

# BRAND HATE AND BRAND FORGIVENESS

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**Abstract.** Consumers nowadays have many possibilities to voice their opinions, and many of them have no fear to communicate their sentiments when they feel that a brand had wronged them. Certain customers might even develop brand hate, which can lead to profound ramifications for brands, particularly when companies fail to adequately respond. Recent examples include the public outrage following the controversial campaign by fashion brand Balenciaga. However, the number of publications on this topic remains limited. We strive to close this gap by addressing the roles of brand attachment and companies' response strategies for brand forgiveness in the case of a value-based brand transgression. We show that brand attachment significantly increases brand forgiveness. Importantly, customers with medium to high brand attachment show levels of brand forgiveness that are unrelated to corporate responses. In contrast, consumers with low brand attachment show significant differences in brand forgiveness depending on the type of corporate response. We thus recommend managers to foster brand attachment, as medium to highly attached customers will forgive even in cases of negative corporate responses. However, companies should take responsibility in their responses, as this will increase brand forgiveness amongst customers with low brand attachment.

**Keywords:** brand forgiveness, brand attachment, brand hate

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, there has been a shift in how consumers see and experience brands, mainly a shift from transactional to relationship-based experiences <sup>[1]</sup>. This gave consumers the possibility of not only directly communicating with brands but also to influence how brands conduct business. Moreover, brands have been gradually personifying themselves, adopting personality archetypes and traits, and communicating with their customers as fully developed personas or human-like entities <sup>[2]</sup>.

As contemporary consumers have access to ubiquitous means of communication enabling them to voice their opinions, researchers have in turn identified the phenomenon of brand hate as an essential threat towards brands. Recent examples of hatred include the public outrage following a controversial campaign launched by fashion brand Balenciaga or the PepsiCo commercial starring Kendall Jenner <sup>[3,4]</sup>. For companies it is essential to explore antecedents of brand hate and find out why consumers react the way they do. Importantly, companies need to be made aware as to how to respond to hateful rhetoric; thus, understanding the concept of brand forgiveness as well as having the knowledge to divert a crisis and restore relationships is essential <sup>[5]</sup>.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to address the role of brand attachment and corporate response strategies in brand forgiveness after a value-based brand transgression.

## 2 BACKGROUND

Human beings actively seek companionship and build relationships <sup>[6]</sup>. An essential characteristic of all relationships is a level of interdependence between the involved parties; in other words: *“the manner in which individuals alter their behavior in order to coordinate with others’ actions and preferences.”* <sup>[6(p. 234)]</sup>. Individuals involved in groups thus react to each other and adapt their behavior to form unique dynamics that can either be positive or negative <sup>[6]</sup>.

The recent decades have brought forth a focus on relationship marketing <sup>[7]</sup> and customer engagement marketing <sup>[8]</sup>, thus, concentrating on positive forms of B2C relationships. What is more is that researchers investigated specific forms of customer-brand relationships, such as brand loyalty <sup>[9]</sup> or brand love <sup>[10]</sup>.

Understandably, consumers loving a brand should form the primary target for companies, primarily due to their high potential for sales, including cross-selling. Thus, much of the available research pertaining to brand emotions addresses positive rather than negative emotions. However, consumers engaging in brand hate must not be overlooked <sup>[11]</sup>. Due to negativity bias, which delineates that people weigh negative information more heavily, consumers’ negative actions can be far more consequential than one might assume <sup>[12]</sup>.

### 2.1 BRAND HATE

Brand hate is a complex concept that has a vast impact on brands’ overall equity and their long-term survival in the market. However, it has only recently become a topic of research <sup>[11]</sup>. Küçük <sup>[13(p. 20)]</sup> defines brand hate as *“a psychological state whereby a consumer forms*

*intense negative emotions and detachment toward brands that perform poorly and give consumers bad and painful experiences on both individual and social levels.”*

There are certain differences between interpersonal hate and brand hate. Brand hate is not directed towards a person but rather towards an object or organization, making it impersonal or abstract. A brand can be the target of a person's hate, but a brand won't start hating a person, which makes the situation rather one-sided. Furthermore, the consumer can usually walk away from the hated brand, which might be more complicated in interpersonal relationships <sup>[14]</sup>.

Generally, extant literature discusses three main brand-related antecedents for consumers to develop brand hate:

Product or service-related reasons are based on negative experiences related to product/service dissatisfaction <sup>[1]</sup>. This is especially intense when customers love brands, leading to their brand love turning into brand hate (*“love-becomes-hate”* effect) <sup>[15,16]</sup>. Moreover, betrayed consumers tend to feel much more inclined to restore what they perceive as fair <sup>[17]</sup>.

Symbolic incongruity occurs when consumers' self-image does not align with the brand image. Consumers purposefully choose brands when constructing their self-concept and identity <sup>[1]</sup>. However, as self-constructed images change over time, image incongruity is not necessarily connected to corporate wrongdoing <sup>[5]</sup>. Symbolic incongruity further occurs in the context of polarizing brands that simultaneously have a *“significant group of lovers and a substantial group of haters”* <sup>[18(p. 615)]</sup>.

Ideological incompatibility is related to corporate wrongdoing against consumers' moral values (e.g., unethical business practices, greed, deception in communication) <sup>[1]</sup>. In the case of a value-based brand transgression, consumers will express moral outrage <sup>[19]</sup>.

Whilst some customers simply depart from a brand following a negative experience, others become incensed, and certain frustrated customers might even engage in anti-branding behavior <sup>[19]</sup>. In practice, brand hate can manifest in various forms, such as via consumer empowerment <sup>[12]</sup>, negative word of mouth <sup>[13,20,21]</sup>, brand detachment <sup>[22]</sup>, brand avoidance and boycotting <sup>[1,21]</sup>, online anti-branding activities <sup>[23,24]</sup>, or even extreme forms of brand retaliation that can include illegal activities such as damaging the property of the brand <sup>[13]</sup>.

## 2.2 BRAND FORGIVENESS

Nearly all brands might face a crisis at some point, be it a product malfunction, a product-harm crisis <sup>[25]</sup> or negative publicity following a controversial advertising campaign. Managing brand hate not only covers calming down angry consumers after a brand transgression but also repairing consumer relationships <sup>[5]</sup>.

Joireman et al. <sup>[26(pp. 76–77)]</sup> cover the related concept of customer forgiveness and define it as *“customers' internal act of relinquishing anger and the desire to seek revenge against a firm that has caused harm as well as the enhancement of positive emotions and thoughts toward this harm-doing firm”*. Fetscherin and Sampedro <sup>[5(p. 635)]</sup> refer to Tsarenko and Tojib's <sup>[27(p. 382)]</sup> argumentation that *“the main component that underlies forgiveness is the*

*transformation of negative emotions.*” The authors thus conceptualize brand forgiveness as “*having various determinants*” and state that it “*relates to the process of a reduction or replacement of negative feelings with positive ones.*” Like in interpersonal relationships, forgiveness serves as the primary mechanism for reducing or replacing negative sensibilities <sup>[5]</sup>.

While consumers with strong brand relationships experience brand-related negative emotions more severely, these consumers are also more likely to forgive. That is because they view their brand engagement as an investment worth protecting <sup>[28]</sup>. Hassey <sup>[29]</sup>, however, argues that consumers—independent of their brand relationships—are generally more likely to forgive brand failures violating their expectations. Kim, Park, and Lee <sup>[30]</sup> found that customers express greater forgiveness for underdog brands in case of nonrelational transgressions. However, there is no difference between underdog and top-dog brands in cases of relational transgressions. Rathee et al. <sup>[31]</sup> further show that consumers are more willing to forgive a brand when it has a fun brand name, however, only in case of utilitarian products. Moreover, a brand’s employees play a pivotal role. Feng et al. <sup>[32]</sup> discussed consumer forgiveness and showed that employee participation positively influences brand image restoration. It is further essential to consider the severity of a brand transgression. Fetscherin and Sampedro <sup>[5]</sup> show that consumers are more willing to forgive a brand after a product or service failure, whereas image- or value-based transgressions are less likely to result in brand forgiveness.

### 2.3 BRAND ATTACHMENT

Attachment theory has a long research history in psychology. Early research addressed the relationship between infants and caregivers as a determinant of relationship behavior in adulthood <sup>[33–35]</sup>. In addition to the investigation of interpersonal relationships, attachment theory has been applied to numerous other contexts, such as celebrities <sup>[36]</sup>, social media <sup>[37]</sup>, retail stores <sup>[38]</sup>, or brand trust and brand loyalty <sup>[39]</sup>.

In this context, researchers conceptualized the construct of brand attachment. Park et al. <sup>[40(p. 2)]</sup> define brand attachment as “*the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self*”. Extant research identifies brand attachment as a highly relevant construct for consumer-brand relationships that influences service adoption <sup>[41]</sup>, consumers’ emotional well-being <sup>[42]</sup>, trust <sup>[39]</sup>, loyalty and willingness to promote a brand <sup>[39,40]</sup>, or resilience to negative information and willingness to defend a brand <sup>[43,44]</sup>.

However, brand attachment has also been identified to explain detrimental consumer behavior. Researchers showed that brand attachment is related to negative behaviors such as schadenfreude or trash-talking <sup>[45,46]</sup>. Strong bonds towards specific brands and resulting strong brand identification can lead to heightened rivalry against other brands. Furthermore, consumers with strong brand relationships experience stronger feelings of betrayal and brand hate in case of brand transgressions <sup>[47]</sup>. Thus, strong emotional bonds can lead to anti-brand behavior in case of brand transgressions <sup>[17,46]</sup>. Furthermore, Davis and Dacin <sup>[48]</sup> argue that consumers with strong brand attachment perceive severe value-based transgressions as more threatening, which results in intentions to dissolve brand relationships. Thus, brand attachment serves as a highly relevant construct for discussing anti-brand behavior and brand forgiveness.

## 2.4 CORPORATE CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Küçük <sup>[13(p. 165)]</sup> argues that *“no complainer turns into hater overnight”*, suggesting that brands can actively manage negative emotions. By complaining, consumers inform brands that a problem needs to be addressed. Dismissiveness can lead to escalation and damage towards the brand’s reputation <sup>[13]</sup>.

Successful engagement with resentful customers needs to be done in the right tone, through the right communication channel, and with appropriate timing. Demonstrating empathy is essential as customers might feel their concerns are not being taken seriously <sup>[13]</sup>. Satisfaction with complaint handling has been identified as essential for positive recommendations <sup>[49]</sup>. With regards to outcomes of brand hate, Rasouli et al. <sup>[50]</sup> further found significant differences depending on receiving an apology letter after a service failure.

Abbasi et al. <sup>[51]</sup> found that complaint handling can weaken the influence of ideological and symbolic incongruity on brand hate. When dealt with appropriately, negative emotions can be reduced or even replaced with positive ones, which indicates that a consumer has forgiven the brand for its perceived transgression <sup>[5]</sup>. Yang and Mundel <sup>[52]</sup> further argue that offering compensation can lead to brand love, whereas an absence of compensation might result in dissatisfaction and brand hate.

A crisis is a sudden, unexpected event that can physically, emotionally, or financially harm stakeholders. It can be defined as a *“perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes”* <sup>[53(p. 19)]</sup>. Coombs and Holladay <sup>[54]</sup> advanced the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as a reference frame covering consumers’ reactions towards crises and corporate response strategies. SCCT assists in determining responsibility for a crisis and offers guidelines in how to effectively respond <sup>[53]</sup>. Crisis response strategies shape responsibility, frame the conversation, and reduce negative emotions. SCCT provides three main categories for response strategies: denial (i.e. an attempt to prove a brand bore no responsibility), diminishment (i.e. arguing that the crisis is not as adverse as it might appear), and rebuilding (i.e. offering compensation, expressing remorse) <sup>[54]</sup>.

## 3 HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The recent years have brought forth several publications on brand forgiveness <sup>[31,50,51]</sup>. However, to the best of our knowledge, research pertaining to brand attachment and corporate crisis communication in the context of brand crises remains scarce. We strive to close this gap by addressing the role of attachment theory and corporate crisis communication for brand forgiveness in case of a value-based brand transgression.

Nobi et al. <sup>[28]</sup> demonstrated that consumers with strong (positive) brand relationships are more forgiving in case of transgression. This is in line with Schmalz and Orth <sup>[44]</sup>, who argue that brand attachment influences behavioral consequences of corporate unethical behavior. However, these outcomes are limited to moderately rather than extremely negative ethical wrongdoing.

Brand attachment can lead to anti-brand behaviors, such as schadenfreude or trash-talking. This is particularly important when customer relationships are weakened due to corporate opportunism or value incongruity <sup>[45]</sup>. Furthermore, strong brand attachment can lead to heightened rivalry due to social identification and lasting hate in case of brand transgressions <sup>[17,46]</sup>. A recent study further shows that brand attachment is related to impulsive and obsessive-compulsive buying, whereas compulsive-buying consumers are more likely to engage in trash talking <sup>[55]</sup>. In light of these findings, we argue that brand attachment plays a pivotal role for relationships, judgment, and thus brand forgiveness in case of brand transgressions. We thus formulate H1:

**H1:** Brand attachment influences brand forgiveness in case of a value-based transgression.

It is common practice for companies to issue a certain form of apology in case of a brand transgression. This apology often takes the form of a public press statement to restore a brand's credibility. However, there is a perceived difference as to whether a company simply regrets its previous actions or whether it also attempts to explain the reasons behind its transgression. In other words, only comprehensive apologies can effectively induce brand forgiveness <sup>[56]</sup>. The type of corporate response thus plays a particular role in avoiding brand hate and generating brand forgiveness. However, to the best of our knowledge, the influence of corporate crisis communication on consumer-brand relationships appears somewhat under-investigated.

Folkes <sup>[57]</sup> found that consumers might perceive to own an apology in order to redress the wrong in case of a firm-related crisis. However, the study did not incorporate different types of apologies. Fetscherin and Sampedro <sup>[5]</sup> offer an investigation into brand forgiveness but do not cover different corporate response strategies. Yuan et al. <sup>[56]</sup> show that consumers are more likely to forgive when companies display self-reflection and self-attribution of responsibility for the transgression in their crisis response. We thus propose that different corporate response strategies lead to different levels of brand forgiveness, formulating H2:

**H2:** The type of a company's response strategy is related to customer's brand forgiveness in case of a value-based transgression.

#### 4 PRETEST

As a first investigation into the roles of brand relationships and response strategies for brand forgiveness, we employed a pretest in the form of a structured online questionnaire. We randomly assigned participants to one of four groups representing different types of brand relationships. We asked participants to name a brand that aligns with their experimental group's description (e.g., "*brand I love and am a regular customer of*"). This procedure of self-selecting brands was in line with Fetscherin and Sampedro's <sup>[5]</sup> study on brand forgiveness.

All participants were then exposed to the same description of a hypothetical value-based brand transgression based on unethical business practices. We chose this procedure in order to induce ideological incompatibility with participants' values <sup>[1]</sup>. After that, we exposed participants to five different scenarios of brand response strategies, one after

another (denial, attacking the accuser, excuse, concern, and taking responsibility). We then assessed the participant's level of brand forgiveness for every company response. Following Fetscherin and Sampedro <sup>[5]</sup>, we adopted items from Xie and Peng <sup>[58]</sup> (see *Appendix for study design*).

#### 4.1 RESULTS

The pretest resulted in a total of 100 valid questionnaires. We applied analysis of variance (ANOVA) to analyze differences in brand forgiveness depending on the factor brand relationship. We found significant differences in brand forgiveness among different groups of brand relationships in the corporate response scenarios of denial ( $F(3, 96) = 4.212, p = 0.008$ ), attacking ( $F(3, 96) = 3.039, p = 0.033$ ), and excuse ( $F(3, 96) = 3.159, p = 0.028$ ). Importantly, our pretest showed no significant differences in the cases of concern and taking responsibility.

Based on these preliminary results, one might assume that the type of relationship does not influence brand forgiveness if the company shows concern or if the company takes responsibility. We thus performed a main study explicitly measuring brand attachment.

### 5 MAIN STUDY

Our pretest revealed some provocative first findings. However, this preliminary study came with certain shortcomings considering question design and sample size. We addressed these shortcomings in our main experimental study. We exposed participants to one of three hypothetical scenarios of corporate responses. In contrast to our pretest, we explicitly assigned our scenarios to a specific well-known consumer electronics brand, which was in line with Rodrigues' and Brandão's study <sup>[59]</sup> on brand hate. We did this to make sure that all participants think of the same brand, as consumers might react differently to different brands <sup>[30]</sup>.

We first assessed brand attachment by applying items from Park et al. <sup>[40]</sup>. We then exposed participants to the same hypothetical brand transgression as in our pretest and assigned participants to one out of three scenarios (denial, taking responsibility, and a control scenario without a corporate response). Subsequently, we measured brand forgiveness with items from Xie and Peng <sup>[58]</sup> (see *Appendix for study design*).

#### 5.1 RESULTS

We obtained 237 completed questionnaires (63.7 % female) and ensured reliability via Cronbach's alpha for brand attachment (0.883) and brand forgiveness (0.796).

We applied regression analysis to statistically test for H1, suggesting an influence of brand attachment on brand forgiveness. We obtained significant results across all scenarios: Brand attachment positively influences brand forgiveness in the scenarios of denial ( $\beta = 0.502, t = 5.120, p < 0.01$ ), taking responsibility ( $\beta = 0.402, t = 3.806, p < 0.01$ ), as well as in the control scenario ( $\beta = 0.501, t = 5.113, p < 0.01$ ), thus lending support to H1.

H2 suggests a relationship between corporate response strategy and brand forgiveness. To consider different levels of brand attachment in our analysis, we first created three groups (1 SD below mean, 1 SD above mean, in between, see *Figure 1*). We then applied

analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test for differences in brand forgiveness depending on the factor response strategy for every group. We found partial support for H2: For the group with low brand attachment, our results show significant differences in brand forgiveness depending on the type of response strategy ( $F(2, 44) = 3.416, p = 0.042$ ). However, we found no significant differences in the groups with medium and high brand attachment (see Figure 1).

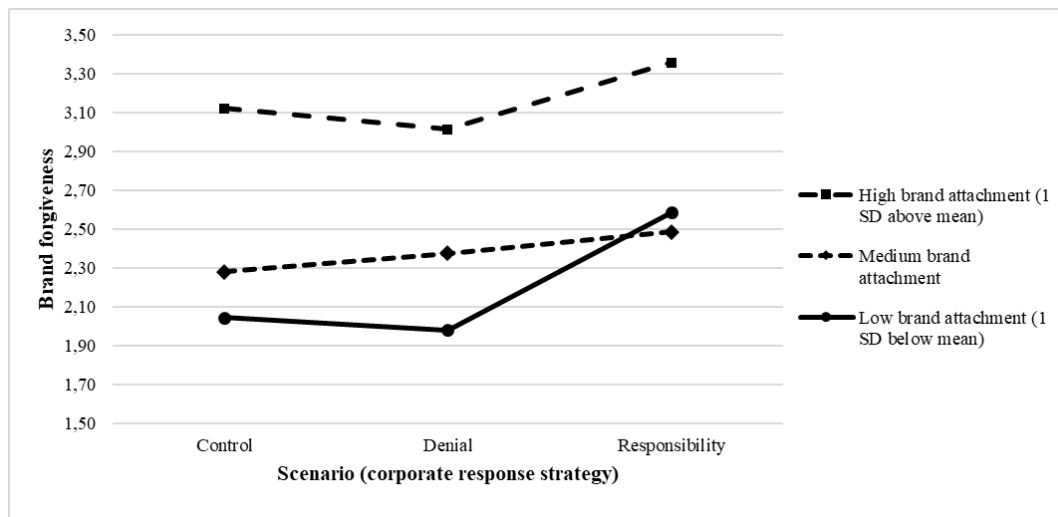


Figure 1. Relationship between brand attachment, brand forgiveness, and corporate response strategy

## 6 DISCUSSION

Across two studies (pretest and main study) we addressed the roles of customer-brand relationships and corporate response strategies for brand forgiveness in case of a value-based brand transgression. The results of our pretest indicated an extraordinary role of corporate response strategies: We found no significant differences in brand forgiveness among different groups of brand relationships when the company shows concern or takes responsibility.

In our main study, we thus specified the measurement of brand relationships by explicitly measuring brand attachment. We found a positive influence of brand attachment on forgiveness across all scenarios. Our findings on the relationship between corporate response strategy and brand forgiveness are two-fold. Participants with low brand attachment show significant differences in brand forgiveness depending on the type of response strategy. However, if consumers show medium to high brand attachment, there are no significant differences in brand forgiveness depending on corporate responses (see Figure 1).

We thus find that the type of corporate response strategy does not play an extraordinary role when consumers are moderately to highly attached to a brand. These findings are in line with Nobi et al. [28], who show that consumers with strong (positive) brand relationships are more forgiving. Our results further follow Schmalz and Orth [44], who described the positive influence of positive brand relationships in case of corporate misbehavior. Furthermore, Kennedy and Guzmán [60] also found that—regardless of any apologies—positive consumer feedback (brand love, co-creation etc.) is more likely to occur when consumers view brands as positive.



## 7 CONCLUSION

Our results have important theoretical and managerial implications. First, we demonstrate that both brand attachment and corporate response strategies play an essential role for brand forgiveness in case of brand transgressions. Second, we show that brand attachment significantly increases brand forgiveness. Third, participants with medium to high brand attachment—however—show levels of brand forgiveness that are unrelated to corporate response strategies. Importantly, participants with low brand attachment significantly show higher levels of brand forgiveness depending on corporate response strategies.

We thus recommend managers to foster brand attachment among their customer base, as medium to highly attached customers are willing to forgive even in cases of negative corporate responses. However, managers are encouraged to focus on taking responsibility in cases of brand transgressions, as this type of corporate response will increase levels of brand forgiveness amongst customers with low brand attachment.

Our research represents a first step towards an understanding of the roles of brand attachment and corporate response strategies for brand forgiveness. However, this research has several limitations. Future research could address different categories of consumer goods. That is further important because—according to Aziz and Rahman <sup>[61]</sup>—existing research on brand hate mainly focuses on services rather than products. Further, we recommend future researchers to rely on larger and more heterogeneous samples. Moreover, future studies could further assess brand hate, either preexisting or induced by the presented hypothetical brand transgression. Considering the different influence of corporate responses in different groups of brand attachment, future researchers are furthermore urged to investigate possible interaction effects between brand attachment and corporate responses.

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## 9 APPENDIX

### 9.1 SELF-SELECTED CATEGORIES OF BRAND RELATIONSHIPS (PRETEST)

- brand I love and am a regular customer of
- brand I used to love but was disappointed by and am no longer a customer of
- brand I hate and will never be a customer of
- brand I have no attachment to and whose products are, for me, replaceable by others on the market

### 9.2 BRAND ATTACHMENT (MAIN STUDY)

Park et al. (2010), Likert-type scale ranging from 1, “not at all” to 5, “completely”

- *“To what extent is this brand part of you and who you are?”*
- *“To what extent do you feel personally connected to this brand?”*
- *“To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward this brand often automatic, coming to mind seemingly on their own?”*
- *“To what extent do your thoughts and feelings toward this brand come to your mind naturally and instantly?”*

### 9.3 VALUE-BASED TRANSGRESSION (PRETEST AND MAIN STUDY)

*“Selected brand has been accused of tampering with rules regarding safety measures in their factories in developing countries to increase productivity. This allegedly exposed its workers to dangerous working conditions and caused injuries due to too long working hours and exhaustion. None of this has yet been proven in court, however, the evidence and witness testimonies are pretty solid. Some human rights organizations have already started to get involved.”*

### 9.4 SCENARIOS

*“A representative has made a public statement to address the accusations.”*

- Denial (pretest, main study): *“The accusations are false. Nothing like this ever has or would take place at our production facilities.”*
- Attacking (pretest): *“If these so-called human rights organisations actually did their job right, they would see that we are not the ones they should be focusing on.”*
- Excuse (pretest): *“We cannot know what goes on in our partner establishment at all times and although we have introduced strict standards from our side, some things are out of our control and supervision.”*

- Concern and compensation (pretest): *“We do, however, feel for the people involved in this situation and will be helping those who are most affected by it on a case-by-case basis.”*
- Taking responsibility (pretest, main study): *“Our lack of oversight and constant pressure on our partner establishments to deliver has caused this situation that never should have happened. We take full responsibility for it. We ask for your forgiveness and commit to working with all parties involved to right this wrong.”*

## 9.5 BRAND FORGIVENESS (PRETEST AND MAIN STUDY)

Xie and Peng <sup>[58]</sup>, Fetscherin and Sampedro <sup>[5]</sup>, Likert-type scale ranging from 1, *“absolutely don’t agree”* to 5, *“totally agree”*

- *“I would think favorably of X.”*
- *“Given X’s response, I would condemn it.”* (reverse coded)
- *“Given X’s response, I would forgive it.”*
- *“I would disapprove of X.”* (reverse coded)
- *“I feel sympathetic toward X.”*