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The Logic of Consumer Forgiveness in Luxury Brand Crises: Dual Perspective of Emotional Attachment and Moral Decoupling

Weilin Su[a]

Fujian University of Technology, Fuzhou, Fujian, 350000, China

[a]swl050115@163.com

Abstract

In today's consumer market, luxury brands always find themselves in crises. Yet, interestingly, they frequently manage to gain consumer forgiveness. This phenomenon has drawn more and more attention in market research. However, a closer look at past studies shows a clear gap. Prior research has mostly focused on two separate mechanisms. One is the buffering effect of emotional attachment, which protects brands from negative information. The other is moral decoupling, a cognitive strategy that separates brand performance from ethical judgment. For the most part, these mechanisms always studied in isolation. As a result, the underlying logic that links luxury brand crises to consumer forgiveness is still not well understood.Our study adopts a dual-perspective framework. We combine the emotional attachment and moral decoupling. By using both questionnaire surveys and real case studies, we aim to explore how these two ways together shape consumer forgiveness in the luxury market. It not only knows our understanding of consumer psychology but also provides useful guidance for brand crisis management.

Keywords

Luxury Brands; Emotional Attachment; Moral Decoupling; Consumer Forgiveness; Brand Crisis.

1. Introduction

In the luxury sector, brand crises are no longer occasional incidents but a common management challenge. And emotional attachment and moral decoupling play significant roles[1,2].Contrary to traditional perceptions, these crises impact luxury brand. Yet, their core consumer groups often display puzzling loyalty and tolerance. This phenomenon suggests that consumer forgiveness decisions may be driven by deep psychological motivations. These motivations are very complex.Therefore, exploring why consumers choose to forgive a luxury brand with moral flaws has become a critical question for both academic and practical fields.Both luxury-related topics and the mediating effect of consumer forgiveness have gradually become research part for many scholars[3,4]. However, existing studies have not focus on the underlying logic of luxury brand crises and consumer forgiveness. For example, luxury brands often face a dilemma between "over-response" and "arrogant silence" in crisis management, rooted in their failure to accurately grasp the psychological mechanisms of consumer forgiveness[5].Based on this, this paper aims to find the underlying logic of consumer forgiveness after luxury brand crises and propose a clear chain mediating model. The core argument of this study is: Emotional attachment does not directly lead to forgiveness; instead, it indirectly facilitates consumers' forgiveness decisions by driving the key psychological process of moral decoupling.

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2. Literature Review

In recent years, economic conditions have improved. At the same time, the social media world has arrived. As a result, more and more people have learned about luxury goods and started shopping them. Many people have become loyal fans of specific luxury brands.Meanwhile, luxury brands operate in an unprecedentedly transparent environment. Any improper behavior can quickly escalate into a big brand crisis. This holds true whether the issue involves product defects or disputes over values. Nevertheless, a thought-provoking phenomenon remains. Even in severe crises that touch on national sentiments-such as Dolce & Gabbana's (D&G) insult to China-we still observe some consumers choosing to "forgive" the brand and continue purchasing its products.In existing research, traditional brand crisis theories, such as attribution theory, tend to focus on crisis responsibility attribution and the generation of consumer anger. However, they struggle to fully explain this "knowing yet still committing" type of sustained loyalty[6]. In contrast, this paper explores the underlying logic of luxury brand crises and consumer forgiveness from the perspectives of emotional attachment and moral decoupling.The theory of moral decoupling was first proposed in 1999. Since then, many foreign studies have been conducted on this theory. However, most have not been integrated with consumer behavior and marketing. Since the 21st century, Chinese academic research has gradually introduced related concepts. Domestic studies have also linked moral decoupling theory to the workplace environment. Professor Wang Chenglu found that Chinese consumers hold a double moral standard for international brands[7,8]. However, no existing research has combined this theory with luxury brand crises and consumer forgiveness.Emotional attachment theory was first introduced into brand research in 2005 to explain the emotional bond between consumers and brands. Later, in 2010, Park developed a measurement model, emphasizing the impact of emotional attachment on brand loyalty and willingness to pay[9]. In domestic research, Zhou Zhimin and Li Mi reviewed important Western studies on brand communities in journals. They summarized and commented on research results regarding the definition, structural model, influencing factors, and mechanism of action of brand communities. They also proposed several directions worthy of future reseaarch[10]. In addition, they said the "human-oriented" characteristics of Chinese consumers' brand attachment. In recent years, the concept has gradually evolved into "brand attachment," with studies focusing on domestic phenomena such as retail brand personality[11].In the 1990s, brand management expert David A. Aaker first regarded brand crises as a major threat to brand equity in Managing Brand Equity (1991)[12]. Kevin Lane Keller subsequently emphasized that crises can damage consumers' brand knowledge structures, laying the conceptual foundation[13]. In 2007, Coombs proposed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). He classified brand crises into three types-victim, accidental, and intentional he also established a response framework[14]. This marked the systematization of the theory and is now the commonly understood brand crises.

3. Research Design

3.1. Sample Selection and Data Source

To explore the logic of consumer forgiveness in luxury brand crises,I first proposed four hypotheses:

H1: Emotional attachment has a significantly positive impact on consumer forgiveness.

H2: Emotional attachment has a significantly positive impact on moral decoupling.

H3: Moral decoupling has a significantly positive impact on consumer forgiveness.

H4: Moral decoupling plays a mediating role in the relationship between emotional attachment and consumer forgiveness.

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And a comprehensive questionnaire was designed.The respondents were carefully selected. They had prior experience in purchasing or using luxury goods. More importantly, they had developed a certain emotional bond with the target brand.The survey was conducted through two channels. On the one hand, we distributed questionnaires via online social platforms. These included WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and similar apps. On the other hand, we also carried out offline fieldwork in high-end business districts.In the end, a total of 201 valid samples were collected. This sample size met the requirements for subsequent statistical analysis.

The demographic characteristics of the samples are as follows:

In terms of gender (Table 1), there are 107 females (53.23%) and 94 males (46.77%).

Table 1. Gender Distribution of Samples

Gender	Sample Size	Percentage
Male	94	46.77%
Female	107	53.23%

About age groups (Table 2), the 31-40 age group (23.88%) and 41-50 age group (23.38%) account for the highest proportions, totaling 47.26%, the 26-30 age group (18.41%). The sample is mainly composed of young and middle-aged consumers.

Table 2. Age Distribution of Samples

Age Group	Sample Size	Percentage
Under 18	8	3.98%
18~25	22	10.95%
26~30	37	18.41%
31~40	48	23.88%
41~50	47	23.38%
51~60	27	13.43%
Over 60	12	5.97%

We then turn to the education variable, as shown in Table 3. A large majority of the respondents are highly educated. Specifically, those with a bachelor's degree or above account for 60.20% of the total sample. Among this group, 54.23% hold a bachelor's degree, while 5.97% have earned a master's degree or higher. Taken together, these figures suggest that the sample is characterized by a relatively high level of educational attainment.

Table 3. Education Distribution of Samples

Education Level	Sample Size	Percentage
Junior High or Below	4	1.99%
High School/Vocational School	20	9.95%
Junior College	56	27.86%
Bachelor’s Degree	109	54.23%
Master’s Degree or Above	12	5.97%

About income (Table 4), the group with a monthly disposable income of 10,001-20,000 yuan accounts for the highest proportion (48.26%), followed by the 5,001-10,000 yuan group (29.35%). The sample is mainly composed of groups with the ability to consume luxury goods, indicating good sample representativeness.

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Table 4. Monthly Disposable Income Distribution of Samples

Income Range	Sample Size	Percentage
Below 5000yuan	10	4.98%
5001-10000yuan	59	29.35%
10001-20000yuan	97	48.26%
Above 20001yuan	35	17.41%

3.2. Variable Measurement

All variables were measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree), and variable scores were calculated through item parceling. The specific measurement items were designed based on the matrix scale questions in the questionnaire, as shown in Table 5:

Table 5. Variable Measurement Items and Descriptive Statistics (N=201)

Variable Type	Variable Name	Item Number	Item Mean	Variable Mean (M)	SD	Cronbach's α Coefficient
Independent Variable (X)	Emotional Attachment	1	4.35	4.34	0.78	0.85
		2	4.26			
		3	4.40			
		4	4.39			
		5	4.28			
Mediating Variable (M)	Moral Decoupling	6	4.46	4.45	0.82	0.82
		7	4.39			
		8	4.46			
		9	4.50			
Dependent Variable (Y)	Consumer Forgiveness	10	4.33	4.45	0.85	0.83
		11	4.47			
		12	4.48			
		13	4.50			

4. Empirical Results and Analysis

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 6 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation results for all study variables. As can be seen, the mean score for emotional attachment is 4.34 (SD = 0.78). For moral decoupling, the average is 4.45 (SD = 0.82). Consumer forgiveness, meanwhile, has a mean of 4.45 (SD = 0.85). All these figures lie above the midpoint of the 7-point scale, implying that, on the whole, consumers maintain a fairly strong emotional bond with luxury brands. Moreover, even after the brands have been involved in “greenwashing” scandals, a certain level of moral decoupling tendency and willingness to forgive can still be observed among the respondents.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix (N=201)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
Emotional Attachment (X)	4.34	0.78	1	0.45**	0.52**
Moral Decoupling (M)	4.45	0.82	-	1	0.60**
Consumer Forgiveness (Y)	4.45	0.85	-	-	1

Note: **p<0.01 (two-tailed test)

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Turning to the correlation matrix, all three pairs of variables are significantly and positively correlated. Specifically, the correlation between emotional attachment and consumer forgiveness is 0.52 ($p < 0.01$). Similarly, emotional attachment is positively associated with moral decoupling, with a coefficient of 0.45 ($p < 0.01$). The strongest relationship is found between moral decoupling and consumer forgiveness, where the coefficient reaches 0.60 ($p < 0.01$). Taken together, none of these correlation coefficients exceeds the conventional threshold of 0.7, indicating that multicollinearity is unlikely to be a serious concern in our data. This finding, in turn, provides a solid empirical basis for the subsequent testing of mediating effects.

4.2. Reliability and Validity Tests

We then did a reliability test. We used Cronbach's α to check the internal consistency of each scale. The results were good. For emotional attachment, α was 0.85. For moral decoupling, it was 0.82. For consumer forgiveness, it was 0.83. All of these are above the common standard of 0.7. We also looked at what happens if we delete one item. We found that no single item deletion would increase α noticeably. This shows that all items are internally consistent. So, our scales are reliable, and the data can be trusted for further analysis.Next we checked the validity of our scales. We used exploratory factor analysis (EFA). First, we tested if the data were suitable. The KMO value was 0.812, above the cutoff. Bartlett's test was significant ($\chi^2 = 1268.35$, df = 78, $p < 0.001$). So the data were good for factor analysis.

Then we extracted factors using principal component analysis with varimax rotation. We got three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. This matched our theory: emotional attachment, moral decoupling, and consumer forgiveness. They explained 68.52% of the total variance.

We also checked factor loadings. All items loaded well on their own factors, from 0.62 to 0.79, and there were no big cross-loadings. This gave us confidence. Then we calculated AVE for each construct. The AVEs were 0.62, 0.58, and 0.60, all above 0.50.

Overall, these results support the validity of our scales. Both convergent and discriminant validity were good, so our measurement was appropriate for testing the hypotheses.

4.3. Mediating Effect Test Results

4.3.1. Stepwise Regression Analysis

Following Wen Zhonglin's mediating effect test steps, three regression equations were constructed, and the results are shown in Table 7:

Table 7. Stepwise Regression Analysis Results (N=201)

Regression Equation	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	**β**	**SE**	t-value	p-value	**R^2**	Adjusted **R^2**	F-value	**VIF**
Equation 1	Y	X	0.65	0.08	8.52	0.000	0.27	0.26	72.56**	1.00
		Constant	1.20	0.35	3.43	0.001				
Equation 2	M	X	0.50	0.07	7.08	0.000	0.20	0.19	50.12**	1.00
		Constant	1.10	0.38	2.89	0.004				
Equation 3	Y	X	0.30	0.09	3.33	0.001	0.42	0.41	71.89**	1.22
		M	0.70	0.08	8.75	0.000				1.22
		Constant	0.80	0.32	2.50	0.013				

Note: X = Emotional attachment, Y = Consumer forgiveness, M = Moral decoupling; **$p<0.01$; VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) < 2, indicating no multicollinearity; Standard errors are robust standard errors.

Equation 1: In the first step, we set consumer forgiveness as the dependent variable and emotional attachment as the independent variable. The result showed a positive coefficient of

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0.65 ($p < 0.001$). The model's R^2 was 0.27, and the F-test was also significant. This means that emotional attachment alone explains about 27% of the variance in forgiveness. So H1 is supported.

Equation 2: In the second step, we used moral decoupling as the dependent variable and emotional attachment as the independent variable. Again, emotional attachment had a significant positive effect, with $\beta = 0.50$ ($p < 0.001$). The R^2 was 0.20, and the F-test was significant. In other words, emotional attachment explains roughly one-fifth of the variance in moral decoupling. Thus H2 is supported.

Equation 3: In the final step, we put both emotional attachment and moral decoupling into the model to predict consumer forgiveness. After controlling for emotional attachment, moral decoupling still had a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$). At the same time, the direct effect of emotional attachment dropped from 0.65 in Equation 1 to 0.30 in this model ($p < 0.01$). The model's R^2 increased from 0.27 to 0.42, meaning that adding moral decoupling improved our prediction of consumer forgiveness. Taken together, these results show that moral decoupling partially mediates the relationship between emotional attachment and consumer forgiveness. H3 is therefore supported.

4.3.2. Bootstrap Mediating Effect Test

To verify the robustness of the mediating effect, the PROCESS macro (Model 4) was used for Bootstrap testing (sampling times = 5000), and the results are shown in Table 8:

Table 8. Bootstrap Mediating Effect Test Results (N=201)

Effect Type	Effect Value	BootSE	95% Confidence Interval (CI)	Significance	Effect Ratio (%)
Total Effect	0.65	0.07	[0.51,0.79]	Yes	100.00
Direct Effect	0.30	0.09	[0.12,0.48]	Yes	46.15
Indirect Effect (M)	0.35	0.06	[0.22,0.49]	Yes	53.85

We used the Bootstrap method to test the mediating effect more formally. We got several key results.

First, the indirect effect through moral decoupling was 0.35. We used the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval to check significance. The interval was [0.22, 0.49], and it did not include zero. So the indirect path was significant.

Second, we looked at the direct effect. After adding the mediator, the direct path from emotional attachment to consumer forgiveness was still significant, with a 95% CI of [0.12, 0.48], also not including zero.

We also calculated the proportion of the total effect that was mediated. The indirect effect accounted for 53.85% of the total. In other words, more than half of the total effect of emotional attachment on forgiveness worked through moral decoupling.

Overall, these results are consistent with our earlier regression findings. They further confirm that moral decoupling partially mediates the relationship between emotional attachment and consumer forgiveness. So H4 is supported.

5. Research Results and Conclusion

5.1. Research Results

This research collected survey data from 201 luxury-brand consumers. Multiple analytical approaches, including correlation analysis, stepwise regression and Bootstrap testing, were

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applied to verify the proposed model. The core objective was to examine whether moral decoupling acts as a mediator between emotional attachment and consumer forgiveness. The major results are summarised below.

Emotional attachment exerts a significant positive impact on consumer forgiveness. In short, the stronger consumers' emotional connection to a luxury brand, the more inclined they are to forgive the brand.

Emotional attachment can positively predict moral decoupling. Consumers with stronger brand attachment tend to distinguish the brand's ethical conduct and product value. By focusing on product quality, they declined the bad influence caused by the brand's moral violations.

Moral decoupling itself has a significant positive effect on consumer forgiveness. Consumers adopting this cognitive strategy are more likely to disregard the brand's bad behaviour, and such mental adjustment alleviates the psychological discomfort triggered by ethical conflicts.

Lastly, mediation analysis confirms that moral decoupling partially impact between emotional attachment and consumer forgiveness. That is, emotional attachment functions via two pathways: the direct effect accounts for 46.15% , while the indirect effect makes up 53.85%. Since the indirect effect outweighs the direct one, moral decoupling serves as a crucial mechanism through which emotional attachment drives consumer forgiveness.

5.2. Research Conclusion

Brands should build emotional bonds with consumers. They can use personalized services, brand stories, and exclusive member benefits. These methods strengthen consumers' sense of belonging. This helps brands respond to crises.

In the long run, brands should balance emotional marketing and moral responsibilities. If they rely too much on consumers' emotional attachment and moral decoupling, their long-term reputation may suffer. To avoid moral crises, brands should truly integrate sustainable development into their production. This way, they can achieve long-term win-win results with consumers.

However this study has some limitations. First, we used not too much data. Future research could use longitudinal designs. Researchers could collect data before and after brand crises. This would help test becomes better.

Second, our sample only includes luxury consumers. So we should be careful when generalizing the findings. The results may not apply to every consumer goods or service brands.

Third, we did not examine moderating variables. These include brand reputation, consumer environmental awareness, and crisis severity. Future studies could add these variables.

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