

Cleaning up the Brand Image

How Cleanliness Stimuli Influence Brand Image Damaged by Moral Transgression

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Abstract

How do cleanliness photographs influence a brand image, that is damaged by moral transgression? Can the emotion disgust, evoked through immoral behavior, be reduced by cleanliness photographs, helping to moderate moral emotions? The results provide partial evidence for an existing connection between cleanliness and morality.

Introduction

In existing literature, an association between moral purity and bodily purity is suggested and reflected in the famous “Macbeth effect”, where a threat to morality induces a need for cleaning oneself, helping to restore moral purity. This association is based on emotions from the physical and moral domain represented as for example by disgust. If the emotion disgust can be linked to moral transgressions, there seems to be a high possibility for a connection between cleanliness and morality. Whereby, the feeling of cleanliness works in opposition to feeling disgusted. Helping to symbolically restore threatened values and immoral behavior. To expand existing findings, the influence from cleanliness photographs on companies` real moral transgressions were determined.

Method Section

The experiment employed a 2 (type of damage: moral transgression vs. incompetence) x 2 (brand: one of two brands) x 2 (types of remedy: cleanliness vs. competence) between-subjects design. During the experiment, participants were provided with either immoral (Volkswagen or Tesla) or incompetent (Fiat or BMW) looking company articles. The purpose of reading those articles was to elicit the feeling of disgust towards the company, for participants reading the moral transgression article, and give participants the impression of an incompetent company, by reading the incompetence article.

After reading and evaluating the articles, participants were presented with six photographs indicating either cleanliness

or competence, supposedly to give them their best caption. To ensure a connection between the brand and the cleaning respectively competence activity, the brand logo was present in each picture (see figure 1 for an example). The cleaning activities were directly pointed at the companies, respectively to their automobiles. The caption task was intended to activate the opposite feeling of disgust, namely cleanliness, for the participants who saw the cleanliness photographs and to activate a feeling of competence towards the company, for the participants who saw the competence photographs. In the end, participants` attitudes towards the companies were determined using explicit and implicit measures.



Figure 1 Example photographs for the competence and cleanliness group of Volkswagen and Tesla.

Results

The Results reveal evidence that for the brand Volkswagen the explicit brand evaluation between the cleanliness (M = 5.24, SD = .96) and the competence (M = 4.55, SD = 1.61) group, $t(53.87) = 2.34, p = .023, d = .692$ was indeed higher. Suggesting that people who saw cleanliness pictures, evaluated Volkswagen, that was intended to make people feel disgusted, better than those who saw competence pictures, supporting the hypothesis, that the activation of cleanliness stimuli after the exposure to immoral behavior and eliciting disgust, have a positive effect on the brand evaluation, weakening the severity of moral judgments (see figure 2 explicit brand evaluation for the brands (for the type of remedy)).

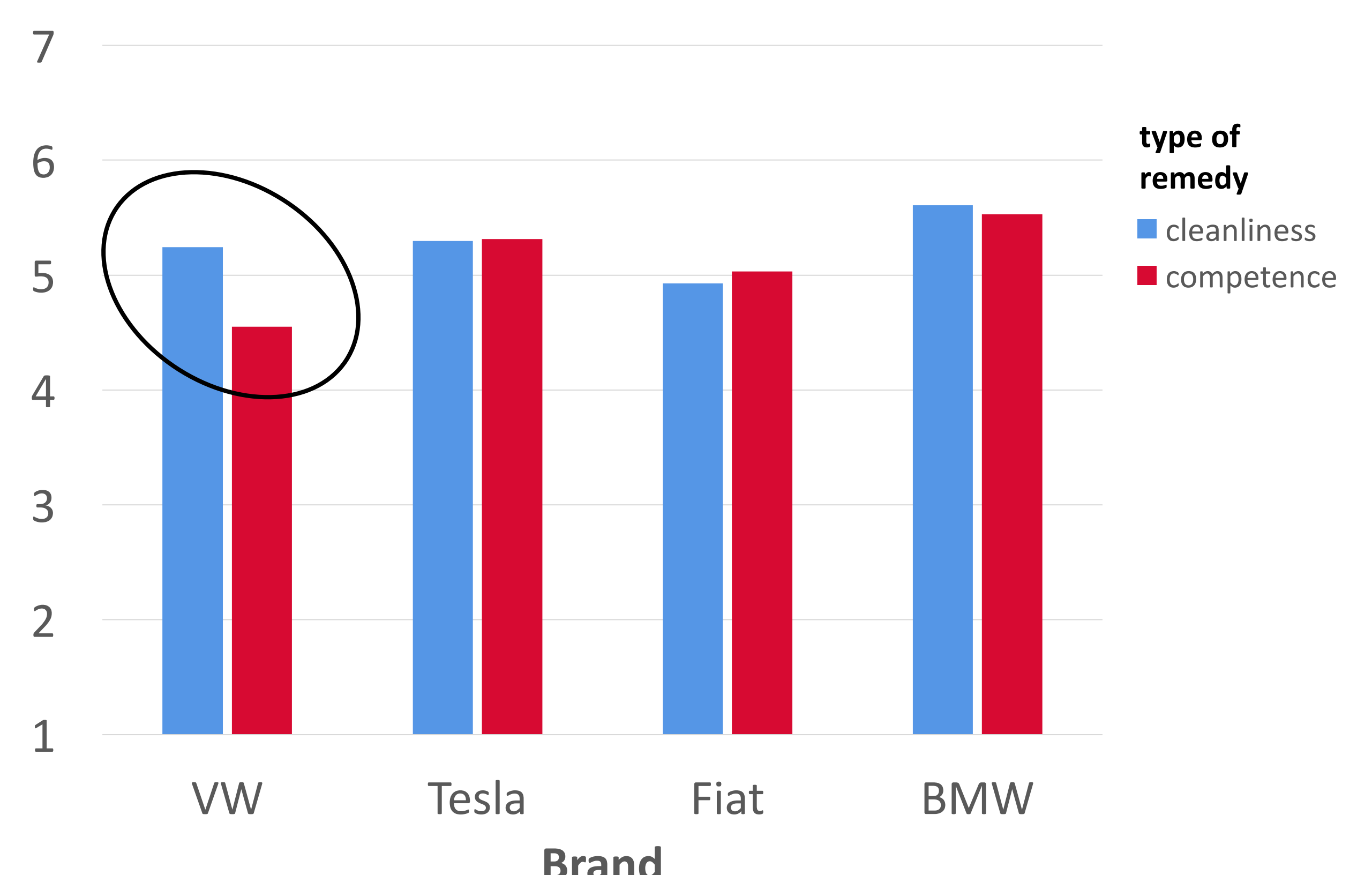


Figure 2 Explicit brand evaluation: Estimated marginal means of raw scores.