



Consumer Moral Reputation Toward the Affected Company During a Company Culpable Product Harm Crisis: How Gender and Culture Matter?

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Abstract

Despite large body of research on product harm crisis, wide spreading of crises in the market place induce the study to scrutinize this burning issue through a new empirical angle. The main purpose of this study is to investigate how culture and gender shape consumers' moral reputation toward the troubled company during a company culpable crisis. A questionnaire containing a hypothetical crisis scenario was distributed among 200 Chinese and Sri Lankan respondents. ANOVA revealed a detrimental effect of crisis on consumers' moral reputation toward the affected company. Gender further triggers this link, when combines with culture. However, detrimental moral reputation toward the troubled company is comparatively lower with respect to male respondents and Chinese culture. This study provides useful theoretical and managerial implications and future research directions for a sustainable marketing environment.

Keywords: culture; gender; moral reputation; product harm crisis; uncertainty avoidance

1. Introduction

Product harm crises are negative, unexpected ethical situations that are grounded by consumers' ethical beliefs (Vassilikopoulou *et al.*, 2011). Even though past scholars recognized the ethical nature of crises (Hagan & JoLong, 2005) and consumers' moral perceptions attached to crises (Weiner, 1986), to the best of our knowledge, not a single research has addressed yet the consequences of product harm crises on consumers' moral reputational perceptions toward the troubled company. Moreover, despite a growing interest in cultural difference in consumer behavior, yet a handful studies on product harm crises have focused on consumer perceptions in a cross cultural perspective (See Taylor, 2000; Laufer and Coombs, 2006). Another neglected area concerns the unique cultural features of emerging markets. Evidence suggested that level of economic development influences the aspirations and goals of consumers (Sinha, 1994). Indeed, China and Sri Lanka have emerging markets with open economies (Das, 2004). Even though the Asian emerging economies should be given the great concern as well, majority of consumer behavior studies have been based on American and European context with paying very little attention to Asian consumers' voices. Hence, past literature has hardly documented the Asian consumers' voice during crises in particular with respect to Asian emerging markets. Moreover, based on crises history, consumers in these two economies, i.e., China and Sri Lanka have totally different experiences regarding product harm crises. Therefore, investigation of Chinese and Sri Lankan consumers' moral perceptions toward the affected company in crises is vital to capture Asian views in a global market environment, which remains as an unexploited area yet. Hence, the applicability of most of the existing theories in the Asian setting is questionable. Therefore, the present study selected two Asian cultures; Chins and Sri Lanka for the investigation.

Past scholars have documented how culture and gender shape consumer perceptions in a product harm crisis (Laufer & Coombs, 2006; Taylor, 2000). Moreover, past scholars have recognized the attachment of consumers' ethical beliefs to product harm crises (Vassilikopoulou et al., 2011). However, it is noteworthy that despite the recognition of pivotal role of gender and culture in consumer behavior, to the best of our knowledge, not a single research in the domain of product harm crisis has examined the interactions of gender, culture and consumers' moral perceptions in product harm crises. Therefore, this study tries to address these gaps in the existing literature. The main purpose of current study is to uncover how gender and culture shape consumers' moral perceptions toward the troubled company in a company culpable product harm crisis, with special reference to Chinese and Sri Lankan respondents.

2. Theoretical background

Product harm crises are defined as well – publicized incidences wherein products are found to be defective or dangerous (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994). Weiner (1979) has noted the placement of a causal attribution in terms of causal dimensions vary greatly from person to person, as well as from situation to situation implying the importance of a cross-cultural study in the face of a product harm crisis. Kotler (2005) showed that consumer perceptions vary based on their demographics. A large body of literature suggested that different beliefs, value orientations, and perceptions are influenced by individual differences in attribution thinking and cross-cultural orientation (Betancourt *et al.*, 1992; Fletcher & Ward, 1988; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). Taylor (2000) noted the difference between high and low uncertainty avoidance countries' reactions to the Coca-Cola product harm crisis in Belgium in 1999. Therefore, it is well accepted phenomenon that consumer perceptions vary across cultures in a product harm crisis domain (Laufer & Coombs, 2006; Taylor, 2000) and in other domains (McBride, & Gonzalez, 2005; Sorrentino *et al.*, 2013) as well. Moreover, in the corporate social responsibility domain, Chapple and Moon (2005) showed the variation of consumer perception among Asian countries mainly due to their respective national business systems. By using these different concepts, past scholars showed that the existence of perceptual variation even among Asian culture as well. Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, understanding of consumers in a same culture is important for developing conceptual frameworks that are generalizable across cultures.

Product harm has not yet become a crisis in Sri Lanka despite several incidences in the past. China has experienced with several country-originated crises according to the crises history. Melamine milk crisis was one of the dramatic examples of awful crisis faced by Chinese market recently. Moreover, out of 152 consumer products recalled by the United States Product Safety Commission since January 2007, 104 were made in China (Roth *et al.*, 2008). In 2008, out of the 86 consumer products recalled in the UK, 72% or 62 of these products were made in China (Rapex, 2009). Hence, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first study of comparing two Asian countries; Sri Lanka and China where consumers' perceptions related to product harm crises can drastically be vary based on their experience. Moreover, this is the first study capturing Sri Lankan consumers' view in a product harm crisis context.

In terms of cultural differences, Hofstede (1997) showed four dimensions by which countries could be differentiated. As study concerns product harm crisis, discussion related to the uncertainty avoidance dimension will yield fruitful results, out of other three: namely, power distance, individualism- collectivism, and masculinity-femininity (Hofstede, 1997). The uncertainty nature of crises motivates the study to consider this dimension. Crises can hit a company at anytime, regardless of the size of the company or where it operates in the world. Hofstede (1997, p.263) defined uncertainty avoidance as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations”. According to that dimension, Hofstede (1997) classified Greece, Belgium, Japan, Russia Germany, etc. as high uncertainty avoidance countries, while Singapore, USA, UK, China, India, etc. as low uncertainty avoidance countries, along with their respective Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI). Evidence showed that people from high uncertainty avoidance countries are more risk averse and react more strongly to a product harm crisis while making stronger attributions of responsibility to the company than people from countries that rank lower on this cultural dimension (Taylor,

2000). Unfortunately, Hofstede did not provide UAI for Sri Lanka. However, the current study assumes that the consumers in these two cultures react differently in the face of a product harm crisis. Product harm crisis causes negative effects on the reputational status of the affected company (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994). In addition, past scholars recognized that in an occurrence of a negative incident due to a controllable cause, the observer evaluates the event based on his moral beliefs and thoughts (Weiner, 1986). Moral thought reflects ethics and one's moral reputation may be something too important to be entrusted just to one's moral sense (Sperber & Baumard, 2012). As such, perceptions of product harmfulness and target vulnerability have an effect on publics' judgments of the ethics of the strategy (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997) which in turn perhaps reflect their moral perceptions. Therefore,

H₁: Crisis has a detrimental effect on consumers' moral reputation toward the troubled company.

However, the detrimental effect toward the troubled company is expected to be lower with respect to Chinese than Sri Lankans.

Gender is one of the most important categorization in consumer behavior. Kotler (2005) documented the importance of gender as one of the most popular means of segmentation, which represents a group of consumers who share a similar set of needs. Harris and Miller (2000) showed that women view threatening events as more severe than men, due to biological and socialization factors. Moreover, in a product harm crisis context, Laufer and Gillespie (2004) found that women blame company more than men after reading about the product harm crisis because they feel more personally vulnerable to a similar crisis occurring to them. In addition, Laufer and Coombs (2006) showed that women, more than men blame the companies for the product harm crisis. These empirical evidences motivate current study to hypothesize that female may more disrepute the company than their male counterparts to crises motivate current study to h in a product harm crisis. Therefore, as afore mentioned, consumers' moral perceptions attached to crises and the detrimental reputational status adhered with crises motivate current study to hypothesize,

H₂: Female consumers will exhibit lower moral reputation toward the affected company than male in a company culpable crisis

3. Methodology

An experimental survey was carried out in October, 2012 in Sri Lanka and in November, 2012 in China. A self administrated, pre-tested questionnaire survey was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses. The study used a fictitious product harm crisis scenario to highlight the company culpable (where the locus of the crisis is company, stable and controllable by the company) product harm crises situation related to a fictitious yogurt brand. In the control condition, no crisis information was given. Experimental condition preferred as experimental researches are essential to build evidence based- knowledge for crisis management (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Moreover, Theofilou *et al.*, (2011) showed the significance of using imaginary scenarios as a valid method in crisis management research. The reason for selecting a company culpable crisis was, as Attribution theory predicts that consumers' attitudes are more likely to be negatively affected when the crisis event is perceived to be internal and controllable by the firm than when it is external and uncontrollable (Weiner, 1986) and it has been proven in a product harm crisis context (Klein & Dawar, 2004). Yogurt was selected as the product category because of the interest and familiarity of the subject population. Experimental scenario was followed by different questions to elicit perceptions of the locus, stability and controllability of the cause of the crisis event (in order to understand whether consumer correctly identified the crisis situation), and consumers' moral reputation toward the company. A fictitious brand and a fictitious crisis scenario were taken to avoid confounding effects due to consumers' potential relationships or experiences with existing brands and past product harm crisis situations (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994).

Altogether 200 undergraduate marketing specializing students participated in the survey. Total 50 un-

dergraduate university students who were studying in week-ends in marketing institutions, namely Sri Lanka Institute of Marketing (SLIM) and National Institute of Business Management (NIBM) were selected from Sri Lanka (as product harm crisis concept is uncommon in the Sri Lankan context), and 50 marketing and business specializing students were selected from Huazhong Agricultural University in China. The undergraduate students from these institutions were selected as they are familiar with product harm crisis and brand equity concepts as per their course curricula. In the control situation, no information was given about crises and 100 students from China ($n=50$) and Sri Lanka ($n=50$) were participated. Therefore, these two sets of questionnaires which contain no crisis information (control) and hypothetical product harm crisis information (experiment) were distributed randomly among 200 respondents in each country. Two versions (Chinese & English) of questionnaires were used. The convenience sampling method was preferred since questionnaire can be easily and quickly collected and respondents are more corporative (Malhotra and Peterson, 2006; Vassilikopoulou *et al.*, 2009). It is noteworthy that although, the sample seems to be convenience, the interviews were conducted randomly at different classrooms and on different days and times, in both countries in order to reduce response-bias resulting from date, time and location parameters (Vassilikopoulou *et al.*, 2011). Figure 1 schematically presents the conceptual framework of the current study.

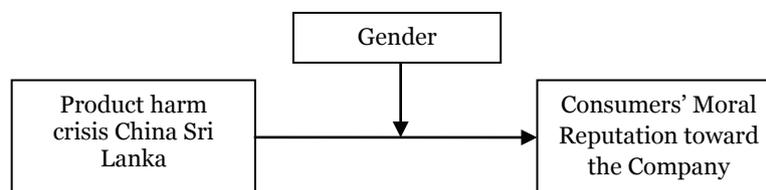


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

The survey instrument included measures of causal attributions, and consumers' moral reputation toward the affected company. Each of these constructs with measurement items, detailed in Table 1. The items used for attributions (locus, stability, controllability), and moral reputation (Zhou & Whitla, 2012), were measured with 7- point Likert scales ranging from 1= "strongly disagree" to 7= "strongly agree". Respondents rated fictitious experimental situations as, 1= "not realistic at all" and 7= "very realistic" at the end of each scenario to ensure the plausibility.

Answers for the variable, consumers' moral reputation toward the company, which stated negative questions were reversed in order to comply with the scales of the rest of the variables in the questionnaire. Factor analysis identified the validity and reliability of the different items used in each construct measured the same underlying construct (Pallant, 2008). The reliability of the scales was accessed by reliability coefficient, Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951). In case of validity analysis, Kaiser, Meyer and Olkinn (KMO) sampling criterion ($KMO > 0.5$) and the statistically significant Bartlett's sphericity criterion ($P < 0.001$) verified the adequacy of the sample. ANOVA was used to assess the research model.

4. Results and discussion

Analysis revealed that majority of the respondents in two countries recognized the locus, stability and controllability of the product harm crisis correctly as internal locus (96% Chinese and 96% Sri Lankan), stable (98% Chinese and 90% Sri Lankan) and controllable (96% Chinese and 90% Sri Lankan) which the experimental scenario needed to accentuate. In addition, majority of respondents in China (78%) and Sri Lanka (92%) stated that the experimental scenario was realistic. In addition, this provides the guarantee of the absence of fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). All the constructed items guaranteed the reliability and validity under this crisis ground (table 1).

Among Chinese respondents who took part to respond the questions based on company culpable crisis, 46 per cent were male and the mean age was 20. 80. Their net monthly family income was US\$ 813. 40. Table

2 shows the detailed characteristics of two samples of China and Sri Lanka.

Table 1: Validity and Reliability of Each Constructs with Measurement Scales-Company Culpable Crisis

Variables	Items	KMO of Sampling Adequacy		Cronbach's Alpha	
		China	SL	China	SL
		Locus	The cause is something that reflects an aspect of the company		
	The cause is something that is inside of the company	.71***	.77***	0.85	0.95
	The cause is something that is related to the company's own responsibility				
Stability	Only one item was used	-	-	-	-
Controllability	The cause is under the control of the company	.50***	.50***	0.74	0.88
	The company is responsible for the control of its own action				
MRC	Company "A" deserves little respect from me	.74***	.77***	0.9	0.95
	This event makes me disbelieving about the virtue and the values of company "A"				
	This event makes me feel that company "A" lacks integrity				

Note- Bartlett's Test of Sphericity *** $p < 0.001$, SL refers to Sri Lanka. MRC refers to consumers' moral reputation toward the affected company.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of two Samples of China and Sri Lanka

	China	SL
Gender (%)		
Male	46	40
Female	54	60
Average Age (Yrs)	20.8	24.94
Net monthly family income (US\$/month)	813.4	338.28

Study compared the consumers' moral reputation toward the affected company in the crisis situation with the control. Independent samples *t* test revealed that there was a significant difference between these two situations in China (means were 6.07 vs. 3.35 in control and in the crisis situation respectively, $t = 14.87$, $p < 0.001$) as well as in Sri Lanka (means were 5.99 vs. 2.25 in control and in the crisis situation respectively, $t = 31.33$, $p < 0.001$), Significant mean differences indicate the reduction in consumers' moral reputation toward the affected firm during a crisis.

A2 (country: China; Sri Lanka) x 2(gender: male; female) ANOVA between subject experimental design was used to test the hypotheses. Results showed that the country ($F_{1,96} = 32.93$, $P < 0.001$) and the gender ($F_{1,96} = 30.84$, $P < 0.001$) main effects were highly significant. As expected, there was a significant difference between Chinese and Sri Lankan consumers' moral reputation toward the affected company and consumers exhibited low values on the 7 point Likert scale (Means were 3.36 vs. 2.40 related to China and Sri Lanka respectively, $F_{1,96} = 32.93$, $P < 0.001$). Therefore, H1 is substantiated. Interestingly, in testing H2, ANOVA recognized the significant difference between male and female respondents' moral reputation toward the affected company. As expected, male consumers exhibited relatively higher reputation toward the affected company than their female counterparts verifying H2 (Means were 3.34 vs. 2.41 related to male and female respectively, $F_{1,96} = 30.84$, $P < 0.001$). Moreover, the interaction term (gender) x (country) was highly significant revealing the moderating effect of gender on moral reputation toward the troubled company ($F_{1,96} = 13.07$, $P < 0.001$) in these two countries, which is vital with respect to managerial decisions.

Findings of this research embellish past literature through a moral lens and add new insights into the

crisis literature. It embellishes past literature (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Klein & Dawar, 2004) stating that crisis causes detrimental effect on consumer perceptions. Moreover, it shows the cultural differences in consumer perceptions and embellishes past literature (Laufer & Coombs, 2006; Taylor, 2000) and providing an empirical evidence to the Hofstede's (1997) uncertainty avoidance cultural dimension. In addition, current study shows the gender difference in consumer perceptions in a product harm crisis embellishing past literature (Harris & Miller 2000; Laufer & Gillespie, 2004; Laufer & Coombs, 2006). Most interestingly, results showed that gender moderates the impact of culture on consumers' moral reputation toward the troubled company, when the troubled company itself is accused for a crisis. That interesting finding was not hypothesized by the study. The practical significance of this has been addressed in managerial implications.

5. Conclusions and implications

This is the first comparative study between China and Sri Lanka in a product harm crisis context which investigates the effect of gender and culture on consumers' moral perceptions toward the troubled company. Moreover, this is the first study which scrutinizes consumers' moral perception in a crisis context. Present study reveals that the culture and gender significantly shape consumers' moral reputation toward the troubled company. Detrimental effect of the crisis on consumers' moral perceptions toward the troubled company is relatively lower with respect to Chinese and male consumers.

Theoretical and managerial implications

Introduction of the link between product harm crisis and consumers' moral reputational perceptions is the key contribution of the current study to the existing product harm crisis and consumer behavior literature. Moreover, current study captures important empirical findings which help to sharpen our understanding of the application of Weiner's Attribution theory. Observers evaluate the negative event according to his moral beliefs which reflect their negative moral reputational perceptions toward the affected company. In addition, present study demonstrates the relevance of the existing theories in the Asian context as well. Most importantly, current study directs crisis managers to take managerial decisions during a company culpable crisis. Managers should take special concern of crises in their day to day business lives, as crises significantly tarnish consumers' moral reputation toward the troubled companies. This perhaps results the permanent damage to the reputation of a brand (Wix & Mone, 2007) and subsequent negative brand related implications (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000) which has been nurtured since many years. However, the degree of reduction of consumers' moral reputation toward the troubled company varies with respect to culture and gender of the consumer. As female consumers and relatively high uncertainty avoidance countries seem more morally disrepute the company than oppose, companies may need to react differently depending on the culture and whether the product is used primarily by men or women. In particular, with respect to multinational companies, companies will have to react quicker and more decisively as gender combines with culture to trigger the negative effect. Under this situation, a company should pay more attention on mitigating the crisis at the best possible way. This may be manifested, for instance, by offering an apology and explanation to consumers (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). In addition, managers should treat product harm crisis as an ethical issue and attempt to understand moral perceptions of consumers in different cultures. This is in line with the recommendation of vassilikopoulou *et al.*, (2011). Authors recommended that companies should understand the ethical beliefs of consumers. Present study suggests that culture and gender should be incorporated in the crisis management decision- making process in order to implement an effective and efficient moral building strategy.

Limitations and future research

The current study has several limitations that can seed future investigations. Main limitation of this research is the use of hypothetical scenarios that limits the generalization of the conclusions drawn from the current research. Therefore, findings related to embellish past findings may change with a real product harm crisis incidence with a real brand. Further, current study considered only one brand, from one product category,

yogurt. Therefore, these insights cannot be generalized to all other product categories in the same vein. In addition, the sample chosen which consists of both young and a single (Asian) culture further limits the generalization of findings. Laufer *et al.*, (2005) explored the differences between older and younger consumers in attributions of blame for product harm crises. Though, these limitations limit the generalization and the precision of the results obtained, based on the scope of this study and due to various practical considerations, they were not taken in to account of the current study. However, these issues remain promising avenues for future research.

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