Negative Spill Over Effects in Brand Alliance Crises

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ABSTRACT

Brand alliances, or partnerships between established brands, is a viable branding strategy. Yet, it is an inherently risky strategy, especially when one of the brand partners faces a crisis. A direct fallout of brand alliance crisis concerns consumer attitude spill over. Despite the surge in brand alliance research and industry interest, the literature on the psychological mechanisms and outcomes of spill over effects remains sparse. Underpinned by the Balance theory from social psychology, this research examines the impact of crises on consumers' evaluations of corporate brand alliances. Employing an experimental design across three crisis contexts – *preventable, accidental and victim*, the research shows that crises in brand alliances negatively impact consumers' evaluations of the culpable brand which spills over to the co-branded product. The non-culpable partner, however, is not found to be negatively affected. The results also show that post-crisis attitudes can be enhanced if consumers are exposed to recovery information that diminishes the culpable brand's role in the crisis. The research provides novel contributions to knowledge and offers managerial guidelines on effective post-crisis public relations communication.

Keywords: brand alliances; co-branding; brand crisis; negative spill over effects; balance theory; experiment

1. INTRODUCTION

Brand alliance, or co-branding, is a partnership in which companies cooperate to present their brands jointly to consumers (Rao et al., 1999; Singh et al., 2020a). It is a popular brand marketing strategy that can reduce a brand's logistics costs by 3-4% and manufacturing costs by 5-15% (Accenture, 2022). In fact, 71% of consumers enjoy co-branding partnerships, encouraging more companies to enter brand partnerships (PR News Wire, 2021). Research highlights several benefits associated with brand alliances, such as signalling quality of the partnering brands (Rao & Ruekert, 1994), diluting the risk of entering new markets (Abratt & Motlana, 2002), enhancing brand equity (Ueltschy & Laroche, 2011), positive impact of cause-brand alliances (Singh, 2016), and transferring favorable associations to the partner brands (Crisafulli et al., 2020; Kalafatis et al., 2014; Kalafatis et al., 2016; Pinello et al., 2022; Washburn et al., 2000).

In brand alliance research, spill over effects is documented as the change in consumer attitudes towards partner brands pre- and post-brand alliance formation (Park et al., 1996; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). While academic interest and the prevalence of brand alliances continues to grow, extant research on spill over effects mostly show positive spill over due to the benefits of the partnership (e.g., Lafferty et al., 2004; Swaminathan & Reddy, 2012; Roosens et al., 2019). By contrast, research addressing the consequences and associated risks, that is, the negative spill over effects, of corporate brand alliances is still relatively limited.

Crucially, the prevalence of high-profile crises such as product deficiencies and unethical corporate acts involving a partner brand (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Cleeren et al., 2013), suggest that corporate brands in alliances are often exposed to risks. For example, Ford was boycotted by consumers in the wake of Firestone's tyre scandal (The Economist, 2001). Similarly, Reebok experienced backlash on social media following the controversial statements from the CEO of its longstanding partner, CrossFit (Yahoo News, 2020), and more recently, Adidas was forced to suspend its highly anticipated collection with Balenciaga following backlash received from a campaign featuring images of children holding teddy bears dressed in bondage gear (Complex, 2022). The above examples demonstrate that crises pose a potential reputational threat to the brand alliances partners. The prevalence of brand crises poses significant challenges for branding and public relations (PR) practitioners in terms of providing effective response and is exacerbated by the lack of robust and empirical research-supported guidelines.

Although crises in brand alliances are recurrent, to date only a handful of studies have empirically examined negative spill over effects in corporate co-branding partnerships (e.g., Singh et al., 2020a; Singh et al., 2020b). These studies show that crises pose a risk to the brand image of the culpable partner in the alliance (Singh et al., 2020a). In addition, crisis type and brand equity play a crucial role in mitigating the effects of crises in an alliance context (Singh et al., 2020b). Notwithstanding the insights provided by the above studies, existing knowledge on negative spill over effect is limited to the impact of negative brand information on one or both partners in an alliance. The literature is silent on how a partner brand's transgression can impact 1) the co-branding initiative itself, which represents the core proposition of the partnership, 2) the change from pre-crisis to post-crisis brand attitude evaluations, and 3) how crisis recovery communication can impact consumers' post crisis brand evaluations of the alliance partners. Given the popularity of brand alliances and the prevalence of brand crises in real life, research on the conditions under which negative spill over effects are likely to occur in a corporate brand alliance context is, therefore, theoretically and managerially important, and provides motivation for our study.

Against the above backdrop, we examine how a brand crisis involving one partner in a brand alliance impacts consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the three entities in the alliance –

the culpable brand (i.e., the brand involved in the crisis), the non-culpable brand partner (the 'innocent' brand), and the co-branded product (i.e., the product jointly created by the partners). Our study makes several theoretical contributions. Underpinned by the Balance theory (Heider, 1958) from social psychology, our study advances knowledge on consumers' motivations for processing information in brand alliances, and demonstrates the role of brand crisis attribution and commitment in explaining consumers' evaluations of crises in corporate brand alliances. The study advances understanding of negative spill over effects by providing empirical evidence that crises in brand alliances lead to negative signals about the culpable partner brand which, in turn, spill over to the co-branded product. In addition, our findings enhance managerial understanding of the risks associated with brand alliance strategies. The study is a landmark in providing benchmarks for PR practitioners, in terms of the post-crises communications content and are useful for managing the fallout on traditional media as well as on social media, following a crisis. The findings also show how PR practitioners and brand managers can employ established concepts such as brand commitment and consumer attributions toward successful management of crisis recovery.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Balance Theory

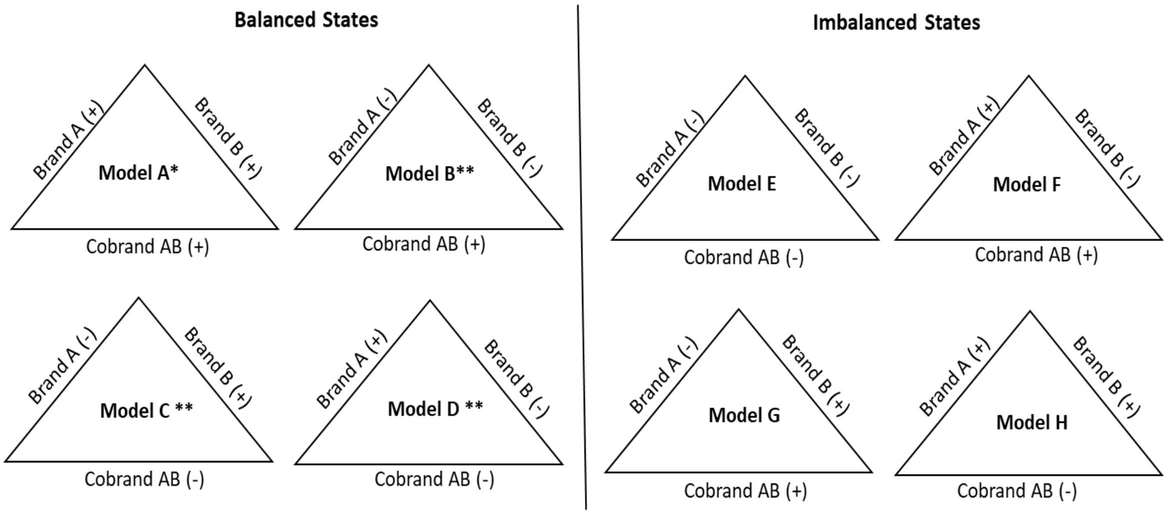
Balance theory (Heider, 1946; 1958) considers individuals' desires to seek consistency among entities or objects they perceive belong together in relational triads (i.e., a group of three entities). The theory assumes that individuals have a psychological preference for maintaining balanced cognitions among triad relationships. If an individual's cognition in a relational triad is inconsistent (i.e., imbalanced), they will be motivated to change their existing attitudes toward one, or more, of the three entities to restore balance.

Balance, or consistency, is related to two factors that shape relationships in a triad: 1) cognition relation (i.e., liking and disliking), and 2) unit relation (i.e., conditions under which entities belong together, such as fit, ownership and group membership). A fundamental assumption of Balance theory is that "*cognitions are not entirely independent of the perceptions of unit connections between entities, and the latter in turn are not entirely independent of cognitions*" (Heider, 1958, p. 201). This means that attitudes and unit relations are mutually interdependent, and that the evaluation of one entity is affected by how the evaluation will fit with other related cognitions (Woodside & Chebat, 2001). It also suggests that if a balanced state does not exist, then pressures toward changing this state will arise. If a change is not possible, the state of imbalance will produce tension. Prior studies indicate (e.g., Carson et al., 1997; Woodside & Chebat, 2001) that there is pressure among individuals toward finding a harmonious, uniform and consistent view of entities that are in a unit relationship with each other. If inconsistencies among such views arise, individuals seek to reconcile divergent attitudes and align their cognitions in various ways so that they appear rational and consistent. This can be done through either altering attitudes, or by developing a rationale for the discrepancy. An individual's drive towards psychological balance, therefore, functions as a motivation for attitude change.

2.2 Modelling Balance Theory in Brand Alliances

According to Balance theory, triadic relationships could be either balanced, or imbalanced. There are four possible states of balance as illustrated in Figure 1. As shown in Model A, the consumer thinks positively toward Brands A, B, and the co-brand AB. In this pleasant, or positively, balanced triad, the relationships are harmonious. An unpleasant balanced triad, however, occurs when consumers hold negative attitudes about two of the three entities in the co-branding partnership (due to, for example, a corporate crisis). As shown in Model B, the consumer may think negatively about Brand A and Brand B, yet think positively about the co-brand AB. Alternatively, in Models C and D in Figure 1, the consumer may think positively about Brand A(B), yet negatively about the co-brand AB and Brand B(A). While unpleasant balance in alliances, where consumers' attitudes are predominately negative, may seem counter-intuitive (i.e., the success of alliances depends on the positive evaluations of its partners), it is still plausible, as evident in cases from practice. For example, following Pepsi's pesticide controversy in India, consumer opinions toward Pepsi and its sales alliance with the potato crisps brand, Lays, were predominantly negative, yet consumer opinions of Lays remained positive (negative, negative, positive – as in Model C). Similarly, Ray Rice, a National Football League (NFL) star, was embroiled in a domestic abuse scandal, with both partners (Rice and NFL) drawing negative publicities. NFL's share prices declined, and the sports star was publicly condemned, yet the league's television rating and fan attendance at games remained high (negative, positive, negative – as in Model B). Notably, whilst balance can occur in triads with only one positive attitude (as in Models B, C and D), the situation is unstable and may induce unpleasantness for the parties involved (Heider, 1958). Individuals prefer a consistent and positive relationship among all entities in a triad (Crandall et al., 2007; Woodside & Chebat, 2001). Heider (1958) observes that for the highest quality attitude triad to exist, both pleasant and positive interpersonal relationships are required.

Figure 1: Illustration of balanced and imbalanced brand alliance triads



** Pleasant balanced state, ** Unpleasant balanced state*

By contrast, there are also four possible states of imbalance. In these states, consumers may have positive attitudes about Brand A and B yet think negatively about the co-brand AB (Model H). Alternatively, consumers may think positively toward the co-brand AB and one of the brand partners, yet negatively about the second partner (Models F and G). In Models E, F and G, the relationships between the entities are characterized by internal tensions (i.e., inconsistent cognitions) for the consumer. To eliminate this tension, positive attitudes about all entities need to be re-established (i.e., a return to Model A). If consumers cannot be influenced to re-evaluate their attitudes, the triad will likely deteriorate into Model E where all attitudes are negative. In brand alliances, the imbalanced state of Model E occurs when consumers have negative feelings toward both alliance partners (Brand A and B) and the co-brand (AB). In this triad, relationships are unpleasant and stressful. Balance theory posits that if brands are unsuccessful at re-establishing positive relationships among the entities, the relationship will eventually weaken. As suggested by Heider (1958), the long-term ramifications of negative attitudes among all three entities in a triad is the dilution of the cognitive unit. Consumers who feel negatively about both partners, and the product in an alliance following a crisis, are likely to stop patronizing, and would make the partnership untenable. This can lead to the conclusion that the alliance is meaningless, eventually leading to termination.

Our study proposes that evaluations of each entity (e.g., the culpable brand, partner brand and co-branded product) following a crisis will be based on maintaining consistency in the triad, and therefore, post-crisis perceptions of each entity will be adjusted in a manner that ensures balance in the overall evaluation of the alliance. We contend that in the event of a crisis, consumers are likely to process negative information in a manner that does not result in an imbalanced state and accordingly, their post-crisis evaluations of each entity in the alliance are affected by how that evaluation fits with other related attitudes held by consumers.

2.3 Consumer Response to Negative Brand Information

Extant evidence on consumers' responses to negative brand information is well-documented. A number of studies demonstrate that exposure to negative brand publicity weakens consumers' brand evaluations (e.g., Pullig et al., 2006) which, in turn, threatens brand trust (e.g., Yannopoulou et al., 2011), tarnishes brand image and corporate reputation (e.g., Dean, 2004), diminishes brand equity (e.g., Dawar & Pillutla, 2000), and leads to a decrease in product sales (e.g., Van Heerde et al., 2007). The authors largely agree that a brand crisis can have negative consequences on the affected brand (e.g., Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Dutta & Pullig, 2011).

In the context of brand alliances, prior research has shown that unfavorable brand information negatively influences consumer post-crisis evaluations of the culpable brand (e.g., Thomas & Fowler, 2016; Till & Shimp, 1998). Further, research suggests that negative spill over from the culpable brand to the partner brand occurs only if consumers believe that the partner knew of, and or condoned the culpable partner's actions (Votolato & Unnava, 2006). Whilst the above studies offer insights into negative spill over effects in brand alliances, the findings are relevant to celebrity-brand endorsement partnerships. There is, so far, limited understanding of the role of brand crisis in an alliance context with two corporate brands. Extending the literature, our study investigates whether and how consumers are influenced by crisis encounters involving one of the two corporate brands partnering in an alliance.

Studies on negativity effect (Baumeister et al., 2001; Ito et al.,1998; Nguyen & Claus, 2013; Kanouse & Hanson, 1972; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) show that individuals are cognitively biased towards assigning significant weight and value to negative stimuli in the formation of judgements. Considering negative events happen less frequently, the novelty increases the probability that it will be attended to, and remembered, and greater weight being assigned, in the formation of judgements (Kellermann, 1984). Judgement requires retrieval of information from memory (Kanouse, 1984). When doing so, individuals do not carry out an exhaustive search for information; instead, they draw on a fraction of the information that is most accessible (Taylor & Fiske, 1978). Among the information that is easily accessible are negative stimuli, due to its novelty and distinctiveness. As demonstrated by Herr, Kardes and Kim (1991) consumers are psychologically biased to weigh negative stimuli more significantly, than equivalent positive stimuli. The above authors show that product evaluations diminish when consumers are presented with negative attribute information, suggesting that negative brand information has a strong effect on consumers probability to purchase and attitudes toward a product.

Consistent with the above reasoning, we postulate that consumers perceive brand crisis information negatively, and the effect is manifested with lowered attitude evaluations of the brand involved in the crisis. Therefore,

H1: Following a brand crisis, consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the culpable brand will *be significantly weaker than their pre-crisis evaluations.*

By contrast, negative stimuli are not expected to influence consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the partner brand. The contention that negative stimuli about the culpable brand will not influence consumers' evaluations of the partner brand, finds theoretical support in Heider's (1958) Principle of Local Relevance. According to the framework, the evaluation of environmental conditions within a triad depends on individuals' perceptions of local relevance, referring to the extent to which associated stimuli appear to be connected to the event. The connection represents a form of categorization, for example, when people are held responsible for events because of their group membership. Heider (1958) observes "*If individuals perceive the cause of an event is restricted to the immediate nature of x and the simple fact that x has caused it, associated stimuli will retain their identity in spite of their being organized into units"* (p. 253). This suggests that if an environmental condition is perceived to be associated with just one entity in a triad, it is unlikely to affect individuals' evaluations of the other entities. It follows, therefore, that a brand crisis restricted to one brand in an alliance will influence evaluations of that brand and is unlikely to have an effect on the partner brand.

Drawing upon the above theoretical precepts, our study posits that when brands in an alliance face a crisis, negative information about the culpable brand and potentially about the partner brand, are relayed to consumers (e.g., Till & Shimp, 1998; Votolato & Unnava, 2006). Negativity Effect contends that negative stimuli are weighted significantly in the formation of evaluations, and are crucial in influencing how consumers respond to the brands in crises (e.g., Ahluwalia, 2002). As the crisis involves the culpable brand, consumers are likely to weigh the negative information about the brand, question the brand's role in the occurrence, and revisit their existing attitudes toward the culpable brand accordingly. Thus, consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the culpable brand will be significantly weaker than their pre-crisis evaluation. On the other hand, considering the partner brand has no role in the crisis, we contend that negative spill over will be restricted to only the culpable brand. Following Heider's (1958) Principle of Local Relevance, the partner brand might be perceived as extraneous to the brand crisis with no control or ability to influence the occurrence, and therefore exempt from blame. Hence,

H2: Following a brand crisis, consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the culpable brand will not spill over to the partner brand.

Drawing on Balance theory (Heider, 1946; 1958), our study contends that consumers' predicted attitude changes toward the culpable partner brand but not the partner brand (as discussed in H1 and H2 above), will prompt an imbalance within the alliance relationships. This imbalance will subsequently prompt consumers to revisit and revise their pre-crisis attitudes toward the co-branded product in order to restore balance. Balance theory assumes that individuals strive for consistency and balance among the entities in a triad and are motivated to change their held attitudes toward one or more of the three entities, if their combined cognitions toward the triad are inconsistent.

According to Heider (1958), a triad with attitudes toward two of the three entities as positive and one as negative (as shown in Model G in Figure 2), represents a tension-filled state of imbalance. When a triad is imbalanced, pressure and conscious thinking are prompted. To eliminate the imbalance, attitudes towards one or more entities must be altered such that the evaluation will fit with other related attitudes held by the individual (Carson et al., 1997). Consumer research employing Balance theory suggests that evaluations of the three entities in a triad often happens concurrently to influence overall consumer responses (e.g., Basil & Herr, 2006; Szőcs et al., 2016). For instance, Phillips, Lin and Costello (1998) show that loyalty attitudes between a consumer to the dealer, dealer to the manufacturer, and customer to the manufacturer, interact in shaping consumers' perception of satisfaction in supply chain relationships. The above authors note that entities in a triad are mutually dependent, and as such, attitudes toward one entity are likely to affect attitudes toward the other entities.

Following the above rationale, our study postulates that consumers' post-crisis attitudes toward the co-branded product will be assessed based on how that evaluation fits with their post-crisis evaluations of the culpable brand, and the partner brand. We posit that consumers' post-crisis responses to the culpable brand will be negative, however, will remain positive for the partner brand. Therefore, consumer's post-crisis responses to the co-branded product are likely to be negative in order to maintain psychological balance in the alliance (as shown in Model C in Figure 1). Thus,

H3: Following a brand crisis, consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the culpable brand will spill over to the co-branded product.

2.4 The Moderating Effect of Attribution

Extant organizational crisis research suggests that attribution plays a crucial role in predicting consumers' responses to crises (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Lei et al., 2012). Attribution refers to the cognitive process by which individuals explain behavior or identify the source of a negative event (Schmidt & Weiner, 1988). Weiner (1985) suggests that judgement of responsibility is a function of how individuals perceive and make sense of an actor and the environment in the wake of a negative event. In particular, the source of attribution is fundamental to ascribing meaning to an event, and that the consequences for an actor are greater when attribution is internal rather than external (e.g., Jeong, 2009, Kinderman & Bentall, 1997; Rotter, 1966). Internal attribution is the process of assigning the cause of an event to an actor or to some characteristics within the actor (Weiner, 1985). For the above, the actor's personality traits, motives, beliefs, and behavior are examined to assign responsibility for an event. By contrast, external attribution denotes the cause of an event to be outside the control of the actor (Weiner, 1985). In such instances, situational factors within the environment are examined to explain the cause of an event.

The relationship between attribution and consumers' response towards brands post-crises has received extensive empirical support (e.g., Um, 2013; Whelan & Dawar, 2016). Researchers have shown that attribution has a greater impact on consumers' attitudes to the brand following a crisis, than brand reputation or crisis response type (Dean 2004), and that consumers' attribution of blame influences their brand evaluations — the more blame attributed to the brand, the more brand evaluations decline (e.g., Klein & Dawar, 2004). Further, Whelan and Dawar (2016) suggest that even if a brand is later exonerated, the damage caused by early attributions of blame can be irrevocable, as blame leads to consumer complaining (e.g., Richins, 1983), negative word-of-mouth (e.g., Folkes, 1988), and decreased purchase intentions for the company's entire portfolio of products, not just the product involved in the crisis (e.g., Lei et al., 2008; Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994).

Consistent with the above evidence, our study posits that consumers' responses to a brand crisis involving one of two brands in an alliance will be moderated by 'who' they perceive as responsible for the event, that is, internal or external perceptions of responsibility. Consumers who perceive the cause of the crisis to be internal to the culpable brand will have weaker post-crisis evaluations toward the culpable brand and the co-branded product, than those who perceive the cause of the crisis to be attributed to an external factor. Thus,

*H4: Attribution of responsibility will moderate the strength of spill over effects to the culpable brand, such that consumers' post-*crisis *evaluations will be significantly weaker (stronger) for consumers who ascribe internal (external) brand crisis attribution to the culpable brand.*

*H5: Attribution of responsibility will moderate the strength of spill over effects to the co-branded product, such that consumers' post-*crisis *evaluations will be significantly* *weaker (stronger) for consumers who ascribe internal (external) brand crisis attribution to the culpable brand.*

2.4.1 The Impact of Brand Commitment on Attribution

Commitment refers to an individual's "*emotional attachment to an organization, such that strongly committed individuals identify with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in the organization*" (Allen & Meyer 1990, p 2). It is well-established as a strong driver of attribution (e.g., Ellemers et al., 1998; Pittman et al., 1977). The relationship between commitment and attribution can be explained by the Social Judgement literature (e.g., Granberg, 1982; Sherif & Hovland, 1961) which posits that human judgement is an amalgamation of latitudes (i.e., the range of views individuals hold on any given matter). There are latitudes of acceptance (where the range of ideas that a person sees as a reasonable or worthy of consideration) and rejection (which is the range of ideas that a person sees as unreasonable or objectionable) in one's perception. If stimulus is farther away from one's judgemental anchor, a contrast effect is highly possible; when the stimulus is close to the anchor, an assimilation effect can happen (e.g., Kalafatis et al., 2014). In other words, information that falls within the latitude of rejection is unlikely to be persuasive.

According to Sherif and Hovland (1961), highly involved, highly committed individuals have larger latitudes of rejection and therefore will find it harder to attribute blame to a brand they are committed to because strong opinion has been formed which are unlikely to change. Thus, individuals who hold strong opinions on issues are likely to examine relevant empirical evidence in a biased manner. They are apt to accept confirming evidence at face value, while subjecting disconfirming evidence to critical evaluation.

Based on the above discussion, our study contends that in a brand alliance context, consumers' post-crisis evaluations will not only be influenced by the information available about the crisis, but also by consumers' attachments to the partner brand involved in the crisis.

When confronted with a crisis involving one of the two brands in an alliance, consumers are likely to gather information about the crisis to make sense of the occurrence (e.g., Votolato & Unnava, 2006). In this regard, Social Judgement theory underpins that consumers with high emotional attachment to the culpable partner are expected to resist any information that contradicts their held view of the brand. We contend that high-committed consumers are less likely to attribute blame to the brand, even when the brand's culpability is salient and sufficient to explain the crisis. By contrast, consumers with little prior attachment to the culpable brand are expected to evaluate the information at face value and attribute appropriate blame to the brand. Thus,

H6: Consumers' evaluations of brand crisis attribution are positively related to their commitment toward the culpable partner brand, such that high-committed (low- committed) consumers will ascribe significantly lower (higher) internal brand crisis attribution.

2.5 Post-Crisis Recovery

Notwithstanding consumers' predicted post-crisis evaluations of the entities in an alliance represents a balanced state void of tension (see H1, H2 and H3), it does not represent a *pleasant* balanced state (see Model C in Figure 1). A pleasant balance state represents a triad which the attitudes among the entities are *all* positive and fit together harmoniously, that is, no unpleasantness exists (see Model A in Figure 1). In a pleasant balanced state, the consumer does not need to cognitively distort, re-evaluate, or behaviorally withdraw from the situation (e.g., Carson et al., 1997). Extant literature in psychology suggests that a pleasant balanced triad is the state other triads must evolve to for the highest quality interaction among its entities (e.g., Crandall et al., 2007; Woodside & Chebat, 2001). Heider (1958) explains that while two negative and one positive attitude represent balance, the relationship is not considered pleasant. Ideally, individuals prefer a consistent and positive view of actors, objects, and events that belong together. Whenever possible, Heider (1958) argues, individuals will strive to maintain a harmonious and positive relationship among all entities in a triad. Therefore, failure to maintain a harmonious, tension-free relationship can lead to some ambiguity and confusion. In such instances, individuals are motivated to gather more information in order to obtain a more meaningful sense of the event that overturned their once positive/consistent view of the triad.

A resolution to achieving a pleasant balanced state is to adjust causal perception of 'who' or 'what' may be responsible for the negative event via crisis recovery information which diminishes the culpable partner brand's role in the crisis (i.e., external attribution). Attribution to external sources has been found to increase perceived credibility toward the brand, and as a result, enhances consumers' perception toward the brand (e.g., Dean, 2004; Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Um, 2013; Wood & Mitchell, 1981). As suggested by Raju and Rajagopal (2012), "*By attributing the failure to an outside party, firms can restrict the negative association of having committed a [negative] act and consequently reduce the future likelihood of repeating the act*" (p. 964). In other words, mitigating one's responsibility by ascribing blame to an external factor reduces consumers' perception of blame.

Based on the above reasoning, our study postulates that in the pursuit of a pleasant balanced alliance, consumers will be motivated to reassess their original assessment about the crisis when additional information about the negative event is available. Considering inferences of external attribution positively mitigates negative brand evaluations (e.g., Klein & Dawar, 2004), the study hypothesizes that exposure to post-crisis recovery information, which diminishes the culpable brand's role in a crisis, can enhance consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the culpable brand and the co-branded product; thus, reverting to a pleasant balanced state. Hence,

H7: Exposure to crisis recovery information that attempts to diminish a brand's role or responsibility in a brand crisis will have a positive impact on spill over effects to the *culpable partner brand, such that consumers' post-crisis evaluations will be significantly enhanced.*

H8: *Exposure to crisis recovery information that attempts to diminish a brand's role or responsibility in a brand crisis will have a positive and significant impact on spill over effects to the co-branded product, such that consumers' post-crisis evaluations will be significantly enhanced.*

In particular, it is likely that the type of crisis recovery information consumers are exposed to, will have a differential impact on their post-crisis evaluations of the culpable partner brand and the co-branded product. Three dimensions of attribution are discussed in psychology literature – causality, stability, and controllability (e.g., McAuley et al., 1992; Laczniak et al., 2001; Weiner, 1985). Causality refers to the cause of the event (intentionality or unintentionality) by the brand. Stability refers to how likely the cause of an event will change over time, that is, whether it is an isolated case and unlikely to happen in the future. Controllability refers to whether, or not, the brand has control over the situation.

In the context of organizational crisis, Coombs (2004) distinguishes between controllability, stability, and causality. The author suggests that perceptions of crisis responsibility are strongest when attribution reflects strong controllability and posit that the latter has a greater effect on consumers' post-crisis evaluations of brands than stability and causality. The above observations are consistent with Heider's (1958) explanation that individuals' judgement of responsibility is first prompted by questions of controllability. Heider (1958) explains that when attributing the cause of an event, individuals gather information by first assessing who caused it, and second whether they were in control of the event. If individuals attribute the cause of the act to be within an actor's control, the need to seek further additional information, such as 'why' and 'is it likely to re-occur' is enhanced. Heider (1958) contends that extensive elaboration is likely to lead to deeper levels of processing which, in turn, can significantly impact individuals' evaluation of the actor. Conversely, if individuals attribute that the cause of the act is not within an actor's control, the need to seek further information is diminished, demonstrating that consumers' priority when forming judgements about an act is to assess perceptions of controllability before seeking out details related to stability or causality.

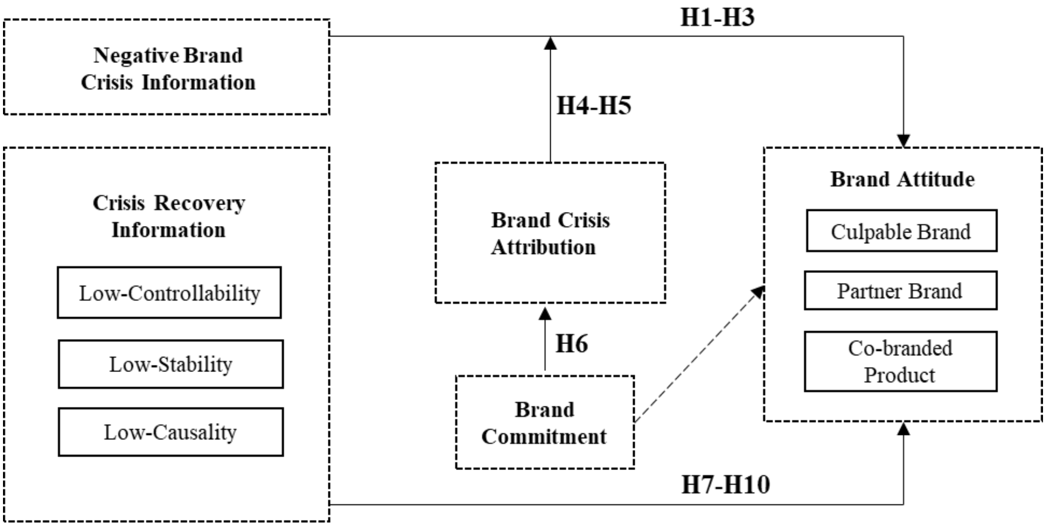
Building on the above theorising that perception of controllability has a stronger effect on inferences of attribution than stability and causality, our study postulates that the effect of crisis recovery on consumers' post-crisis evaluation is contingent upon the type of information consumers are exposed to. We contend that if consumers are presented with low-controllability recovery information which exonerates the culpable brand from having control over the crisis, their need for additional information is diminished. Thus, consumers are likely to make judgements about the crisis on the face value of the information available. By contrast, low-stability information and low-causality do not directly address primary questions of 'who caused the event' and 'whether they are in control of the event', and so consumers are likely to seek out additional information to make judgements about the crisis. Exposure to information that reflects low-controllability attribution is, therefore, expected to have a stronger effect on consumers' perceptions of responsibility than low-stability and low-causality information. In response, consumers' evaluations of the culpable partner brand and the co-branded product are also likely to differ. Hence,

H9: The type of crisis recovery information consumers are exposed to, will affect spill over effects to the culpable brand, such that post-crisis evaluations among consumers exposed to low-controllability information will be significantly more positive than those exposed to low-causality and low-stability information.

H10: The type of crisis recovery information consumers are exposed to, will affect spill over effects to the co-branded product, such that post-crisis evaluations among *consumers exposed to low-controllability information will be significantly more positive than those exposed to low-causality and low-stability information.*

The research hypotheses are summarized in the conceptual model in Figure 2

Figure 2: Conceptual Model



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sample

We designed a scenario-based experimental design to test the research hypotheses. A hypothetical alliance between two real brands (a technology brand and a battery brand) was created, and three real-life crisis scenarios experienced by the technology brand were used in the experiments. The decision to use real brands in a scenario-based experiment was consistent with prior studies examining spill over effects in co-branding literature (e.g., Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Washburn et al., 2000), while the use of real-crisis scenarios enhanced the realism of the experiment (Morales et al., 2017).

Crisis recovery information used in the experiment was manipulated in the scenarios to reflect the respective dimensions of attribution – low-stability, low-causality and low-controllability. Causality refers to whether the crisis was intentionally caused by the brand.

Stability refers to how likely the crisis is likely to happen in the future, and controllability refers to whether the brand has control over the situation (Weiner, 1985).

The experiment was replicated across three crisis contexts following the categorization of crisis types suggested by Coombs (2007) – *Accidental*, *Preventable* and *Victim*. In preventable crises, the inappropriate actions of the brand result in a breach of the law, whereas in accidental crises, the unintentional actions of the brand create a crisis. In victim crises, however, the organisation itself is perceived as a victim of the crisis. Coombs (2007) contends that the nature of a crisis and, importantly, the company’s ability to control a crisis can differentially influence how consumers evaluate an organization in the wake of a negative brand event. By testing the conceptual framework across three distinct crisis types, the generalizability of the research findings was enhanced.

Participants included a simple random sample of UK consumers recruited by an established online consumer panel representative of the UK population. Altogether 1,235 valid responses were obtained (Accidental context n=379; Preventable context n=442; Victim context n=414). The sample consisted of 57 percent females, 43 percent males, all aged 18+ years.

Stimuli

Experimental stimuli were developed based on a series of pre-tests. Pre-test one (n=69) identified the brands to be included in the stimuli. Respondents were shown a list of brands shortlisted from Interbrand’s global ranking and asked to rate brand familiarity and brand equity. Extant literature shows that brand familiarity and brand equity can impact consumers’ evaluations of brand alliances (e.g., Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Washburn et al., 2004), thus these constructs were measured. Consumer goods market were specifically selected given the likeliness that the brands in this category would be relatively familiar to respondents. A technology and a battery brand displayed high and relatively comparable brand equity and familiarity, hence these were selected as partner brands for the study.

A second pre-test (n=26) was conducted to assess consumers' 1) pre-attitude towards the technology and battery brand and 2) perceptions of fit between the two brands. Extant literature suggests that pre-attitudes toward the constitute brands as well as the fit between the brands impact consumers' processing and evaluation of brand alliances (e.g., Radighieri et al., 2014; Rodrigue & Biswas, 2004; Swaminathan et al., 2012). Thus, attitude and fit were measured. The results show that consumers viewed both brands favorably and perceived the brands to be highly compatible.

Finally, realism and manipulation checks were conducted to assess whether the experimental stimuli were perceived as intended. A realism check (n=48) was performed to assess whether respondents visualized the scenarios as 1) realistic (1=*very unrealistic to 7=very realistic*) and 2) negative (*1=very negative to 7=very positive*). One sample *t*-tests confirmed that the negative events described in the scenarios were realistic (*Accidental*= $M_{negativebrandinfo} = 5.60$, $M_{lowcausality} = 5.10$, $M_{lowcontrollability} = 5.40$, $M_{lowstability} = 5.00$; *Victim*= $M_{negativebrandinfo} = 5.50$, $M_{lowcausality} = 5.50$, $M_{lowcontrollability} = 5.10$, $M_{stability} = 5.50$; *Preventable*= $M_{negativebrandinfo} = 4.60$, $M_{lowcausality} = 4.90$, $M_{lowcontrollability} = 4.60$, $M_{stability} = 4.30$) and negative (*Accidental*= $M_{negativebrandinfo} = 2.00$, $M_{lowcausality} = 2.40$, $M_{lowcontrollability} = 2.90$, $M_{lowstability} = 2.10$; *Victim*= $M_{negativebrandinfo} = 2.30$, $M_{lowcausality} = 2.20$, $M_{lowcontrollability} = 2.50$, $M_{stability} = 2.20$; *Preventable*= $M_{negativebrandinfo} = 2.10$, $M_{lowcausality} = 2.20$, $M_{lowcontrollability} = 2.80$, $M_{stability} = 2.40$) across all three crisis types, and there were no significant differences between the conditions ($p > .05$). To ensure that the levels of the independent variables were distinct from one another, manipulation checks were performed using a panel of UK consumers (n=329) via three rounds of data collection and testing (*Accidental*= $M_{negativebrandinfo} = 5.03$, $M_{lowcausality} = 3.90$, $M_{lowcontrollability} = 3.71$, $M_{lowstability} = 3.20$, $t(133)=4.73, p < .05$); *Victim*= $M_{negativebrandinfo}$

= 5.65, $M_{lowcausality}$ = 2.88, $M_{lowcontrollability}$ = 2.96, $M_{stability}$ = 3.66, $t(73)=4.67$, $p < .01$); *Preventable*= $M_{negativebrandinfo}$ = 5.51, $M_{lowcausality}$ = 3.62, $M_{lowcontrollability}$ = 3.82, $M_{stability}$ = 3.61, $t(119)= 5.44$, $p < .01$). Overall, the results of the realism and manipulation checks confirmed that the scenarios functioned as desired.

3.2 Data collection and Measures

For data collection, a self-administered online questionnaire was designed including pre-crisis and post-crisis measurements administered in two phases. In the first phase, participants were asked about their attitudes and commitment toward the culpable and the non-culpable brands. Participants were then presented with the brand alliance and answered questions concerning their attitudes toward the alliance. Next, participants completed an unrelated filler question to allow a temporal separation between the measurements of variables, thus minimizing common method bias (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2003; Schuman & Presser, 1996). Following the filler material, participants were shown a crisis scenario involving the technology brand and asked questions to assess attribution and their post-crisis attitudes toward the culpable brand, the non-culpable brand, and the co-branded product. In the second phase, participants were asked to complete another unrelated filler question, before they were randomly assigned to one manipulation condition (i.e., crisis recovery information manipulated at three levels). Following exposure to the recovery scenario, participants' attitudes toward the culpable brand, the partner brand, and the co-branded product were once again measured.

The study adapted and contextualized established multi-item scales; three items from Sengupta and Johar (2002) were used to measure brand attitudes, eight items from Klein and Dawar (2004) for brand crisis attribution, and three items by Beatty, Homer and Kahle (1988) for brand commitment (see Table 1). All measures were on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1=strongly disagree, and 7=strongly agree. A pilot test (n=83) confirmed that Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (P_c), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity estimates for all constructs were well above the recommended thresholds, confirming that the measures had good psychometric properties.

Table 1: Measures

Constructs	Measurement items	Sources
Brand Attitude	• I think favorably of [company name] as a brand • I think [company name] is a good brand • I like [company name]	Sengupta and Johar (2002)
Brand Crisis Attribution: *Stability*	• In my opinion, the product recall represents an ongoing problem with [company name] products • In my opinion, similar product recalls are likely to occur again in the future with [company name] • In my opinion, [company name] has had similar product recalls with its products in the past • In my opinion, the product recall is typical of [company name] products	Klein and Dawar (2004)
Controllability	• In my opinion, [company name] has control over the cause of the product recall	
Causality	• In my opinion, [company name] is responsible for the product recall • In my opinion, [company name] should be held accountable for the product recall • In my opinion, the product recall is [company name's] fault	
Brand Commitment	• I consider myself to be loyal to [company name] as a brand • If a product from [company name] is not available at a store, I will go to another store to purchase the [company name] product • If a similar product from a different brand is on sale, the product from [company name] will still be my first choice	Beatty, Homer and Kahle (1988)

Note: Brand Crisis Attribution items above were used in the accident context. The items were contextualized across the three studies to reflect the different crisis types.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To test the research hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H7 and H8, Repeated Measures ANCOVA was employed to compare consumers' attitude before the crisis (Time 1), after the crisis (Time 2) and following the exposure to crisis recovery information (Time 3). Descriptive statistics across all three crisis types are summarized in Table 2. The results show that there is a statistically significant difference among the mean scores for attitude to the culpable brand (accidental: $F(2,377)=56.331$, $p=.000<.05$, $\eta p2=.230$; preventable: $F(2,392)=34.916$,

p=.000<.05, $\eta p2=.151$; victim: F(1,412)=8.192, p=.004<.05, $\eta p2=.019$) and co-branded product (accidental: F(2,377)=29.677, p=.000<.05, ηp2=.136; preventable: F(2,392)=34.916, p=.000<.05, $\eta p2=.151$; victim: F(1,411)=20.787, p=.000<.05, $\eta p2=.048$), before and after the crisis. More specifically, there is lower attitude ratings toward the culpable brand (accidental: $M_{precrisis}$=5.76, SD=1.01 vs. $M_{postcrisis}$=5.36, SD=0.72; preventable: $M_{precrisis}$=5.02, SD=1.13 vs. $M_{postcrisis}$=4.72, SD=1.02; victim: $M_{precrisis}$=4.93, SD= 0.86 vs. $M_{postcrisis}$=4.85, , SD=0.94) and the co-branded product (accidental: $M_{precrisis}$=5.59, SD= 0.98 vs. $M_{postcrisis}$=5.31, SD=1.10; preventable: $M_{precrisis}$=5.47, SD= 0.85 vs. $M_{postcrisis}$=5.34, SD=0.91; victim: $M_{precrisis}$=5.33, SD=0.74 vs. $M_{postcrisis}$=5.20, SD=0.85), following the crisis. This result shows that consumers' post-crisis attitudes to the culpable brand following a crisis are significantly weaker than their pre-attitudes to the brand. Therefore, H1 and H3 are supported.

As predicted, the results also show a general strengthening of attitudes toward the culpable brand when crisis recovery is undertaken (accidental F(2,377)=56.331, p=.000<.05, $\eta p2=.230$:$M_{postcrisis}$=5.36, SD=0.72 vs. $M_{postrecovery}$=5.46, SD=0.69; preventable: F(2,392)=34.916, p=.000<.05, $\eta p2=.151$:$M_{postcrisis}$=4.72, SD=1.02 vs. $M_{postrecovery}$=4.92, SD=0.95; victim: F(1,412)=31.809, p=.000<.05, $\eta p2=.072$:$M_{postcrisis}$=4.85, SD= 0.94 vs. $M_{postrecovery}$=4.97, SD=0.72), and for the co-branded product (accidental: F(2,377)=29.677, p=.000<.05, $\eta p2=.136$: $M_{postcrisis}$=5.31, SD=1.10 vs. $M_{postrecovery}$=5.39, SD=1.07; preventable: F(2,391)=9.095, p=.000<.05, $\eta p2=.044$:$M_{postcrisis}$=5.34, SD=0.91 vs. $M_{postrecovery}$=5.38, SD=0.90; victim: F(1,411)=12.70, p=.000<.05, $\eta p2=.030$:$M_{postcrisis}$=5.20, SD=0.85 vs. $M_{postrecovery}$=5.22, SD=0.97). The strengthening effect is especially evident in the victim crisis context, whereby consumers' pre-crisis attitudes to the culpable brand are fully restored. The results confirm that post-crisis communication which diminishes a brand's role or responsibility in a crisis will have a positive and significant impact on spill over effects. Thus, H7 and H8 are supported.

By contrast, attitudes toward the non-culpable brand remain stable after the crises. The results show a lack of significant difference among the mean scores pre and post attitude (accidental $F(2,377)=.408$, $p=.665>.05$, $\eta p2=.002$; preventable: $F(2,392)=1.333$, $p=.265>.05$, $\eta p2=.007$; victim: $F(1,412)=.050$, $p=.823>.05$, $\eta p2=.000$). In sum, the results confirm the predictions that in a corporate alliance, a crisis involving one partner is unlikely to transfer to the partner brand, supporting H2.

Table 2: Pre- and post-crisis changes in constructs' mean averages

			Accident			
Construct	**Mean (SD) Pre-Crisis**	**Mean (SD) Post-Crisis**	**Mean (SD) Post-Recovery**	***f*-value**	***p*-value**	**Sig. Difference**
Attitude to the Culpable Brand	5.76 (1.01)	5.36 (0.72)	5.46 (0.69)	(2,377)=56.331	.000***	yes
Attitude to the Non-Culpable Brand	5.70 (0.94)	5.69 (0.51)	-	(2,377)=.408	.665 ^{ns}	no
Attitude to Co-Branded Product	5.59 (0.98)	5.31 (1.10)	5.39 (1.07)	(2,377)=29.677	000***	yes
			Preventative			
Construct	**Mean (SD) Pre-Crisis**	**Mean (SD) Post-Crisis**	**Mean (SD) Post-Recovery**	***f*-value**	***p*-value**	**Sig. Difference**
Attitude to the Culpable Brand	5.02 (1.13)	4.72 (1.02)	4.92 (0.95)	(2,392)=34.916	.000***	yes
Attitude to the Non-Culpable Brand	5.72 (0.93)	5.71 (0.94)	-	(2,392)=1.333	.265 ^{ns}	no
Attitude to Co-Branded Product	5.47 (0.85)	5.34 (0.91)	5.38 (0.90)	(2,391)=9.095	.000***	yes
			Victim			
Construct	**Mean (SD) Pre-Crisis**	**Mean (SD) Post-Crisis**	**Mean (SD) Post-Recovery**	***f*-value**	***p*-value**	**Sig. Difference**
Attitude to the Culpable Brand	4.93 (0.86)	4.85 (0.94)	4.97 (0.72)	(1,412)=8.192	.004***	yes
Attitude to the Non-Culpable Brand	5.65 (0.91)	5.64 (0.73)	-	(1,412)=.050	.823 ^{ns}	no
Attitude to Co-Branded Product	5.33 (0.74)	5.20 (0.85)	5.22 (0.97)	(1,411)=20.787	.000***	yes

Note: One-tailed tests: *$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$; ^{ns} = *not significant*

To test the hypothesized relationships between 1) attribution and consumers' post-crisis evaluation and 2) commitment and attribution, the data were split following a median split approach suggested by Cohen et al. (1983). Table 3 presents the results from ANOVA tests across the three crisis contexts. Consistent with our expectations, the results show that the effect between attribution and consumers' post-crisis evaluation of the culpable brand are positive and significant, across all three crisis types confirming H4 (accidental: $F(1,376)=2.127$, $p=.046<.05$, $\eta p2=.006$; preventable: $F(1,439)=6.790$, $p=.009<.05$, $\eta p2=.015$; victim: $F(1,411)=6.211$, $p=.013<05$, $\eta p2=.015$). The same, however, does not apply to the co-branded product (accidental: $F(1,375)=7.161$, $p=.008<.05$, *ηp2=.019*[1]; preventable: $F(1,438)=.004$, $p=.951>.05$, *ηp2=.000*; victim: $F(1,410)= 302$, $p=.583>.05$, *ηp2=.001*). Hence H5 is not supported. Further, the results demonstrate that when consumers are highly committed to the culpable brand in the alliance, they are less likely to hold the brand accountable for the crisis in preventable and accidental crisis types, thus mitigating unfavourable evaluations (accidental: $F(1,377)=6.261$, $p=.013<.05$; preventable: $F(1,440)=27.940$, $p=.000<.05$; victim: $F(1,412)=.003$, $p=.956>.05$). H6 is therefore partly supported.

Finally, we examined the differential impact of the type of crisis recovery information on consumer responses to the culpable brand and the co-branded product. The results indicate the absence of a significant difference among the mean scores for attitude to the culpable brand (accidental: *F(2,375)=.658, p=.898>.05, ηp2=.001*; preventable: *F(2,391)=1.206, p=.301>.05, ηp2=.006;* victim: *F(2,410)=1.674, p=.189>.05, ηp2=.008*) and the co-branded product (accidental: *F(2,374)=.108, p=.519>.05, ηp2=.003*; preventable: *F(2,390)=.396, p=.674>.05, ηp2=.002;*victim: *F(2,409)=1.924, p=.147>.05, ηp2=.009*) among consumers exposed to low-causality, low-stability and low-controllability crisis recovery information. Thus, H9 and H10 are not supported.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics

Hypothesized Relationship	**External Attribution Mean (SD)**	**Internal Attribution Mean (SD)**	***f*-value**	***p*-value**	**Sig. difference**
Accident					
BCA → PCA-CB	5.43 (0.74)	5.28 (0.71)	(1,376)=2.127	.046**	Yes
BCA → PCA-CBP	5.17 (0.79)	5.45 (0.72)	(1,375)=7.161	.008***	yes [wd]
Preventative					
BCA → PCA-CB	4.80 (0.68)	4.54 (0.71)	(1,439)=6.790	.009**	Yes
BCA → PCA-CBP	5.32 (0.69)	5.32 (0.72)	(1,438)=.004	.951 [ns]	No
Victim					
BCA → PCA-CB	4.97 (1.00)	4.73 (0.96)	(1,411)=6.211	.013**	Yes
BCA → PCA-CBP	5.17 (0.76)	5.22 (0.81)	(1,410)=.302	.583 [ns]	No
Hypothesized Relationship	**High Commitment Mean (SD)**	**Low Commitment Mean (SD)**	***f*-value**	***p*-value**	**Sig. difference**
Accident					

[1] Although the result is significant, the direction of the effects does not confirm the research hypothesis. The mean ratings shown in Table 2 shows stronger attitudes scores for consumers who ascribed internal (vs external) brand attributions.

BC → BCA	4.54 (0.97)	4.76 (0.76)	(1,377)=6.261	.013**	Yes
Preventative					
BC → BCA	4.91 (0.91)	5.39 (0.98)	(1,440)=27.940	.000***	Yes
Victim					
BC → BCA	4.50 (0.92)	4.49 (0.95)	(1,412)=.003	.956 ^{ns}	No

Hypothesized Relationship	**Low Stability Mean (SD)**	**Low Controllability Mean (SD)**	**Low Causality Mean (SD)**	***f*-value**	***p*-value**	**Sig. difference**
Accident						
CRI → PCA-CB	5.52 (0.88)	5.49 (0.86)	5.38 (0.87)	(2.375)=.658	.898^{ns}	no
CRI→ PCA-CBP	5.36 (0.92)	5.42 (0.89)	5.37 (0.90)	(2,374)=.108	.519^{ns}	no
Preventative						
CRI→ PCA-CB	5.03 (0.91)	4.83 (0.93)	4.89 (0.90)	(2,391)=1.206	.301^{ns}	no
CRI→ PCA-CBP	5.44 (0.90)	5.35 (0.95)	5.33 (0.97)	(2,390)=.396	.674^{ns}	no
Victim						
CRI→ PCA-CB	4.88 (0.85)	5.09 (0.86)	4.94 (0.83)	(2,410)=1.674	.189^{ns}	no
CRI→ PCA-CBP	5.12 (0.98)	5.18 (0.89)	5.35 (0.92)	(2,409)=1.924	.147^{ns}	no

*Note: One-tailed tests — *p<0.10; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01;* ^{ns} *= not significant*; $^{\mathbf{wd}}$ = wrong direction; BCA (Brand Crisis Attribution); PCA-CB (Post-Crisis Attitude to Culpable Brand); PCA-CBP (Post-Crisis Attitude to Co-branded Product); BC (Brand Commitment); CRI (Crisis Recovery Information).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings provide novel insights on the psychological processes underlying consumers’ responses to brand crises in brand alliances. Results from our study show that a brand crisis involving one partner in a corporate brand alliance negatively affects consumers’ attitudes toward the culpable brand, which in turn, spills over to consumers’ evaluations of the co-branded product. Attitudes toward the partner brand, however, are not negatively affected by the crisis. The above evidence adds to prior research suggesting that brand crises often precipitate a range of effects that negatively impact the way consumers perceive brands post-crises (e.g., Kim, 2014; Votolato & Unnava, 2006). Our findings show that consumers are likely to respond negatively to the culpable partner brand embroiled in a crisis, *regardless* of the nature of the crisis. Notably, our findings contradict other studies suggesting that partner brands are penalized for the misdeeds of the alliance, especially in a celebrity-brand alliance (e.g., Thomas & Fowler, 2016; Till & Shimp, 1998). We demonstrate that across various crisis types, spill over from the culpable to the non-culpable partner is not likely to occur if the latter had no role in the crisis. The above finding is explained by Heider’s (1958) Principle of Local Relevance which elucidates that if an environmental condition is perceived to be associated with just one entity in a triad, it is unlikely to affect the evaluations of the other entities. It follows, therefore, that a brand crisis restricted to one brand in an alliance will influence evaluations of that brand and is unlikely to have an effect on the non-culpable partner brand.

The findings also suggest that spill over effect is contingent upon perceived attribution, that is, consumers who perceive the culpable brand as being responsible for the crisis (i.e., internal attribution) evaluate the culpable brand more negatively than consumers who perceive the cause to be outside the brand's control (i.e., external attribution). The above effect, however, is not evident for the co-branded product. The finding suggests that in an alliance, the cues that would cause consumers who ascribe blame on the culpable brand to revisit their brand evaluations, seem weaker for the co-branded product, thereby lowering its moderating effects on evaluations of the co-branded product. This can be explained by the fact that the crisis information presented to respondents focused only on the culpable brand in the study. It is likely that respondents might not have considered attributional cues about the culpable partner brand to be important, or credible, in forming their post-crisis attitudes towards the co-branded product. Hence, while the perception of blame is likely to significantly impact consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the culpable partner brand, the effect of attribution on consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the co-branded product is non-significant. The findings also suggest that consumers with a higher level of commitment to the culpable brand are less likely to make internal attributions in preventable and accidental crises, thus, acting as a buffer against negative brand information which, in turn, can attenuate the impact of brand crises. The findings are, thus, important contributions to the attribution and commitment streams of literature.

Finally, the results show that consumers' post-crisis attitude towards the culpable brand and the co-branded product can be enhanced if they are exposed to post-crisis recovery information that attempts to diminish the culpable brand's role in the crisis. The above findings corroborate research showing that post-crisis communication providing an explanation for a negative event mitigates post-crisis blame and unfavorable brand evaluation (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Kim et al., 2004; Lei et al., 2012). Our findings, however, show that consumers' post-crisis evaluations are not significantly different among those exposed to low-causality, low-stability and low- controllability crisis recovery information. This finding is a departure from prior research suggesting that controllability, which refers to whether the brand has control over the situation, is the strongest measure of attribution (e.g., Betancourt et al., 1992; Carroll & Payne, 1976). The results demonstrate that consumers' post-crisis evaluation following exposure to any of the three types of external recovery information are not significantly different. The lack of a significant relationship between the types of crisis recovery information can be attributed to consumers being less concerned about the *type* of low attribution recovery message, than they are about whether the culpable brand can diminish blame by adequately explaining its role in the crisis. For example, in study 2 (preventable crisis), the respondents were told that the labour violations did not directly involve the brand and was caused by a third-party manufacturing supplier. We contend, therefore, that attempting a crisis recovery alone can outweigh the type of recovery information provided towards shaping consumer responses following a crisis.

6. CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Our study provides four contributions to knowledge. *First*, it introduces a novel approach for examining attitude spill over effects in brand alliances through the lens of Balance theory. The study advances knowledge on spill over effects by establishing that post-crisis evaluations of each entity in an alliance are affected by how that evaluation fits with other related attitudes held by consumers. For example, consumers' post-crisis evaluations of the co-branded product are influenced by their post-crisis evaluations of the culpable brand, and vice versa. As a result, the impact of brand crises on consumers' evaluations of brand alliances should be examined concurrently, rather than by focusing on individual effects toward one partner.

Drawing on Balance theory, our study provides empirical evidence that consumers are motivated to revisit their negative post-crisis attitudes to achieve an ideal balanced state (i.e., a triad in which all attitudes are positive). The study shows that the state of balance in an alliance influences consumers' evaluations of the alliance partners, and the co-branded product to differing degrees. By focusing on consumers' psychological desire to strive towards ideal balance in alliances, therefore, we offer new theoretical insights on the psychological processes that underpin the formation and reversal of negative attitude spill over.

Second, our study demonstrates the role of brand crisis attribution and brand commitment in explaining consumers' evaluations of crises in brand alliances. We provide empirical evidence that causal attributions are determined by two factors: i) the assessment of information about an event/occurrence, and ii) commitment towards the object perceived as responsible for such an event/occurrence. In doing so, we add two new dimensions — attribution and brand commitment — to the theoretical knowledge on negative spill over effects.

Third, we advance brand alliance research by elucidating the effect of crises in brand alliances, an area currently overlooked. Our study is the first to empirically examine the impact of a partner's transgressions on consumers' evaluations of both partner brands and, importantly, the co-branded product. We establish that crises in corporate alliances are particularly damaging to the culpable brand and the co-branded product, a caveat to the benefits demonstrated with brand alliances in prior research.

Fourth, our study offers novel insights by examining the effects of crisis recovery in a brand alliance context. We demonstrate that consumers' post-crisis perceptions can be enhanced through exposure to crisis recovery information that attempts to diminish the culpable brand's role in the crisis; however, the perceptions are not differentially impacted by the *type* of crisis recovery information that consumers are exposed to. In doing so, the study advances knowledge on the efficacy of crisis recovery strategies beyond single brand contexts.

6.2 Managerial Applications

From a managerial perspective, our study provides important implications for brand and crisis communications managers. The findings establish benchmarks for PR practitioners seeking to design effective post-crisis communication strategies. Our findings indicate that consumers' negative post-crisis perceptions of the culpable partner and the co-branded product can be enhanced through exposure to crisis recovery information, regardless of the type of crisis recovery they are exposed to (i.e., low-controllability, low-causality and low- stability). Post crisis communication focussed on assuring consumers that a crisis is unlikely to recur is no more, or less, effective than information focussed on the brand's lack of control over the crisis. Given the above, PR and brand managers can employ any of the above-mentioned types of crisis recovery strategies in their post-crisis communications. Nonetheless, it is critical that the PR and brand managers of the culpable partner brand are prepared to respond immediately following any type of crisis and focus on diminishing blame by adequately explaining its role in the crisis. Specifically, post-crisis communication should explicitly convey that the cause of the negative event was due to an external factor [2]*. For example, if a brand recalls a faulty product, attributing the cause to an uncontrollable technical glitch is unlikely to lead to unfavorable consumers' post-crisis evaluations. Similarly, communicating that a supplier is responsible for a legal breach can attenuate negative consumer attitudes toward the brand.

[2] The guideline does not advocate endorsing a misrepresentation of external factors, to shift blame, or to avoid responsibility. Attributing cause of the negative event to an external factor is applicable in situations where a crisis is undeniably caused by external circumstances.

In addition, we demonstrate the value of brand commitment for organizations. We provide empirical evidence that brand commitment influences consumers' evaluations of attribution which, in turn, impact consumers' post-crisis evaluation of brand alliances in crises. The above findings underscore the need for brand managers to invest resources in enhancing commitment to the brand, since it serves as a buffer for brands involved in crises. In the event of a crisis, PR practitioners and brand managers should consider employing committed consumers on its social media channels and in PR activities, to generate positive feedback and offset negative publicity.

Further, we enhance managerial understanding of the risks associated with brand alliances. Our study demonstrates that the benefits of alliances must be weighed against its potential risks, as consumer attitude towards the co-branded product is likely to suffer alongside the culpable brand. Brand crises are unpredictable, and managers need to be aware that they are unable to control the actions of their partners. While it is not possible to predict crises based on a partner's reputation, managers should be prudent when deciding who to partner with. For example, brands may wish to conduct a risk assessment audit on potential partners to identify threats which could possibly evolve into a crisis. Managers are also advised to undertake a scenario planning exercise when deciding about the co-branding initiative. The exercise can be aimed at forecasting the likely impact of a crisis on the partnership, and to allow managers to prepare for potential crises.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study has limitations which also provide avenues for future research. We examined consumers' responses to brand alliances, while accounting for the focal role of attribution. Other variables, however, could influence the phenomenon under investigation are identified. For example, the severity of a crisis and the media's interest and coverage of a crisis might explain why perceptions and attitudes toward the alliance are altered following a crisis.

Moreover, while in this study consumers' post-crisis attitudes reflected an unpleasant balanced state (Model C), it was balanced nonetheless, thus, the effect of the recovery information was more effective in re-establishing a pleasant balance triad (Model A). Notably, this may not always be the case, particularly in crises with varying severity and media interest. For example, consumers with post crisis attitudes that reflect Model E may be harder to recover. Further, we employ cross-sectional data to investigate the impact of brand crises on consumers' perception of brand alliances. In the real world, however, crises can extend over a period. Future research could employ longitudinal data to investigate how consumers' post-crisis perception of the culpable brand, the partner brand, and the co-branded product, change over time.

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