SELF-CONSCIOUS MORAL EMOTIONS AND E-WOM DIFFUSION IN RESPONSE TO CORPORATE BEHAVIORS

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ABSTRACT

Consumers become increasingly concerned about the impact of business on the society and social media platforms facilitate the spread of their concern worldwide. This research investigates how consumers react (i.e. Electronic Word-of-Mouth) when brands initiate good or bad practices in the context of social and environmental corporate responsibility. Three experiments provide a multifaceted representation of the phenomenon. We examine the role of consumers' self-conscious moral emotions (i.e. guilt and pride), in combination with brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) and brand loyalty, in explaining consumers' reaction. The results will help scholars and managers to better understand and address the spread of consumers' e-WOM relating to what they perceive as responsible or irresponsible brand behaviors.

Keywords: corporate behavior, corporate social responsibility, moral emotions, electronic word-of-mouth, loyalty, brand engagement in self-concept, customer–brand relationships

Introduction

Customer–brand relationships often evolve through meaningful consumption interactions (Fournier, 1998). The quality of this dyadic relationship is mostly based on individual emotive elements such as trust, relationship, commitment and identification (Grégoire & Fisher, 2006), as well as the consumer's perceived self-distance from the brand (Alba & Lutz, 2013; Park, Eisingerich & Park, 2013). Among several theories supporting the critical role of *the self* in the customer–brand relationship, the self-expansion model (Aaron & Aaron, 1986) has gained considerable importance (Park et al., 2013). In this model, individuals are motivated to enter and maintain close relationships to expand themselves via the resources, perspectives and/or characteristics of the other in *the self*, which also enhance their ability to accomplish mutual goals. This leads the person to act and think as if some or all aspects of others are partially their own; thereby expanding *the self*.

Such a self-expansion approach is also supported by Arnould and Thompson's (2005) Consumer Culture Theory, which asserts that consumers use brands to help construct their identity (Belk, 1988). The perception of closeness between *the self* and the brand leads the individual to express or divulge positive or negative feelings based on the brand's conduct. Such perception of closeness can also influence one to engage

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in external rather than internal attribution of blame when something goes wrong with the other (Park et al., 2013).

Most literature on customer–brand relationships has emphasized the positive aspects of such relationships (e.g. Zarantonello, Romani, Grappi & Bagozzi, 2016), while research on negative aspects is scarce (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013). Furthermore, most research on the negative aspects has focused on those emotions that trigger specific behavioral outcomes, such as spreading negative word of mouth (e-WOM) about brands' features, complaining, and switching and avoiding behaviors (Romani, Grappi & Dalli, 2012). The extant literature has identified different typologies of emotions involved in negative customer–brand relationships, mainly related to product or service failures (Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012), irritation toward brand slogans (Rosengren & Dahlén, 2006), advertising disapproval (Antonetti, Baines & Walker, 2015), undesirable images the brand symbolism projects (Hogg & Banister, 2001), and the apparent disregard for human rights (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004).

Yet despite such conceptualization of negative emotions that lead to specific behavioral outcomes, these studies appear to have overlooked the importance of the customer's identification with the brand without considering other emotions more related to *the self*. Thus, emotions more related to self-attribution of specific outcomes, whether positive or negative, should also be considered in customer–brand relationships. In line with this, self-conscious moral emotions such as guilt or pride have been considered in some of the customer–brand relationship literature to examine both positive and negative behavioral outcomes, such as e-WOM which is traditionally related to 'other-condemning' emotions (Haidt, 2003). It was therefore hypothesized in this study that the higher the degree of closeness of the customer–brand relationship, the stronger the effect of these moral emotions, because the attribution process stemming from specific brand conduct is also related to the self. This often leads to consumer behavioral outcomes that stem from the imbalance created by these moral emotions, such as attacking or rewarding the brand (bad and good brand conduct, respectively). However, as negative information is generally more memorable, processed more deeply and more likely to be divulged than positive (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013), it was anticipated in this study that negative emotions will have a higher impact on specific outcomes. We focus on e-WOM since this form of communication has become one of the most influential sources of information, due to the emergence of online platforms (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016) that enable the production and dissemination of user-generated contents (Christodoulides, Michaelidou & Argyriou, 2010). E-WOM refers to consumers' use of the Internet to convey positive or negative opinions about goods, services, and companies. Hence, consumers now play an important role in influencing each other (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012) by sharing information about companies, products and brands (Gomez-Suarez et al., 2017), consequently leading to substantial changes in consumer behavior (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014).

To test our hypotheses, this study investigates customer responses to good (i.e. responsible) and bad (i.e. irresponsible) brand conduct in terms of either positive or negative e-WOM. This enables us to address two gaps in the literature.

The first one is a dearth of research on how self-conscious moral emotions, whether positive (i.e. pride) or negative (i.e. guilt), affect consumer responses to responsible or irresponsible brand practices. Relevant responses such as positive or negative e-WOM behaviors have mainly been studied in the context of condemning moral emotions such as contempt, anger and disgust (e.g. Grappi, Romani & Bagozzi, 2013), or by focusing only on positive responses to responsible brand conduct (e.g. Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). This study has subsequently examined how self-conscious moral emotions in the context of customer–brand relationships can be shaped by brand practices.

The second gap relates to how self-conscious moral emotions influence brand-related constructs, measuring self-distance between the brand and the customer through brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) and loyalty. BESC relates to the natural tendency of consumers to establish relationships with brands, while loyalty is based on the strength of the relationship with a specific brand. In line with the stream of corporate social responsibility (CSR) research influenced by Bhattacharya, Korschun and Sen (2009) who first studied the underlying processes driving such consumer responses, this study proposes that psychological mechanisms (e.g. self-conscious moral emotions) can be used to identify consumer reactions (i.e. e-WOM) to responsible or irresponsible brand behaviors.

Theoretical background

CSR and consumer reactions

As asserted by Nielsen's Senior Vice President of Public Development and Sustainability Grace Farraj (Nielsen, 2015), CSR is a worldwide concern that continues to gain momentum, especially in those countries where growing populations are putting additional stress on environmental and social issues. More consumers now consider responsible actions an imperative rather than a value-adding activity. Since the 1950s when CSR was established (Carroll, 1999), a significant amount of research has focused on the evolution of its concept and definition. Many studies, particularly marketing and psychology, have examined the effects of CSR on consumer perceptions and behaviors (e.g. Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006; Joshi & Rahman, 2015; Liu, Wang & Wu, 2010; Palihawadana, Oghazi & Liu, 2016).

In this study, we adopted the perspective of Petkus and Woodruff (1992), where CSR is defined as a company's commitment to the minimization or elimination of any societal harmful effects, maximizing its long-term beneficial impact on society. According to Brunk (2010), this conceptualization promotes consideration of the consequences of a company's actions on society and helps researchers to consider positive and negative consequences of such company conduct.

Irresponsible corporate behaviors have been broadly defined as firms "showing a lack of care for society or the environment" (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016, p. 1). Such CSR behaviors mostly relate to corporate/brand transgressions or misconducts viewed negatively by consumers; they disappoint consumer expectations due to the violations of ethical norms or due to product- and service-related defects (Huber, Vogel & Meyer, 2009).

As highlighted by Haberstroh, Orth, Hoffmann and Brunk (2017), most relevant studies have agreed that irresponsible corporate behavior leads to negative consequences among consumers, including damage to the company image (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson & Kamins, 2006), its products (Biehal & Sheinin, 2007), its brands (Schmalz & Orth, 2012), as well as consumer attitudes (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013) and consumer intentions and behaviors (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). It is therefore widely believed that most consumers sanction businesses deemed to be behaving unethically (Carrigan & de Pelsmacker, 2009; Creyer & Ross, 1997). In contrast, a company perceived as responsible can improve its image, consumer perceptions (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) and consequent consumer behaviors (Öberseder, Schlegelmilch & Murphy, 2013), such as making use of e-WOM (Romani, Grappi & Bagozzi, 2013). Thus, on the one hand, consumers who favour what the company is saying and doing can spread the word to others and share information within their social network (Choi et al., 2019). On the other hand, via e-WoM, consumers not only have a chance to transmit their complaints easily to the target company but also reach a wider consumer audience. This spreading effect of online complaining against companies' irresponsibility is more destructive and has immediate and reliable responses compared to traditional ways (Arslan et al., 2018).

CSR and moral emotions

An emergent part of this literature has considered consumer emotions as key to explaining their reactions to corporate behavior. Empirical studies have demonstrated how negative emotions arise from brand violations of consumer expectations (e.g. Grappi et al., 2013; Guckian, Chapman, Lickel, & Markowitz, 2018; Lindenmeier, Schleer & Pricl, 2012; Romani et al., 2013b; Romani, Grappi, Zarantonello & Bagozzi, 2015). Others have shown how firms' socially responsible behaviors are often associated with positive moral emotions such as gratitude (Romani et al., 2013a), pride or elevation (Kim & Johnson, 2013).

Moral emotions are commonly regarded as a way to understand how individuals make decisions stemming from perceptions of either good or bad behavior (Kim & Johnson, 2013; Monin, Pizarro & Beer, 2007). Haidt (2003, p. 276) defined moral emotions in the context of CSR as those "that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent". That is, they are often the motivational force to do good and not bad (Kroll & Egan, 2004). Some researchers have found that people engage in moral behaviors based on feelings of approval or disapproval, which are often linked to moral emotions (Haidt, 2001). Thus, irresponsible corporate behaviors are often seen as moral transgressions (Grappi et al., 2013) that engender negative emotional – moral – reactions in those exposed to them (Haidt, 2007; Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007). In contrast, responsible behavior generally arouses a positive moral emotional response in consumers, who view such company initiatives as supporting one or more of their own moral goals (Romani et al., 2013a).

In line with this, Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) argued that consumers are often more sensitive to socially irresponsible than socially responsible behavior, based on social psychology literature focused on integration biases in impression formation and in particular on the diagnosticity of information (e.g. Skowronski & Carlston, 1987).

Such research suggests that consumers have a negativity bias in evaluating others' moral behaviors, in that they judge negative more heavily than positive behaviors (Folkes & Kamins, 1999). As suggested by Mishina, Block and Mannor (2012), in contrast to what happens when considering a target's competence and ability, negative cues are often viewed as more diagnostic and thus given greater weight than positive cues when considering a target's behavioral tendencies. This is because positive cues, such as good behavior, may merely be an indication of conformance with societal expectations and norms. Positive cues may consequently be considered the foundation to what is socially acceptable, making negative cues particularly salient as a deviation from the norm, and seemingly more representative of the true underlying character of the target under evaluation.

In line with this Grappi et al. (2013) highlighted how negativity bias has helped some researchers understand consumer product evaluations influenced by unethical corporate behavior, although it does not necessarily contribute to an understanding of how or why consumers engage in negative e-WOM or protest behaviors. Scholars of appraisal theory of emotions have suggested that positive and negative emotions can involve different reaction tendencies associated with either promotion or prevention regulatory foci (Frijda, Kuipers & Ter Schure, 1989; Higgins, 1997).

When considering interpersonal relationships, promotion actions relate to positive outcomes such as a partner's or one's own happiness, including via increased intimacy or personal growth, while prevention goals involve moving away from negative outcomes such as conflict, betrayal or rejection (Higgins, 1998). By analogy, promotion and prevention goals can influence different behaviors in the customer-brand relationship context. For example, positive brand relationships may activate promotion goals such as self-expansion, which may be associated with pro-brand actions (i.e. positive e-WOM), while negative brand relationships may activate prevention goals (i.e. negative e-WOM) such as seeking the avoidance of self-harm based on perceived closeness with the brand (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013; Newman & Trump, 2017).

There has been minimal research that has investigated coping strategies and positive emotions in psychological and marketing literature, since the literature on coping suggests greater differentiation among negative than positive emotions (Soscia, 2007). That is, bad situations are more likely to trigger a wider variety of negative responses (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988). The action tendencies identified in the literature for positive emotions are fairly vague and underspecified (Fredrickson, 2004).

Hypotheses development

Self-conscious moral emotions and e-WOM
Emotions are responses to perceived changes, threats or opportunities in the world (Lazarus, 1991; Plutchik, 1980). Self-interest is generally affected by such circumstances, although a considerable proportion of human emotions are in response to social events that do not directly affect the self (Haidt, 2003). According to Haidt (2003), moral emotions can be divided into two categories: the other-condemning one (e.g. contempt, anger, disgust), and the self-conscious one (e.g. shame, embarrassment, guilt). Most self-conscious moral emotions are evoked by self-reflection and self-evaluation (Tangney et al., 2007). Given the cultural differences, particularly among

people from Western and Eastern countries, the literature indicates ambiguity on how many emotions are included in this category.

According to Lewis (1993), most Western researchers list shame, embarrassment and guilt as the principal negative self-conscious emotions, and pride as positive pole of the same component. Guilt has been defined as the emotion that arises when people think they are in the wrong and should not have done something, often leading to a drive to undo such actions and punish themselves, to apologize, and/or want to make up for their misdeeds to be forgiven. That is, guilt is an emotion that often leads people to think about their transgressions and attack themselves to rectify the situation (Roseman, Wiest & Swartz, 1994). Guilt elicitors often rely on violations of moral rules and imperatives that cause harm or suffering to others (Hoffman, 1982; Lazarus, 1991). Guilt usually motivates one to help one's victim or otherwise, to make up for one's transgression, because its action tendencies generally make people conform to rules and uphold the social order.

Among self-conscious moral emotions, guilt is the only one of the main three (including shame and embarrassment) that motivates direct helping behavior (Haidt, 2003) or third-party punishment behaviors (Tangney et al., 2007). More recent literature on CSR has often considered guilt as one of the main antecedents of pro-social behaviors (Lwin & Phau, 2014; Muralidharan & Sheehan, 2017) including ethical consumption choices (Chatzidakis, 2015; Gregory-Smith, Smith & Winklhofer, 2013). Guilty consumers engage in reparative or compensatory actions or make plans regarding future actions. Soscia's (2007) study shows that accepting responsibility and recognizing one's role in a bad outcome is coherent with the decision not to complain and not to engage in negative e-WOM. Although this is in contrast with the concept of direct helping and third-party punishment behavior, often deemed as main outcomes of guilt (Haidt, 2003; Tangney et al., 2007).

According to Roseman's (1991) appraisal theory of emotions, guilt and pride can be viewed as polarising components within parts of the self-caused emotions group. Pride has been determined as a "positive emotion associated with a sense of achievement and self-worth" (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014, p. 121). In particular, pride occurs when individuals positively evaluate their own performance of an action or achievement of an outcome (Bagozzi, Gopinath & Nyer, 1999). That is, pride is "generated by appraisals that one is responsible for a socially valued outcome or for being a socially valued person" (Mascolo & Fischer, 1995, p. 66). From this perspective, pride is useful to improve a person's self-worth and to encourage future behavior that conforms to social standards of worth and merit (Tangney et al., 2007).

Such affective consumer responses to brand practices have traditionally been studied in terms of other-focused moral emotions such as contempt, anger or disgust (e.g. Grappi et al., 2013; White, 2010), or elevation and gratitude (e.g. Romani, Grappi & Bagozzi, 2016). Yet self-conscious emotions have often been viewed as responses to other entities' conduct, especially if a strong bond between the self and the third party exists. Accordingly, guilt may originate when the self-distance between the self and the entity is so close that the two identities appear to overlap. Such a strong connection may lead individuals to feel guilty not only for their own anti-moral actions, but also for those of the other entity. Guilt often fulfils an interpersonal function caused by two affective foundations; that is, empathic distress over victim suffering and separation or

exclusion anxiety over the possible loss or damage to the relationship due to a transgression (Baumeister, Stillwell, Heatherton & Parrott, 2001).

The same interpersonal rationale can be used to explain pride elicitors and outcomes. For instance, pride may be triggered not only by a reflection on the self, but also by a reflection on another entity's performance that is felt to be particularly close. Pride has been recognized as originating from comparisons with others, where strong similarity is perceived via recognition of one or more attributes that are shared with another person, entity or group (Oveis, Horberg & Keltner, 2010). When such a sense of similarity exists, individuals are more likely to feel proud if the other performs well.

It was therefore determined in this study that guilt and pride may be affective responses to brand practices when the bond between the self and the brand is strong. In the context of behavioral reactions, those experiencing guilt are focused on a moral violation that highlights the negative consequences experienced by others, thereby fostering an empathic response and motivating them to "right the wrong" (Tangney et al., 2007, p. 351). Hence, there is a direct relationship between the sense of guilt and the behavior, and a primary tool that can be used to right such wrongs is the voice. This is why negative e-WOM is often seen as a tendency of guilt triggered by the brand's irresponsible practices towards a specific person, group or community.

Negative e-WOM can be interpreted as the extent that an individual speaks or writes poorly about a brand via internet (Filieri, 2015), influenced by various reasons including product or service failure, irresponsible manufacturing behaviors or contrasting ethical values. It entails telling friends and others about a brand including advising them not to acquire from that organization (Bougie, Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2003).

It has been suggested that feelings of pride can also serve as motivational functions that reward and reinforce commitment to ethics (Tangney et al., 2007). Yet most of the literature does not support any direct relationship between the sense of pride and behavior, which is partly due to such research lacking a depth of understanding of behavioral outcomes of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004). Despite this common lack of understanding, Williams and DeSteno (2008) contended that pride increases the motivation to persevere, reinforcing perceptions of control and effectiveness. Thus, as Antonetti and Maklan (2014) suggested, the motivational effects of pride are based upon a realization, either implicit or explicit, that the self can control and influence positive outcomes, which can also be achieved by spreading positive e-WOM.

Thus, considering this perspective and the negativity bias as defined earlier, it was hypothesized in this study that:

H1*: Emotions mediate the effect of corporate behavior on consumer e-WOM.*

Moderating effect of BESC and brand loyalty on consumer e-WOM
When investigating consumer and brand relationships, most scholars have focused on the perceived distance between the self and the brand, to understand the quality of the customer–brand relationship. Various constructs have been used to determine such self-brand distance, such as self-brand connection (Escalas, 2004), self-brand identification (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar & Sen, 2012) and self-congruence

(Sirgy, 1982). Self-brand connections have been known to influence favorable brand attitudes (Escalas 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003) and correspondingly increase consumer purchase intentions (Grohmann & Bodur, 2015). They have often been used to identify situations where brand associations can be used to describe someone or to communicate one's self to others, based on a strong connection between the brand and the consumer self-identity (Moore & Wurster, 2007).

Previous research has also shown that self-brand identification and self-congruence can lead to stronger customer–brand relationships (Sirgy, 1982; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Such investigations have shown that the strength of this relationship generally depends on consumer characteristics as well as brand features; a match between the two enables a relationship to evolve. Many have treated the customer–brand relationship as a moderator variable by examining both consumer and brand characteristics. Thus, this study involved three independent studies. The first examined the influence of corporate behavior on consumer emotions, the second the effects of BESC on the individual consumer, and the last the role of brand loyalty as a brand-related variable.

The strength of the relationship (between two or more actors) often affects the way the actors behave and how they react to reciprocal behaviors and conducts (Grégoire & Fisher, 2006; Grégoire, Tripp & Legoux, 2009). This is particularly relevant for brand conduct, where the more the brand is perceived responsible for its conduct, the stronger the consumer's reaction is (Casado Diaz & Mas Ruìz, 2002). Thus, the customer–brand relationship generally evolves via meaningful interactions influenced by both the brand and the consumer (Fournier, 1998).

However, a specific stream of research has focused on the consumer's natural tendency to establish stronger relationships with some brands. That is, some consumer segments are able to establish stronger relationship with specific brands because of their nature. In line with this, the BESC construct has been conceived as "an individual difference representing consumers' propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves" (Sprott, Czellar & Spangenberg, 2009, p. 92). These authors' definition is based on the notion of self-concept that includes the set of self-schemas representing the knowledge structure about the self that is possessed by an individual.

Most consumers vary in their self-schemas and in their tendency to possess brand-related schemas that directly affect their propensity to include the brand as part of their self. According to Sprott et al.'s (2009) conceptualization of BESC, self-brand identification is more salient for brands with high BESC. A higher level of connection between customers and brands leads to higher affective responses to brand practices. The effect of the emotional consumer response on e-WOM is consequently higher for greater levels of BESC.

Thus, given that H1 in this study anticipated higher levels of e-WOM associated with guilt than proud, once BESC is introduced, it was determined that pride is more likely to have a positive effect on e-WOM due to a stronger brand connection that leads the individual to show the self-participation to these positive brand outcomes (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014). Thus, the following hypothesis was put forward in this study:

H2: *Consumer BESC moderates the effect of emotions on consumer e-WOM. Specifically, when the level of BESC is high, the e-WOM is greater if the moral emotion is positive (e.g. pride), in respect of lower levels of BESC.*

In the context of a customer–brand relationship, this study considered brand loyalty one of the most relevant brand-related constructs. As such loyalty has traditionally been considered an outcome of branding and marketing strategies, it is more related to brand characteristics than consumer traits. Others have also recognized that the development of strong bonds with consumers is likely to facilitate stronger brand loyalty and consequent repeat purchasing (Leckie, Nyadzayo & Johnson, 2016). Brand loyalty has been determined as the degree of attachment a customer has for a specific brand, leading to the intent to rebuy or re-patronize this preferred brand (Oliver, 1999). In line with this, Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) indicated that customer–brand identification is often a predictor of brand loyalty, and that loyal customers are more likely to be sensitive to brand practices. Thus, similar to the BESC case, the following was hypothesized in this study:

H3: *Consumer brand loyalty moderates the effect of emotions on consumer e-WOM. Specifically, when the level of loyalty is high, the e-WOM is greater if the emotion felt is positive, in respect of lower levels of loyalty.*

Figure 1 and 2 show our conceptual framework.

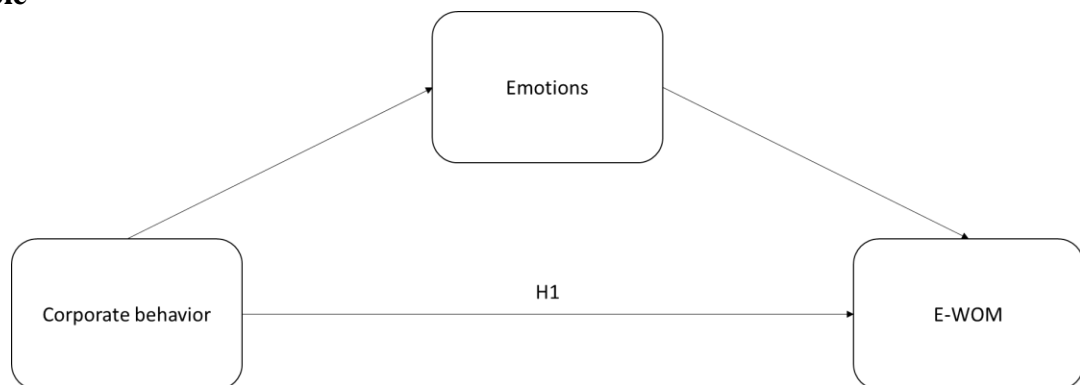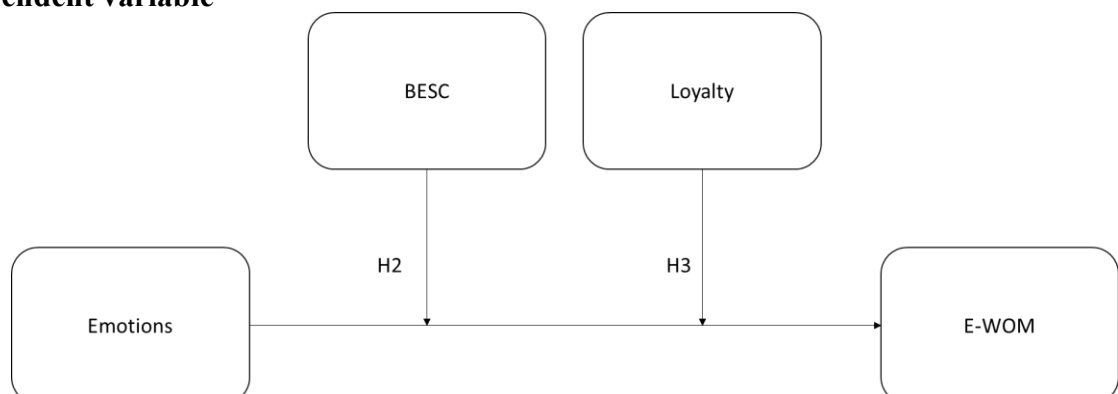**Figure 1: Mediation model with emotions as mediator and e-WOM as dependent variable**

Figure 2: Moderation model with BESC and loyalty as moderators and e-WOM as dependent variable

Methodology

Research design overview

As previously discussed, three studies were conducted to test the hypotheses proposed within this study. The first examined how corporate behavior affects consumer reactions, determined by emotions as the mediating effect, to test H1. The second and third examined the effect of emotions on consumer reactions, based on consumer–brand closeness as the moderator, to test the second and third hypotheses. Specifically, the second study investigated the effect of positive and negative emotions on e-WOM, with BESC as the moderator, while the third investigated the effect of these emotions on e-WOM, with loyalty as the moderator.

These three studies were designed as between-subject online experiments and the constructs were measured via a questionnaire. Data were collected in Italy based on questionnaires that were first written in English, translated to Italian and then back-translated into English. The back-translation ensured the Italian questionnaire was the same as the English version (Sekaran, 1983).

Study 1

This study tested the first hypothesis in the context of environmental responsibility. This was carried out via two online questionnaire versions that were provided to two different respondent groups randomly assigned to the different scenarios. The use of a scenario-based experiment is often applied for experiments (e.g. Romani et al., 2013b). In both questionnaire versions, respondents were asked to consider a brand they feel close to.

The brand behavior was manipulated through two different stimuli that had been pre-tested on a sample of 131 respondents as recommended by Antonetti and Maklan (2014). The first group of Italian respondents (sourced from Prolific Academic) was examined via the two scenarios (positive and negative corporate behavior) with their feelings of guilt and pride measured. As expected, the corresponding data confirmed they felt more guilty when exposed to the negative corporate behavior scenario (M_{guilt_n}=4.50) compared with the positive scenario (M_{guilt_p}=3,71, t(97.28)= 2.18, p=0.03). Similarly, they felt more pride when exposed to the positive scenario (M_{pride_p}= 3.40) versus the negative one (M_{pride_n} = 1.82, t(85.59)= -4.60, p<0.01). Within the questionnaire, the negative scenario provided a narrative as follows:

'Imagine reading in the newspaper that the brand you have chosen before causes enormous damage to the environment'.

While the positive stimulus stated the following:

'Imagine reading in the newspaper that the brand you have chosen before has been rewarded because of its respect towards the environment'.

Data collection was undertaken via a questionnaire that was randomly distributed through the Prolific Academic (ProA) online crowdsourcing platform. ProA, which launched in 2014, was selected because it has been highlighted that its respondents provide higher quality data than other platforms such as CrowdFlower and

Amazon Mechanical Turk (Peer, Brandimarte, Samat & Acquisti, 2017).

The respondents were randomly assigned to the two scenarios so that each group contained approximately 95 subjects. All were exposed to the same cover story and text orienting them to the task instructions, and the construct variables were drawn from validated scales in the literature. They were all exposed to the stimulus and asked to express their level of agreement with the statement regarding their e-WOM, which was measured via an adaptation of Bougie et al.'s (2003) 7-point Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha of e-WOM was 0.92, which confirmed the reliability of this scale. The guilt and pride emotions were measured according to Antonetti and Maklan's (2014) three-item, 7-point Likert scale, with the Cronbach's alphas at 0.85 and 0.86 respectively confirm their reliability.

Study 2

This study tested the second hypothesis in the context of social responsibility via two versions of the online questionnaire that were provided to two different respondent groups, randomly assigned to the two different scenarios. In both versions, respondents were asked to consider a brand they felt close to.

The emotion towards the brand chosen by chose was then manipulated via two stimuli. The group one stimulus was used to make respondents feel a negative emotion toward the brand they had thought about (guilt), and the second to make them feel a positive emotion (pride). These narrative stimuli were adapted from Grappi et al. (2013) and were confirmed through a manipulation check that showed how respondents associate a negative emotion to negative behavior stimuli and vice versa. A t-test confirmed that irresponsible corporate practices are often associated with a negative emotion compared with responsible corporate practices associated with positive emotions (t (255) = 2.30, p = 0.02).

They were presented as follows:

'Imagine reading on the newspaper that the brand you have chosen before uses child labor to produce. Children are regularly conscripted and physically abused'.

This was for the negative behavior stimulus state while the following was for the positive behavior stimulus state:

'Imagine reading in the newspaper that the brand you have chosen before has been rewarded because of its conduct toward employees'.

Data collection was undertaken using an online questionnaire sent with a private message; a method that has been known to improve response rates, with the ability to randomize survey items and protect confidentiality (Machado, Carvalho, Torres & Costa, 2015). As the intention in this study was to engage consumers that felt close to a brand, respondents were sourced from Facebook brand communities, and were randomly assigned to the two scenarios so that each group contained approximately 125 subjects. All were exposed to the same cover story and text orienting them to the task instructions, and the construct variables were drawn from validated scales in the literature.

Before presenting the stimulus, respondents were asked to indicate their level of BESC to the brand they felt particularly close to, which was measured with an eight-item, 7-point Likert scale adopted from Sprott et al. (2009). They were then exposed to the stimulus and asked to express their level of agreement with the e-WOM statement, which was measured via an adaptation of Bougie et al.'s (2003) 7-point Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha scores were 0.96 for BESC and 0.92 for e-WOM.

To check the manipulation of the independent variable, emotion (guilt or pride) was also measured according to Antonetti and Maklan's (2014) three-item, 7-point Likert scale. The Cronbach's alphas were 0.81 for guilt and 0.90 for pride.

Study 3

This study tested the third hypothesis in the context of environmental responsibility and used the same manipulation of study one.

As in the second study, analysis was carried out via two versions of an online questionnaire provided to two different groups of randomly assigned respondents. Each group contained approximately 130 subjects.

Data collection was carried out adopting the same procedure as the second study. Before they were presented with the stimulus, respondents were asked to indicate their level of loyalty to the brand that felt particularly close to, which was measured via the three-item, 7-point Likert scale adopted from Stokburger-Sauer, et al. (2012).

Respondents were then exposed to the stimulus and asked to express their level of agreement with the e-WOM statement. Even in this case, manipulation was checked by asking respondents to indicate their level of emotion (guilt or pride) that was measured according to scales found in the literature. The Cronbach's alpha results were 0.76 for loyalty, 0.91 for e-WOM, 0.81 for guilt and 0.91 for pride.

Main results

Study 1

This sample was composed of 46% women, with age ranges of 8.4% between 16 and 20 years, 21.1% between 21 and 25 years, 22.6% between 26 and 30 years, 11.1% between 31 and 35 years, 15.3% between 36 and 40 years, and 21.1% over 40 years.

To test the first hypothesis, we used Hayes and Rockwood's (2017) methodology, as well as the mediation model within Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 4). The results showed that the effect of corporate behavior on e-WOM was significant (unstand. coeff.=-0.757; SE=0.275; t=-2.753; p=0.006), as well as the effect of corporate behavior on emotion (unstand. coeff.=2.226; SE=0.199; t=-11.164; p<0.001). They also showed that emotion significantly affected e-WOM (unstand. coeff.=0.253; SE=0.078; t=3.238; p=0.001). The 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval (5.000 trials) was from 0.127 to 0.998, and as 0 is not in the confidence interval it was concluded that the indirect effect was different from 0. Thus, H1 was supported.

Study 2

This study's sample was characterized as follows: 120 men (47%) and 137 women (54%), with ages range consisting of 24.1% between 16 and 20 years, 46.3% between 21 and 25 years, 10.9% between 26 and 30 years, 2.7% between 31 and 35 years, 5.4% between 36 and 40 years, and 10.5% over 40 years.

Hayes and Rockwood's (2017) method was also used to test the second hypothesis, with regression estimation performed using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS

macro (Model 1). The results showed that the effect of different emotions on e-WOM was significant (unstand. coeff.=-1.468; SE=0.406; t=-3.613; p=0.000). In addition, those subjects exposed to the negative scenario condition indicated a higher level of e-WOM (M=4.74; DVS=1.77) than those exposed to the positive scenario (M=4.53; DVS=1.68). The interaction effect between BESC and consumer emotions on e-WOM was also significant (unstand. coeff.= 0.520; SE=0.139; t=-3.727; p=0.000), validating H2 about the moderation effect of BESC.

Study 3

This sample was composed of 70 men (26.8%) and 191 women (73.2%), of which 24.5% were aged 16 to 20 years, 46.4% between 21 and 25 years, 10.7% between 26 and 30 years, 2.7% between 31 and 35 years, 5.4% between 36 and 40 years, and 10.3% over 40 years.

The regression estimation using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 1) was also performed in this study. The main effect of emotions on e-WOM was significant (unstand. coeff.=-3.010; SE=0.549; t=-5.475; p=0.000). The interaction effect between loyalty and consumer emotions on e-WOM was also significant (unstand coeff.= 0.740; SE=0.119; t=6.217; p=0.000), validating H3 about the moderation effect of loyalty. All interactions are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

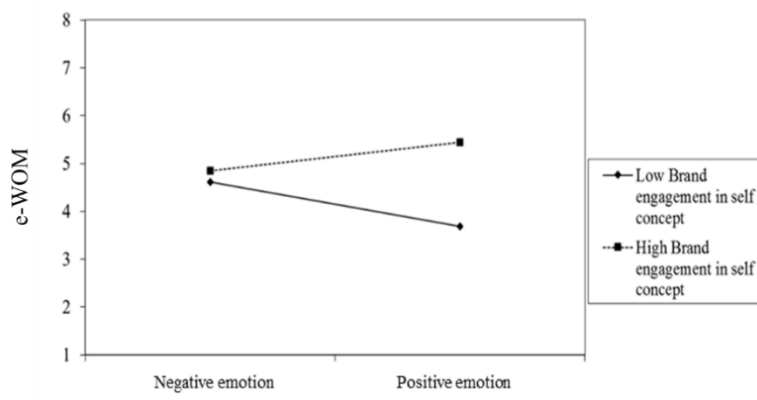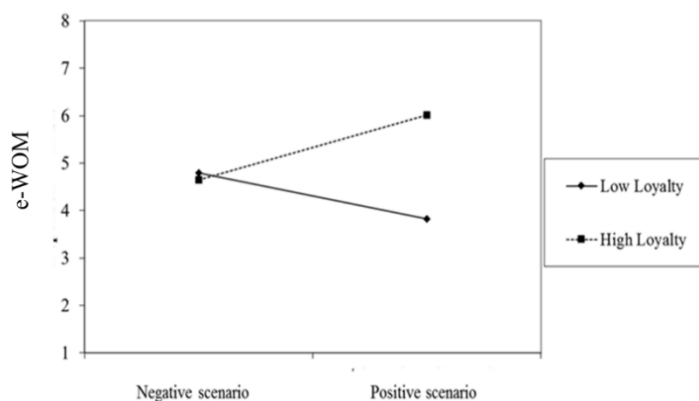**Figure 3. Electronic word of mouth as function of emotion and brand engagement in self concept**

Figure 4. Electronic word of mouth as function of emotion and loyalty

General discussion

If it is true that every action has a consequence, the intention in this research was to assess consumer reactions to brand conduct deemed as either responsible or negligent. In particular, we examined the role of emotions on brand-related e-WOM, which highlighted two main findings. First, consistent with the literature, when evaluating a brand's moral behaviors, it would appear that consumers weigh negative behaviors more heavily than positive (Mishina et al., 2012). When brands behave responsibly, it is likely an indication of conformance to societal expectations and norms, while negative behavior is particularly salient as a deviation from the norm. This is most likely why the misconduct of a brand is more likely to provoke negative emotions that cause consumers to speak or write antipathetically about the brand; the effect is greater than when the emotion is positive.

Second, these results also confirm how the strength of the customer–brand relationship can affect consumer reactions to brand conduct. That is, a higher level of connection between customers and brands often leads to higher affective responses to those brand practices. In particular, the relationship between a specific brand and a consumer's self-concept and loyalty can influence consumer reactions. When a brand they feel loyal to acts responsibly, consumers are proud of this behavior and are more prone to positive e-WOM if their relationship with the brand is stronger. In contrast, when their relationship with the brand is weaker, the effect of e-WOM is lower. Yet in the context of brand misconduct, e-WOM is still likely to be lower if the customer–brand relationship is strong. Most consumers refrain from communicating negatively about a brand they have a strong connection with.

This study's investigation into consumer responses to responsible and irresponsible brand conduct has various implications. Theoretically, it contributes to research on psychological mechanisms involved in consumer responses related to CSR (Bhattacharya et al., 2009). In particular, it has integrated self-conscious moral emotions into a stream of research that has traditionally focused on other condemning moral emotions (e.g. Grappi et al., 2013). Moreover, it has examined these psychological phenomena through the lens of the customer–brand relationship, evaluating the role of BESC and brand loyalty in determining the e-WOM response. The level of self-brand connection will be particularly useful to help improve the direct effect of positive moral emotions (e.g. pride) on e-WOM.

This study's findings also have implications for marketing and brand managers, as consumer reactions (e.g. e-WOM) are highly important to most companies, and it can be difficult to recover from negative reactions. Many firms' priority is to prevent consumer perceptions of irresponsible behavior, as negative e-WOM often spreads more easily than positive (Grappi et al., 2013). Other researchers have subsequently recommended companies aim to reduce the elicitation of negative emotions to control negative e-WOM (e.g. Schoefer & Diamantopoulos, 2008). This study also contends that brands that establish a stronger connection with customers will foster more positive.

While positive e-WOM can be more difficult for brands to attain, pride has been recognized in this study as a significant trigger of it. The customer–brand connection relies both on the natural tendency of a consumer to consider brands as part of their self-concept and on their propensity to be loyal to specific brands; in both cases, the effect on positive e-WOM is greater when such pride is higher. Consequently, brands

that are able to establish stronger connections with their customers (i.e. gain higher levels of BESC and loyalty) own a higher value. Moreover, loyal customers are more willing to forgive irresponsible brand behavior and are more prone to spread positive e-WOM when the brand acts responsibly. However, this value should be preserved through responsible practices. Marketing managers should therefore better promote responsible brand practices via CSR communications, to limit the risk of auto-celebration. Such communications about CSR initiatives are likely to evoke strong and positive reactions among consumers (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Limitations and further research

This study has multiple limitations. The first concerns the use of scenario-based experiments, where the respondents were asked to respond to two different corporate responsible and irresponsible scenarios. It is possible that some respondents paid more attention to these scenarios than they would have if they had read about them in the media or online. Thus, future research could replicate this study under more naturalistic conditions, to provide a more conservative test of the effects of brand practices.

Second, respondent self-conscious moral emotions were measured via a language-based method only. Future research could measure such emotions through different methods such as facial expressions and functional magnetic resonance imaging (FMRI) techniques to improve construct validity and generalizability.

Third, CSR contexts in addition to environmental and social used in this study could be applied to test the proposed theoretical framework, which may strengthen the generalizability of these findings.

Fourth, other studies could replicate and expand on this study's conceptual model by controlling the effects of other-condemning moral emotions (e.g. contempt, anger and disgust) that have traditionally been used to explain consumer reactions to corporate irresponsible behaviors.

Lastly, this study's theoretical framework could be expanded to include additional processes and individual variables, such as the moral identity of consumers, to examine other aspects of their responses to brand practices.

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Appendix 1: Constructs items

Constructs	Source	Items
BESC	Sprott et al. (2009)	1. I have a special bond with the brands that I like. 2. I consider my favorite brands to be a part of myself. 3. I often feel a personal connection between my brands and me. 4. Part of me is defined by important brands in my life. 5. I feel as if I have a close personal connection with the brands I most prefer. 6. I can identify with important brands in my life. 7. There are links between the brands that I prefer and how I view myself. 8. My favorite brands are an important indication of who I am.
Loyalty	Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)	1. I will continue to use this brand because I am satisfied and acquainted with the brand. 2. I will use this brand in spite of competitors' deals. 3. I prefer the brand to others.
Negative (Positive)e-WOM	Bougie et al. (2003)	1. Say negative (positive) things about the brand to other people via internet 2. Recommend (Not recommend) the brand to someone who seeks your advice via internet 3. Discourage (Encourage) friends and relatives to have relationship with the brand via internet