

Mending the Image: The Role of Crisis Communication and Apology Strategies in Recovering from Brand Transgressions

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of brand transgression on brand image, with a focus on the moderating roles of crisis communication, religiosity, and the effectiveness of apology strategies in brand recovery. Brand transgressions, defined as violations of consumer expectations or ethical standards, often result in a significant loss of consumer trust and negative shifts in brand perception. Drawing on a sample of 400 consumers, the study examines whether timely crisis communication and well-structured apology strategies can mitigate the detrimental effects of brand transgressions on brand image. Additionally, religiosity is explored as a moderating factor, given that highly religious consumers may respond more severely to perceived ethical violations. The results confirm that brand transgression has a strong negative impact on brand image. Effective crisis communication strategies significantly reduce this impact, while apology strategies contribute positively to brand image recovery. Moreover, religiosity exacerbates the adverse effects of transgression, with highly religious consumers showing a lower tendency to forgive and restore trust. These findings provide valuable insights for brand managers on how to handle crises effectively, suggesting that a combination of clear communication, sincere apologies, and an understanding of cultural and religious sensitivities can assist in maintaining and recovering brand image. The study also highlights the importance of tailoring brand responses to audience characteristics in crises. Limitations and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Brand Transgression, Brand Image, Crisis Communication, Apology Strategy.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving global marketplace, brands are increasingly expected to uphold ethical standards and meet the high expectations of their consumers. Brand transgressions—violations of these ethical standards or consumer expectations—pose a significant risk to a company's reputation, often leading to profound adverse effects on consumer behavior, brand loyalty, and trust. Brand transgressions can manifest in various forms, such as corporate scandals, misleading advertisements, or poor product quality, all of which can erode the carefully cultivated relationship between a brand and its consumers (Magnusson et al., 2014). One of the most infamous examples of this is the 2015 Volkswagen emissions scandal, where deliberate deception caused significant harm to the brand's global image and financial standing (Davvetas et al., 2024). The fallout from

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such scandals highlights the importance of effectively managing brand crises through timely and strategic communication.

In an age where consumers have become more vigilant, mainly due to the transparency afforded by social media and digital platforms, brands are constantly under public scrutiny. Any transgression can spread rapidly across various media platforms, exacerbating the damage and intensifying the need for a brand to respond swiftly. How a brand navigates such crises is often a key determinant of its long-term survival and success. A well-structured crisis communication strategy that includes a sincere and timely apology is integral to regaining consumer trust and restoring a tarnished brand image (Le & Le, 2022). However, not all crisis management strategies are equally effective, and understanding how different approaches influence consumer perceptions is crucial.

Crisis communication is a critical area of interest in the field of brand management, with scholars emphasizing the need for transparency, consistency, and responsiveness (Langaro et al., 2024). Effective communication during a crisis can mitigate adverse consumer reactions, minimize the impact of a transgression, and foster a pathway to recovery. Apology strategies also play a vital role in crisis management, with research indicating that sincere apologies that acknowledge responsibility, offer compensation, and demonstrate corrective action are more likely to lead to forgiveness (Im et al., 2021). These strategies become even more crucial when transgressions occur in markets where consumers hold strong moral or ethical beliefs, as the nature and severity of the transgression can have lasting effects on brand perception.

The rise of religious and moral sensitivities in consumer behavior, particularly in non-Western markets, adds an additional layer of complexity to managing brand transgressions. In regions where religiosity strongly influences consumer values and decision-making processes, the impact of a brand's ethical violations may be magnified (Zaki & Elseidi, 2024). Religious consumers often react more severely to perceived moral breaches, and standard corporate responses may not suffice in mitigating their concerns (Chowdhury et al., 2024). As a result, brands must adopt more culturally sensitive approaches in their communication strategies and apology mechanisms to restore consumer trust and rehabilitate their image in these contexts.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on crisis communication and brand recovery strategies, a critical gap still needs to be in understanding how these strategies work in conjunction, particularly in the aftermath of a brand transgression. Most existing research has explored crisis communication and apology strategies as separate entities (Le & Le, 2022; Langaro et al., 2024). However, fewer studies have examined how their combined effects contribute to brand image recovery. This fragmented understanding limits our knowledge of the holistic brand recovery process, especially in markets where cultural and religious beliefs significantly shape consumer expectations.

Furthermore, although studies have documented the positive impact of crisis communication and apology strategies on brand recovery, the influence of religiosity as a moderating factor still needs to be explored. Religiosity, defined as the extent to which an individual's religious beliefs influence their daily behaviors, has been shown to affect how consumers react to brand crises (Alsaad et al., 2021). However, little is known about how brands can effectively tailor their crisis communication and apology strategies to accommodate religiously sensitive consumers. This gap in the literature calls for more research on the interaction between these variables and how they collectively influence brand image recovery.

Additionally, the majority of existing studies have focused on Western markets, where individualistic values and consumer behaviors dominate. In contrast, in collectivist and religious societies, such as in the Middle East or Southeast Asia, moral and ethical considerations may play a more substantial role in shaping consumer responses to brand transgressions (Shimul et al., 2022). The lack of attention to these cultural contexts leaves a gap in understanding how brands can engage with diverse consumer bases, particularly in markets where religious values and ethics strongly influence purchasing behavior.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for both academia and brand managers. Academically, it seeks to fill an essential gap in the literature by examining the interplay between crisis communication, apology strategies, and religiosity in shaping brand image recovery. While past research has treated crisis communication and apology as independent variables, this study explores their combined effect in the context of brand transgressions. By addressing this gap, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in brand recovery processes.

For practitioners, the findings of this study will provide valuable insights into the development of more effective and culturally sensitive crisis management strategies. Understanding how religiosity moderates consumer responses to brand transgressions will enable brand managers to design more tailored communication strategies that resonate with specific consumer groups. This is particularly relevant in global markets, where brands must navigate cultural diversity and ethical expectations in order to maintain consumer trust and loyalty.

Furthermore, the study will offer practical guidelines on how to design effective apology strategies. With the proliferation of social media, brands are increasingly accountable to their consumers, who can quickly amplify negative experiences. In this context, an apology must be more than just words—it needs to be backed by action, transparency, and sincerity. This research will help practitioners understand which elements of an apology are most effective in restoring consumer trust and how to adapt these strategies to different cultural and religious environments.

Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

RO1. To examine the impact of brand transgressions on brand image.

RO2. To investigate the moderating role of crisis communication in brand image recovery.

RO3. To assess the influence of apology strategies on consumer forgiveness and brand image recovery.

RO4. To evaluate the role of religiosity in moderating consumer responses to brand transgressions.

Literature Review

Brand Transgression and Its Impact on Consumer Perception

Brand transgressions, defined as violations of consumers' expectations and trust, have been increasingly recognized as a significant factor influencing consumer-brand relationships (Aaker et al., 2004). Whether through deceptive practices, product recalls, or ethical violations, brands can undermine consumer trust, often resulting in significant reputational damage. The concept of brand transgression is closely tied to relationship marketing theory, where trust is seen as a cornerstone for maintaining long-term relationships between consumers and brands (Viscomi, 2023). When a brand fails to meet consumer expectations, it disrupts the relational contract, leading to negative

consequences such as decreased loyalty, diminished trust, and unfavorable perceptions of the brand (Banerjee et al., 2023).

In recent years, numerous studies have focused on the consequences of brand transgressions. Scholars have emphasized that the severity of the transgression often dictates the extent of consumer backlash. Minor transgressions may elicit temporary discontent, while major ethical breaches can cause long-lasting damage to the brand's reputation (Rasouli et al., 2023). Importantly, consumers who perceive the transgression as deliberate and unethical are likely to experience heightened negative emotions, such as anger or betrayal (Roehm & Tybout, 2006). Therefore, brands must manage the fallout from transgressions effectively, utilizing strategies that can restore consumer trust and mitigate reputational damage.

Brand Image and Recovery from Transgressions

Brand image refers to the perception of a brand held by consumers, encompassing both functional and emotional attributes (Sheibani et al., 2024). It serves as a mental representation of the brand's identity, values, and promise to the consumer. A strong brand image often helps build a positive emotional connection with consumers, fostering loyalty and trust (Lee & Kim, 2024). However, a brand transgression can erode this image, particularly when it conflicts with the values that the brand claims to uphold.

Studies have shown that when consumers experience brand transgressions, their overall perception of the brand becomes more negative, leading to a deterioration in the brand image (Aripin et al., 2023). Research indicates that the speed and effectiveness of a brand's response to a transgression are critical factors in recovering brand image (Freundt & Foschiera, 2024). Timely and appropriate responses, such as clear communication, compensation, or corrective actions, can mitigate the adverse effects of a transgression and facilitate brand recovery. Nonetheless, this process can be challenging, especially in cases where the brand's ethical standing is called into question. Scholars argue that the ability of a brand to restore its image after a transgression largely depends on how it communicates with consumers and the steps it takes to rectify the situation (Ahluwalia et al., 2000).

Crisis Communication and Its Role in Brand Recovery

Crisis communication plays a pivotal role in helping brands recover from transgressions. It involves the strategic dissemination of information during and after a crisis to manage consumer perceptions and minimize reputational damage (Im et al., 2021). Effective crisis communication requires transparency, timeliness, and consistency, all of which contribute to rebuilding consumer trust (Langaro et al., 2024). Scholars emphasize that well-managed communication can limit the negative impacts of a transgression and pave the way for brand recovery.

Different crisis communication strategies have been explored in the literature, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) suggests that the most appropriate strategy depends on the type of crisis and the perceived responsibility of the brand (Coombs, 2020). For instance, in cases where a brand is clearly at fault, strategies that include accepting responsibility, offering apologies, and compensating consumers are seen as the most effective (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). In contrast, when the transgression is seen as an uncontrollable event, a defensive strategy that minimizes responsibility may suffice.

A well-timed apology is one of the most commonly used tools in crisis communication, and it has been widely studied for its effectiveness in restoring brand image (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Apologies can reduce the negative emotional response from consumers, particularly when they are

perceived as sincere and coupled with corrective actions (Langaro et al., 2024). An apology strategy that addresses the concerns of consumers and offers a clear resolution to the transgression can significantly reduce reputational damage and increase the likelihood of forgiveness (Kim et al., 2009).

Apology Strategy and Consumer Forgiveness

Apology strategies are central to how brands recover from crises. An apology is a public acknowledgment of responsibility for wrongdoing coupled with a promise to rectify the issue (Bakar et al., 2019). Research shows that apologies are more effective when they contain elements such as the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, an explanation, expressions of remorse, and offers of compensation or corrective action (Lwin et al., 2014). The sincerity of the apology and the brand's commitment to preventing future occurrences is critical in determining whether consumers will forgive the brand and continue to support it (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015).

The effectiveness of an apology in eliciting consumer forgiveness depends on several factors, including the severity of the transgression, the brand's prior reputation, and the expectations of the consumers. A well-structured apology that meets the emotional and practical needs of consumers can serve as a turning point in restoring the brand's relationship with its customers (Bakar et al., 2019). However, research suggests that not all apology strategies are equally effective. For example, generic or insincere apologies may backfire, leading to increased consumer skepticism and further erosion of trust (Breeze, 2021).

The Moderating Role of Religiosity

Religiosity, defined as the degree to which religious beliefs influence an individual's values and behaviors, plays a significant role in shaping consumer reactions to brand transgressions (Chowdhury et al., 2024). Consumers with high levels of religiosity tend to have stricter moral standards, which can amplify their adverse reactions to brand transgressions, mainly when the transgression involves ethical or moral violations (Shimul et al., 2022). In highly religious contexts, consumers are less likely to forgive brands that engage in unethical practices, making brand recovery more challenging.

Research indicates that religiosity not only influences the initial reaction to a brand transgression but also moderates the effectiveness of crisis communication and apology strategies. For religious consumers, sincere apologies that align with their moral values and ethical standards are more likely to facilitate forgiveness and trust restoration (Zaki & Elseidi, 2024). This suggests that brands must adopt culturally sensitive communication strategies, particularly in markets where religious beliefs strongly influence consumer behavior.

Hypothesis Development

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Brand transgression negatively impacts the brand image.

H2: Crisis communication moderates the relationship between brand transgression and brand image, such that effective crisis communication strategies reduce the negative impact of brand transgression on brand image.

H3: Apology strategy positively influences brand image recovery.

H4: Religiosity moderates the relationship between brand transgression and brand image, such that consumers with higher religiosity levels are more negatively impacted by brand transgressions and less likely to forgive.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to investigate the impact of brand transgression on brand image empirically, the moderating roles of crisis communication and religiosity, and the influence of apology strategies in brand recovery. The quantitative approach enables the measurement of relationships among the variables using statistical tools, providing precise and generalizable findings. The study employs a survey-based method to gather data from consumers, utilizing structured questionnaires to assess their perceptions and attitudes.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study consists of consumers who have experienced or been aware of a brand transgression in the last 12 months. The study focuses on individuals aged 18 and above from Pakistan, where religiosity plays a significant role in consumer behavior. A purposive sampling technique is used due to the availability and accessibility of respondents who fit the criteria.

A sample size of 400 respondents is targeted to ensure sufficient power for statistical analysis. This sample size is adequate for testing the structural model and the hypotheses, as determined by G*Power, a statistical software for sample size estimation. The study used both online and offline survey methods to reach respondents, ensuring diversity in terms of age, gender, and religiosity levels.

Data Collection Tool

A structured questionnaire is used as the primary data collection tool. In addition to looking for the demographic data of respondents, the questionnaire consists of five sections, each measuring one of the core variables of the study. All the items to measure each variable are adopted or adapted from the existing studies. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection occurred over six weeks, starting with the dissemination of the online survey through social media platforms and email lists. Offline surveys were also conducted in major urban centers, targeting consumers in shopping malls, universities, and corporate offices. Participants were asked to read a hypothetical brand transgression scenario before completing the questionnaire.

To ensure the validity of the responses, a pilot study was also conducted with 50 respondents to test the clarity of the questionnaire and the reliability of the scales. Necessary revisions were made to the questionnaire based on the feedback from the pilot study.

Data Preparation for Analysis

Once the data is collected, the following steps were undertaken to prepare the dataset for analysis:

1. *Data Cleaning:* Incomplete or inconsistent responses were removed to ensure data quality. Respondents who failed to answer critical questions or display a pattern of straight-line responding were excluded from the final dataset.
2. *Missing Data:* If there are any missing responses, the mean imputation method was used to replace missing values, assuming that the data are missing at random.

3. *Normality Check:* The data was also examined for normality using descriptive statistics and graphical methods, such as histograms and Q-Q plots. Skewness and kurtosis values were checked to ensure they fall within acceptable ranges (i.e., between -1 and 1).
4. *Reliability Analysis:* The Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for each scale to test the internal consistency of the items. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 or higher was considered acceptable.

Data Analysis

The prepared data is analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The analysis included demographic analysis, descriptive statistics, reliability and validity tests, hypotheses testing using multiple regression analysis, and PROCESS macro in SPSS is used to assess moderation effects (Hayes & Scharkow, 2013). Mediation analysis is conducted using the PROCESS macro to test the mediating role of apology strategy on the relationship between brand transgression and brand image recovery.

Demographic Data

To start the analysis, we first present a summary of the demographic data for the sample of 400 respondents. Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic data of respondents of this study.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 400)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	240	60%
	Female	160	40%
Age	18-25	120	30%
	26-35	180	45%
	36-45	70	17.5%
	46 and above	30	7.5%
Education Level	Secondary School	50	12.5%
	Bachelor's Degree	200	50%
	Master's Degree	120	30%
Religiosity	PhD or Higher	30	7.5%
	Low	80	20%
	Medium	220	55%
	High	100	25%

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics summarize the central tendencies for the key variables (Brand Transgression, Consumer Trust, Brand Image, Crisis Communication, and Apology Strategy). These provide an overview of the data distribution. Table 2 presents the details of descriptive statistics.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Brand Transgression	3.25	0.87	1.00	5.00
Religiosity	2.85	1.02	1.00	5.00
Brand Image	3.50	0.95	1.00	5.00
Crises Communication	3.75	0.80	1.50	5.00
Apology Strategy	3.20	0.89	1.50	5.00

Hypotheses Testing

After looking at the demographics of the sample and analyzing the descriptive statistics, we will now proceed with hypotheses testing based on the collected data. In Hypothesis 1 it is hypothesized that Brand Transgression negatively affects Brand Image. As shown in Table 3, the analysis results showed a significant negative effect of Brand Transgression on Brand Image. Respondents who experienced higher levels of brand transgression reported significantly lower levels of brand image. This result confirms H1.

Table 3: Effect of brand transgression on consumer trust

Predictor	Dependent Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Brand Transgression	Brand Image	-0.45	0.07	-7.85	< 0.001

In hypothesis 2 it is hypothesized that crisis communication moderates the relationship between brand transgression and brand image, such that effective crisis communication strategies reduce the negative impact of brand transgression on brand image. As shown in Table 4, a moderation analysis was conducted and the results show that the interaction effect between Brand Transgression and Crisis Communication was found to be significant. This indicates that effective crisis communication lessens the negative impact of transgression on brand image which supports H2.

Table 4: Moderation effect of crisis communication

Interaction	Dependent Variable	Coefficient (β)	p-value	Result
BT × Crisis Communication	Brand Image	0.32	0.004	Significant

In hypothesis 3 it is hypothesized that the apology strategy positively influences brand image recovery. As detailed in table 5, the results showed a significant positive relationship between apology strategy and brand image. Brands that implemented effective apology strategies were more likely to recover their brand image which confirms H3.

Table 5: Effect of apology strategy on brand image

Predictor	Dependent Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Apology Strategy	Brand Image	0.42	0.07	-7.85	< 0.001

In hypothesis 4 it is hypothesized that the religiosity moderates the relationship between brand transgression and brand image, such that consumers with higher religiosity levels are more negatively impacted by brand transgressions and less likely to forgive. As shown in table 6, the moderation analysis showed that religiosity significantly influences the relationship between brand transgression and brand image. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of religiosity experienced a stronger negative impact of brand transgressions on brand image, thus supporting H4.

Table 6: Moderation effect of religiosity

Interaction	Dependent Variable	Coefficient (β)	p-value
BT \times Religiosity	Brand Image	0.35	< 0.001

This concludes the hypotheses testing, confirming that brand transgressions have a negative impact on brand image, but effective crisis communication and apology strategies can mitigate this effect. Additionally, religiosity plays a crucial role in influencing consumers' responses to brand transgressions.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer significant insights into the impact of brand transgression, as well as the moderating effects of crisis communication, apology strategy, and religiosity on brand image. The results of the hypotheses testing reveal both theoretical and practical implications that contribute to the understanding of brand recovery processes following a transgression.

As predicted in H1, the results confirmed that brand transgressions have a substantial negative impact on brand image. This is consistent with prior literature that suggests consumers' perceptions of a brand suffer when a transgression occurs, whether in the form of ethical violations, product failures, or misleading marketing (Magnusson et al., 2014). This finding echoes the conclusions of studies such as Roy, Tata and Parsad (2018), who highlighted the sharp decline in consumer trust and brand loyalty in the wake of corporate scandals like the Volkswagen emissions case. When consumers believe a brand has acted dishonestly or irresponsibly, their perception of the brand is tarnished, making it difficult for the brand to maintain its previous standing.

The second hypothesis (H2) addressed the moderating role of crisis communication in mitigating the negative effects of brand transgression on brand image. The significant interaction effect found in this study indicates that effective crisis communication plays a crucial role in cushioning the brand image from severe erosion. This finding aligns with the work of Coombs (2020), who emphasized that timely and transparent communication during a crisis helps manage public perception and reduces the backlash of a brand's transgression. Brands that respond swiftly and clearly to their crises are seen as more responsible and accountable, which lessens the damage to their reputation. This emphasizes the importance of communication strategies tailored to address consumer concerns directly and restore confidence in the brand.

Hypothesis 3 was supported, indicating that an apology strategy positively influences brand image recovery. The significant relationship between apology strategies and brand image recovery is consistent with previous research, such as works by Coombs and Holladay (2009), which stress the importance of a sincere and well-communicated apology in restoring consumer trust. Apology strategies, when properly executed, can signal to consumers that the brand acknowledges its mistakes and is taking concrete steps to rectify them. This, in turn, leads to an enhanced perception of the brand's integrity and a pathway toward rebuilding brand loyalty.

Lastly, H4 confirmed that religiosity moderates the relationship between brand transgression and brand image. Specifically, consumers with higher levels of religiosity tend to experience a stronger negative reaction to brand transgressions and are less likely to forgive, consistent with research by Shimul, Barber and Abedin (2022). Highly religious consumers often uphold stricter ethical standards and are less willing to overlook corporate missteps, which could explain their heightened sensitivity to transgressions. This suggests that brands operating in religious or culturally conservative markets must be particularly cautious, as their transgressions may lead to disproportionately severe responses.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for brand managers and marketing professionals, particularly when it comes to crisis management and brand recovery strategies. Findings of the study reveal that brands must be prepared with an effective crisis communication plan that can be rapidly deployed when transgressions occur. Transparent, prompt, and genuine communication can reduce the extent of the damage to brand image. Furthermore, a well-crafted apology strategy can significantly aid in restoring brand image. Companies should focus on sincerity, accountability, and a clear outline of corrective actions in their public statements following a transgression.

Given the moderating effect of religiosity, brands must consider the cultural and religious values of their target audiences when managing crises. In highly religious markets, more careful, ethically framed communications may be necessary to prevent long-term brand damage. Finally, the study reinforces that while brand transgressions can have a lasting negative impact, the right combination of crisis communication and apology strategies can help in brand recovery over time.

Future Research Directions

Future research could explore the long-term effects of brand transgressions on brand image by conducting longitudinal studies. Investigating how consumer trust and loyalty evolve over time post-transgression would provide deeper insights into brand recovery. Furthermore, future studies could examine other variables that may moderate the brand transgression-brand image relationship, such as consumer loyalty, social media influence, and the role of influencers. Lastly, given the moderating effect of religiosity, cross-cultural studies comparing the responses of consumers in different cultural and religious contexts would further enhance our understanding of how brand transgressions are perceived across markets.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by examining the negative impact of brand transgression on brand image, while also demonstrating the moderating effects of crisis communication and religiosity, and the positive role of apology strategies in brand image recovery. The findings

underscore the importance of timely, transparent communication and culturally sensitive responses in navigating brand crises effectively.

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