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The Effects of Two Kinds of Corporate Publicity on Customer-brand Relationship

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Abstract In the recent marketplace, corporate brands are exposed to a variety of corporate publicity, which may elicit unexpected consumer responses and requires more academic attention. This study explores how two kinds of corporate publicity (ability-related vs. social responsibility-related) influence customer-brand relationship. We propose that both kinds of publicity influence customer-brand relationship strength through brand trust and brand affect. In addition, the interaction pattern between the two kinds of publicity is further examined. Two competing hypotheses predicting divergent patterns of the interaction effect are proposed. A 2×2 between-subject experiment is conducted in the context of fast food service industry. Results show that, after controlling the existing customer-brand relationship, social responsibility-related publicity has significant influence on the strength of customer-brand relationship, while ability-related publicity has no such effect, given the fact that consumers probably have developed well-established perceptions on the focal company's ability. Furthermore, the specific interaction pattern between the two kinds of publicity is consistent with the prediction based on fairness heuristic theory. In addition, brand trust and brand affect play mediating roles in the mechanism through which corporate publicity influences customer-brand relationship.

Keywords corporate publicity, social responsibility, corporate ability, customer-brand relationship, brand affect, brand trust

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1 Introduction

In order to investigate psychological and behavioral meanings of brands to consumers, brand researchers propose the customer-brand relationship theory and extend relevant research into new domains (Fournier, 1998). Despite of the continuously enriched understandings of customer-brand relationship, research on factors influencing customer-brand relationship is still limited (Keller, 2001; Aaker et al., 2004). Brand managers usually invest a lot of resources in building and sustaining good relationships with their customers. They can benefit from the exploration of factors determining customer-brand relationship in that it satisfies their urgent needs for practical skills to develop and manage brand relationship. This research focuses on the mechanism through which corporate publicity has impact on the strength of customer-brand relationship.

All kinds of corporate publicity are widely existent in the current marketplace, making the focal companies the targets of stakeholder scrutiny. Publicity takes different forms, with some reflecting corporate ability (e.g., product quality and management skills) and others emphasizing corporate performance on shouldering social responsibility (e.g., environment protection and charitable causes). Different from communication channels dominated by companies, corporate publicity is usually disseminated by a third party with an objective stand, and thus seems more convincing. In addition, its ubiquity enhances its impact on customer attitude and behaviors. Previous research provides established insights on the detrimental influence of negative publicity, such as reduced customer satisfaction, behavioral intention and corporate brand equity (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). Despite of the extensive presence of corporate publicity, it is surprising that relevant research is still inadequate and mostly limited to case studies. Significant academic gaps exist in literature, which warrant additional investigations. For instance, previous research focuses on the harmful effect of negative publicity on corporate image and customer responses, and few studies consider the more realistic scenarios (e.g., coexistence of diverse publicity). Moreover, corporate publicity has not been systematically categorized and examined respectively and jointly.

To address the gaps mentioned above, this research classifies corporate publicity into ability-related and social responsibility-related ones, and intends to explore the mechanism through which they concurrently and interactively influence customer-brand relationship strength. The findings are useful to advance managerial knowledge on customer reactions towards corporate publicity and thus facilitate formulation of effective responding strategies. Specially, this study answers the following questions:

How ability-related publicity and social responsibility-related publicity

influence customer-brand relationship strength?

What is the specific pattern of the interaction effect between the two kinds of publicity?

Do brand affect and brand trust play mediating roles in the influencing mechanism?

In the following sections, we first review relevant literature on customer-brand relationship, corporate publicity, and the two-factor theory/fairness heuristic theory. A conceptual framework and hypotheses are proposed accordingly. After that, experiment design, data analysis and results are reported. In addition, we discuss in detail what academic and managerial implications can be derived from this study. Finally, research limitations and directions for future research are provided.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Customer-brand Relationship Strength

Building and sustaining good relationship with customers are considered key to brand success in a competitive market environment, thus they falls into one of the most important responsibilities for brand managers, which provides a guideline through all their daily work. For researchers, customer-brand relationship is an emerging topic attracting continuous efforts. Some brand researchers claim that relationships between customers and their brands possess similar characteristics with interpersonal relationships, such as those between partners and friends (Fournier, 1998). Fournier and Yao (1997) suggested that the integration of relationship theory and brand research can deepen our understanding of the connotation of customer-brand relationship, gain richer brand knowledge with diagnostic value, and capture the dynamic nature of customer-brand relationship.

Prior research has provided multiple theoretical models to conceptualize components of customer-brand relationship (e.g., Keller, 2001). Among those, BRQ (brand relationship quality) model proposed by Fournier (1998) may be the most influential one and inspires following research in relevant domains. Fournier suggested that BRQ comprises six key dimensions, namely love/passion, self-connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy, and partnership quality. Building on BRQ model and taking into account unique characteristics of local consumers, He (2006) developed a Chinese brand relationship quality scale (CBRQ), which suggests that brand relationship quality in Chinese context includes trust, interdependence, commitment, self-concept connection, social

value expression, and real and assumed emotions. Comparison between the original BRQ and CBRQ indicates that the first four dimensions are present in both models, which implies a universally conceptual consistence of the construct. However, the last two dimensions of CBRQ emerge due to the cultural uniqueness of Chinese society, which implies a cross-cultural divergence of brand relationship quality. Existing studies on customer-brand relationship depend greatly on theories and findings from psychology and sociology research, and apply general rules rooted in interpersonal interactions into the investigation of customer-brand relationship. For instance, Aggarwal (2004) categorized customer-brand relationships into exchange relationships and communal relationships, and further suggest that consumers in an exchange relationship with brands process brand information differently from consumers in a communal relationship.

Further, Aaker et al. (2004) proposed another concept of customer-brand relationship strength, which broadly refers to the durability and effectiveness of a relationship, to capture the nature of customer-brand relationship. In their study, customer-brand relationship strength is regarded as a multidimensional construct, comprising satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and self-connection. Compared with Fournier's (1998) original BRQ model, customer-brand relationship strength model adds in the dimension of satisfaction, and removes the dimensions of love/passion and interdependence. Such modification is probably due to the extremely high correlations among dimensions of the original BRQ model (Fournier and Yao, 1997) and to inevitable limitation when apply the reciprocal rule of interpersonal interactions into the customer-brand context (Bengtsson, 2003).

Research on influential factors of customer-brand relationship quality/strength is limited. Thorbjornsen et al. (2002) took initiatives in comparing the effectiveness of individualized website and consumer community in shaping customer-brand relationship quality and find that personal internet-relevant experience determines whether two methods make difference or not. Aaker et al. (2004) explored how brand aggressive behaviors influence customer-brand relationship strength, and suggested divergent mechanisms for sincere brands and exciting brands.

The development of any relationship is based on continuously obtaining and processing relational information. Various actions and events relating to a focal brand are probably finally received and transformed by consumers in terms of a series of informational elements, which subsequently create or update their brand attitude and responding behaviors. Concerning to the relationships between customers and brands, relational information may come directly from personal consumption experience, or indirectly from word-of-mouth, and corporate

advertising etc. Publicity (e.g., news reports) is another extensively utilized way to distribute corporate information, to which consumers are both actively and passively exposed everyday. However, literature provides few insights on the impact of corporate publicity on customer-brand relationship. This research intends to investigate how the two kinds of publicity (i.e., ability-related publicity and social responsibility-related publicity) interactively change customer-brand relationship strength, in particular customer satisfaction and commitment.

In Aaker et al.'s (2004) study, partner quality is considered as the immediate antecedent of customer-brand relationship strength. Partner quality puts emphasis on brand characteristics such as reliability, integrity, and sincerity, which imply the extent to which customers have trusting beliefs in the brand. We suggest that the concept of partner quality mainly considers cognitive aspects of consumer responses toward a brand, but neglects possible affective responses. Gratification of customers' affective needs is another essential requirement for forming good customer-brand relationship. Previous research has indicated that both brand trust and brand affect are central determinants of customer-brand relationship status (e.g., loyalty), with brand trust reflecting customer reliability and dependence on a brand while brand affect demonstrating positive affections derived from brand usage (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Therefore, brand trust and brand affect are proposed here as mediating factors in our conceptual model exploring the effect of publicity on customer brand relationship.

2.2 Corporate Publicity and its Effect on Customers

In public relation literature, much research documents the impact of publicity, especially negative one, on corporate performance (Henard, 2002; Kroloff, 1988; Renkema and Hoeken, 1998). Following the definition of negative publicity given by Sherell and Reidenbach (1986), we define publicity as "information distributed in the form of news reports through printing, broadcasting, word of mouth, and other kinds of media, which is targeted at a product, service, commercial organization or individual." That with potentially destructive effect is called negative publicity, while that with potentially constructive effect is called positive publicity. Compared with marketing communication channels dominated by companies (e.g., advertising), publicity is regarded as a kind of information source with more trustworthiness, and thus more influential (Bond and Kirshenbaum, 1998). Marketing researchers also provide interesting insights on consumers' psychological and behavioral reactions towards corporate publicity (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Griffin et al., 1991; Pullig et al., 2006). Among those, earlier studies built their findings on impression formation theories, emphasizing the role of negative affect and granting negative information greater

weight in evaluation than positive information (Griffin et al., 1991; Fiske, 1980). Through a series of experiments, Menon et al. (1999) found that negative affect process and cognitive elaboration process concurrently exist and jointly determine how consumers may respond to corporate negative publicity. However, Ahluwalia et al. (2000) pointed out the inadequacy of negative affect theory in explaining how negative publicity influences consumer attitude and behaviors. They further suggested that brand commitment moderates the pattern how consumers process negative information about familiar brands. More specifically, negative affect process works only for consumers with low brand commitment but not for highly committed consumers.

Recent studies reported a more extensive impact of negative publicity. For instance, Dahlén and Lange (2006) investigated how the negative publicity of one brand can spill over to other brands. Lei et al. (2006) focus on the roles of specific information characteristics in the effect of negative publicity on brand portfolio. In addition, Stammerjohan et al. (2005) suggested that negative publicity, advertising and existing brand attitude intertwine with each other and determine consumers' attitude on brand advertisement as well as the focal brand.

Gaps still exist in the extant research on corporate publicity, which warrant further examination. For example, previous research focuses on the harmful impact of negative publicity on corporate image and customer responses, while only few studies investigate the more realistic scenarios in which publicity of different nature and valence is present simultaneously. In addition, there is a lack of systematic categorization of corporate publicity in previous research. Most studies utilize product harm crisis as research context in their experiment or survey design (Weinberger and Romeo, 1991). Dacin and Brown (1997) proposed the term of corporate associations to generically represent all the information about a company that a person holds, including relevant perceptions, inferences, and beliefs. Given the ubiquity and reliability of corporate publicity, it is not surprising that publicity is one of the major sources for consumers to generate or update their associations with a corporate brand. In addition, they provide a systematic two-category classification of corporate associations, in which corporate associations are categorized into corporate ability associations and corporate social responsibility associations. Following this framework, this study will examine two categories of corporate publicity, namely ability-related publicity and social responsibility-related publicity concurrently and in particular their interaction effect.

2.3 Two-factor Theory and Fairness Heuristic Theory

Both two-factor theory and fairness heuristic theory can be used to explain the interaction effect between the two kinds of publicity, but give divergent

predictions (Hui et al., 2004). Referring respectively to two-factor theory and fairness heuristic theory, this research proposes two competing patterns through which corporate publicity may interactively weaken (enhance) customer-brand relationship. Ability-based publicity (social responsibility-related publicity) plays different roles in consumer decision-making process in two theoretical frameworks.

Two-factor theory has been widely applied to explain a variety of marketing phenomena, such as advertising effectiveness (Rethans et al., 1986), customer satisfaction (Swan and Combs, 1976) and service quality (Chowdhary and Prakash, 2005). This theory suggests that the influential factors of an evaluation result can be classified into motivators and hygiene factors. In addition, if hygiene factors have not arrived at the expected standard, people will make negative evaluation regardless of the level of motivators. In other words, motivators can improve evaluation results only when hygiene factors are adequately good. For instance, through a key event study, Maddox (1981) found that determinants of customer satisfaction are dissimilar with those of customer dissatisfaction. Specifically, products with inferior hedonic features but superior functional features lead to reduced customer satisfaction rather than increased dissatisfaction. In the context of corporate publicity, two-factor theory may suggest that ability-related publicity probably serve as a hygiene factor while social responsibility-related publicity as a motivator. In free market economy, the primary reason that consumers are interested in a company is its ability to provide offerings satisfying certain functional customer needs, which lays a foundation for the existence of a customer-company relationship. On the other hand, corporate social responsible behaviors, especially the ethical and philanthropic actions etc., can not directly provide customers with economic benefits. However, it facilitates the generation of a respectful and desirable corporate image and thus induces customer trust and likeness. In this way, out of the two kinds of publicity, we attempt to treat ability-related publicity as the hygiene factor and social responsibility-related publicity as the motivator.

Fairness heuristic theory suggests that the overall assessment on a social exchange is determined together by the favorability of the exchange results and the fairness of the exchange process (Lind and Tyler, 1988). In a condition of good results, people will give favorable evaluation regardless of the exchange process. However, in a condition of bad results, the fairness of the exchange process can make a big difference in final assessment. Specially, results derived from a fair exchange process will get higher evaluation than those from an unfair process (Brockner, 2002). For instance, Hui et al. (2004) showed that consumers, in face of uncertain service results, use process quality as a heuristic substitute to judge a service provider's trustworthiness. In addition, the interaction pattern

between final service results and process quality is consistent with that predicted by fairness heuristic theory. According to fairness heuristic theory, social responsibility-related publicity, to some extent, indicates whether a company comply a fairness rule throughout its commercial operation. This point will be further illustrated in the following section.

3 Hypotheses Development

This study intends to investigate the mechanism through which two main categories of corporate publicity concurrently and interactively influence customer-brand relationship strength, and to explore the roles of brand trust and brand affect in this process. The conceptual model we propose to explain the process is shown in Fig. 1.

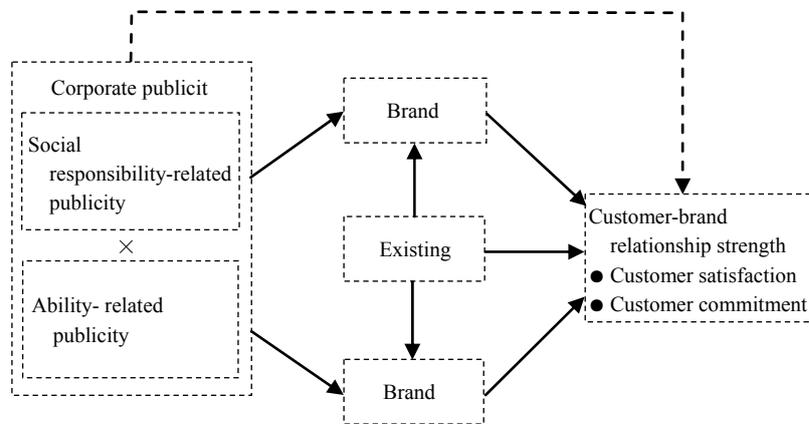


Fig. 1 Conceptual Model of Corporate Publicity and Customer-brand Relationship

3.1 Corporate Publicity and Brand Trust

Ability-related publicity communicates corporate information to the public regarding to a company's product quality, expertise, R&D ability, manufacturing skills, management capability and leadership in the whole industry etc, while social responsibility-related publicity involves corporate information regarding to organizational actions and efforts in protecting welfares of employees, customers and the whole society. Previous research suggests that perceived favorability of ability, benevolence, and integrity of the target (e.g., brands and service providers) can determine the extent to which consumers trust it. For example, Mayer et al. (1995) propose an integrative model of organizational trust, in which ability,

benevolence, and integrity are identified as three key dimensions of perceived trustworthiness and subsequently determine interpersonal trust among employees within an organization. In addition, Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) found that the ability and benevolence of the personnel and management system in service industries are key determinants of the service provider's trustworthiness and consumer trust. Ability-related publicity can be directly linked to corporate ability associations consumers hold in their mind and are able to modify customer perceptions on competitive advantage of the corporate brand, while social responsibility-related publicity may change consumer beliefs in brand benevolence and/or integrity. As such, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a Positive (negative) social responsibility-related corporate publicity strengthens (weakens) consumer trust toward the corporate brand.

H1b Positive (negative) ability-related corporate publicity strengthens (weakens) consumer trust toward the corporate brand.

3.2 Corporate Publicity and Brand Affect

Brand affect refers to the potential of a brand to stimulate positive affective reactions when a consumer is associated with the brand (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Berens et al. (2005) showed that both corporate ability associations and social responsibility associations can inspire favorable product-level emotional reactions. For instance, products labeled by a corporate brand of high social responsibility are regarded as more sympathetic, attractive and pleasant. Similarly, positive (negative) corporate ability publicity and social responsibility publicity are able to induce desirable (undesirable) affects at the brand level (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Specifically, positive ability-related publicity helps reduce perceived risk and anxiety in making brand choice, and thus consumers have more confidence and security in purchasing and using highly capable brands. In addition, when consumers are convinced that the ability of the focal corporate brand has been improved to a great extent or has competitive advantage as indicated in the publicity, they are likely to be more satisfied because of the potential to benefit from superior brand value. On the contrary, negative ability-related publicity may result in uneasy and concern about the brand, or even depression and anger. The strength of the negative responses depends on many individual and relational factors. Concerning to social responsibility-related publicity, the positive one may make consumers feel harmonious, happy and blissful, while the negative one probably leads to disappointment toward the brand and even other violent negative emotions. Moreover, consumers may also feel enhanced self-esteem when they are identified with a corporate brand with high reputation of social responsibility,

and thus become more affectionate of the brand (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). As such, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2a Positive (negative) social responsibility-related corporate publicity strengthens (weakens) consumer affect toward the corporate brand.

H2b Positive (negative) ability-related corporate publicity strengthens (weakens) consumer affect toward the corporate brand.

3.3 Corporate Publicity and Customer-brand Relationship Strength

Due to the nature of ability-related publicity, which communicates corporate information regarding to product quality, expertise, R&D ability, manufacturing skills and leadership in the whole industry etc., exposure to such publicity can alter perceived quality and value of the offerings endorsed by the corporate brand. Much evidence supports the notion that perceived quality and/or value are key predictors of customer satisfaction and commitment, and thus essential for building strong customer-brand relationship (Fornell et al, 2006).

According to Luo and Bhattacharya (2006), the phenomenon that highly social responsible companies are more likely to make consumer satisfied can be explained at least by three reasons. First, the “generalized customers” (customers who are not only regular customers focusing on consumption experience but also actually or potentially belong to stakeholder groups) are likely to show higher satisfaction towards products and services offered by socially responsible firms. Second, CSR initiatives contribute to the development of identified relationships (i.e., a sense of connection) between a firm and its customers, which subsequently lead to enhanced satisfaction level with the firms’ offerings. Third, given other things equal, offerings from a socially responsible company are likely to provide customers with more perceived value (i.e., added value derived from good social actions) and thus increase customer satisfaction. These arguments can be equally applied to our context. As such, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3a Positive (negative) social responsibility-related corporate publicity strengthens (weakens) customer-brand relationship strength.

H3b Positive (negative) ability-related corporate publicity strengthens (weakens) customer-brand relationship strength.

3.4 Brand Trust/brand Affect and Customer-brand Relationship Strength

Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) suggested that brand trust and brand affect jointly determine the nature of customer-brand relationship and both are able to boost brand loyalty. Relationship marketing researchers have arrived consensus

on the belief that trust is a central factor for maintaining a long-term, stable and sturdy relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In addition, the positive linkage between trust and commitment has received strong support from literature in a variety of contexts (e.g., Moorman and Gerald, 1992). For example, Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) provided empirical findings in retail and airline industries that customer trust towards a firm could increase customer loyalty through enhanced perceived value. Morgan and Hunt (1994) claimed that a buyer puts itself in a disadvantaged position that involves high likelihood of getting harmed, when the buyer is highly committed to a seller. Thus, a partner perceived as trustworthy is highly preferable in a long-term relationship. Viewing customer-brand relationship from the perspective of partnership, trust also becomes a key factor determining the nature of customer-brand relationships. Concerning to the causal relationship between trust and satisfaction, divergent opinions exist in previous research (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Geyskens et al., 1999). It is dependent on whether satisfaction is defined based on a specific transaction (satisfaction causes trust) or based on a long-term cumulative evaluation (trust causes satisfaction). In this research, the cumulative approach is adopted to define brand satisfaction. In other words, given other things equal, the extent of customer satisfaction varies with change in customer trust towards the brand (e.g., trust change after exposure of positive/negative corporate publicity) (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) suggested that besides cognition-based trust, affective aspects that universally exist in relationships between customers and their brands require additional academic attention. In interpersonal connections, positive emotions are among key predictors of relationship intimacy. In addition, consumer researchers find that consumers in positive emotions may indicate higher brand loyalty compared with in negative emotions. Moreover, brand satisfaction and commitment per se contain elements of positive affects. In sum, consumers are more likely to indicate higher level of satisfaction and commitment towards brands that are able to afford them happiness, comfort, security and other favorable affects. In other words, brands with such capability are more likely to build good relationship with their customers. As such, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4 Brand trust enhances customer-brand relationship strength.

H5 Brand affect enhances customer-brand relationship strength.

Meanwhile, we intend to further explore whether brand trust and brand affect play mediating roles in the effect of publicity on customer-brand relationship strength.

3.5 Interaction Effect of the Two Kinds of Publicity

Despite of little explicit examination on the interaction effect between different categories of corporate publicity, some findings in literature support the existence of the interaction. For example, organizational investment on social responsible activities may result in decreased purchasing intention as well as negative brand perceptions when consumers believe that such investment will impair corporate ability-related performance (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Moreover, in occurrence of a product harm crisis (and responding negative ability-related publicity), consumers indicate less unfavorable evaluation on companies with good reputation of social responsibility than those with bad reputation because favorable perceptions on social responsibility performance make is more likely for consumers to generate constructive attributions about the negative publicity (e.g., uncontrollable and unintentional) and subsequently reduce the harmful impact (Klein and Dawar, 2004). However, no study has explicitly investigated the specific pattern between different categories of publicity varying in targeting aspects and valence. In this research, we, based respectively on two-factor theory and fairness heuristic theory, propose two conflicting predictions on the interaction pattern between social responsibility-related publicity and ability-related publicity.

Two-factor theory suggests that all factors influencing evaluating results (e.g., satisfaction) can be classified into motivators and hygiene factors (Herzberg et al., 1959). Moreover, interaction between motivators and hygiene factors reflects a hierarchical information processing mode. Specifically, motivators can improve evaluation only when hygiene factors have exceeded the expected level. We propose that when social responsibility-related publicity and ability-related publicity appear simultaneously, they serve as the motivator or the hygiene factor in determining customer-brand relationship strength. In nature, two kinds of publicity communicate dissimilar corporate information that consumers may care. Ability information directly reflects the brand's ability to conduct economic transaction and signals the amount of functional benefits consumers may derive from owning the brand. Social responsibility-related information tells us the "soul" and "value system" of the focal brand, which is more related with social aspects of the transaction and influences the amount of affective benefits in customer-brand relationship. As such, out of the two kinds of publicity, ability-related publicity can be regarded as evaluation baseline, namely the hygiene factor, while social responsibility-related publicity is more likely to serve as the motivator. Social responsibility-related publicity (the motivator) has

more significant and stronger effect on customer-brand relationship strength in the condition of positive ability-related publicity than in the condition of negative ability-related publicity. As such, we propose the following hypothesis:

H6a Compared with in the condition of negative ability-related publicity, favorable social responsibility-related publicity has stronger enhancing effect on customer-brand relationship strength in the condition of positive ability-related publicity (based on two-factor theory).

Fairness heuristic theory suggests that individual's overall assessment on a social exchange is dependent both on the favorability of the exchange results and the fairness of the exchange process (Lind and Tyler, 1988). When exchange results are not good, the influence of process fairness is more significant, that is to say, evaluation derived from a fair process is superior to evaluation from an unfair process (Brockner, 2002). Likewise, fairness is an imperative rule of social exchange in customer-brand relationships when brands are regarded as partners. Out of the two kinds of publicity, ability-related publicity may change consumer perceptions on economic and market results that a company can achieve through market competition, while social responsibility-related publicity signals whether the focal company operates in a fair and sound manner towards its consumers, competitors and the whole society. Thus, to some extent, ability-related publicity informs customers the results of social exchange that the focal company conducts, while social responsibility-related publicity demonstrates the extent to which the company gains profits in a fair way. When exposed to negative ability-related publicity (i.e., inferior exchange results), consumers become more sensitive to social responsibility-related publicity (i.e., the exchange process). Taking into account information relating to both results and process, consumers are more likely to indicate higher evaluation on companies with inferior results but through fair process. When exposed to positive ability-related publicity (i.e., superior exchange results), consumers are insensitive to social responsibility-related publicity. In this way, consumers evaluate the company favorably regardless of the valence of social responsibility-related publicity. As such, we propose the following hypothesis:

H6b Compared with in the condition of positive ability-related publicity, positive social responsibility-related publicity has stronger enhancing effect on customer-brand relationship strength in the condition of negative ability-related publicity (based on fairness heuristic theory).

H6a and H6b, based on two different theories, are competitive hypotheses. The specific pattern of interaction effect can be clarified by examining and validating one of the two hypotheses.

4 Methodology

4.1 Experiment Design

A 2 (social responsibility-related corporate publicity: Negative vs. Positive)×2 (ability-related corporate publicity: Negative vs. Positive) between-subject experiment is conducted to test hypotheses. Both social responsibility-related and ability-related corporate publicity are framed into negative and positive levels. Research context is set under the fast food industry, and KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) is selected as the target brand in stimuli materials. Three reasons support this selection. First, two divergent approaches to manipulate the target corporation/brand are widely adopted in publicity literature. Some research utilizes a hypothetical company, in which experiment results are purer due to the avoidance of the potential contamination from participants' existing perceptions. However, the realism of this method and generalizability of its results have attracted criticism. On the contrary, the other method involves real companies in stimuli materials. As such, the experimental realism is enhanced but results may be confounded by participants' established perceptions on the target company. In our case, as customer-brand relationship is the main research concern, which can not be well developed immediately during the experiment, established relationships between participants and the target brand are necessary. Considering the nature of the research and balancing advantages and disadvantages of both methods, the real-brand method is preferable and employed. Second, a pretest ($N=23$) indicates that participants are generally familiar with fast food industry (familiarity=7.40 in an 11-point Likert scale), and KFC is a well-known fast food brand among Chinese young consumers. Third, it is not unusual for consumers to encounter a variety of corporate publicity relating to fast food companies in newspaper or on TV. Therefore, participants would not think stimuli materials used in this experiment as unrealistic.

To increase external validity of the manipulated corporate publicity, several pieces of real publicity published in a key business newspaper are adopted with some adjustment into this research context. In addition, as both concepts of corporate ability and corporate social responsibility have comprehensive connotations, publicity either positively or negatively manipulated involves two main aspects of the construct that are widely recognized. Specifically, positive social responsibility-related publicity involves news reports on (1) corporate donation for education causes (i.e. Hope project in China) and (2) brand promotion for public health knowledge and health activities, while negative social responsibility-related publicity involves news reports on (1) the utilization

of harmful ingredients in its products and (2) corporate fraud of signing unfair labor contract with its employees. Positive ability-related publicity are manipulated through news reports on (1) corporate implementation of strict quality management system and (2) continuous product innovations, while negative ability-related publicity are manipulated through news reports on (1) decreasing management effectiveness and service quality and (2) its lack of product/promotion innovations.

4.2 Participants and Procedures

Ninety-nine undergraduate students in business majors and MBA students are recruited as participants in this experiment for extra credits. They are randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. To address the limitation of potential confounding effect of participants' existing perceptions on and attitude toward the targeted brand, the experiment consists of two phases in which participants' existing perceptions on and attitude toward the target brand are first measured and controlled before stimuli materials are provided. In phase 1, participants are, at first, given the general information about KFC brand, and then asked to evaluate their relationship with KFC brand, in addition to their familiarity and involvement with fast food industry. Finally, they indicate their personal information. One week later, the second phase of the experiment is conducted. Similarly, participants in phase 2, at first, read the general information about KFC brand. After that, they are exposed to four pieces of printed news relating to KFC brand, including two pieces of social responsibility-related publicity and two pieces of ability-related publicity. All publicity is designed as news published in "Consumer Guidance", a hypothetical newspaper issued by China Consumers' Association (a governmental organization, thus increasing source credibility). After that, they reevaluate their relationship with KFC brand, indicate their assessment on brand trust and brand affect, answer questions about manipulation check and provide personal information. Finally, they are debriefed and thanked.

4.3 Measurement

The key dependent variables of this study include brand trust, brand affect and customer-brand relationship strength. The scales for measuring brand trust and brand affect are adopted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Dawar and Pillutla (2000). Brand trust is measured by four items, namely "I trust KFC brand", "I rely on KFC brand", "KFC is an honest brand" and "KFC is reliable" (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$). Brand affect is measured by four items, namely "I feel

good when I am in KFC”, “KFC brand makes me happy.”, “KFC brand gives me pleasure” and “Consuming in KFC is an enjoyable experience.” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.89$). Satisfaction and commitment are used to indicate customer-brand relationship strength. Specifically, relationship satisfaction is measured by three items, namely “I am completely satisfied with KFC brand”, “I am completely pleased with KFC brand” and “KFC is turning out better than I expected” (Phase 1 Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$; Phase 2 Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$). Five items measuring commitment include “I think I will continue to visit KFC when I need this service category”, “I am willing to recommend KFC brand to my friends”, “I will support KFC when it is in difficulty”, “For me, KFC is among the best brands in its service category”, and “KFC is my first choice in its service category” (Phase 1 Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$; Phase 2 Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$).

After main measurement, participants respond to items for manipulation check and experiment realism. They make judgment on the target brand’s performance on taking social responsibility through four items (i.e. “KFC has excellent performance in supporting public philanthropy”, “KFC is willing to help the disadvantaged people”, “In general, KFC makes contribution to social welfare” and “In general, KFC is highly social responsible”), and performance on ability through two items (i.e. “KFC is highly capable of technical innovation”, and “KFC has high R&D ability”). To ensure high realism and low extremity of corporate publicity used in the experiment, participants make general assessment on corporate publicity to which they are exposed on four items: (1) “The news reports described above are real ones”, (2) “The news reports described above are convincing”, (3) “The news reports described above are acceptable”, and (4) “The news reports described above are credible” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.94$).

All the measures are assessed on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree).

5 Analysis and Results

5.1 Manipulation Check

Before hypotheses testing, we first run analysis for manipulation check. Results of ANOVA indicate that participants in positive social responsibility-related publicity condition hold more favorable perceptions on social responsibility performance of the target company than those in negative social responsibility-related publicity condition (positive = 4.73, negative = 3.65,

$p < 0.01$). In addition, the two groups do not show significant difference in their evaluation on corporate ability (positive = 4.13, negative = 4.21, $p > 0.1$). In other words, manipulation of the social responsibility-related publicity does not impact participants' perceptions on corporate ability. Similarly, participants in positive ability-related publicity condition hold more favorable perceptions on the target company's ability than those in negative ability-related publicity condition (positive = 4.54, negative = 3.79, $p < 0.01$). In addition, ability publicity manipulation has no influence on participants' perceptions on corporate social responsibility (positive = 4.33, negative = 4.11, $p > 0.1$). In addition, corporate publicity employed are generally considered as real and reliable (Mean = 5.25, S.D. = 1.16).

Moreover, participants are moderately familiar (Mean = 4.35, S.D. = 1.28) and involved (Mean = 4.38, S.D. = 1.61) with fast food service. Neither familiarity nor involvement varies among four conditions. As both factors of familiarity and involvement have no effects on dependent variables once established customer-brand relationship strength is included, they are not included in following analyses. Further, participants do not show difference across four conditions in their established relationship with the target brand (Min mean = 4.12, Max mean = 4.18; Min S.D. = 1.17, Max S.D. = 1.37). Undergraduate and MBA participants do not indicate any divergent responses on key factors.

5.2 Hypotheses Testing

To examine H1, H2 and H3, a MANCOVA is conducted to analyze data, with brand trust, brand affect and post-publicity customer satisfaction/commitment as dependent variables (see descriptive results of dependent variables in Table 1), both publicity categories and their interaction as independent variables, and existing relationship strength as a covariate (pre-commitment is used to represent existing relationship in order to avoid multicollinearity; results do not change when satisfaction is used).

As shown in Table 2, after controlling the existing customer-brand relationship strength, social responsibility-related publicity has significant effects on all dependent variables, specifically, brand affect ($F(1,95) = 11.626, p < 0.001$), brand trust ($F(1,95) = 9.570, p < 0.01$), satisfaction ($F(1,95) = 6.783, p < 0.05$), and commitment ($F(1,95) = 4.205, p < 0.05$). In other words, compared with participants in the negative condition of social responsibility-related publicity, those in the positive condition indicate more favorable affects towards KFC brand, regard it as more trustworthy and have more satisfactory experience related with the brand. More importantly, they indicate higher commitment

towards the brand. In other words, they regard their relationship with the brand as valuable and are willing to continue the relationship. However, ability-related publicity has no main effect on any dependent variable, specifically, brand affect ($F(1, 95) = 1.622, p > 0.1$), brand trust ($F(1, 95) = 0.069, p > 0.1$), satisfaction ($F(1, 95) = 1.651, p > 0.1$), and commitment ($F(1, 95) = 0.144, p > 0.1$). Therefore, H1a, H2a and H3a are supported by empirical evidence, while H1b, H2b and H3b are not supported.

Table 1 Results of Descriptive Analysis of Dependent Variables

		Social responsibility-related publicity							
Ability-related publicity		Positive				Negative			
Sample size		N=26				N=24			
Positive	Construct	Satisfaction	Commitment	Trust	Affect	Satisfaction	Commitment	Trust	Affect
	Mean	4.10	4.24	4.82	4.70	4.01	4.25	4.28	4.18
	S.D.	1.25	1.19	1.17	0.89	1.07	1.08	(1.17)	(1.19)
Negative	Sample size	N=26				N=23			
	Construct	Satisfaction	Commitment	Trust	Affect	Satisfaction	Commitment	Trust	Affect
	Mean	4.15	4.44	4.79	4.50	3.56	4.00	4.25	3.98
	S.D.	1.17	1.09	1.13	1.15	1.07	0.94	(0.81)	(1.13)

H6 proposes two competing hypotheses respectively based on two-factor theory and fairness-heuristic theory, which make divergent predictions on the interaction effect between social responsibility-related publicity and ability-related publicity. As noted before, two theories differ in predicting in which condition of ability-related publicity, social responsibility-related publicity has stronger effect in enhancing customer-brand relationship strength. Two-factor theory will be confirmed if social responsibility-related publicity has stronger effect when ability-related publicity is positive, while fairness-heuristic theory will be supported if social responsibility-related publicity has stronger effect when ability-related publicity is negative. As shown in Table 2, two publicity categories have significant interaction effect on both satisfaction and commitment ($F(1, 95) = 4.030, p < 0.05$; $F(1, 95) = 4.037, p < 0.05$).

The interaction patterns are shown in Fig. 2a and Fig. 2b. Specifically, the effects of two publicity categories on satisfaction and commitment are clear and consistent. The difference of customer-brand relationship strength between positive and negative social responsibility-related publicity is significantly greater in negative condition of ability-related publicity, while social responsibility-related publicity has no impact on relationship assessment in

positive condition of ability-related publicity. Therefore, H6b, consistent with fairness-heuristic theory, is confirmed by experimental evidence, while H6a, predicted by two-factor theory, is not supported.

Table 2 Results of MANCOVA on the Effect of Corporate Publicity

Independent variables	Dependent variables			
	Brand affect	Brand trust	Satisfaction	Commitment
Intercept	50.872***	72.828***	23.342***	41.358***
Social responsibility publicity	11.626***	9.570**	6.783*	4.205*
Ability publicity	1.622	0.069	1.651	0.144
Social responsibility publicity×Ability publicity	0.306	0.139	4.030*	4.037*
Existing relationship	39.426***	18.671***	58.095***	62.542***
R^2	0.340	0.216	0.406	0.412
Adjusted- R^2	0.312	0.182	0.381	0.387
F (d.f.)	6.458 (4, 98)	12.099 (4, 98)	16.078 (4, 98)	16.477 (4, 98)
p value	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001

Note: *** denotes significant at 0.001 level, ** denotes significant at 0.01 level, * denotes significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

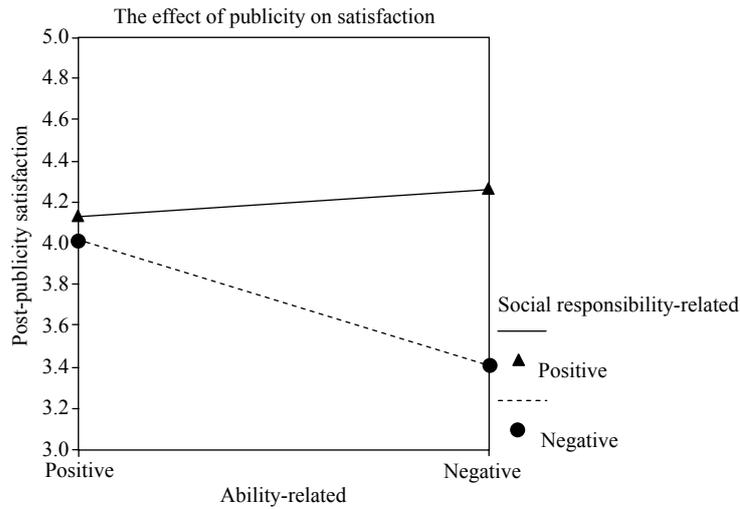


Fig. 2a Effects of Corporate Publicity on Customer-brand Relationship Strength (Satisfaction)

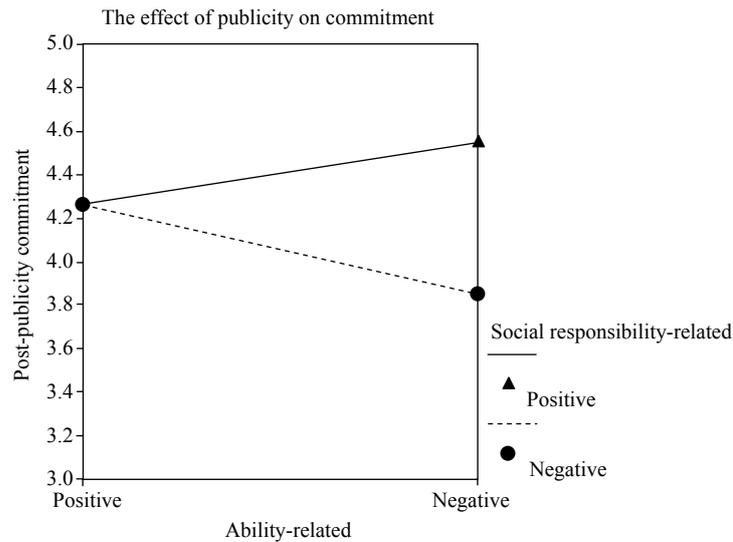


Fig. 2b Effects of Corporate Publicity on Customer-brand Relationship Strength (Commitment)

To examine H4 and H5, and explore the possible mediating roles of brand trust/affect in the effect of corporate publicity on customer-brand relationship strength, a new equation is constructed for further analysis (we will focus on the role of social responsibility-related publicity, as the main effects of ability-related publicity on all key dependent variables in Table 2 are not significant, and thus no need to further discuss its mediating role). Specifically, a MANCOVA is conducted, with post-publicity customer satisfaction/commitment as dependent variables, both publicity categories and their interaction as independent variables, and brand trust, brand affect as well as existing relationship strength as covariates. In this set of equations, brand trust and affect are explicitly treated as predictors of customer-brand relationship strength.

Results in Table 3 indicate that both brand affect and brand trust have significant effects on satisfaction and commitment. The higher brand trust and/or brand affect that a customer indicates, the stronger is the relationship he/she has with the focal brand. Therefore, H4 and H5 are supported. In addition, a close comparison of results in Table 2 and Table 3 demonstrates that once brand affect and trust are included as covariates in the equations, the main effects of social responsibility-related publicity on relationship strength become insignificant. In other words, divergent affective feelings and trustworthiness evaluation that customers generate towards a brand after exposed to publicity can partially account for the disparity of customer-brand relationship strength between positive and negative conditions of social responsibility-related publicity. However, the

interaction of two publicity categories can not be changed by the inclusion of brand trust and brand affect, and are still comparably significant as before. This result is not consistent with the notion that the effect of procedure equity on increasing favorable evaluation is due to its ability to enhance the judge's trust rather than the equity perception per se (Brockner et al., 1997). Therefore, the mediating roles of brand trust/affect in the linkage between corporate publicity (i.e., social responsibility-related publicity) and customer-brand relationship strength are partially supported in this study.

Moreover, some researchers suggested that the established relationship may moderate how people process incoming information and thus reduces the detrimental effect of negative information (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). In responding to this statement, we further test whether the established customer-brand relationship strength operates as a moderator of reaction patterns towards publicity in this study. Specifically, according to their pre-publicity relationship strength, participants are median-split into high relationship group and low relationship group. Then, the newly formed factor of relationship strength is put into the equation as an additional between-subject factor. Results show that no interaction terms of the new relationship strength factor and other factors are significant. Thus, the impact of corporate publicity on customer-brand relationship in this research does not vary with the extent of existing relationship strength.

Table 3 Results of MANCOVA on the Effects of Brand Trust and Affect

Independent variables	Dependent variables	
	Relationship strength (satisfaction)	Relationship strength (commitment)
Intercept	0.777	0.783
Social responsibility publicity	0.003 (n.s.)	0.049 (n.s.)
Ability publicity	0.447 (n.s.)	0.037 (n.s.)
Social responsibility publicity×Ability publicity	4.599*	4.107*
Brand affect	46.729***	14.978***
Brand trust	5.801*	13.355***
Existing relationship	12.159***	17.583***
R^2	0.670	0.603
Adjusted- R^2	0.649	0.577
F (d.f.)	31.187 (6, 98)	23.250 (6, 98)
p value	0.001	0.001

Note: *** denotes significant at 0.001 level, ** denotes significant at 0.01 level, * denotes significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed). n.s. means nonsignificant.

6 Discussion and Implications

The main purpose of this research is to demonstrate how the relationship between

a customer and his/her brand could be influenced when a variety of corporate publicity appear simultaneously. Particularly, we focus on the specific pattern and underlying mechanism through which social responsibility-related publicity and ability-related publicity concurrently and interactively change consumers' beliefs and emotions and subsequently adjust their relationship with the target brand. A two-phase experiment, in which a familiar industry (i.e. fast food) and a real brand (i.e. KFC) are selected as the research context, is conducted to test hypotheses. Results suggest that even for well-known companies like KFC, social responsibility-related publicity could make difference in customer-brand relationship, while ability-related publicity has no impact on brand perceptions, evaluations or customer-brand relationship. More interestingly, the two publicity categories have an interaction impact on customer-brand relationship strength, which is consistent with the pattern predicted by fairness-heuristic theory. In addition, brand trust and brand affect are key predictors of customer-brand relationship strength, and play a partial mediating role in the linkage between corporate publicity and customer-brand relationship. Previous research provides insights in the mechanisms through which corporate associations (e.g., social responsibility associations and ability associations) can be transferred into product-level evaluation (e.g., Dacin and Brown, 1997), and identifies several moderators in the effect of corporate association (Gurhan-Canli and Batra, 2004). However, literature keeps silence in the interrelations between different corporate associations when a variety of corporate publicity coexist, particularly the specific pattern of the possible interaction effect. Moreover, most studies on customer-brand relationship focus on defining this construct and identifying its key components (e.g., Keller, 2001). Less academic attention has been paid to what are the influential factors of customer-brand relationship and how they have impact (Aaker et al., 2004; Thorbjornsen et al., 2002). To address this academic shortage, this study intends to explore the process through which corporate publicity may change existing corporate associations consumers hold towards the focal company or create new associations in their minds, and subsequently adjust their relationship strength with the brand.

In sum, this research contributes to literature by two-fold. First, this study demonstrates a specific interaction pattern between corporate social responsibility-related publicity and corporate ability-related publicity, namely, the strengthening effect of favorable social responsibility-related publicity on customer-brand relationship strength is stronger in the context of negative ability-related publicity. Second, brand affect and brand trust are identified as key mediators partially transferring a variety of corporate publicity in marketplace into favorable/unfavorable customer response.

It is not unusual that companies have realized the importance of relationship

marketing in all aspects and made much effort in building committed and strong brand relationship among their customers. However, various factors, including direct consumption experience and omnipresent corporate publicity, may have impact on the relationship between a customer and a brand. Compared to previous studies, which usually investigate single type of corporate publicity or different ones but separately (e.g., product harm crisis or environment pollution), we focus on a more complicated as well as realistic phenomenon—the coexistence and interaction of different publicity. With escalating development of media industry, all kinds of corporate actions, regardless of desirable or undesirable, could be exposed to the public and under scrupulous examination. In particular, negative corporate publicity spread immediately and extensively among consumers and thus results in significant detriments. In addition, publicity relating to different corporate aspects may influence the focal corporation to a varying extent. For example, this study shows that the favorability of social responsibility-related publicity makes significant difference in customer satisfaction and commitment towards the focal brands even for well-known companies like KFC, while ability-related publicity nearly has no impact. The results indicate that consumers are concerned about whether a company behaves in a social responsible way, and willing to maintain a good relationship with those companies that contribute to the improvement of social welfare rather than aiming simply to the profit-oriented goals. Compared to those encountering negative social responsibility-related publicity, consumers encountering positive social responsibility-related publicity are more satisfied with the focal brand, and more likely to continue the relationship. Especially, when negative ability-related publicity occurs, positive social responsibility-related publicity motivates favorable fairness evaluation and thus buffers the detrimental impact, while negative social responsibility-related publicity may make the situation worse. Although the chief reason why companies choose to operate in a socially responsible way is not economic motives, they may gain market and finally financial benefits from these good behaviors.

It is partly due to the fact that consumers are more likely to show fondness to and trust in firms with high social responsibility. Therefore, it is not only socially meaningful but also practically beneficial for companies to enthusiastically take social responsibility. On the other hand, results also show that when a corporate brand is believed to have high ability of management, production, service-delivery etc, relevant consumer perceptions and attitude can not be simply changed by single exposure of positive/negative ability-related publicity, especially when it is in a favorable media surroundings (e.g., social responsibility publicity). The effectiveness of ability-related corporate publicity in influencing consumer perceptions and attitude depends on the presence and the nature of

other kinds of publicity. In practice, it is common for companies to make investment on advertising, publicity and other approaches to communicate corporate ability-related information, but it is unclear what information attracts consumers' attention or what information is efficient in promoting organizational goals, and thus some of the important corporate characteristics that could be complementary are neglected in these campaigns. This study provides useful insights to help marketing managers advance their understanding in consumer response towards different types of corporate publicity and therefore create more effective communicative strategies.

In addition, this study also reports a specific pattern of the interaction effect between social responsibility-related publicity and ability-related publicity on consumer perceptions and attitude. The findings have important managerial implications in how to deal with negative publicity (e.g., product harm crisis) and design constructive strategies to sustain sound public relation. As results indicate, positive social responsibility-related publicity has stronger enhancing effect on customer-brand relationship in the context of negative ability-related publicity. Therefore, a potential method to reduce the detrimental effect of negative ability-related publicity is to distribute favorable social responsibility-related information, which could create or strengthen positive corporate associations regarding to social responsible behaviors. Building a good brand requires long-term efforts and much investment, while failure to handle one key event may destroy it completely. Therefore, brand managers should actively manage the existing publicity relating to their brands as well as the forthcoming ones in all important media.

Moreover, brand trust and brand affect are two central determinants of the strength of customer-brand relationship. Brand trust focuses on cognitive aspects of consumer response, while brand affect emphasizes emotional aspects. It implies that both cognitive characteristics and affective needs of consumers should be taken into account in brand management.

7 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations. First, although the choice of KFC as the sampled firm can increase the realism and trustworthiness of the publicity stimulus, it might lead to several problems. For example, the insignificant influence of ability-related corporate publicity on customer-brand relationship may be due to the high certainty of established perceptions that consumers hold on KFC's corporate ability, while their perceived performance on corporate social responsibility is relatively ambiguous. Even if the manipulation of corporate ability-related publicity in the experiment is

successful, the established beliefs in mind, which is characterized with high certainty, are more likely to be retrieved and used in judgment when consumers assess their relationship with the focal brand. Thus, we should keep cautious to generalize the findings into different industries or companies (e.g., unfamiliar brands). Second, further research could explore the moderating role of attitude certainty in consumer response on corporate publicity (Pullig et al., 2006). This may be one of the explanatory factors for the divergent results between experiments using real companies and those using hypothetical companies. Third, this research identified brand trust and affect as key determinants of customer-brand relationship strength. Future research could explore the relative importance of trust and affect in different contexts. For example, brand trust may have stronger impact in industries involving high risk, while affect may be more essential for experiential service industries. Fourth, the pattern of interaction effect between social responsibility-related publicity and ability-related publicity we found in this study is consistent with the prediction of fairness-heuristic theory. Additional empirical evidence is needed to support this finding. Fifth, this study focuses on the influence of corporate publicity on two dimensions of relationship strength, namely satisfaction and commitment. As some researchers argue that attitude strength is composed of multiple dimensions, and every dimension may have unique reactive mechanism (Petty and Krosnick, 1995). Therefore, future research could investigate other dimensions of relationship strength (e.g., self-connection and intimacy).

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Appendix

Measurement and Reliability

Constructs	Items	No.	Item-Factor Loadings	Cronbach α
Brand affect	1. I feel good when I am in KFC	4	0.671	0.888
	2. KFC brand makes me happy		0.822	
	3. KFC brand gives me pleasure		0.762	
	4. Consuming in KFC is an enjoyable experience		0.781	
Brand trust	1. I trust KFC brand	4	0.814	0.902
	2. I rely on KFC brand		0.820	
	3. KFC is an honest brand		0.736	
	4. KFC is reliable		0.776	
Satisfaction (second-phase)	1. I am completely satisfied with KFC brand	3	0.814	0.899
	2. I am completely pleased with KFC brand		0.813	
	3. KFC is turning out better than I expected		0.786	
Commitment (second-phase)	1. I think I will continue to visit KFC when I need this service category	5	0.654	0.875
	2. I am willing to recommend KFC brand to my friends		0.704	
	3. I will support KFC when it is in difficulty		0.664	
	4. For me, KFC is among the best brands in its service category		0.737	
	5. KFC is my first choice in its service category		0.771	
