

Falling from Grace or Cushioning the Blow? The Role of CSR in Navigating Ambiguous Brand Responsibility During Corporate Scandals

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A corporate scandal can significantly harm a company's reputation. Yet, as businesses increasingly operate in complex value creation networks, consumers often struggle to identify who is responsible for misconduct. Research has primarily explored whether a transgression has occurred (blatant vs. ambiguous transgression), overlooking the impact of ambiguous brand responsibility. This experimental study, grounded in moral licensing theory, examines how prior CSR influences consumer reactions under such ambiguity. Findings reveal that strong CSR enhances goodwill before a transgression, leading to a more favorable brand attitude afterward compared to weak CSR ('buffer effect'). However, the extent of CSR engagement does not reduce the negative impact of the transgression itself, showing no 'parachute effect'. These results highlight the nuanced role of CSR in mitigating reputational damage when responsibility for wrongdoing is unclear.

Key words: Ambiguous brand responsibility, moral licensing, brand transgression

Track: Product and Brand Management