

Effects of Companies' Responses to Consumer Criticism in Social Media

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ABSTRACT: Social media is changing the balance of power as well as the dynamics of communication between manufacturers and retailers, their brands, and consumers. In this research we examine the effects of companies' responses to consumer criticism in social media. Our findings indicate that a vulnerable response leads to more positive behavioral consequences without damaging product quality perceptions than a defensive response, and this effect is mediated by perceived appropriateness of the response. Applying the expectation-disconfirmation framework, we further identify brand personality and existing relationship strength as the moderators of consumer responses. Responding to criticism with a sense of vulnerability leads to higher perceived sincerity for more sophisticated brands than for less sophisticated brands, and responding to criticism defensively leads to higher perceived appropriateness for more perfect brands than for less perfect brands. Consumers with a stronger existing relationship with a brand perceive defensive reactions as less inappropriate than those with a weaker existing relationship. The results provide guidance to brands on how to interact with their customers, especially when a crisis occurs.

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES: Brand personality, expectation-disconfirmation theory, relationship strength, social media.

Social media, which is defined as a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content [33], has changed the balance of power between firms and consumers and significantly influences customer relationships [29]. It empowers consumers along multiple dimensions: technological, economic, social, and legal [35]. Consumers now create new meanings and values about products and brands in social media that are beyond the control of companies. According to Zwass [59], Internet and social media have provided a channel for collective expression of sentiment. What used to be communication between one customer and a firm—for instance, a complaint—can now easily be published in social media and attract the attention of hundreds and even thousands of existing and potential customers [7].

Numerous incidents have showcased such consumer power. In 2005, disappointed with Dell's customer service, blogger Jarvis coined the term "Dell Hell" in his blogs, which brought Dell national embarrassment. A video of a Comcast technician sleeping on a customer's couch posted in 2006 has been viewed more than 1 million times and greatly damaged Comcast's reputation for customer service. In 2007, a YouTube video "PS3 song," written by a fan who was disappointed with the newly released Sony PS3, was viewed more than 7 million times and generated more than 140,000 comments. More recently, in 2010, Greenpeace's YouTube video attacking Nestlé's use of palm oil in its products and the oil's link to rainforest destruction spurred a hot debate on Nestlé's Facebook fan page.

These incidents are not rare. According to the consulting company Oxford Metrica, companies today have an 82 percent chance of facing a corporate

disaster within any five-year period, compared to only a 20 percent chance two decades ago. This is largely due to the Internet and social media, which allow bad news to spread rapidly. The impact of such media-amplified brand crisis affects brand trust and customer relationships more than the impact of the issue (e.g., product harm) itself [57].

Consumer complaints and discontent damage companies' reputation and dampen consumers' purchase intentions [4, 58]. However, dissatisfied customers, once persuaded to stay with the company or brand, are thereafter more loyal and are likely to generate positive word of mouth [31, 45]. Researchers have recognized the importance of "defensive" marketing, which is marketing strategy and effort aimed at reducing customer turnover [21, 22]. In the traditional context of consumer complaints, companies usually focus on the particular incident and resolve the incident by offering an apology and/or compensation. Defensive marketing is usually reactive in nature, with the goal of preventing legal problems [47] or consumer switching. Although some researchers have advocated a more proactive approach through offensive marketing and encouraging consumers to "voice" their discontent [18], defensive marketing is typically distinguished from "offensive" marketing, which focuses on branding, promotion, and new customer acquisition. In offensive marketing, companies use a variety of media to communicate product or service information to their prospective consumers and build brand image.

In the age of social media, in which consumer complaints and discontent are brought to public attention and witnessed by many consumers, companies' handling of such complaints and discontent also has a direct impact on the companies' reputation, their brand images, and consumers' behavioral intentions. In other words, social media offers a platform for both defensive and offensive strategies. At the same time, social media provides both challenges and opportunities for firms. Our research suggests that companies can use consumer criticism both proactively in their offensive marketing communication and reactively in their defensive marketing by responding to consumer criticism in a way that enhances company image and positive consumer behavior intentions.

How companies react to public complaints, negative incidents, and criticism is crucial in building and maintaining a good product, a positive corporate brand name, and strong relationships with their customers [26]. Should companies admit their brands' defects? Should they apologize? Or should they fend off the accusation? Will admitting the problems tarnish consumer perceptions of brands' quality? These are the key questions we investigate in this research. We use two studies to examine both the voluntary proactive use of consumer criticism and the reactive response to consumer criticism. We propose that the appropriateness of a brand's reaction to consumer criticism is crucial to consumers' ongoing relationship with the brand. Consumers who witness an incident assess the appropriateness of the brand's reaction based on the reaction itself, the brand's personality, and brand's existing relationship with its customers. In this paper, we examine consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses to companies' reactions to criticism in online social media and the moderating roles of brand personality and the existing brand relationship.

Response to Consumer Criticism: Defensive or Vulnerable?

Branding is a focal marketing activity for most firms. In communicating their brands to the target consumers, firms typically demonstrate brand strengths and values offered to consumers through offensive marketing activities such as advertising and promotions. Do brands have weaknesses? Maybe, but they are not designed to have those weaknesses and certainly do not want them to be publicized. However, in the age of social media, weaknesses or defects are hard to hide. The power shift between firms and consumers naturally influences brand–consumer communication as well as companies' branding efforts. Instead of the traditional one-way and one-to-many communication patterns, multiway and many-to-many communication takes over. Rather than being the dominating center of the communication, brand is merely a member in the flat-networked world of consumer consumption experiences. Consumers communicate with one another, interpret brands in their own ways, and create new brand meanings.

Although the Internet and social media are relatively new, research has examined how companies respond to negative incidents and crises in general [26]. The impression management literature describes five types of responses that companies may take: confession, excuse, justification, denial, or silence [11, 39, 49]. Denial and confession, considered the two extremes of response, have been studied most often (e.g., [32]). Denial represents the company's attempt to shift blame as far from itself as possible, and confession embodies the acceptance of blame.

Similar to the way companies react to crisis, two typical reactions to consumer criticism in social media are observed. One is to fend off the accusation, deny the flaw, and try to protect the brand image, which we refer to as the defensive reaction. The other is to admit a possible defect and apologize, which we refer to as the vulnerable reaction. Should brands be defensive or be vulnerable when criticized? It is easy to be defensive, since every company prefers and strives to keep its brands intact. Moreover, research suggests that accepting responsibility by confessing to wrongdoing may contribute to a higher level of perceived responsibility and therefore lower positive attitude and purchase intentions [32]. However, we propose that being vulnerable is more effective in building consumer–brand relationships, because vulnerability conveys sincerity and respect for consumers and may be perceived to be more appropriate.

Sincerity is important in how we see ourselves and others in social interactions and is an important element in communication. Perceived sincerity is an important component in building trust [34]. Sincerity is also an important element of effective communication [6] and is valued in speech, communication, and in expression generally because it is the closest people can get to the genuine state of mind of the person they are communicating with [41]. Research shows that confession can help soften the negative emotions associated with a negative incident [32]. This outcome is also consistent with research on complaint handling, which suggests that accepting responsibility for a problem results in the most favorable pattern of complainant reactions, whereas excuses lead to the most negative reactions [10, 17].

Vulnerability means being open to attack or damage. It means having one's guard down, being open to censure and accepting of criticism. Vulnerability is often seen as a weakness and is rarely considered a good tactic for brand building. Instead, consumers are accustomed to brand claims that are embellished and exaggerated. However, psychology and social relationship literature suggests that vulnerability is crucial in relationship building [10]. In fact, vulnerability is regarded as a necessary element for instilling trust [40]. People seeking to build trust must be willing to make themselves vulnerable by disclosing their weaknesses. By doing so, they risk losing something important to them and rely on the persons they trust not to exploit their vulnerability. Without the willingness and ability to be vulnerable, one simply cannot build deep and lasting relationships—in life or in business—customer relationships [40].

Although companies usually show vulnerability in complaint handling by admitting their mistakes and apologizing [45], showing vulnerability publicly may bear a higher risk of losing control of brand image and being exploited. However, brands that are genuinely transparent and honest demonstrate their confidence and self-esteem by allowing consumers to see them as they really are. In return, they gain consumers' trust and further strengthen their relationships with consumers. Therefore, vulnerability can actually be a sign of strength by communicating sincerity and building trust. Hence, we propose that consumers perceive brands that allow themselves to be vulnerable by admitting their weakness and accepting criticism as more sincere than those brands that are defensive.

***Hypothesis 1:** A vulnerable response to consumer criticism is perceived to be more sincere than a defensive response.*

In addition, being defensive may evoke perceptions of disrespect. Respect is an attitudinal disposition toward a close-relationship partner who is trustworthy, considerate, and accepting, and this conception holds across a variety of close relationships [25]. Markman et al. [38] described respect as one of the four core values in close relationships, along with commitment, intimacy, and forgiveness. One person's respect for another generates respect in return, which deepens security and increases mutual trust [37]. Making consumers feel respected is also an important component of good brand partnership quality [24]. Frei and Shaver [25] found that listening and being accepting, open, and receptive are salient features of respect. Hence, when a brand refuses to listen to its customers and acts defensively, it signals the brand's arrogance and disrespect to its customers. Incidents that have occurred in the real world seem to demonstrate this customer perception. For example, when Dell responded to customers who posted videos of Dell battery defects with threats of legal action, consumer resentment roared and did not subside until Dell apologized. In contrast, when Dell later made fundamental changes by creating Direct2Dell with its own bloggers who admitted the company's problems and started to communicate with consumers, it showed respect to customers and gained other bloggers' and customers' respect in return. Similarly, when consumers criticized Nestlé's business practices on Facebook, Nestlé initially

used a dogmatic approach and claimed that any comments using an altered Nestlé logo would be deleted. When consumers reacted, Nestlé's Facebook moderator responded that "it's our page, we set the rules, it was ever thus." Nestlé's response to the criticism evoked even more discontent than the original criticism of its business practices. Dell's and Nestlé's initial responses violated consumers' expectation of mutual respect. We propose that just as individuals do not like arrogant people, when a brand communicates with its customers in a defensive way, it is perceived as disrespectful.

Hypothesis 2: A defensive response is perceived as less respectful than a vulnerable response.

Perceived Appropriateness of the Response

Whereas a vulnerable response admits weakness but conveys more sincerity, a defensive response fends off the accusation but is considered less respectful. But which response is perceived as more appropriate, and under what conditions? The expectation–disconfirmation theory has been widely adopted in consumer behavior research in examining consumer evaluation of various events, especially customer satisfaction [43, 44]. In general, expectations create a frame of reference to which actual behaviors or outcomes are compared. People use this comparison to evaluate the attractiveness and desirability of products, services, people's behaviors, events, and so on. When performance or outcome meets or exceeds consumers' expectations (i.e., confirmation or positive disconfirmation), evaluation is positive or satisfied. When performance is below consumers' expectations (i.e., negative disconfirmation), evaluation is negative or dissatisfied. We propose that this general framework can be adopted to examine consumers' evaluation of companies' response to criticism. When the communication tactics used deviate from expectations, people experience stress and negative emotions [5, 12]. When communication meets consumers' expectations, the response is perceived as appropriate.

Although the mechanism of the expectation–disconfirmation theory is simple, complexity occurs in the formation of expectations. Expectations are associated with various standards [48], and debates have arisen about what standards are used to form expectations. Spreng et al. [51] suggested that a natural interpretation of expectations is consumers' realistic evaluation (i.e., prediction). Woodruff et al. [54] argued that consumers are more likely to rely on what they believe the brand *should* deliver as the standard. Spreng et al. [51] further proposed to separate the use of predictive expectations (i.e., what *will* be delivered) from those derived from desires, industry norms, or best brands (i.e., what *should* be delivered). More recently, Santos and Boote [48] summarized the literature on the expectation–disconfirmation theory and indicated that consumers do not possess just one standard of how well a product or service will perform. Rather, they have, and use, a set of standards ranging from ideal, normative (*should*), desired (*want*), and predicted (*will*), to minimum tolerable (*adequate*), intolerable, and worst imaginable in the process of forming their overall expectations.

In our research context, we propose that consumer expectations shape consumers' evaluation of companies' responses, and that multiple standards are at work in forming these expectations. First, social norms in interpersonal communication provide a normative standard and form consumers' expectation of the way the company *should* react to criticism. Research shows that people expect communication partners to exhibit sincerity and respect, among other characteristics [6, 56]. Baker and Martinson [6] outlined five principles of ethical communication: truthfulness, authenticity (sincerity), respect, equity, and social responsibility. Treating people with dignity, respect, and sincerity is an effective means and accepted norm of communication that helps to alleviate negative feelings such as perception of unfairness [9]. Consumers expect brands to communicate with them sincerely and with respect [7]; hence, a vulnerable response is perceived as more appropriate than a defensive response.

Hypothesis 3: A vulnerable response to consumer criticism is perceived to be more appropriate than a defensive response.

Moderating Role of Brand Personality

Vulnerable responses are perceived as more appropriate because they fit consumers' expectation of how brands *should* behave in communicating with their customers in general, but we propose that brand-specific characteristics further provide a predictive standard—how consumers expect a certain brand *will* react to criticism. In other words, we expect the effect hypothesized in H3 to be moderated by additional brand-specific factors. Psychology research has indicated that personalities influence attitude and behaviors [4], and relationships are influenced by the personalities of the partners involved [46]. People form expectations of other people's attitude and behaviors based on the personalities of the other people. Hence, consumers may modify their expectations of a brand's response to criticism based on the brand's personality.

Brand personality is defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand [1]. These tend to be *positive* traits that firms would like to have consumers associate with their brands. For example, Pepsi is perceived as young, exciting, and hip, whereas Coca-Cola is perceived to be cool and traditional [1]. Conducting a series of studies, Aaker [1] classified various brand personalities into five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Sincerity is described as being honest, wholesome, cheerful, and down-to-earth and is typified by brands such as Hallmark cards. Excitement is portrayed as being daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date and is typified by brands such as the MTV channel. Competence refers to a personality characterized as reliable, intelligent, and successful and is typified by brands such as the *Wall Street Journal*. Sophistication refers to brands that are upper class and charming such as Mercedes Benz. Finally, ruggedness refers to brands that are outdoorsy and tough such as Harley-Davidson [1]. Although Aaker's [1] model of five-dimension brand personality is widely adopted, it does not necessarily exclude other additional personality dimensions.

We propose that different brand personalities help consumers to form predictions of how a brand *will* respond, hence influencing evaluations of the response. When the *will* expectation coincides with the *should* expectation, no moderating effect will occur. When the *will* expectation deviates from the *should* expectation, consumers will adjust their overall evaluations, and hence moderating effects will occur. Specifically, when the brand responds with vulnerability, the gap (i.e., based on prior knowledge of the brand, consumers predict that this brand will not) lowers the overall expectation and will create a pleasant surprise due to increased positive disconfirmation. When the brand responds with defensiveness, however, the gap (i.e., the brand *should not* be defensive but it *will* be anyway) lowers the expectation and enhances tolerance due to reduced negative disconfirmation. Some evidence in the literature provides support for such moderating effects. For example, research has shown that sincere brands suffer greater damage when transgressions occur [2], and a company with a good reputation actually suffers more when it responds to negative publicity inappropriately [19]. Presumably, consumers hold a more stringent standard and are less tolerant of the negative incident for sincere brands or companies with good reputations because these companies are both expected and predicted to meet the higher standard.

Not all brand personality dimensions, however, produce a moderating effect. To moderate the expectation of how brands should react to a criticism, the focal brand personality dimensions need to be those related to the area of criticism. For example, competence aligns with consumers' expectations of criticism related to quality. So does sophistication, which is usually supported with solid product quality. However, ruggedness and excitement are not relevant to quality expectations, and sincerity does not provide quality inferences either, so we do not expect these dimensions to moderate consumer expectations and reactions. Since our empirical studies involve quality issues as the criticism, we focus on the dimensions of sophistication and competence in developing our hypotheses.

While brands are expected to respond with vulnerability to demonstrate their sincerity, sophisticated brands are perceived to be classy, upscale, and of higher quality; therefore, they are predicted to react more arrogantly. The gap between the predicted behavior (*will not*) and the desired behavior (*should*) will moderate consumers' overall expectations. In other words, consumers will lower their standard and hold a less stringent expectation for sophisticated brands to demonstrate vulnerability. And when the sophisticated brands indeed respond to a criticism with vulnerability, it provides a pleasant surprise and produces positive disconfirmation, which will elicit a higher level of perceived sincerity than would be the case for less sophisticated brands.

Hypothesis 4: *Responding to criticism with vulnerability leads to higher perceived sincerity for more sophisticated brands than it does for less sophisticated brands.*

However, while brands should not be defensive when their product quality is questioned, this expectation may be moderated by whether consumers

perceive the brand to be extremely competent and predict it will behave otherwise. Aaker [1] indicated that although brand personality is similar to human personality in many respects, there are dimensions that individuals desire but do not necessarily have, such as sophistication. We reason that these extreme dimensions are more likely to induce moderating effects by creating the gap between prediction of how a brand will react (e.g., brand-specific characteristics and expectations) and how brand in general should react (i.e., normative expectations). To include an extreme form of competence, we identified the dimension of perfection, which is a state of flawlessness that perfectionists desire and try to achieve [27]. Perfectionism is considered one of the human personality factors and an extreme state of conscientiousness [14]. In the context of brand personality, Aaker [1] suggested that the competence dimension aligns with conscientiousness, both of which tap into responsibility, dependability, and security. Therefore, perfection can be an extreme state of competence. A perfect brand is described as ideal, unblemished, and unlikely to make mistakes. While competence is “human,” perfection is beyond human capacity. No one is perfect, but companies always try to craft their brands as perfect. We propose that perfection moderates consumers’ reactions to companies’ response to criticism.

Although a defensive response is considered less appropriate than a vulnerable response in general (i.e., *should not*), consumers may perceive that perfect brands are extremely competent, have good reasons to defend themselves, and therefore are more likely to do so (i.e., *will*). The gap between the *will* and *should not* standard will moderate consumers’ overall expectations, reducing the size of negative disconfirmation. In other words, we expect that consumers will give the perfect brand the benefit of the doubt and be more tolerant when the “perfect” brand takes a more defensive stance. Hence,

Hypothesis 5: Responding to criticism defensively leads to higher perceived appropriateness for more perfect brands than for less perfect brands.

Moderating Role of Relationship Strength

Finally, we propose that customer relationship strength with the brand will moderate consumers’ reactions to companies’ response by influencing the standard of tolerance [48]. Research has established the concept of brands as relationship partners [24]. The concept of relationship strength broadly defines the durability and significance of the relationship [2] and is usually described by indicators such as levels of trust, commitment, satisfaction, connection, and intimacy [25, 42]. Relationship strength is developed through ongoing brand–customer interactions as well as consumers’ brand consumption experiences. It forms the grounds on which consumers interact with the company. In addition to communication norms and brand personality, we expect that consumers’ existing relationship strength with the brand will influence their perception of the appropriateness of the responses to criticism. When the brand behaves as it *should*, the existing relationship may not make a difference because the brand is predicted to behave like that anyway, but when the brand behaves

as it *should not*, relationship strength may moderate consumer perceptions by increasing the standard of tolerance. Research in similar contexts provides support for this buffering effect of relationship strength. For example, Ahluwalia et al. [3] examined existing customers' responses to negative word of mouth and showed that customers exhibit a different level of attitude change in response to negative publicity depending on their former relationship with the company. Those who have a positive relationship with the company exhibit a smaller attitude change when they are exposed to negative publicity. Consumers' prior positive relationship with the company helps them feel less troubled when encountering a negative incident. They are therefore more tolerant of the transgression [3, 52]. Hence, we predict that when the brand responds to consumers' criticism defensively, consumers with a strong relationship with the brand will perceive the response as less inappropriate than those with a weaker brand relationship.

***Hypothesis 6:** Consumers with a stronger existing relationship with the brand will perceive defensive reactions as less inappropriate than those with a weaker existing relationship.*

Attitudinal and Behavioral Consequences of Vulnerability

Research has indicated that the way companies respond to consumers' complaints and criticisms influences consumer satisfaction as well as repurchase intentions. In the context of social media, when consumers perceive that the brand acted inappropriately, they will exercise their power. For example, on the Nestlé Facebook fan page, one customer wrote, "I was a big fan of your products, but now, when I saw what you guys wrote, I think I'm gonna stop buying them." Some other fans said they would stop being fans. On the other hand, an appropriate response will reinforce positive attitude, help to strengthen the brand relationship with its customers, and lead to positive behavioral intentions. A strong brand relationship is reflected in customer loyalty, which is defined as a buyer's overall attachment or deep commitment to a product, service, brand, or organization [43]. It represents an enduring desire to be in a valued relationship [42]. Customer loyalty manifests itself in behaviors and behavioral intentions. The literature suggests that the most common behaviors generated by loyalty are repeatedly patronizing the provider and recommending the service provider to other customers [20, 36]. We predict that, compared to a defensive response, a vulnerable response will lead to higher satisfaction, purchase intention, and positive word of mouth.

***Hypothesis 7:** A vulnerable response leads to higher (a) satisfaction, (b) purchase intention, and (c) positive word of mouth than a defensive response.*

Research further shows that a good image developed from successful conflict resolution can influence the behavior of the company's current and even potential customers when the resolution of the conflict becomes known [15]. In the context of social media, while the criticism usually starts with one customer

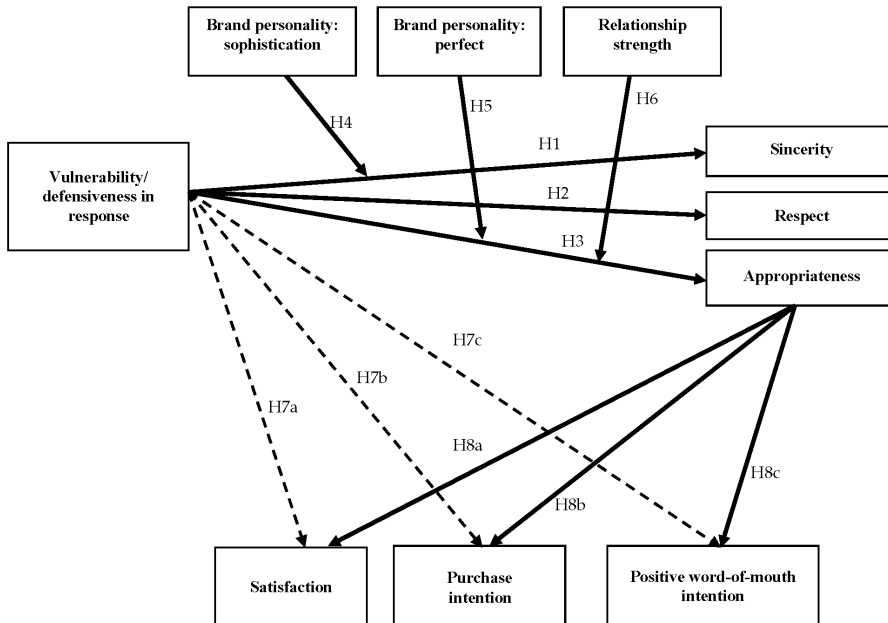


Figure 1. Overall Conceptual Model

or a small group of customers on product-related issues (e.g., quality), the impact goes beyond and could involve the attitude and behavior intentions of a much larger group of customers who witnessed the conflict and the resolution. For these customers, who are the focus of our research, it is not only the issue itself, but also how companies and brands react to the criticism that influences these consumers' subsequent attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, the effects hypothesized above are expected to be at least partially mediated by perceived appropriateness of the response.

***Hypothesis 8:** The effects of different responses are mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the response.*

Overall, in this research we examine two different types of brand responses to consumer criticism in online social media. Hypotheses are organized and illustrated in the model presented in Figure 1. We propose that consumers develop different perceptions about the brand response in terms of its sincerity, respectfulness, and appropriateness. These perceptions are moderated by certain dimensions of brand personality and relationship strength. In addition, a vulnerable response leads to more positive attitude and behavioral intentions, and this effect is mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the response. While a vulnerable response leads to more positive impact, a related concern is whether being vulnerable will lead to perceived incompetence. We suggest that this may not be a serious concern. Considerable research in service recovery suggests that the response to service failure, and not the service failure itself,

is of critical importance to relationship development [28]. In other words, how the brand handles the negative incident is more important than the incident itself in determining whether consumers will forgive the brand. The Dell and Nestlé cases also support this argument. Hence, we expect that being vulnerable and admitting and accepting the imperfection will not sacrifice consumers' perception of product quality. Next, we present two studies that examine the impact of different response styles.

Empirical Studies

As we suggested, social media offers a context in which a company's offensive and defensive marketing strategies can be integrated. On the one hand, a brand can proactively react to consumers' criticisms voluntarily, incorporating vulnerability in its offensive marketing. On the other hand, the brand can reactively respond to consumers' criticisms when pressed. We conducted two studies using two different contexts. Study 1 involves a naturally occurring event in which a brand reveals vulnerability in brand building. The study is exploratory in nature. Study 2 is in the context of consumer criticism of product quality in social media, where the brand has to respond as in defensive marketing. We designed an experiment by manipulating different responses and testing specific hypotheses.

Study 1

Study 1 used Domino's Pizza's Turnaround campaign as the context in which a firm voluntarily shows vulnerability in its offensive marketing. Domino's launched the Turnaround campaign in December 2009 with TV ads, which further led to a 4.5-minute video posted on its Web site as well as on YouTube. In the video, Domino's shows consumers' criticisms of their pizza, acknowledges the defects, and promises improvements with new materials and recipes. Soon after the campaign was launched, we conducted Study 1. Fifty-one students from a Northeastern college were recruited. They were first asked their attitude and their perceptions about the trustworthiness of the brand and the quality of Domino's Pizza. They were also asked about their frequency of consumption of Domino's products. Attitude was measured using four items on a semantic differential scale: good/bad, positive/negative, favorable/unfavorable, and pleasant/unpleasant ($\alpha = 0.98$). Trustworthiness was measured using another four items: trustworthy/untrustworthy, honest/dishonest, transparent/opaque, and sincere/insincere ($\alpha = 0.92$). Perceived quality was measured using three items: good/bad, tastes delicious/tastes bad, and good quality/bad quality ($\alpha = .97$). Next, students watched the 4.5-minute campaign video that Domino's posted on YouTube. After watching the video, they were again asked their attitude and perceptions of trustworthiness using the same scales. We also asked about their intention to buy Domino's Pizza (1 to 7 on a Likert scale). An open-ended question was used to elicit their thoughts about the campaign.

Among the participants, 34 percent had heard or seen the campaign (the 15-second commercial but not the extensive 4.5-minute video). The study was conducted soon after the campaign was launched, and participants were specifically told to answer the first part of the questions based on their perceptions before they watched the campaign. Analysis showed no significant differences between those who had heard or seen the campaign and those who had not on the key dependent measures, so they were analyzed together. Results show that the video led to positive attitude change (after-before) ($t(50) = 7.13, p < 0.001$) and a higher perceived trustworthiness ($t(50) = 6.62, p < 0.001$). Interestingly, the attitude change is more significant for light Domino's users ($r = -0.36, p < 0.01$) and those who perceive Domino's quality as low ($r = -0.48, p < 0.01$), which is consistent with literature on attitude change. Heavy users tend to have a stronger and stable relationship with the vendor and exhibit a smaller attitude change based on individual incidents. This result is consistent with what we hypothesized in H6.

A total of 83.6 percent of respondents indicated that they would be likely to try Domino's Pizza after watching the video. Regression analysis showed that even after previous usage and perceived quality were controlled for, attitude change due to the campaign still had a significant effect ($\beta = 0.50, p < 0.01$) on purchase intention. This result provides some indirect support for H7.

In the open-ended question, participants indicated that they were intrigued that Domino's openly admitted its weakness, accepted consumers' criticism, and showed willingness to improve. For example, participants made the following comments: "The fact that they faced their criticism and did something about it rather than running a PR campaign to cover it and hide from it is admirable, and usually rare in big corporations." "They are listening to us, which is always a great feeling to have." "I find it intriguing that Domino's is showing all the negative perceptions of their pizza because it makes them vulnerable." "The fact that the company was willing to publicize the harsh criticisms it has received is very intriguing."

Whether they like the pizza or not, participants feel the brand is sincere and honest, and therefore they feel closer to the brand. For example, they commented, "It gives credibility and authenticity to the brand in my eyes." "I have more respect for the company and the employees in it. The video definitely made me respect the company more." "The intriguing thing about this campaign is how honest they are to admit their product was below average." "It was refreshing to see a company taking responsibility for its shortcomings." "The manager was sincere, friendly and just a normal guy who liked pizza." "By showing actual employees of Domino's, it seems like they really cared about what the customers had to say." "It is intriguing that the video shows upper level executives and chefs actually being concerned about the problem."

Although a few respondents remained skeptical about the promised quality improvement and questioned whether it is just Domino's marketing gimmicks, overall most of the thoughts are positive and consistent with what we expected in H1, H2, and H3. Domino's Turnaround campaign represents a case in which the company incorporated consumer complaints into its offensive marketing strategy and voluntarily revealed its vulnerability. The analysis indicates that

consumers are more accepting of “human brands,” which clearly have both strengths and weaknesses. When consumers feel that the brand shares some common weakness or imperfection that they have, it actually makes the brand closer to the consumers’ heart. Therefore, revealing vulnerability by admitting and accepting identified weaknesses may not necessarily undermine the strength and competitive edge of the brand. Rather, such vulnerability may help to enhance perceived honesty and trustworthiness of the brand and therefore enhance purchase intentions. Study 1 supported these general expectations. The Domino’s campaign was a naturally occurring event that lends realism to the study, although it does not allow us to test specific hypotheses, especially the moderating effects. It nevertheless showcases the effect of vulnerability in offensive marketing.

A more prevalent situation in which vulnerability may be revealed occurs in defensive marketing when brands have to reactively respond to consumer criticisms. We conducted Study 2 in such a context by manipulating company response styles to test the specific hypotheses.

Study 2

Method and Measures

In contrast to the Domino’s case, Study 2 represents a typical case in which consumers complain through social media and the firm has to respond. A scenario-based approach is used. Study 2 is a 2×2 experiment manipulating brand (Dunkin’ Donuts vs. Starbucks) and response to consumer criticism (vulnerable vs. defensive). We used coffeehouse brands because most consumers in the Northeast area are familiar with them, and the two brands have been active in social media such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition, the coffee war between Starbucks and Dunkin’ Donuts (and also McDonald’s) heated up during 2009. We explored some online reviews and comments (<http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/bizfinance/biz/features/15139/index1.html>), which revealed that, in addition to price, the issues of quality, class, status, and sophistication usually come up. Expecting some differences in brand personality, especially in sophistication and perfection, which are the focal dimensions we examine, we used this brand manipulation to inject variances to brand personality.

Students and staff from a northeastern U.S. college were recruited, and 173 people participated in the study. Participants were presented with an online survey administered through Qualtrics. First, participants answered questions measuring perceived brand personality, usage level, and relationship strength with the brand (Dunkin’ Donuts or Starbucks). Then, participants were presented with a scenario. They were told that they visited an online forum and found that some consumers criticized the quality of the products and services offered by the brand. Next, they found that the CEO of the company posted a response to these criticisms on the forum. In the response, the CEO was either defensive or vulnerable. In the defensive response, the CEO denied any quality issue, saying that although they welcome consumer opinions, they would

not allow their brand name to be tarnished by ungrounded accusations. In the vulnerable response, the CEO admitted that the brand is not perfect and accepted the criticism. After reading the scenario, participants were asked their perceptions of the brand's sincerity and respectfulness and the appropriateness of the response based on the scenario. Finally, participants were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the brand, their purchase intention, and their intention to recommend the brand to other people.

The items used by Aaker [1] to measure the five dimensions of brand personality were used, together with the items we developed to measure perfection. Following the ways other personality dimensions are measured, we selected adjectives close to perfection (perfect, unblemished, and ideal; $\alpha = 0.83$). We adapted the measure of relationship strength in Aaker et al. [2]. Measures of perceived sincerity, respectfulness (reverse coded), and appropriateness of the response were developed. We also checked manipulation of the company response to criticism using two items: "(The brand) admits its weakness in the response" and "(The brand)'s response is very defensive."

Sample and Manipulation Check

Participants were primarily female (74 percent), with ages ranging from 18 to 68, with an average age of 37. They are relatively active in using social media. Among all the participants, 83.1 percent use Facebook, 46.9 percent use LinkedIn, 22.6 percent use Twitter, 25.4 percent participate in online forums or chat rooms, and 33.3 percent read blogs. On average, they buy Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks products at least 1–3 times a month.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) using the two manipulation check items as dependent variables and product and response manipulation as independent variables showed significant effect of response. Defensive response is perceived as being more defensive ($F(1, 17,069) = 33.99, p < 0.001$, mean = 4.74 vs. 3.35) and less weak and vulnerable ($F(1, 170) = 100.34, p < 0.001$, mean = 5.07 vs. 2.93) than vulnerable response. There is no effect of brand. Hence, our manipulation of response style was successful.

We also examined reliability and validity of the measures. Factor analysis on brand personality measures revealed six factors, including the five from Aaker [1] and the perfection dimension we added. A comparison of Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks showed that Dunkin' Donuts is perceived as more sincere ($F(1, 170) = 13.88, p < 0.001$, mean = 3.35 vs. 2.84) and more perfect ($F(1, 170) = 4.23, p < 0.001$, mean = 2.56 vs. 2.27) than Starbucks, and Starbucks is perceived as more sophisticated ($F(1, 170) = 170.85, p < 0.001$, mean = 3.57 vs. 1.90). No significant differences in other dimensions were observed. Measures of brand relationship strength were summed up to form a relationship strength index. As shown in Table 1, the measures demonstrated appropriate level of reliability.

Interconstruct correlations are presented in Table 2. To check validity, we calculated the confidence level of the correlations; all of them are significantly lower than unity [16]. In addition, average variance extracted is larger than the squared correlations [23]. Finally, we constrained items for all possible pairs

Table 1. Measures and Reliability

Measures	Factor loadings	Reliability
Perceived appropriateness of response		
Starbucks' response is appropriate	0.96	0.97
In my opinion, Starbucks responded in a right way	0.99	
Perceived sincerity of response		
Starbucks' response is sincere	0.96	0.95
Starbucks' response is genuine	0.98	
Starbucks' response is earnest	0.90	
Perceived respectfulness of response (reverse coded)		
Starbucks' response did not show respect to its customers	0.98	0.95
Starbucks' response did not show caring to its customers	0.93	
Satisfaction		
I am completely satisfied with Starbucks	0.98	0.97
I am completely pleased with Starbucks	0.98	
I am very happy with Starbucks	0.94	
Purchase intentions		
I will keep buying from Starbucks	0.87	0.82
I will stay loyal to Starbucks	0.83	
I will make more purchases from Starbucks in the future	0.75	
Positive word of mouth		
I will recommend Starbucks to other people	0.93	0.95
I will tell my friends how good Starbucks is	0.96	
I will spread positive word-of-mouth regarding Starbucks	0.96	
Perceived quality		
I think Starbucks products and services are of good quality	0.97	0.90
I trust Starbucks' quality	0.91	
I have no doubt about Starbucks' quality	0.81	

of constructs to load on a single underlying factor instead of two individual factors in the confirmatory factor model. The model fit significantly worsened each time, further demonstrating validity.

Effects of Response on Sincerity, Respectfulness, and Perceived Appropriateness

We conducted a MANOVA using brands and response as independent variables and perceived sincerity, respectfulness, and appropriateness of the response as dependent variables, controlling for participants' existing relationship with the brand. Results showed a main effect of response ($F(3, 167) = 6.01, p < 0.01$) and a main effect of brands ($F(3, 167) = 2.87, p < 0.05$). There is no interaction effect ($F(3, 167) = 1.6, p = 0.18$).

Vulnerable response was perceived as more sincere ($F(1, 169) = 7.56, p < 0.01$, mean = 4.74 vs. 4.23), more respectful to the consumers ($F(1, 169) = 16.82, p < 0.001$, mean = 3.97 vs. 3.00), and more appropriate ($F(1, 169) = 13.32,$

Table 2. Interconstruct Correlations

	Sincerity	Respect	Appropriateness	Satisfaction	Purchase	Recommend
Sincerity	0.92					
Respect	0.50**	0.90				
Appropriateness	0.58**	0.72**	0.93			
Satisfaction	0.39**	0.30**	0.38**	0.92		
Purchase	0.22**	0.18*	0.23**	0.69**	0.75	
Recommend	0.40**	0.23**	0.30**	0.77**	0.77**	0.89

Notes: The square root of the AVE is shown on the diagonal. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations

Dependent variables	Vulnerable response	Defensive response
Perceived sincerity	4.72 (0.13)**	4.25 (0.14)
Perceived respectfulness	3.96 (0.16)**	3.06 (0.17)
Perceived appropriateness	5.04 (0.16)**	4.19 (0.17)
Satisfaction	4.33 (0.12)*	3.96 (0.12)
Purchase intention	4.85 (0.12)**	4.38 (0.13)
Positive word of mouth	4.28 (0.12)**	3.81 (0.13)
Perceived quality	4.62 (0.11)**	4.46 (0.11)

** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.01$.

$p < 0.001$, mean = 5.04 vs. 4.13), supporting H1, H2, and H3. There was no brand main effect on perceived sincerity and respectfulness ($F_s < 1$). The effect of brand on perceived appropriateness was marginally significant ($F(1, 169) = 3.27, p = 0.07$). Table 3 shows means and standard deviations.

Testing the Proposed Model

We conducted structural equation modeling analyses using AMOS to test the model with various moderating effects. Moderating variables were modeled as interaction terms. We used the manipulation check items of response style and the interaction terms as the exogenous variable, attitude and behavior intentions as the endogenous variables, and perceived appropriateness (or perceived sincerity in a separate analysis) as the mediating variable. As in ANOVA, we included existing relationship strength as the control variable.

First, we examined the model with perceived appropriateness as the mediator. The overall fit of the structural model was significant ($\chi^2 = 174$, df [degrees of freedom] = 83, $p < 0.01$). Additional goodness-of-fit indices (NFI [normed fit index] = 0.95, TLI [Tucker–Lewis index] = 0.97, CFI [confirmatory fit index] = 0.97, and RMSEA [root mean square error of approximation] = 0.075) all met the recommended levels and provide evidence that the model fits the data well [30] (see Table 4). More defensive response had a negative effect on perceived appropriateness ($\beta = -0.30, t = -3.24, p < 0.01$), further supporting H1. Response to criticism interacts with the brand personality of perfection ($\beta = 0.26, t = 2.27, p < 0.01$) and with relationship strength ($\beta = 0.33, t = 3.32, p < 0.01$) to influence perceived appropriateness, supporting H5 and H6.

To examine the nature of the interactions, we further conducted an ANOVA using manipulated response and perfect brand personality dimension

Table 4. Testing the Proposed Model Relationships (Study 2)

	Mediator: Perceived appropriateness		Mediator: Perceived sincerity	
	Standard estimate	t-value	Standard estimate	t-value
Direct path from → to				
H1 + Response ^a → Sincerity	N/A	N/A	-0.34	-3.60*
H2 - Response → Respect	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
H3 - Response → Appropriateness	-0.30	-3.24*	N/A	N/A
H4 + Response x Sophistication → (appropriateness)/Sincerity	(-0.20)	(-2.26)**	-0.31	-3.34*
H5 + Response x Perfect → Appropriateness/(sincerity)	0.26	2.27**	(0.41)	(3.42)*
H6 + Response x Relationship → Appropriateness/(sincerity)	0.33	3.32*	(0.17)	(1.63)
H7a + Response → Satisfaction	-0.13	-2.13**	-0.18	-3.17*
H7b + Response → Purchase intention	-0.04	-0.72	-0.09	1.66
H7c + Response → WOM	-0.11	-1.97**	-0.14	-2.40**
H8a + Appropriateness/Sincerity → Satisfaction	0.29	4.77*	0.19	3.32*
H8b + Appropriateness/Sincerity → Purchase intention	0.15	2.61*	0.03	0.62
H8c + Appropriateness/Sincerity → WOM	0.20	3.28*	0.21	3.59*
Control Relationship strength → Satisfaction	(0.68)	(11.88)*	(0.61)	(11.12)*
Relationship strength → Purchase intention	(0.83)	(14.31)*	(0.83)	(14.21)*
Relationship strength → WOM	(0.74)	(11.76)*	(0.65)	(11.38)*
Goodness-of-fit statistics				
Chi-square (df)	174 (83)		171.7 (98)	
NFI	0.95		0.95	
TLI	0.97		0.98	
CFI	0.97		0.98	
RMSEA	0.075		0.065	

Notes: N/A = not applicable; WOM = word of mouth; df = degrees of freedom; NFI = normed fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation. Statistics in parentheses are those not hypothesized. ^a Higher value means more defensive. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

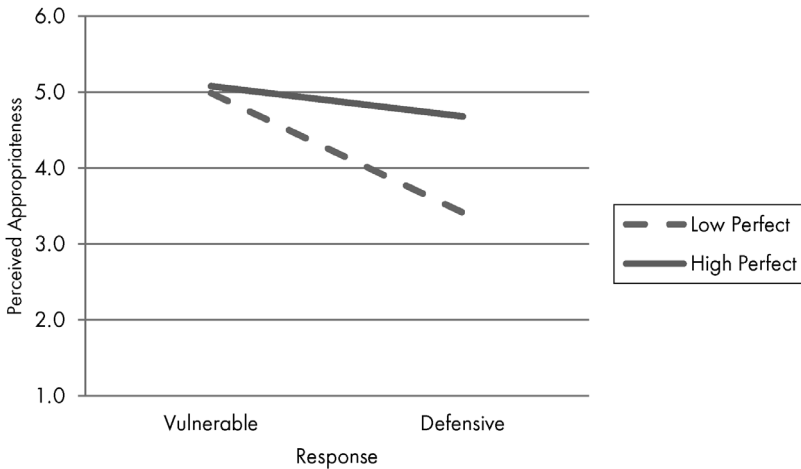


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Perfect Personality

(standardized with mean = 0 and SD = 1) as independent variables and perceived appropriateness as the dependent variable. In addition to the main effect of response ($F(1, 169) = 17.59, p < 0.001$), results revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 169) = 4.34, p < 0.05$). While vulnerable response is perceived as more appropriate than defensive response overall, defensive response is perceived to be more appropriate when the brand is perceived as perfect ($\beta = 0.59, p < 0.01$). When responding with vulnerability, the “perfect” personality had no significant effect ($\beta = 0.12, p > 0.1$). This result further supported H5 (see Figure 2).

A similar analysis was done with relationship strength. Results revealed the main effect of response ($F(1, 169) = 8.79, p < 0.01$) and a marginal interaction between response and relationship strength ($F(1, 169) = 3.0, p = 0.08$). When the brand responded with vulnerability, existing relationship strength with the brand had no impact ($\beta = -0.01, p > 0.9$). However, when the brand responded defensively, consumers who had a stronger relationship with the brand perceived the response as more appropriate than those who had a weaker relationship ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.05$), supporting H6 (see Figure 3).

Perceived appropriateness of the response further influenced satisfaction ($\beta = 0.29, t = 4.77, p < 0.01$), purchase intention ($\beta = 0.15, t = 2.61, p < 0.01$), and word of mouth ($\beta = 0.20, t = 3.28, p < 0.01$). The direct effect of response to satisfaction ($\beta = -0.13, t = -2.13, p < 0.01$) and word of mouth ($\beta = -0.11, t = -1.97, p < 0.05$) were significant. The effect on purchase intention was not significant ($\beta = -0.04, t = -0.72, p = 0.47$). We further examined the direct paths from response to attitude and behaviors when appropriateness was not in the model. Analyses showed that the paths were stronger and were all significant (satisfaction: $\beta = -0.36, t = -5.03, p < 0.01$; purchase intention: $\beta = -0.20, t = -2.49, p < 0.01$; word of mouth: $\beta = -0.28, t = -3.78, p < 0.01$), supporting H7. To directly test the mediating effect, we conducted the Sobel test as recommended [50]. The statistics were all significant (Sobel Z [on satisfaction] = 3.11, SD = 0.10, $p < 0.01$; Sobel Z [on purchase intention] = 3.12, SD = 0.10, $p < 0.01$; Sobel Z

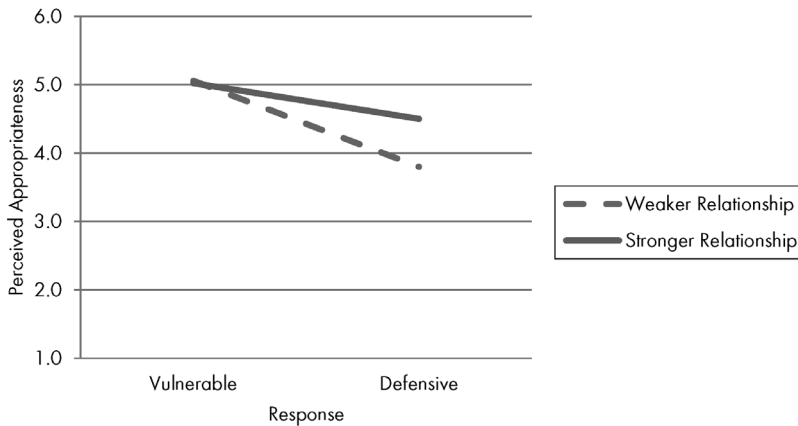


Figure 3. Moderating Effect of Relationship Strength

[on recommendation] = 2.52, $SD = 0.13$, $p < 0.01$), supporting full mediation of effect on purchase intention and partial mediation of effects on satisfaction and word of mouth. Hence, H8 is mostly supported.

Next, we ran a second model with perceived sincerity replacing perceived appropriateness. Results showed a similar fit. The overall fit of the structural model was significant ($\chi^2 = 171.7$, $df = 98$, $p < 0.01$). Additional goodness-of-fit indices (NFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.98, CFI = 0.98, and RMSEA = 0.065) met the recommended levels [30] (see Table 4). All the paths exhibited a pattern similar to those in the model with perceived appropriateness. We specifically examined the hypothesized interaction between response and the brand personality trait of sophistication. The interaction was indeed significant ($\beta = -0.31$, $t = -3.34$, $p < 0.01$), providing support for H4 (see Figure 4). An ANOVA provided further information on the nature of the interaction. Results revealed a main effect of response ($F(1, 169) = 8.76$, $p < 0.01$) qualified with an interaction with the “sophisticated” brand personality $F(1, 169) = 4.45$, $p < 0.05$). Responding to the criticism with vulnerability enhanced perceived sincerity of sophisticated brands more than it did for less sophisticated brands ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H5 (see Figure 4). However, when the company responded defensively, the “sophisticated” brand personality had no moderating effect ($\beta = -0.11$, $p > 0.1$).

Finally, an additional ANOVA showed that the way the company responded to the criticism had no effect on perceived quality ($F(1, 169) = 1.01$, $p > 0.3$). Responding to the criticism with vulnerability did not sacrifice the brand’s perceived quality. This conclusion did not change even when relationship strength and various dimensions of brand personality were taken into consideration.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the results supported our expectations. A company’s response to a complaint, more than the issue involved, is important in consumers’ reac-

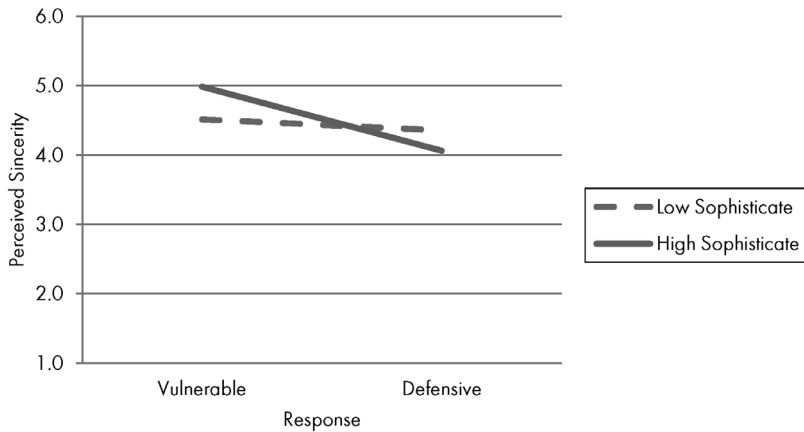


Figure 4. Moderating Effect of Sophistication Personality

tions. The response is evaluated with reference to consumers' expectations formed based on communication norms (how brands *should* respond), brand personalities (how the brand *will* respond), and customers' relationship with the brand (level of tolerance). Consumers assess whether the responses are sincere and respectful, which are important elements of a good partner relationship [21, 22]. Consumers expect brands to be honest, good listeners, accepting, and open. A vulnerable response to criticism meets consumer expectations, demonstrates the brand's sincerity and respect for its customers, and is perceived as more appropriate. Results from two different contexts supported this expectation. As further demonstrated in Study 2, an appropriate response enhances consumer satisfaction, further bonds brands' relationships with their customers, and leads to both higher purchase intention and positive word of mouth.

In addition to the main effect of a response on perceived appropriateness and its consequences, we also showed that brand personality and existing relationship strength moderate perceived sincerity and appropriateness of the response. While consumers form expectations of how companies should respond to criticism appropriately, the expectations are moderated by their predictions of how the brand will respond based on brand personalities that are relevant to the focal issue. The two brand personality dimensions we examined in this research are perfection and sophistication. Consumers are more tolerant of a defensive response when the brand is "perfect," and a vulnerable response induces higher perceived sincerity when the brand is considered "sophisticated." Based on the expectation–disconfirmation theory, we reasoned that the gap between predicted behavior and desired behavior leads to a pleasant surprise or inclines the consumer to give the benefit of the doubt to the company. Consumers are more tolerant when a "perfect" brand defends itself and pleasantly surprised when a "sophisticated" brand reveals vulnerability.

Finally, brand relationship strength represents the accumulated relationship between the brand and its customers, and it exerts a more stable influence on

behavior intentions. As expected, consumers who have a stronger relationship with the brand are overall more satisfied and more likely to purchase and recommend. Furthermore, relationship strength also moderates consumers' perceptions of the brand's response to criticism. A stronger relationship implies a higher commitment level and lowers the intolerance threshold. When the brand responds with vulnerability, relationship strength has no significant effect. But when the brand responds defensively, consumers with a stronger relationship with the brand have a less negative perception of the brand's response.

Contributions and Implications

Communication and information are fundamental sources of power of control and social change [13]. The Internet and social media have changed the company–consumer relationship and power balance [53]. They have also changed the landscape of both defensive marketing and offensive marketing. This research captures these changes and provides both theoretical and empirical contributions. First, in the context in which product-related issues with some consumers are communicated and witnessed by the extended consumer community, the impact of response style is as important as the response itself. This research provides insights into how consumers evaluate consumer–brand communication in social media. We demonstrate that the impact of response styles on attitude and behaviors are mediated by consumers' perceived appropriateness of the response. Applying the expectation–disconfirmation framework, we show that the evaluation of different response styles is influenced by (dis)confirmation between the expected response and the actual response. Expectations are formed based on various standards, including communication norms, brand personalities, and existing relationship strength. We identified sophistication and perfection as two brand personality dimensions that moderate the effect of response on perceived appropriateness. However, our theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating the general mechanism. Personality dimensions that align with the focal issue will influence expectations when there is a gap between the predicted expectation and the normative expectation. In contexts where different issues and brands are involved, other personality dimensions may exert influence.

Second, offensive marketing and defensive marketing have been traditionally two separate components of marketing strategy, although they are related and both are important [21]. This research presents a context in which offensive and defensive marketing strategies are intertwined and suggests ways in which they influence each other. On the one hand, brand personalities and relationship strength built through offensive marketing moderate consumers' reactions to the companies' responses to criticisms. On the other hand, how companies react to consumer complaints and criticism in defensive marketing may influence corporate and brand image and change their customer relationships. The two studies in this research, with Study 1 operating in the form of offensive marketing and Study 2 operating in the form of defensive marketing, reflect this integration.

Finally, this research also provides new insights into offensive marketing. Traditionally, offensive marketing focuses on the strength of the product or brand and avoids the weakness. Companies build brand image and relationship with customers in a more controlled manner. This research suggests that companies can enhance consumer experiences and strengthen relationships by being vulnerable and handing over control to consumers. We conceptualize the concept of vulnerability and demonstrate that vulnerability is not a weakness but can actually be used to gain consumers' trust and enhance satisfaction without damaging brand quality perceptions. Although offering apologies and taking responsibility have been regarded as good practice in handling consumer complaints, no research has examined the impact of using these tactics proactively in offensive marketing.

From the manager's point of view, it is important to acknowledge that consumers now have much greater access to independent information about a company's products and services and even its business practices. It is difficult for companies to maintain close control of their brand images [8]. Social media is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allows negative news to spread to thousands of customers and bring significant damage to the company. On the other hand, it can be effectively used for both defensive marketing and offensive marketing, and effectively maintaining a brand community in social media may enhance consumer loyalty [49]. Companies should proactively adapt to social media in both their defensive and offensive marketing strategies. In general, consumers are more accepting of "human brands" that have strength but also acknowledge their weaknesses. An appropriate response not only means interacting with consumers in an honest and humble way but also requires that the responses conform to the norms of social networks and are consistent with the brand's personality.

In addition, brand personality is embedded not only in the product but also in the people behind the brand [1, 55]. Given the potential impact of brand personality, we suggest that companies should be careful in selecting the brand's spokesperson and examine the fit between the spokesperson's personality and that of the brand. For example, Domino's CEO frequently appeared in the company's marketing promotion as sincere and down-to-earth, which is consistent with the personality that Domino's wants to build. On the other hand, Nestlé's moderator on Facebook probably did not realize that fans would project his response to the criticism onto the brand. Social media gets consumers closer to brands, as well as the people behind the brands.

The field of social media is still new to both managers and researchers. Our research has many limitations. First, we used a convenient sample, which consisted of mostly females (Study 2). Although research has shown that the brand personality perceptions across samples are invariant between male versus female participants and younger versus older participants [1], additional research should be conducted to extend the generalizability of the results. Second, while the use of a naturally occurring event (Study 1) and real brand names (Study 2) enhances realism of the study, there is more noise in the environment that prevents us from examining specific hypotheses.

Many issues warrant future research. In this current research, we only investigated the effects of the ways companies react to consumers' general

criticism on product quality. Responses and consequences may vary depending on the issue involved, such as an unethical business practice, environmental degradation, or product harm. These additional issues should be examined, and brand personalities that align with these issues may emerge as moderating factors. Second, we examined two extreme response styles (defensive vs. vulnerable). Brands can respond to consumer criticism using a combination of the two. Effects of alternative responses should be examined in the future. Finally, this research shows that brand personality influences consumers' reactions to consumer-brand communications. In the long run, such communication may also change brand personality. The dynamic relationship between brand personality, relationship strength, and communication warrants future research, as it is becoming ever more complicated.

NOTE

1. Here defensive means a defensive attitude toward consumer criticism, which is different from defensive marketing.

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