and 3) used undergraduate students aged between 20 and 26 years as participants. College students, who represent Gen Z and Millennials, are commonly used in social media research, since they are the heaviest social media users with an average of four hours a day spent on social media platforms (Pew Research Center, 2021; Ypulse, 2021).

## MATERIALS & METHOD

## **Study 1 – Effects of negative brand blunder information on brand trust and brand liking**

### *Method*

In this study, we aim to understand if a brand blunder is evaluated differently by high and low-commitment consumers of a brand. Specifically, we explore how a brand blunder will affect consumers' trust and liking of the brand depending on their level of commitment. To understand the role of brand commitment on brand trust and liking, student participants ( $N = 113$ , 46% female,  $M_{age} = 22.35$ ) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the high (vs. low)-commitment condition were told that they knew the brand well and (but) frequently (rarely) bought its products. We manipulated brand blunder with the same scenario used in the pilot study, wherein all participants read about a brand posting an obscene pornographic image by mistake while replying to a customer on Twitter. As the DVs, brand trust and brand liking were measured on a 7-point scale "How does this incident influence your trust/liking in the brand?" (1 = definitely my trust/liking will not be reduced, 7 = definitely my trust/liking will be reduced), (see Appendix for all stimuli and construct measures).

### *Results*

ANOVA results revealed that high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' brand trust ( $M_{high-commitment} = 4.10$  vs.  $M_{low-commitment} = 3.26$ ;  $F(1, 111) = 5.61$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and brand liking ( $M_{high-commitment} = 3.90$  vs.  $M_{low-commitment} = 3.06$ ;  $F(1, 111) = 4.90$ ,  $p < .05$ ) decreased to a higher extent upon receiving negative blunder information (see Table 2).

Using a real-life brand blunder scenario, this study reveals that high-commitment consumers of a brand respond to negative blunder information more unfavorably than the low-commitment consumers. Specifically, high-commitment consumers' brand trust and brand liking decrease to a higher extent following a blunder, which supports H1a. In the next study, we aim to understand the reason for the higher decrease of brand trust and liking of high (vs. low)-commitment consumers upon encountering blunder information (H2).

## **Study 2 – Process explanation for brand blunder's effect on reduced brand trust and brand liking**

### *Method*

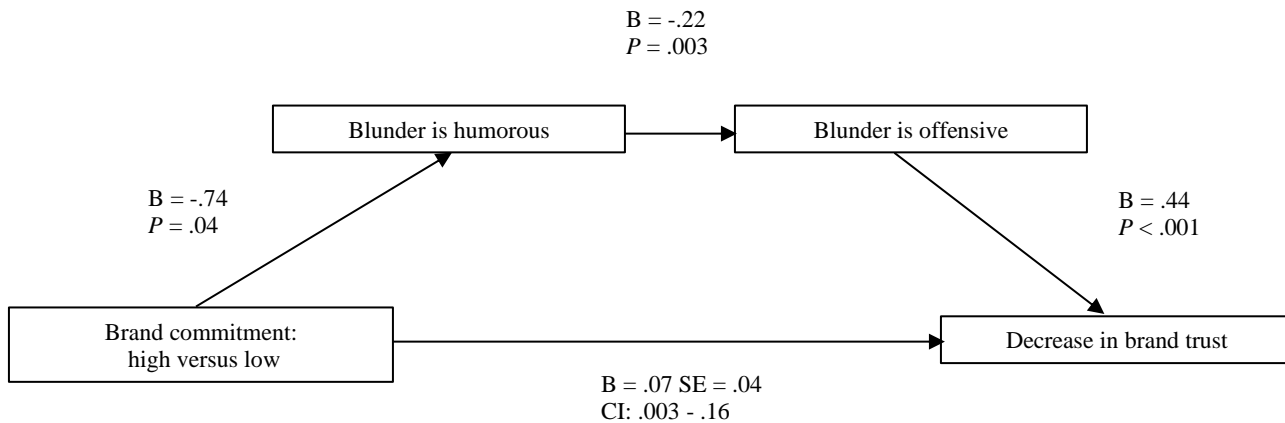
In order to generalize the results of Study 1, Study 2 utilized a different real-life blunder scenario, and explored the underlying mechanism behind high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' reduced brand trust and brand liking upon receiving negative blunder information. Student respondents ( $N = 151$ , 54% female,  $M_{age} = 21.46$ ) were randomly assigned to high versus low-commitment conditions. Participants read a scenario that described a clothing brand accidentally posting an Instagram story of their employees getting drunk and having fun in the office during work hours (Kanter, 2011). Brand commitment was manipulated as in the first study. In addition to brand trust and brand liking, we measured consumers' evaluations of the blunder with two items that were adopted from the pilot study: how humorous and offensive they found the blunder (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). We predicted that high-commitment consumers would not find the blunder as humorous as low-commitment consumers do. This, in turn, would affect how offensive they perceive the blunder, and their brand trust and liking, which were measured as in Study 1.

### *Results*

As expected, ANOVA results revealed that high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' brand trust ( $M_{\text{high-commitment}} = 4.06$  vs.  $M_{\text{low-commitment}} = 3.38$ ;  $F(1, 149) = 4.33$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and brand liking ( $M_{\text{high-commitment}} = 3.37$  vs.  $M_{\text{low-commitment}} = 2.75$ ;  $F(1, 149) = 4.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were eroded to a higher extent upon receiving negative blunder information (see Table 2).

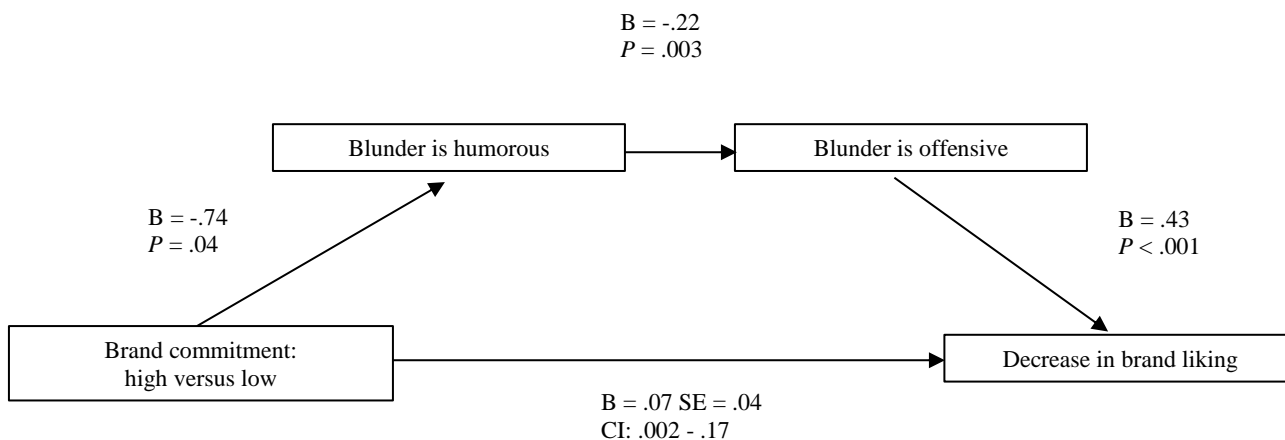
Next, we conducted two separate serial mediation analyses (model 6: 5,000 Bootstrapped samples, Hayes, 2013) to understand the reasons for high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' reduced brand trust and liking. High (vs. low)-commitment condition was coded as one (zero). We first regressed humorous on brand commitment and found that brand commitment had a significant effect on humorous ( $B = -.74$ ,  $SE = .35$ ,  $t = -2.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As the second step, offensiveness was regressed on humorous and brand commitment. Only humorous had a significant effect on offensiveness ( $B = -.22$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t = -3.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ); brand commitment did not have a significant effect on offensiveness ( $B = .21$ ,  $SE = .31$ ,  $t = .68$ ,  $p = .50$ ). As the final step, we ran two additional regressions. First, brand trust was regressed on humorous, offensiveness, and brand commitment. Humorous ( $B = -.17$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t = -2.61$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and offensiveness ( $B = .44$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = 5.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ) had significant effects on brand trust; but brand commitment did not have a significant effect on brand trust ( $B = .38$ ,  $SE = .29$ ,  $t = 1.32$ ,  $p$

= .19). Furthermore, 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of brand commitment through how humorous and offensive participants find the blunder on their brand trust excluded zero ranging between .003 and .16 (Effect = .07, SE = .04), (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Serial mediation for brand trust (Study 2)

Second, brand liking was regressed on humorous, offensiveness, and brand commitment. Offensiveness had a significant effect on brand liking ( $B = .43$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t = 5.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ); yet, humorous ( $B = -.10$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t = -1.50$ ,  $p = .14$ ) and brand commitment did not have significant effects on brand liking ( $B = .39$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $t = 1.42$ ,  $p = .16$ ). Furthermore, 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of brand commitment through how humorous and offensive participants find the blunder on their brand liking excluded zero ranging between .002 and .17 (Effect = .07, SE = .04; see Figure 3).



### Figure 3 Serial mediation for brand liking (Study 2)

Using a realistic blunder scenario that is different than in Study 1, this study further supports that high (vs. low)-commitment consumers respond more unfavorably to negative blunder information resulting in reduced brand trust and liking. It also explains the mediating mechanism behind the revealed main effects. Specifically, high-commitment consumers perceive blunders as less humorous and more offensive. These perceived differences, in turn, decrease their liking and trust in the brand (H1a).

In order to validate that consumers' attitudes toward blunder versus product performance incidents move in opposite directions, and also to support previous research findings (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Ahluwalia et al., 2001; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000) next, we examine how high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' brand trust and liking are influenced upon receiving negative product performance information (H1b).

### Study 3 – Effects of negative product performance-related information on brand trust and brand liking

#### *Method*

In this study, we explore how high (vs. low)-commitment consumers respond to negative product performance-related information, by focusing on change in their brand trust and brand liking as outcomes. Student participants (N = 129, 42% women,  $M_{age} = 21.35$ ) were randomly assigned to high and low-commitment conditions. We used the same product performance scenario that was used in the pilot study, and brand commitment was manipulated as in previous studies. After reading the news article about the product incident, participants indicated how their brand trust and brand liking were affected, measured as in previous studies.

#### *Results*

As expected, ANOVA results revealed that low (vs. high)-commitment consumers' brand trust ( $M_{high-commitment} = 4.55$  vs.  $M_{low-commitment} = 5.33$ ;  $F(1, 127) = 8.87$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and brand liking ( $M_{high-commitment} = 4.27$  vs.  $M_{low-commitment} = 4.87$ ;  $F(1, 127) = 4.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ) decreased to a higher extent upon receiving negative product performance information (see Table 2). Also, in line with the findings of pilot study, neither high-commitment nor low-commitment consumers found the



negative product information humorous ( $M_{\text{high-commitment}} = 2.47$  vs.  $M_{\text{low-commitment}} = 2.49$ ;  $F(1, 127) = .91$ ,  $p = .94$ ) or offensive ( $M_{\text{high-commitment}} = 2.78$  vs.  $M_{\text{low-commitment}} = 2.71$ ;  $F(1, 127) = .04$ ,  $p = .83$ ).

In sum, this study supports that product performance problems significantly influence brand trust and brand liking as blunders do, yet brand commitment has an opposite effect in this relationship. In line with previous literature findings, these results confirm H1b, and better highlight the contrary effects of blunders and product performance problems on consumers' attitudes (i.e., trust and liking) toward the relevant brand.

**Table 2** Effects of negative brand blunder and product performance-related information on brand trust and brand liking, ANOVA results (Study 1, 2 & 3)

	High-commitment consumers		Low-commitment consumers		<i>F</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Brand trust					
(S1)	4.10	1.79	3.26	1.94	5.61*
(S2)	4.06	2.09	3.38	1.90	4.33*
(S3)	4.55	1.69	5.33	1.27	8.87**
Brand liking					
(S1)	3.90	1.89	3.06	2.09	4.90*
(S2)	3.37	1.80	2.75	1.98	4.13*
(S3)	4.27	1.78	4.87	1.53	4.21*

Note. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

## DISCUSSION

In today's fast-paced digital marketplace, companies are interacting with consumers in real-time on social media platforms. This gives rise to new forms of brand crises taking place on digital channels. The goal of this research is to explore the under researched topic of online brand blunders in consumer behaviour context. Due to lack of research on online brand blunders, a pilot study was initially conducted to understand how consumers evaluate negative brand blunder information (e.g., an obscene image mistakenly published in response to a consumer comment from brand's Twitter account) in comparison to negative product performance information (e.g.,

defective laptops of a brand). Our findings show that while product performance misconducts are perceived as more severe and important incidents, blunders are perceived as more offensive, and also more humorous mistakes.

Contrary to product performance problems, brand blunders are not related to functional attributes and usage experience of a product. They are more social and ethical misconducts in nature, and concern the moral issues surrounding the brand. This makes committed consumers of a brand less likely to rely on their previously established product experiences and brand associations in evaluating the negative blunder information. Accordingly, we predict and show that high (vs. low)-commitment consumers respond more negatively to blunder information, resulting in decreased brand trust and liking of the blunderer brand (Study 1). We further show that the underlying reason for high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' reduced brand trust and liking is due to perceiving the blunder information less humorous and more offensive than their low-commitment counterparts (Study 2).

On the other hand, when consumers encounter negative product performance information that concern the functional attributes of a product, they are able to evaluate it in light of their pre-existing product experiences and expectations. The contradicting negative information with committed consumers' prior product experiences leads to high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' higher tendency to forgive and defend the brand (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). Our results support previous research findings by showing that high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' brand trust and brand liking decrease to a lower extent upon receiving negative product performance information (Study 3).

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Theoretical implications**

We seek to contribute to existing literature in two pertinent ways. First, we extend the limited early academic work on business blunders (Ricks, 1983; Ricks et al., 1974). In marketing, blunders were predominantly examined as cases of managerial mistakes that resulted from maladaptation of firm strategies in foreign markets. However, digitalization of marketing practices and online consumer-brand interactions have led to the occurrence of a new form of

online blunder. Our research constitutes the first attempt to explore blunder incidents that take place on brands' social media accounts. Taking a consumer behavior perspective, it explores how consumers' brand trust and brand liking toward the blunderer brand change upon encountering a social media blunder. Further, it investigates how consumers with different levels of brand commitment (high vs. low) are influenced by the blunder information. Therefore, our work adds to the research findings on business blunders by investigating a novel form of blunder and its consumer outcomes.

Second, we extend the broad literature on negative brand actions and brand publicity. Negative brand actions have been researched mainly under two categories: product performance problems that relate to functional attributes of a brand, and ethical, values-related brand wrongdoings. We examine online brand blunder, a digital form of negative brand action that is of ethical nature, which has been neglected by previous research. Our studies and process explanation provide insights into consumers' evaluations of brand blunders by showing that blunders are perceived as humorous and offensive, yet less severe misconducts than product performance problems. We specifically focus on understanding the change in consumers' brand trust and brand liking based on their level of brand commitment, in response to blunder information, which are vital components in building strong consumer-brand relationships. We show that high (vs. low)-commitment consumers of a brand are more negatively influenced by blunder information, resulting in reduced brand trust and liking of the blunderer brand. Our results further support and replicate previous literature with respect to the role of brand commitment on consumers' attitudes toward product performance problems (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000).

### **Practical implications**

There is rising managerial interest in handling digital brand crises in the modern marketing environment (Hansen et al., 2018). With widespread use of digital technologies and social media in consumer-brand interactions, online brand crises take place more frequently than ever. Compared to traditional media, digital media platforms enable quicker and wider spread of consumer reactions given to brand crises (Pace, Balboni, & Gistri, 2017). Upon encountering brand misconducts on social media, consumers can convey their outrage to large masses in a short amount of time (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). Online transmission of negative brand

information may severely harm perceptions of the respective brand (Labrecque et al., 2013) and impact its sales negatively (Kim et al., 2016; Park & Lee, 2009). Accordingly, understanding the negative effects of online brand blunders has been an important practical issue in social media marketing.

Our findings reveal that brand blunders threaten to decrease consumers' trust and liking of the brand, yet this effect differs between high and low-commitment consumers. Specifically, high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' brand trust and liking decrease to a higher extent upon receiving blunder information, and hence are the more sensitive consumer group that should be given more delicate support. Therefore, we contend that managers should prioritize high and low-commitment consumers differently and tailor blunder communications in handling online blunders. Our results suggest that blunders indicate brand misconducts that are of ethical nature and perceived as offensive by the consumers, unlike product problems that are related to functional attributes of a product. Our findings further imply that managers should prioritize focusing on improving the ethical and moral aspects of their relationships with consumers while handling blunder crises.

Company response strategies to negative brand publicity have been extensively studied in literature (e.g., Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). If handled the right way, negative brand actions need not inevitably be damaging for the brand. As the next step in our research, we started exploring consumers' expectations on firm response strategies to blunder incidents. Our initial results from an exploratory study ( $N = 129$ , 56% female,  $M_{age} = 21.09$ ) indicate that consumers expect firms to be more responsive in managing blunders compared to product performance-related problems. Specifically, in order of importance, consumers expect the managers to publicly apologize ( $M_{blunder} = 6.15$  vs.  $M_{product} = 5.30$ ;  $F(1, 127) = 11.21$ ,  $p = .001$ ), lay off the responsible employees that had a role in the incident ( $M_{blunder} = 4.88$  vs.  $M_{product} = 3.67$ ;  $F(1, 127) = 11.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and donate money to a charity to make up for the misconduct ( $M_{blunder} = 4.74$  vs.  $M_{product} = 3.95$ ;  $F(1, 127) = 5.51$ ,  $p < .05$ ), (1 = do not expect at all, 7 = expect very much). Brand managers, thus, may consider engaging in these responsive actions to recover from a blunder incident. Nevertheless, whether high (vs. low)-commitment consumers' expectations with respect to company response strategies differ awaits further investigation.

### **Limitations and future research**

Our work is not without limitations. We used real-life product performance problems and online brand blunder examples in the studies, based on previous literature and media releases. We used student samples in the main studies, because they make up the heaviest adopters and users of social media platforms and hence are predominantly used in social media research. We also used a more diverse nonstudent sample of MTurk participants in the exploratory pilot study, to increase the generalizability of the findings. Future studies can replicate our work with individuals from more diverse demographic groups to generalize the results to the entire population of social media users. Moreover, our studies were scenario-based and did not use real brand names. Therefore, our findings depend on the participants' self-reports, and we are limited in uncovering individuals' intentions rather than actual behaviors. Collecting real-life social media blunder data, and analyses of consumers' written responses (e.g., Twitter or Instagram comments) would make a good addition to our research. Also, our studies investigate consumer responses right upon receiving negative blunder information. Understanding the post-crisis consumer attitudes; whether these effects will carry over to the long term by undertaking longitudinal studies would be fruitful.

In line with prevalent social media brand blunder incidents, we used blunder scenarios that depicted inappropriate responses sent from brands' social media accounts. Future research may explore more diverse types of blunder cases, such as online blunders that arise from language or culture barriers, or blunders that are committed by the company owner, the spokesperson, or the influencer who endorses the brand. Consumers' attribution of blame to the company, brand or to responsible individuals may hypothetically differ across different blunder types.

Another extension of our work would be to investigate the potential spillover effects of blunders; how blunder information may influence other consumer beliefs that are indirectly related to the focal brand. Ahluwalia et al. (2001) showed that when consumers are unfamiliar with a brand, negative information about the product may spill over and harm other attributes related to the brand. Roehm and Tybout (2006) further showed that brand crisis information may spill over and hurt evaluations of competing brands in a product category. It would be worthwhile to explore the possible spillover effects of blunder information to other brand attributes, as well as to the corporate image, or other brands in the category, and whether possible spillover effects would be perceived differently between high and low-commitment consumers of the brand.

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## APPENDIX

### Stimuli

*Twitter blunder information (Pilot Study), (Halliday, 2014).*

Please imagine that you come across a news article of a consumer electronics brand that you know. The article states that the brand has recently posted an obscene pornographic image in response to a customer on Twitter by mistake. They removed the tweet and apologized for this mistake, but still were heavily criticized by the public.

*Product performance-related negative information (Pilot Study) (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Passingham, 2019)*

Please imagine that you come across a news article of a consumer electronics brand that you know. The article states that the recently launched laptop models of this brand are defective. Their batteries can overheat and cause fire under some conditions. The brand has recalled the defective laptop models and apologized for this mistake, but still were heavily criticized by the public.

*Twitter blunder information (Study1), (Halliday, 2014).*

Please think about a consumer electronics brand that you know well and (but) frequently (rarely) buy products from. You come across a news article about this brand. The article states that the brand has recently posted an obscene pornographic image in response to a customer on Twitter by mistake. They removed the tweet and apologized for this mistake, but still were heavily criticized by the public.

*Product performance-related negative information (Study1 and Study 3), (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Passingham, 2019)*

Please think about a consumer electronics brand that you know well and (but) frequently (rarely) buy products from. You come across a news article about this brand. The article states that the recently launched laptop models of this brand are defective. Their batteries can overheat and cause fire under some conditions. The brand has recalled the defective laptop models and apologized for this mistake, but still were heavily criticized by the public.

*Instagram blunder information (Study 2), (Kanter, 2011).*

Please think about a clothing brand that you know well and (but) frequently (rarely) buy products from. You come across a news article about this brand. The article states that the brand has accidentally posted an Instagram story of their employees getting drunk in the office during work hours. They removed the post and apologized for this mistake, but still were heavily criticized by the public.

### Construct measures

Brand trust (1 = definitely my trust will not be reduced, 7 = definitely my trust will be reduced).

“How does this incident influence your trust in the brand?”

Brand liking (1 = definitely my liking will not be reduced, 7 = definitely my liking will be reduced).

“How does this incident influence your liking in the brand?”