

When Brands Make Us Feel Less Human: Moral Brand Transgressions and Brand Dehumanization Experience

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Abstract

Moral brand transgressions, such as harmful products, discriminatory campaigns, or exploitative practices, can severely damage consumer–brand relationships. Prior research often examines how moral brand transgressions influence the customer–brand relationship, but it rarely considers how such transgressions might affect consumers’ relationships with affiliated brands or their own well-being. Understanding this phenomenon is important because moral failures may trigger spillovers that shape consumers’ marketplace decisions, well-being, and self-regulation beyond the focal brand. We introduce brand dehumanization experience and test it as a key response to moral brand transgressions. Across a recall pre-test and two experiments, we show that moral brand transgressions increase brand dehumanization experience. A second exploratory experiment again finds increased dehumanization experience and further explores brand anthropomorphism, brand punishment intention, and impulsive consumption.

Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics