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# When Hostile Consumers Wreak Havoc on Your Brand: The Phenomenon of Consumer Brand Sabotage

In recent years, companies have been confronted with a new type of negative consumer behavior: consumers who have turned hostile and who are strongly determined to cause damage to the brand. Empowered by new technological possibilities, an individual consumer can now wreak havoc on a brand with relatively little effort. In reflection of this new phenomenon, the authors introduce the concept of consumer brand sabotage (CBS). On the basis of different underlying motives, a conceptual framework distinguishes CBS (a form of hostile aggression: harming the brand as dominant motive) from other forms of negative consumer behavior, such as customer retaliation and negative word of mouth (instrumental aggression: harming a brand is only a means to achieve other objectives, e.g., restoring equity). This framework adapts insights from aggression and appraisal theories as well as qualitative interviews with actual saboteurs to a consumer–brand relationship context in order to develop an improved theoretical understanding of the under-researched phenomenon of CBS. The authors analyze the mental escalation processes of individual consumers toward CBS and develop a road map for future research.

**Keywords:** marketing theory, consumer brand sabotage, brand management, consumer–brand relationships, relationship breakdown

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A few years ago, musician Dave Carroll got upset with United Airlines for breaking his cherished guitar. Due to repeated inadequate responses from United’s management, Carroll turned hostile and produced a music video titled “United Breaks Guitars” about his negative experience. Since it was posted on YouTube, the video has been viewed by more than 15 million people, causing an estimated damage of more than \$180 million to United (*The Economist* 2009), as well as creating a long-lasting impression that United “breaks guitars.” This example illustrates a relatively new phenomenon wherein consumers empowered by new technologies (Labrecque et al. 2013) and driven by negative experiences with brands become hostile

and aggressively attack, with the dominant motive of causing harm to the brands. Now, similar to saboteurs in warfare, consumers can have a dramatic negative impact on a brand relatively easily. In a networked, digital world, even one single consumer can cause a brand to lose numerous existing customers and can alienate innumerable potential customers, which can result in millions of dollars of damage to a brand. Thus, academics and marketing managers need to understand this new phenomenon and, especially, what drives consumers to engage in such hostile behavior.

Against this background, we introduce the concept of consumer brand sabotage (CBS), which is a deliberate form of hostile, aggressive behavior on the part of a consumer, designed to harm a brand. This type of behavior occurs when a consumer–brand relationship completely breaks down (i.e., “bridges are burned”) and has been understudied in the literature. In contrast, other forms of negative consumer behavior, such as customer retaliation, consumer boycotts, and negative word of mouth (WOM), represent forms of instrumental aggression, wherein a consumer exerts aggressive actions against a brand or company, not necessarily to cause harm to the brand, but to achieve other objectives, such as restoring equity and venting negative emotions (Anderson and Bushman 2002). A key point is that in the large majority of cases in which consumers are angry or unhappy with a brand, the consumers are more likely to

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engage in instrumental aggression than CBS. However, there are important instances in which consumers engage in a different kind of behavior and actually try to hurt a brand. Given the potential severe consequences of CBS, it is important for marketers to develop an understanding of what we argue is a unique phenomenon.

In this article, we contribute to the literature on brand management and consumer–brand relationships by introducing the new construct of CBS and developing a conceptual framework of aggressive consumer behavior toward brands. Guided by conceptual considerations from aggression and appraisal theories in social psychology (person-to-person context) as well as in-depth interviews with actual consumer brand saboteurs, our framework develops a novel theoretical perspective for understanding this type of behavior in a brand relationship context. In this article, we will (1) illustrate how CBS represents a unique form of aggressive behavior in a consumer–brand context that merits special attention, and (2) show that the phenomenon and concept of CBS is distinct from other forms of negative consumer behavior (e.g., negative WOM). Furthermore, we report some initial empirical findings regarding CBS and its antecedents from two quantitative studies among consumers. Our article culminates with the development of an agenda for future research on CBS. Managers can gain important insights from our framework on how to recognize and to deal with the challenging new phenomenon of CBS.

## Definition of CBS

The term “sabotage” originates from the French word *sabot*, a type of wooden clog that disgruntled French workers threw into machines during the Industrial Revolution in order to harm their companies. This phenomenon of sabotage by employees has been examined in management research (e.g., Analoui 1995). In marketing research, brand saboteurs have been defined as employees who work actively against their brand (Wallace and De Chernatony 2007). However, this definition does not recognize that individuals outside a company can also harm the brand. Therefore, in our study, we adopt a company-external perspective and examine sabotage activities by consumers. We define CBS as deliberate behavior by customers or noncustomers who have the dominant objective of causing harm to a brand through the impairment of the brand-related associations of other consumers. This definition comprises five key elements. First, a “deliberate act” implies that an action is taken consciously and intentionally; CBS activities are not impulsive but thoughtful actions that are carefully selected because of their potential to damage the brand. Thus, sabotage refers to consumers’ conscious and planned behavior (see Fishbein and Ajzen 1975), in contrast to instinctive, automatic responses to stimuli (Anderson and Bushman 2002).

Second, the word “behavior” signifies that some action must be undertaken. Thus, thoughts of committing CBS (i.e., behavioral intention) without engaging in any activity or preliminary activity (e.g., making a brand sabotage video without publishing it) would not be classified as CBS. This

action-oriented perspective can also be found in military law, in which “sabotage” refers to actual activities and not just intentions (Warner 1941). CBS activities can differ with regard to their scope and modality. Concerning geographical and temporal scope, CBS comprises local and global activities (Van Doorn et al. 2010) and can involve both sporadic and customary behavior (Harris and Ogbonna 2002). With regard to modality, sabotage activities can be either offline or online (e.g., creating and uploading a sabotage video to the web) or can combine online and offline activities (e.g., using social media to spur graffiti relating to British Petroleum’s (BP’s) oil catastrophe; Flickr 2010). However, there is no specific activity that automatically qualifies as CBS. Rather, a particular activity qualifies as CBS if the objective to harm a brand is the dominant underlying motive.

Third, CBS can be executed by both customers and noncustomers. Consumers who actually have purchased and consumed the brand’s products can engage in CBS activities, but people who have never experienced the brand as customers can do so as well. This was the case for Abercrombie & Fitch, when a noncustomer was outraged by the following statement of the company’s chief executive officer (CEO): “A lot of people don’t belong [in our clothes], and they can’t belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely. Those companies that are in trouble are trying to target everybody: young, old, fat, skinny” (Denizet-Lewis 2006). As a consequence, the consumer engaged in CBS by creating a viral YouTube and Twitter campaign (“Abercrombie & Fitch Gets a Brand Readjustment: #FitchTheHomeless”; Karber 2013) in which he tried to reposition the brand as the “uncool brand for the homeless” by asking other consumers to donate Abercrombie & Fitch clothes to homeless people. In addition, CBS can be committed by one individual consumer or can be the result of a group activity whereby multiple consumers work together. For example, the brand sabotage campaign against Abercrombie & Fitch was created by one consumer (Karber 2013), whereas graffiti relating to BP’s oil catastrophe sprayed on buildings worldwide was created by multiple consumers (Flickr 2010).

Fourth, the dominant objective of CBS is to harm a brand. The objective of causing harm is consistent with the concept of hostile aggression in social psychology, for which this objective is a key defining element (Anderson and Bushman 2002; Baron and Richardson 1994). A brand saboteur acts as a hostile aggressor and chooses activities that he/she believes will cause harm to the object of his/her aggression (i.e., the brand). According to military literature, a saboteur typically targets a crucial element of the enemy (Lefevre 2001). This is also the case with a brand, which is a highly valuable but also somewhat vulnerable asset of a company and, therefore, represents a worthwhile target for sabotage activities of consumers.

Finally, the brand saboteur tries to harm the brand by impairing the brand-related associations of other consumers. Because the power and true value of a brand lies in the brand associations made and held by consumers (Keller 1993), altering these associations in a negative way represents a key means of causing harm to the brand.

## Distinction of CBS from Other Related Constructs

Consumer brand sabotage represents a novel construct that is distinct from other forms of negative consumer behavior that have previously been discussed in the literature, such as negative WOM (e.g., De Matos and Rossi 2008), customer retaliation (e.g., Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009), and consumer boycott (e.g., Klein, Smith, and John 2004). The key characteristic that distinguishes CBS from these related constructs is the type of aggression exerted by the consumer (i.e., hostile versus instrumental aggression): CBS involves hostile aggression, with the consumer having the conscious desire and dominant motive to harm the brand (see also Anderson and Bushman 2002). The consumer does not wish to (re)establish any relationship and is not interested in any compensation or apology from the brand—the bridges are burned. In contrast, in the case of instrumental aggression, the consumer behaves aggressively against the brand in order to achieve other objectives. Thus, aggression is exerted only as an instrument to achieve other goals, such as to restore equity or to vent negative emotions.

A first construct is negative WOM, which refers to negative informal communication by consumers to other consumers about their evaluations of goods and services (Zhang, Feick, and Mittal 2014). It has been shown that very dissatisfied customers use negative WOM as a form of venting their negative emotions to achieve a feeling of relief (De Matos and Rossi 2008). Also, prior research has argued that consumers engage in negative WOM to restore equity (Wetzer, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2007).

Customer retaliation is a second construct that occurs when a customer feels he/she has been wronged by the company or brand and works to get even (Funches, Markley, and Davis 2009). This definition, along with literature on customer retaliation, shows the importance of equity theory as a foundation of the construct of revenge and retaliation (Funches, Markley, and Davis 2009; Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). In other words, the goal of retaliation is to restore equity rather than to harm the brand per se (as is the case with CBS, whereby—in a punitive overreaction—the damage can go well beyond equity). Furthermore, customer retaliation against a firm is a response to a negative transaction in which the retaliator must have been an actual customer of the firm. In that respect, CBS is broader, because it also includes actions of noncustomers (e.g., noncustomers who disagree with communicated brand values).

A third construct is a consumer boycott, wherein consumers refrain from purchasing the brand in order to achieve certain objectives (e.g., Friedman 1985) such as restoring equity (e.g., making the brand change its behavior; Braunsberger and Buckler 2011) or venting negative emotions (e.g., expressing anger about a perceived inadequate behavior of the brand; John and Klein 2003). Furthermore, boycott behavior can be viewed as prosocial behavior, by which actions are intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself—behaviors such as helping, comforting, sharing, and cooperating (Klein, Smith, and John 2004).

This discussion of various forms of negative consumer behavior illustrates the unique motive structure that is a key distinguishing characteristic of CBS. In the case of negative WOM, customer retaliation, and consumer boycotts, the two motives of venting negative emotions and restoring equity prevail. These behaviors are clearly different from CBS, in which the dominant motive is to cause harm to a brand.

Not only the motives but also the types and levels of emotions and cognitions that precede CBS are unique. In line with aggression literature, we argue that CBS as a form of hostile aggression is more affective than instrumental aggression and, thus, is preceded by stronger negative emotions, such as anger and hatred (see also Anderson and Bushman 2002). With regard to negative cognitions, CBS and instrumental aggression are driven by different cognitive antecedents. Key cognitions associated with CBS are hostile thoughts, such as the wish or imagination to harm or punish the brand (see also Anderson and Bushman 2002), and a perceived threat to one's identity (see also Graham et al. 2013). In contrast, instrumental aggression is preceded by perceived betrayal (e.g., Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009) and perceived powerlessness (e.g., Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010).

Furthermore, CBS is different from other forms of negative consumer behavior on a behavioral level. Typically, CBS activities consist of conscious, well-planned behavior in which the consumer invests a high level of effort; it is not trivial to truly harm brands because the brand-related associations of other consumers are fairly stable and resilient (Keller 1993). In contrast, consumers who engage in activities of instrumental aggression (i.e., negative WOM, customer retaliation, consumer boycott) tend to invest a lower level of effort.

As a result of the different motive structures between CBS and instrumental aggression, and the corresponding behaviors, there are also differences with regard to damage. Because saboteurs tend to carefully plan and invest a high level of effort to deliberately impair the brand-related associations of other consumers, the potential damage from CBS can be extremely high. Other forms of negative consumer behavior, such as negative WOM or individual boycotts (in which consumers typically invest less effort), tend to be less harmful than CBS, as illustrated by a recent study in the context of consumer boycotts, which shows that boycott behavior launched by people using the Internet is ineffective in inflicting economic harm on the targeted firm (Koku 2012).

Finally, CBS is also distinct from related constructs (e.g., negative WOM) on a relationship level. In the case of CBS, the consumer does not wish to (re)establish any relationship or transaction with the brand (e.g., will never again purchase products of the brand) and also is not interested in any compensation or apology from the brand. With other forms of negative consumer behavior, the goal is to restore equity or simply vent negative emotions, while at the same time maintaining the relationship with the brand.

## Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework aims at providing a better understanding of the factors and complex psychological mechanisms

that drive a consumer to engage in brand sabotage activities (see Figure 1). The process begins when the consumer is confronted with a brand stimulus that is either a product or service failure or a company behavior that is in conflict with the consumer's values. The consumer evaluates this stimulus in a primary appraisal process that involves an assessment of the significance of the stimulus for him/her as well as specific cognitions and emotions. The consumer then reassesses these cognitive and emotional responses, the brand-related stimulus, and the entire situation in a reappraisal process. As a result, the consumer might ponder the situation further (rumination) or decide to interact with the brand (e.g., complaining to the company). Subsequently, if the consumer is still not satisfied after reappraisal and possible interaction and rumination loops with the brand, the consumer decides how to respond: with CBS activities or with other forms of negative consumer behavior. Depending on the type of initial stimulus—a performance-based stimulus (e.g., brand failure) or a value-based stimulus (i.e., linked to the brand's values)—that is the starting point for the consumer's mental escalation toward CBS or instrumental aggression, we can distinguish two paths: a performance-related and a value-related escalation path.

The key objective of our conceptual framework is to provide an understanding of these two escalation paths and

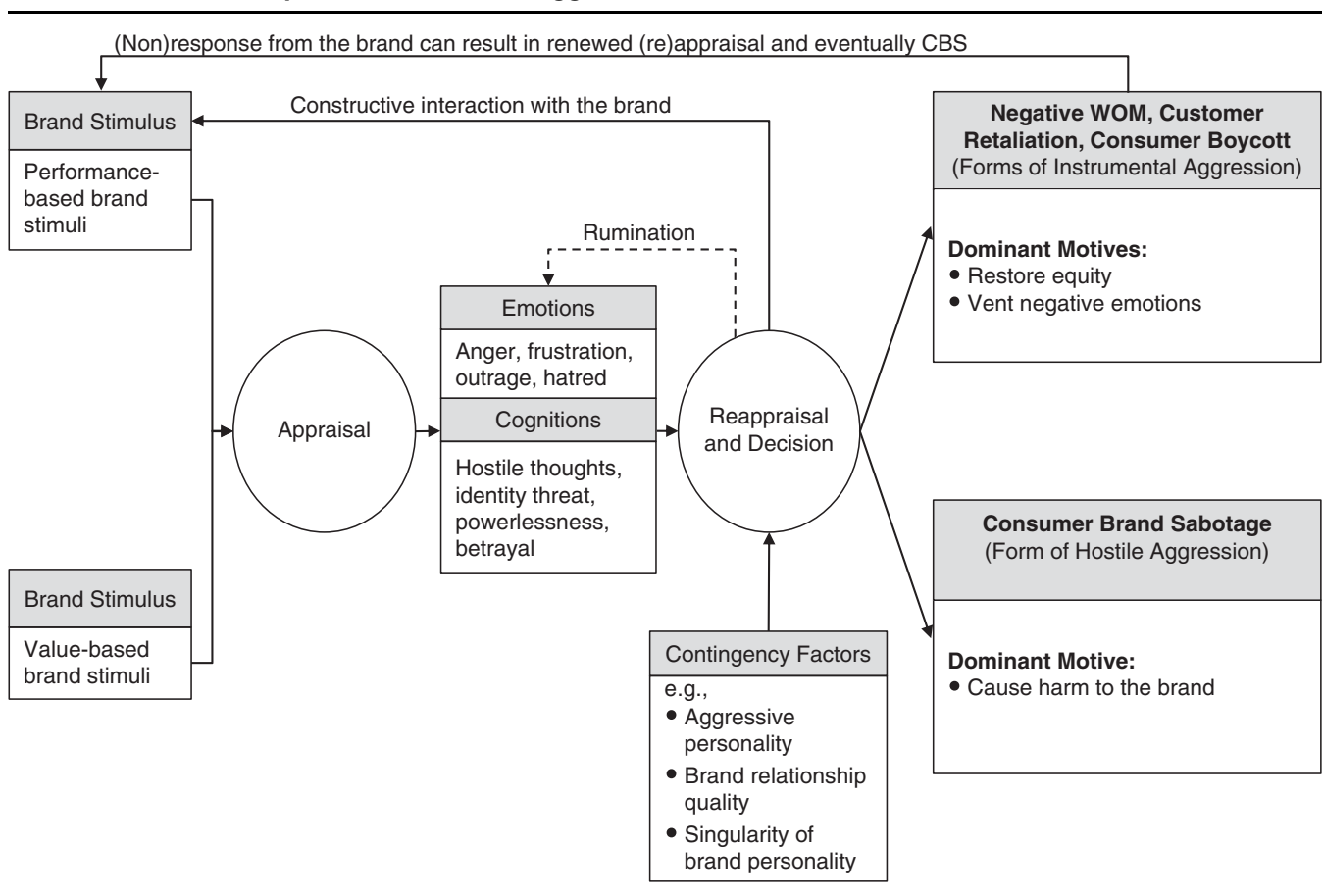
to specifically explain the consumer's decision whether to engage in CBS or alternative behavior. This choice is driven by the consumer's mental escalation process (i.e., primary appraisal, emotions and cognitions, reappraisal, and rumination and interaction loops) and is also influenced by contingency factors such as individual consumer characteristics, brand attributes, and the specific consumer-brand relationship.

This framework has been developed based on theoretical considerations from the aggression and appraisal literature as well as on qualitative interviews with consumers who engaged in aggressive behavior against brands. In addition to these theoretical considerations and our qualitative interviews, we also present some initial empirical findings from two quantitative studies among consumers that concern CBS and its antecedents.

### Theoretical Considerations

Because aggressive behavior plays a central role in our framework, we look to aggression theories from social psychology such as the General Aggression Model (GAM; Anderson and Bushman 2002) for guidance. We identify useful concepts and ideas from the aggression literature and adapt them in a unique way to a consumer-brand relationship context in order to facilitate theory development. The GAM

**FIGURE 1**  
**Conceptual Framework of Aggressive Consumer Behavior Toward Brands**



postulates that aggression results from the mental processing of situational and personal input factors (e.g., insult by another individual). These input factors determine the internal state of the individual, characterized by cognitions and emotions. The overall situation is then evaluated in an appraisal and decision process, potentially resulting in aggression. Guided by this general person-to-person response process, we develop an understanding of a unique form of aggressive behavior in a consumer-brand context.

It is important to note that this perspective provides an important and unique contribution by extending previous aggression theories in several important ways. First, in the case of CBS, a saboteur (person) targets a brand (object). Thus, we are studying person-object relationships, in contrast to traditional aggression theories in social psychology, which focus on person-to-person aggression in the context of interpersonal relationships.

Second, in this person-object context, a saboteur needs to invest more cognitive effort to implement his/her aggression. This occurs because brands are more abstract than humans (even though consumers sometimes attribute anthropomorphic characteristics to brands). Thus, aggression in a consumer-brand context might not be as easy or straightforward as attacking another person (e.g., through face-to-face confrontation or by using violence against the other person).

Third, in a consumer-brand context, there is an initial power difference between the aggressor and the object of aggression. Unlike in interpersonal aggression, in which two opponents often are similarly strong, the aggressor (saboteur) in the context of brand sabotage is a consumer, who is generally much less powerful than a brand. This power gap can be bridged as the consumer empowers him- or herself by activating other consumers whose brand-related associations are impaired as a consequence of CBS, like David beating Goliath.

Fourth, the interaction process for CBS is different from that in an interpersonal context. Because the potential object of aggression in CBS is an object and not a person, the interactions between the consumer and the brand are often more abstract and less direct, and therefore less intuitive, which requires more interpretation and decoding by the consumer. Also, the response by the brand is usually not immediate and spontaneous, which allows more potential rumination and interaction loops. In contrast, the GAM takes a more immediate perspective and “focuses on the ‘person in the situation,’ called an *episode*, consisting of one cycle of an ongoing social interaction” (Anderson and Bushman 2002, p. 34; emphasis in original).

Fifth, our framework is more specific than the GAM with regard to the input variables because we differentiate between performance- and value-based brand stimuli. In an interpersonal setting, there could be many more factors that lead to aggression.

Finally, we take an external conflict perspective on values as a driver of aggression, according to which the object of aggression clashes with the aggressor’s personal values (i.e., a saboteur attacks a brand if it conflicts with his/her values, such as morality or fairness). In contrast, traditional

aggression theories adopt an internal congruence perspective on values: a potential aggressor is more likely to engage in aggression if he/she sees violence as an acceptable method of problem solving. Our external conflict perspective is important because consumers “internalize” brands to express their identity and become especially aggressive to value infringements by the brand because they want to protect their identity.

In addition to aggression theories, we also draw on appraisal theories to better understand the link between brand stimuli and the resulting emotions and cognitions (Arnold 1960; Roseman, Antoniou, and Jose 1996). Appraisal theories examine how emotions are elicited by stimuli, claiming that there is some cognition (i.e., appraisal) involved, prior to the elicitation of emotions, which can be conscious or unconscious (Moors 2009). Such an appraisal perspective is especially relevant to understanding the impact of brand stimuli on consumers’ emotions and cognitions and the subsequent escalation process toward CBS.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

We conducted a qualitative study among seven consumer brand saboteurs and five consumers who had engaged in negative WOM, boycott activities, or customer retaliation (one interview was with two individuals who together engaged in customer retaliation). The purpose of this study was to understand consumers’ motivation for their behavior and the emotions and thoughts that led to it. We conducted semistructured interviews with consumers who in the past four years had engaged in the respective behaviors. In selecting brand saboteurs, we required all components of our definition of CBS to be met. We carefully studied consumers’ behaviors (e.g., when they invested a large amount of effort in their actions) to infer from their behavior their motivation for the actions. For the interviews of consumers who had engaged in instrumental aggression, we relied on definitions of such behavior in the literature (e.g., for customer retaliation, Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux [2009]; for consumer boycott, Klein, Smith, and John [2004]; for negative WOM, Zhang, Feick, and Mittal [2014]).

To identify interview candidates, we searched social networking sites, video-sharing platforms, online forums, blogs, newspapers, magazines, and journals, and distributed flyers. When selecting interviewees, we attempted to maximize diversity with regard to the underlying brand-related stimuli, consumers’ specific behaviors, and their sociodemographics (see Table W1.1 in the Web Appendix). The interviews were conducted over a three-month period and a later two-month period; each interview lasted between a half hour and an hour ( $M = 35$  minutes; total = 7 hours). The interviews were divided into three sections. In the first section, consumers described what brand behavior and later interactions with the brand led to their behavior, as well as how they felt and what thoughts they had in this process. In the second section, consumers talked about their actions against the brands, including how they developed the idea to act in that way. The last section dealt with consumers’ motivations and the objectives of their behavior. We interpreted the content of our audiotaped and

transcribed interviews through a hermeneutical approach, in that we applied an iterative process by shifting back and forth between the data and the literature on aggression and appraisal to provide a well-founded ground of evidence and reach a comprehensive conceptual framework (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Thompson and Haytko 1997). In the first part of this process, we looked at the entire interview intratextually to gain a sense of the consumer's individual experience with the brand and his/her corresponding thoughts and emotions, resulting behavior, and motivation. In the second part, we analyzed the interviews intertextually to identify patterns of similarities and differences within these categories. In this iterative process, we challenged and refined the emerging framework with the data. Two of the authors independently analyzed the interviews. There were only minor differences between the two researchers' analyses, which could easily be resolved by discussion.

### **Preliminary Study 1**

To examine the two paths of hostile versus instrumental aggression, we conducted a survey among 683 consumers (48.6% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 36.4$  years; for a detailed description of the study, see section W2 in the Web Appendix). Consumers from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland were recruited on the crowdsourcing platform Clickworker. They followed a link to an online questionnaire in which they were presented (in randomized order) with six different examples of negative consumer behavior (two CBS, two retaliation, and two negative WOM). For the selection of the CBS examples, we relied on our definition of CBS and insights from the qualitative study and described CBS activities that had actually taken place. For customer retaliation, we carefully selected specific examples from prior research and used the descriptions of those examples as provided in the corresponding studies (Funches, Markley, and Davis 2009; Huefner and Hunt 2000). For negative WOM, we selected real cases as described in our interviews and on the online review platform TripAdvisor (Mudhutter 2007).

Respondents were asked to indicate how they perceived the consumer's behavior in each example and to rate it on a seven-point Likert-scale (where 1 = "not at all," and 7 = "very much") for 15 variables that referred to the conceptualization of CBS and the components of our framework. As shown in detail in Table W2.1 in the Web Appendix, we measured four emotions (anger, frustration, outrage, and hatred), four cognitions (hostile thoughts, perceived betrayal, powerlessness, and identity threat), three motives (harming the brand, venting negative emotions, and restoring equity), rumination and interaction loops, consumers' unwillingness to (re)engage in a relationship with the brand, and the perceived damage caused to the brand.

### **Preliminary Study 2**

In order to examine the two paths of brand stimuli (performance-based and value-based stimuli) that can lead to CBS, we conducted an experiment with a two factorial between-subject design with 289 participants (48.8% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 38.7$  years; for a detailed description of the experiment,

see section W3 in the Web Appendix). We recruited consumers from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland on the platform Clickworker and presented them with either a performance-based ( $n = 144$ ) or a value-based ( $n = 145$ ) brand stimulus. We described an action of a (fictitious) clothing brand in two different ways: the performance-based stimulus was a severe performance failure with several failed interactions; the value-based stimulus was a statement by the brand's CEO that conflicts with most consumers' values as well as indicating unethical brand practices. We made sure that the amount of negative aspects (i.e., number of interaction failures and value conflicts) was the same for the performance-based and the value-based scenario. We based these two scenarios on the content of our interviews with brand saboteurs and conducted a pretest to ensure we manipulated only the intended factors (see section W3 in the Web Appendix).

After presenting participants with one of the two scenarios, we conducted a manipulation check for which we developed four items to measure to what degree the scenario was perceived as dealing with performance ( $\alpha = .95$ ) or values ( $\alpha = .95$ ), each with two items. The performance-based scenario was more strongly perceived as addressing performance ( $M = 4.94$ ) than the value-based scenario ( $M = 3.01$ ;  $F(1, 287) = 91.85, p < .01$ ), and the value-based scenario was perceived as more strongly addressing values ( $M = 5.55$ ) than the performance-based scenario ( $M = 3.93$ ;  $F(1, 280) = 78.90, p < .01$ ). There was no significant difference in the perceived credibility of the two scenarios ( $M_{\text{performance-based}} = 4.33, M_{\text{value-based}} = 4.00$ ;  $F(1, 287) = 2.46, p = .12$ ). We then assessed participants' emotions as follows: anger ( $\alpha = .95$ ) with a three-item scale of Gelbrich (2010); frustration ( $\alpha = .85$ ) with a different three-item scale of Gelbrich (2010); outrage ( $\alpha = .93$ ) with the five-item scale of Lindenmeier, Schleer, and Pricl (2012); and hatred ( $\alpha = .85$ ) with the two item-scale of Halperin, Canetti-Nisim, and Hirsch-Hoefler (2009). Cognitions were measured as follows: hostile thoughts ( $\alpha = .86$ ) with five items that we developed on the basis of our conceptual considerations; perceived identity threat ( $\alpha = .77$ ) with the three-item scale of Jetten, Postmes, and McAuliffe (2002); perceived powerlessness ( $\alpha = .94$ ) with the four-item scale of Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp (2010); and perceived betrayal ( $\alpha = .93$ ) with the three-item scale of Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux (2009). Rumination ( $\alpha = .93$ ) was assessed with the six-item scale of Wade et al. (2008). We then asked participants whether they would react to the scenario (making them think about a possible action) and to what degree they had the following motives: to cause harm to the brand, to restore equity, and to vent negative emotions. We also asked them to rank these motives to identify their dominant one.

Afterward, we asked participants whether they would continue their relationship with the brand (we developed two items based on our conceptual considerations;  $\alpha = .78$ ). We also assessed controls (prior experience with clothing, credibility of the scenario, and product involvement ( $\alpha = .81$ ) with the three-item scale of Chandrashekar [2004]) and sociodemographic variables. Subsequently, we discuss our conceptual framework in more detail.

## Brand-Related Stimuli

Certain brand behaviors or brand philosophies stimulate consumers' mental processes, which then lead to CBS or instrumental aggression. We categorize these brand-related stimuli into the categories of performance-based and value-based stimuli, which are the starting points for two different paths toward CBS. "Performance-based brand stimuli" refers to a brand's failure with regard to product and service quality. This includes defective products, inaccurate bills, late shipments, or product shortages (Copulsky 2011). It also comprises interaction failures, such as excessive wait times for customer service or unfriendly responses on the customer hotline. CBS in response to such performance-based brand stimuli is usually conducted by a customer (vs. a non-customer) because a customer has more touchpoints with the brand and his/her own brand experience.

Value-based brand stimuli are linked to the brand's values, which become visible to consumers through the brand's behavior in the market. These values include the brand's communicated philosophy and brand identity, as well as any demonstration by the brand of unsocial or unethical behavior (e.g., use of child labor in offshore factories). An example was a group of hackers (probably sympathizers of the North Korean government) calling themselves "Guardians of Peace," who attacked Sony Entertainment (even threatening to blow up movie theaters) because one of the firm's movies, *The Interview*, focused on an attempted assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un (Fritz, Yadron, and Schwartzel 2014). Value-based brand stimuli can cause not only the brand's customers but also non-customers to engage in CBS activities.

## Appraisal

In the next phase of our conceptual framework, consumers perceive and evaluate brand stimuli through a mental process. A first step in this process is the primary appraisal of a stimulus, whereby a consumer makes an assessment of the significance and meaning of the brand stimulus for his/her personal situation, which then results in specific emotions and cognitions (Smith and Lazarus 1993). In accordance with appraisal theory, we argue that a high relevance of a brand stimulus to the consumer's personal goals and values results in stronger emotions (Moors 2009) and cognitions (Bushman 1998). Also, the congruence of the stimulus with a consumer's goals and values determines the valence of emotions (Moors 2009) and cognitions (DeWall et al. 2009). In other words, incongruence results in negative emotions and cognitions.

Furthermore, the consumer's negative evaluation of the fairness and morality (equity) of the brand's behavior also drives his/her emotions (e.g., anger) and cognitions (e.g., perceived betrayal) (see also Grégoire and Fisher 2008; Lindenmeier, Schleer, and Priel 2012). As an example, a key reason why one of our interviewees finally decided to start a CBS campaign against a fashion brand was that he felt that the brand and its "arrogant CEO" acted against important societal values, and he accused the CEO of racism: "His quote is like the embodiment of what we don't like about CEOs....

He talks about how a lot of people don't belong in the clothes of his brand. So he talks repeatedly about going after the all-American kid, and when I look through all Americans I immediately feel that is sort of code language for 'white.' ... I guess I was kinda shocked by it, because it really seems like a scripted language of a villain in a film rather than a position someone would actually hold" (Interview 3).

In addition, attribution theory can explain the consumer's evaluation of brand stimuli (e.g., Folkes 1984, 1988). Specifically, the consumer makes a causal inference for the occurrence of the stimulus by evaluating the brand's responsibility for this stimulus and whether the brand has control over it. If the consumer perceives the brand to be responsible for and in control of the negative stimulus, it is more likely that negative emotions and cognitions will be elicited (see also Roseman, Antoniou, and Jose 1996).

## Emotions and Cognitions

As a result of the primary appraisal of the brand stimulus, a variety of interrelated emotions and cognitions can be elicited and activated variously across consumers and situations (Anderson and Bushman 2002). We identified these emotions and cognitions on the basis of considerations from aggression theories, the literature on negative consumer behavior, and our interviews.

First, in our context of aggressive consumer behavior, the key emotions have a negative valence and mostly a high level of arousal (see also Reizenzein 1994). We consider the following emotions to play an important role in our framework: frustration, anger, outrage, and hatred. According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, frustration is a crucial antecedent of aggression (Dollard et al. 1939). A key notion behind this hypothesis is that frustration results from the interference of a stimulus or situation with the expected attainment of a desired goal. A person becomes frustrated if his/her goal is blocked or made unattainable. Frustration as a response to product and service failures has also been addressed in literature on customer retaliation and negative WOM (e.g., Gelbrich 2010), and most of our interviewees stated that a key emotional response was frustration, as illustrated by this quotation: "I cannot understand how a company can be that incompetent! Especially because I always thought my case was that simple and clear. That was just very frustrating!" (Interview 4).

Subsequent research further refines the basic frustration-aggression hypothesis. A prominent refinement was that anger was added as a mediator between frustration and aggression (Berkowitz 1989). General appraisal theories state that anger is usually caused by an external attribution (Roseman 1991); something or someone else is blamed for an aversive situation leading to anger. Thus, we postulate that anger occurs when the consumer blames a brand for blocking his/her goals. This prominent role of anger in our framework was also evidenced in our interviews, in which all consumers explicitly stated that they felt angry. One of our interviewees said, "It was this feeling of anger ... that drove me. Sh——! This procedure drives me f——ing nuts!... I was so mad!" (Interview 10).



Outrage is another important emotion that predisposes consumers to aggressive behavior. Outrage is more complex than the basic emotion of anger and is often linked to the interests or welfare of other consumers (Lindenmeier, Schleer, and Priel 2012). This emotion results from the appraisal that a brand behaves in a way that is offensive to decency or morality, especially if moral norms such as fairness, justice, and political correctness have been violated (see also Batson et al. 2007). Accordingly, we expect outrage to occur particularly in cases of a brand's behavior being incongruent with a consumer's values. As an example, one of our interviewees became really outraged with the perceived injustice of a large railway company. He described his feelings after reading that the CEO had said that on shorter routes during commuter traffic, it could be expected that passengers would stand for 20 minutes: "I am outraged that someone who sits on his office chair for the entire day and is driven around in a private car believes to have the right to say what can be reasonable for us who work eight or nine hours a day with—compared to his work—relatively hard work. It is impertinent! Especially because their [the carrier's] performance keeps decreasing" (Interview 11).

Hatred is another emotion that plays a key role in leading to consumers' aggressive behavior. In social psychology, hatred is a very powerful negative emotion and entails a desire to hurt, humiliate, or even kill someone (Halperin 2008; White 1996). In our interviews, hatred toward the brand was often found among brand saboteurs: "It was really unfair; I was so mad. Well, I maybe even felt hatred towards the employees of my supplier. I cannot hate them for the rest of my life. But the brand shall now bleed for it" (Interview 6).

With regard to the role of consumers' emotions in driving aggressive behavior, the aggression literature has indicated that hostile aggression is more affective than instrumental aggression and is driven by strong emotions such as anger (Anderson and Bushman 2002). This is in line with our findings from Study 1, which show that the levels of anger, frustration, outrage, and hatred were significantly higher for CBS than for instrumental aggression (IA in equations): anger ( $M_{CBS} = 6.25$ ,  $M_{IA} = 5.17$ ;  $F(1, 1,347) = 214.81$ ,  $p < .01$ ), frustration ( $M_{CBS} = 5.84$ ,  $M_{IA} = 5.49$ ;  $F(1, 1,018) = 18.53$ ,  $p < .01$ ), outrage ( $M_{CBS} = 6.54$ ,  $M_{IA} = 6.12$ ;  $F(1, 1,024) = 41.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and hatred ( $M_{CBS} = 6.18$ ,  $M_{IA} = 4.97$ ;  $F(1, 1,057) = 242.80$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These findings for anger and hatred were also supported by Study 2, in which we found that saboteurs reported significantly higher levels of anger ( $M_{CBS} = 6.25$ ,  $M_{IA} = 5.25$ ;  $F(1, 26) = 18.59$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and hatred ( $M_{CBS} = 6.18$ ,  $M_{IA} = 5.17$ ;  $F(1, 259) = 6.78$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than instrumental aggressors.

In terms of cognitions, we identified the following to be most critical: hostile thoughts, perceived identity threat, perceived powerlessness, and perceived betrayal. Hostile thoughts are aggressive concepts stored in consumers' long-term memory that can be activated by brand stimuli (Anderson and Bushman 2002). These thoughts include the idea of hurting/damaging someone or something, the wish or imagination to harm or punish someone, the impulse to attack or destroy something, and the urge to say something rude, inappropriate, or nasty to someone.

In our framework, hostile thoughts are activated as a result of the primary appraisal and are mentally linked to a brand. Our interviewees also reported such hostile thoughts: "I wanted to harm them. I said, 'You can delete us from your customer file. I never want to work with you anymore.' This really was one of my first thoughts after I got their letter" (Interview 6).

A perceived threat to an individual's identity is another cognition that forms an important source of aggressive behavior (Graham et al. 2013). Such a threat refers to actions or situations that challenge or diminish a person's sense of competence, dignity, or self-worth (Aquino and Douglas 2003). A consumer could perceive a threat to his/her self-identity when a brand made him/her feel unimportant or not taken seriously. This perceived threat enhances the likelihood that a consumer will engage in aggression. Several of our interviewees confirmed such a perceived threat to their identity as a driver of their aggressive behavior: "As a long-standing customer you are all of a sudden worthless. They didn't show any reaction, didn't care at all. It hit me really hard. It was as if they were saying, 'You are not interesting for us. We don't care whether you are our customer or not!'" (Interview 2).

A further important cognition in the context of aggression is perceived powerlessness, which refers to the consumer's belief that he/she cannot influence the situation to his/her advantage or that he/she cannot change the target's (i.e., the brand's) attitudes and behaviors (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010), so that the only "escape" could be aggressive behavior. Such behavior can also emerge when a consumer perceives that his/her power has been reduced (e.g., Horwitz 1956). Such power-reduction situations are experienced as attacks, and individuals might counterattack to restore their power (Fagenson and Cooper 1987). This feeling of powerlessness is especially relevant in our consumer-brand context because the brand often has more resources and influence than an individual consumer. In our qualitative study, we found that interviewees often felt powerless: "It is just this feeling of powerlessness that drove me. Knowing who replaces this lovely place just pisses me off! More and more big companies eat and destroy the small ones. That just makes me feel powerless" (Interview 10).

Finally, perceived betrayal is another important cognition, which includes perceived rejection and relationship devaluation (Fitness 2001). It results from a customer's belief that a brand has intentionally violated what is normative in the context of their relationship. This is sometimes the case when customers believe that firms have behaved in an unfair way, lied to them, taken advantage of them, violated their trust, cheated, broken promises, or disclosed confidential information. The importance of perceived betrayal in our context was supported by our interviews: "I felt really betrayed. Since I was a small boy I was their customer. And now, they just presented us with the facts: 'That's what we are planning and that's what we are going to do. We don't care what you say!'" (Interview 11).

Regarding consumers' cognitions, hostile thoughts, such as the wish or imagination to harm or punish a brand, increase the likelihood of consumers choosing the hostile path (see



also Anderson and Bushman 2002). Furthermore, a perceived threat to one's identity has been found to play a key role in conflict escalation, leading to more severe aggression (Graham et al. 2013; Graham and Wells 2003), such as CBS. In line with these considerations, in Study 1, we found that hostile thoughts ( $M_{CBS} = 6.20$ ,  $M_{IA} = 5.05$ ;  $F(1, 1,037) = 206.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and perceived identity threat ( $M_{CBS} = 4.10$ ,  $M_{IA} = 3.61$ ;  $F(1, 1,324) = 18.74$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were more relevant for respondents who had engaged in CBS than for those who had engaged in instrumental aggression. The findings regarding hostile thoughts were supported by Study 2. We found that those respondents who chose CBS reported significantly more hostile thoughts ( $M = 4.94$ ) than those who chose instrumental aggression ( $M = 3.41$ ;  $F(1, 259) = 17.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In contrast, with regard to perceived betrayal and perceived powerlessness (which are related to restoring equity), prior research has found that these two cognitions play a key role in leading to customer retaliation (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010; Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009). In line with this research, in Study 1, we found that perceived betrayal ( $M_{CBS} = 5.00$ ,  $M_{IA} = 5.60$ ;  $F(1, 721) = 29.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and perceived powerlessness ( $M_{CBS} = 3.11$ ,  $M_{IA} = 3.79$ ;  $F(1, 1,324) = 41.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were more important for instrumental aggression than for CBS.

## Reappraisal and Decision

In the next phase of our conceptual framework, the consumer interprets the brand-induced situation from an overall perspective. In other words, the consumer reevaluates the brand stimuli, primary appraisal, and resulting cognitions and emotions. There can also be repeated brand interaction and rumination loops, and finally, the consumer makes a decision about whether to engage in CBS or instrumental aggression, or not to act at all. This phase is also the key mental process of the GAM, determining the final action of the person and the type of aggressive behavior (Anderson and Bushman 2002). A crucial aspect of this integrative evaluation involves the consumer's reflection on how the situation is going to evolve according to the expected future behavior of the brand (Smith and Lazarus 1993). Here, the consumer makes an assessment of whether the situation, including the brand's behavior, will change in the consumer's favor (Lazarus 1991).

With regard to the choice between CBS and instrumental aggression, consumers who believe there is a chance that the brand's behavior will change for the better might choose the instrumental aggression rather than the CBS path (or might choose to interact with the brand again). This assertion is supported by the literature on consumer boycotts, in which it has been found that consumers are more likely to engage in boycotting behavior if they believe that it will influence the firm's behavior (Klein, Smith, and John 2004). If the consumer does not see any chance for such an improvement, he/she tends to be more willing to burn all bridges to the brand and engage in CBS.

These considerations were also supported by our interviews. Consumers who engaged in instrumental aggression believed that the brand's behavior could still improve: "I've hoped that through our protest actions they realize that they

have to change something and that they do something about it" (Interview 11); "I wanted to put pressure on them such that they take care of the problem" (Interview 9). On the other hand, consumers who engaged in CBS did not expect the behavior of the brand to improve in the future: "I didn't attempt to contact them. I think there isn't any benefit to contacting them, because they don't really care about complaints unless they affect sort of the bottom line" (Interview 3); "We have really never had a similar situation. Never did we have to cope with something like this. So far, we have always found a solution. But this time, they really did not even leave us a chance" (Interview 6). Also, our findings from Study 1 confirmed that consumers who engaged in CBS were more likely to want never to become a customer of the brand again ( $M_{CBS} = 5.38$ ,  $M_{IA} = 4.06$ ;  $F(1, 1,438) = 185.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

A specific phenomenon linked to the reappraisal process in our consumer-brand context is rumination. Because a brand's response to a consumer's communication can take some time, the consumer has slack time, which can result in rumination. Here, the consumer repeatedly thinks about the initial negative brand stimuli, resulting negative cognitions and emotions, and prior (repeated) failed interactions with the brand, reflecting on their causes, meaning, and implications (Whitmer and Gotlib 2013). Rumination can worsen consumers' negative internal states by leading to more intense negative cognitions and emotions, which are then again reappraised. Thus, rumination can lead to a vicious cycle of intensifying negativity. Such an aggravation effect of rumination has also been found in the aggression literature: Bushman (2002) finds that angry individuals who engaged in rumination became even angrier and more aggressive compared with other groups that did not engage in rumination.

It can therefore be argued that the more rumination loops, the more negative the consumer's cognitions and emotions become (Whitmer and Gotlib 2013), thereby increasing the probability of the consumer engaging in CBS. In other words, a consumer will be more likely to sabotage a brand if he/she repetitively thinks about the negative situation and everything that went wrong, reflecting on the causes, meaning, and implications of the negative cognitions and emotions generated in the appraisal process. The relevance of rumination for CBS is supported by our findings from Study 1, in which we found that for consumers who engaged in CBS, the level of rumination prior to their hostile action was significantly higher than for consumers who engaged in instrumental aggression ( $M_{CBS} = 5.49$ ,  $M_{IA} = 4.32$ ;  $F(1, 1,040) = 134.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

A consumer's interpretation of a brand-induced situation during reappraisal is followed by a decision of how to react to the situation. In preparation for this decision, the consumer first elaborates on what action options he/she has for coping with the negative brand-induced situation. These include doing nothing (and cognitively redefining the situation as less important or less critical; Lazarus 1991), constructively interacting with the brand (e.g., complaining to the company), or engaging in instrumental aggression or CBS against the brand. In general, the consumer will select a specific action option if he/she sees that alternative as most likely to be

effective in improving the negative brand-induced situation (Smith and Lazarus 1993). For example, the consumer could decide not to attack the brand but to interact constructively with it (e.g., formal customer complaint) if he/she perceives the brand to be responsive to critique. This can be illustrated by one of our interviews, in which a consumer was dissatisfied with the quality of a shirt she bought from an online retailer. She first complained through e-mail because she had a positive image of the retailer's service orientation and believed that her problem could be solved with such a formal complaint: "I thought it can't be that my shirt is ruined after only wearing it once. So far, I have always had positive experiences with the brand. That's why I thought that writing a complaint would resolve the issue" (Interview 8).

With regard to the role of the number of failed interactions in driving aggressive behavior, we argue that multiple negative interactions with a brand (interaction loops) should drive consumers toward CBS because they will increase the negativity of resulting emotions and cognitions and create the impression that there is no chance for a constructive and positive solution (see also Graham and Wells 2003). This argument was supported in our interviews with brand saboteurs: "It has reoccurred again and again. Each time, after they realized their mistake, another unjustified bill arrived. This is impossible! Did they go completely mad? Every time, I stood again at the same spot and had to reinitiate complaining that the bill was unjustified. You could even talk of a tactic of attrition from them. Of course, after all that you can no longer have any positive attitude towards that brand!" (Interview 1); "I was not taken seriously by them. That's very clear. I contacted them so many times. If they had reacted or written to me earlier, I would not have gone that far" (Interview 7). Our results from Study 1 also support this notion: more failed interactions were reported for consumers who had engaged in CBS than for those who had engaged in instrumental aggression ( $M_{CBS} = 4.41$ ,  $M_{IA} = 3.06$ ;  $F(1, 758) = 107.80$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

As an alternative to such a constructive interaction, or as a result of failed interactions with the brand, a consumer can decide that the best action option is to act aggressively against the brand. In this case, he/she can choose between CBS and instrumental aggression. We argue that the choice of CBS versus instrumental aggressive behavior is determined by the motives consumers form as a result of the reappraisal. Consistent with aggression theory (e.g., Anderson and Bushman 2002), CBS is exerted by consumers with the dominant motive to harm the brand. Such an explicit objective to harm was always in evidence in our interviews with brand saboteurs: "[With my viral social media campaign against the brand,] I can do damage to the company. Of course, I could just have boycotted the company, but boycotting actually does not make a difference" (Interview 3). Thus, CBS is typically more harmful than instrumental aggression; this assertion was supported in Study 1, in which CBS activities were associated with significantly higher damage than activities of instrumental aggression ( $M_{CBS} = 6.02$ ,  $M_{IA} = 3.68$ ;  $F(1, 1,307) = 782.64$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Also, saboteurs perceive the brand as their enemy and do not wish to (re)establish any relationship with it: "I never ever want to

work with them again!" (Interview 6); "I believe it just took too long. I had enough! If it had only occurred once, it would probably have been OK. But the entire story took about 1.5 years. Then, a lot needs to happen [before] you become a customer of that brand again. Even if they had a better and cheaper offer than others—I really don't care!" (Interview 1).

In contrast, instrumental aggression is not dominated by the objective to harm the brand (Anderson and Bushman 2002). Rather, consumers use aggression as a means to achieve other objectives. A first key motive of instrumental aggression is the restoration of equity, which is relevant for customers who feel they have been wronged by a company or brand and want to get even (Funches, Markley, and Davis 2009). One of our interviewees, for example, stated, "They presented us with a fait accompli and didn't ask for our opinion. By refusing to show the train ticket, we also wanted to annoy them" (Interview 11). Venting negative emotions is a second key motive of instrumental aggression and is important for very dissatisfied customers who want to achieve a feeling of relief (De Matos and Rossi 2008). In our interviews, this was supported: "I did not really want to harm them [the brand]. I wanted to vent my anger and also to put pressure on them that they react" (Interview 9).

Further support for this distinction was provided by Study 1. As illustrated in Table W2.1 in the Web Appendix, the motive to harm reached significantly higher values for respondents who engaged in CBS than for those who engaged in instrumental aggression ( $M_{CBS} = 6.34$ ,  $M_{IA} = 4.61$ ;  $F(1, 1,204) = 390.19$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, the results show that for CBS, harming the brand was clearly the dominant motive ( $M_{\text{harming the brand}} = 6.34$ , vs.  $M_{\text{restoring equity}} = 6.07$ ;  $t(441) = 4.40$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $M_{\text{venting negative emotions}} = 6.18$ ;  $t(441) = 2.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In contrast, for instrumental aggression (negative WOM and customer retaliation), the dominant motives were restoring equity ( $M_{\text{restoring equity}} = 5.74$ , vs.  $M_{\text{harming the brand}} = 4.61$ ;  $t(883) = 22.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and venting negative emotions ( $M_{\text{venting negative emotions}} = 5.59$ , vs.  $M_{\text{harming the brand}} = 4.61$ ;  $t(883) = 18.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

It is important to note that consumers who have chosen instrumental aggression can still decide to engage in CBS in a next step or escalation round, especially if they perceive the brand's response to their instrumental aggression as unsatisfactory. We expect such a two-step escalation to CBS with an initial focus on instrumental aggression to be more likely to occur in the case of performance-based brand stimuli. In the case of value-based brand stimuli, a direct escalation toward CBS (without prior instrumental aggression) is more likely.

In our Study 2, out of 261 respondents who were confronted with an initial brand-related stimulus and answered the respective question, 17 chose to engage in CBS (i.e., to harm the brand was their dominant motive), of which 13 had seen the value-based stimulus and 4 the performance-based stimulus. The other 244 respondents chose instrumental aggression (i.e., to restore equity or to vent negative emotions as their dominant motive). Of these, 114 had seen a value-based stimulus and 130 a performance-based stimulus. These findings could indicate that value-based brand stimuli lead more directly to CBS than performance-based brand stimuli. To further investigate this idea, we conducted a mediation

analysis using PROCESS model 4 (bootstrapping of 10,000 samples; Hayes 2013). The value- versus performance-based stimuli were dummy-coded as value-based = 0 and performance-based = 1. We found that the performance-based brand stimulus increased the motives of restoring equity and of venting negative emotions, which both in turn increased the motive of causing harm to a brand (restoring equity:  $a_1b_1 = .1465$ , 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.0202, .3035]; venting negative emotions:  $a_2b_2 = .3087$ , 95% CI = [.1138, .5269]). Independent of this mechanism, the performance-based (vs. value-based) stimulus had a negative effect on the motive to cause harm to a brand ( $c' = -.7398$ , 95% CI = [-1.1450, -.3345]). Thus, we found evidence that consumers who are confronted with a performance-based brand stimulus might first engage in instrumental aggression before (in a next escalation round) committing CBS. On the other hand, value-based brand stimuli could lead more directly to CBS (or could be mediated by other factors).

## Contingency Factors

The choice of CBS versus instrumental aggression is also influenced by contingency factors referring to the consumer's personality, his/her relationship with the brand, and the brand itself. Following the literature on aggression as well as our qualitative study, we identified three specific contingency factors that affect this choice: aggressive consumer personality, consumer-brand relationship quality, and singularity of the brand personality.

People with an aggressive personality perceive more hostility and aggression in situations than people with a less aggressive personality (Anderson and Dill 2000). As a result, a consumer with an aggressive personality will be more likely to feel provoked by a brand and to respond with aggressive behavior. Furthermore, due to his/her heightened sensitivity to situational provocation, less provocation is needed to evoke aggressive behaviors in such a consumer (Marshall and Brown 2006). Also, an aggressive consumer will be more likely to turn a potential conflict situation into a hostile one (Anderson, Buckley, and Carnagey 2008).

The consumer-brand relationship quality represents another contingency factor that affects the choice of aggression path. In general, a high-quality relationship should buffer the negative effects of a product or service failure because the consumer is more tolerant with regard to brand transgressions (Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998), making CBS less probable. In contrast, consumers with a low-quality brand relationship do not have such tolerance and will more likely respond with CBS. However, it is also possible that consumers with high expectations of the brand would perceive a brand failure as betrayal (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006), leading to a "love-becomes-hate" effect (Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009) and thereby increasing the likelihood of CBS. This possibility is illustrated by the following quote of a brand saboteur: "We had a really good cooperation for a long time. These were great people. But, well, they have really let us down. I don't trust them anymore. Really, they betrayed me" (Interview 6).

Singularity of brand personality also forms an important contingency factor that influences the choice of aggression path. The focus and single-mindedness of a brand personality profile as intended by management determines the singularity of the brand's personality (Malär et al. 2012). In other words, a highly singular brand focuses on a single concept or idea and has high values on only one brand personality dimension (e.g., Harley-Davidson, which focuses on the personality dimension of ruggedness; Malär et al. 2012). Although singularity has been defined as important driver of brand performance, it can raise the likelihood that consumers will sabotage a brand. By focusing on one personality dimension, a brand might be perceived as clearer and less complex (Malär et al. 2012); however, a singular brand personality also makes any conflict with a consumer's personal values stronger and more apparent. For example, Abercrombie & Fitch's brand strategy was to target the cool, popular, and attractive kids, which led to a rather exciting brand personality (see Aaker 1997). Such a strong focus on excitement might have polarized consumers, resulting in some consumers' strong value conflicts with this positioning. Also, saboteurs could see such a positioning as a chance to demonstrate that the values some brands hold and communicate are strongly unethical in the saboteurs' eyes. The relevance of such a singularity for consumers is illustrated by the following quote of one of our brand saboteurs: "It's not that what [brand] does is so much worse than what everybody else does. It's that it is bad in such a perfect example" (Interview 3). For instrumental aggressors, the singularity of the brand personality will likely be less relevant because they primarily want to restore equity with the brand that has caused them harm in some way, or to vent their negative emotions about the brand.

## Academic Implications

The chief objectives of our article are to improve our understanding of CBS and to stimulate the study of this underresearched phenomenon in marketing. In line with these objectives, we develop a conceptual framework of consumers' aggressive behavior toward brands and advance knowledge in this area in three major ways.

First, we introduce CBS as a relatively new construct to the academic literature. This concept reflects a phenomenon that can increasingly be observed in practice but that has not yet been investigated sufficiently in academic research. We conceptualize CBS as a hostile form of aggressive behavior with the dominant objective of harming a brand through the impairment of the brand-related associations of other consumers. We therefore distinguish CBS from previously studied concepts of negative consumer behavior that represent a more instrumental form of aggression (e.g., negative WOM), by which consumers attempt to achieve other goals, such as restoring equity or venting negative emotions. Overall, by introducing the concept of CBS to the literature, we highlight the need for a better understanding of this new and increasingly important phenomenon.

Second, we explain the inception of CBS among individual consumers from a mental-process perspective. Guided

by previous theory and research as well as qualitative interviews, we develop a novel and more comprehensive perspective on negative consumer behavior and the processes by which it forms. Our theoretical focus is in line with calls for a stronger theoretical foundation (Cheung and Thadani 2010) as well as for a more integrative explanatory approach (e.g., De Matos and Rossi 2008; Lovett, Peres, and Shachar 2013) made in prior research on other forms of negative consumer behavior. These suggestions have been made against the background that prior conceptual and empirical studies on instrumental aggression have tended to focus on fewer, more isolated antecedents (e.g., perceived betrayal). In contrast, in our integrative conceptual framework, we take a more comprehensive perspective, including not only relevant antecedents examined in prior research but also important additional antecedents that have not yet been addressed (i.e., perceived identity threat, hostile thoughts, hatred, and rumination). By highlighting the key mental processes, our framework provides a better understanding of when and why consumers choose the hostile or the instrumental path of aggression against brands. Also, by addressing the choice between CBS and instrumental aggression (i.e., considering several negative consumer behaviors simultaneously in one conceptual model), we integrate the rather fragmented literature on negative consumer behavior, which has generally examined one type of negative behavior at a time (e.g., studies on consumer boycotts or negative WOM).

Third, we complement and support our conceptual framework with qualitative interviews and two quantitative studies. Our interviews with brand saboteurs enable an internal perspective on the mental processes and motivation that lead to CBS (i.e., we interviewed saboteurs regarding their emotions, cognitions, and motives). In addition, our quantitative studies support our distinction between CBS (as a form of hostile aggression) and existing concepts of negative consumer behavior (instrumental aggression, such as negative WOM). We not only conceptually argue but we also empirically show that CBS is driven by the motive of harming a brand, whereas for instrumental aggression, other motives prevail (e.g., restoring equity). Furthermore, we provide empirical evidence that, in comparison with instrumental aggression, CBS is preceded by stronger negative emotions (especially outrage, anger, and hatred), more intense rumination, more failed interactions, and hostile thoughts and perceived identity threats (rather than perceived betrayal or powerlessness).

## Agenda for Future Research

On a general level, research is needed to empirically test our conceptual framework of consumer aggression against brands. This could then lead to a new conceptual discussion and refinement of our framework. The following are just a few examples that should be of interest for future research. Research is needed to more specifically examine why consumers make the critical decision to harm a brand. We have identified key constructs and stages, but their roles in this decision need to be empirically examined in more detail. In particular, it is important to examine how certain brand-related

stimuli and emotions and cognitions are more likely to drive a consumer toward CBS than toward instrumental aggression. It is also critical to understand the importance of rumination and failed interaction loops for a consumer's decision to engage in CBS, especially in comparison with the other drivers of CBS, such as emotions and cognitions. In this context, research is needed to better understand how many rumination and failed interaction loops it takes to drive consumers to engage in CBS. Also important is understanding which specific factors prompt a consumer to intensively ruminate and what indicators signal companies that a consumer has entered into a critical rumination process. These are only a few issues that arise directly from our conceptual framework, and there are clearly others related to each of the variables and stages, which provide promising research opportunities (because these issues have been discussed earlier in the article, they will not be repeated here). In addition, there are a number of additional avenues for future research that could broaden or even go beyond our framework. We now discuss these potential areas and provide specific research questions.

First, in our framework, we have identified and discussed a set of relevant contingency factors that influence consumers' choice of hostile versus instrumental aggression (aggressive personality, brand relationship quality, and singularity of brand personality), and the roles of these contingency factors need to be investigated. However, there are other contingency variables that merit attention as well. In particular, sociodemographic variables (e.g., age, gender, education) should influence a consumer's choice of aggression path. For example, literature on aggression has suggested that men show higher levels of aggression than women (Baron and Richardson 1994); therefore, in the current context, men should be more likely to engage in CBS. Also, psychographic variables, such as personality type and level of extroversion, could play a key role. Research in social psychology has shown that people with type A personalities are more prone to hostile aggression (Check and Dyck 1986) and therefore might be more likely to engage in CBS. Furthermore, the literature on employee sabotage has identified high extroversion as an important driver of sabotage (Harris and Ogbonna 2002).

Furthermore, there are also other potentially important contingency variables, such as brand equity, that are related to the brand. **Prior research on antibranding has shown that more antibrand websites exist for brands with high brand equity than for brands with lower brand equity (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009).** Thus, high-equity brands could have a higher risk of being the target of CBS than low-equity brands. Furthermore, contingency variables regarding the consumer-brand relationship, such as brand attitude, could play an important role in consumers' choice of aggression path because a very negative brand attitude will favor hostile aggression. Taking all this together, future research needs to broaden the contingency perspective of our framework:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are the roles of contingency factors related to the consumer (e.g., gender, type A personality), the brand (e.g., brand equity), and the consumer-brand relationship (e.g., brand attitude) in the consumer's choice of aggression path?

Future studies should also consider contingency factors outside of the consumer–brand dyad, including technological, sociocultural, and market-related developments. As only a few examples, new technologies such as the Internet, social media, and smart mobile devices empower consumers to implement CBS much more easily (Labrecque et al. 2013). Also, CBS is more likely to occur now due to sociocultural developments; specifically, consumer social activism has become more prominent in many countries, facilitating worldwide social antibrand movements (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006). From a market perspective, competitive intensity could favor CBS because the greater availability of product and services from competitors could make a consumer less concerned about attacking a single brand. Thus, we propose the following research question:

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the technological, sociocultural, and market-related factors that make a consumer more likely to engage in CBS?

Within our conceptual framework, we have discussed the mental escalation process focusing on the consumer–brand dyad. Further research could broaden this dyadic view to a network perspective and, thus, broaden our conceptual framework. For example, other consumers could interact with a potential saboteur, which might have an impact on his/her mental escalation process. There might also be different effects with regard to group dynamics. Negative feedback from other consumers could serve as a type of reinforcement for a potential saboteur’s intention to pursue the hostile path toward CBS. On the other hand, venting anger can produce a positive improvement in an individual’s psychological state (Bushman 2002) such that after such a cathartic interaction with other consumers, a potential brand saboteur will refrain from engaging in CBS. This leads us to the following research question:

RQ<sub>3</sub>: How do interactions with other consumers affect a potential brand saboteur’s choice of aggression path?

Although our conceptual framework focuses on consumers’ mental escalation processes leading to CBS, future studies need to also provide a better understanding of the negative consequences of CBS. Needed is an examination of how other consumers perceive and evaluate the activities of brand saboteurs (who intend to impair the brand-related attitudes of those other consumers). The credibility of CBS activities plays a crucial role here: if CBS actions were perceived as highly credible, they might be more likely to change other consumers’ attitudes in a negative way, and the consequences of CBS would thus be much more harmful. Therefore, we need to understand the drivers of credibility in the negative context of CBS. Prior research on the antecedents of credibility in a positive context has shown that source credibility is generally based on trustworthiness and expertness (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953). These findings could also apply to our CBS context. Brand saboteurs might be regarded as trustworthy because they are third-party sources and have little motivation to include false information about a brand (Chatterjee 2001). Research also needs to investigate the differences in the drivers of credibility

depending on the valence of the context (e.g., positive WOM vs. CBS). In the context of online reviews, prior research has found that disclosing the identity of the reviewer more strongly increases the credibility of the negative than the positive reviews (Kusumasondjaja, Shanka, and Marchegiani 2012). Thus, consumers might base their evaluation of the expertise and trustworthiness of a saboteur on different or additional indicators, compared with their evaluation in a positive context. This leads us to the following question:

RQ<sub>4</sub>: What drives the credibility of CBS activities among other consumers?

Furthermore, the negative consequences of CBS are also determined by the diffusion of information about CBS activities among other consumers. A key challenge here is to understand what drives the speed and breadth of diffusion of information about CBS activities, because a more intense diffusion will increase the brand damage from CBS. Further research on this issue could draw on psychological research that has shown that individuals share information with others more intensively if they perceive this information to be important (e.g., Steinel, Utz, and Koning 2010). Thus, we put forth the following research question:

RQ<sub>5</sub>: What factors drive the intensity of diffusion of information about CBS activities among other consumers?

Our conceptual framework deals with the antecedents of and the process leading to CBS. Knowledge regarding these drivers of CBS makes it possible to monitor potential brand saboteurs so that they can be detected in an early phase of their mental process toward CBS (e.g., consumers who have already developed high levels of hostile cognitions and emotions and have engaged in negative interaction loops and intensive rumination). Such a recognition of likely saboteurs prior to their actual engagement in CBS activities would enable companies to prevent CBS by mollifying and reconciling those potential aggressors. Further research is needed to determine whether such a prevention approach can be an effective and also cost-efficient marketing strategy. Also reasonable would be an ex post perspective, whereby companies try to detect CBS immediately after it has occurred rather than preventing it (with the goal of limiting the damage to the brand). With both perspectives, research is needed to understand which specific CBS prevention and response tactics and activities are most suitable. This prompts the following research question:

RQ<sub>6</sub>: When and how should companies respond to CBS: ex ante to prevent it, or only ex post, after it has occurred, to reduce its damage?

If a company chooses a CBS-prevention approach, it has two general implementation options, which need to be examined and evaluated in future studies. First, managers can try to de-escalate the situation by accommodating the potential saboteur and constructively reducing the level of stress by offering some form of redress. For example, in our interviews, we found that saboteurs often felt ignored, exploited, and fooled by the brand because of its supremacy, and, thus, they had the perception that their power had been

reduced. Restoring a consumer's perceived power after a negative interaction, by engaging in reconciliation activities or offering apologies, could therefore be a valuable strategy for resolving an aggressive conflict (Fagenson and Cooper 1987). Such a reconciliation strategy seems to be applicable in the case of performance-based brand stimuli, but it could be less adequate in the case of a value-based CBS escalation context.

Second, a company facing the threat of CBS could try to deter potential saboteurs from engaging in CBS activities by pointing out the negative consequences of such behavior to the saboteur. As an example, the company could signal its determination to take legal action against saboteurs (see Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). However, such a deterrence strategy also has potential negative effects. Trying to deter a potential saboteur could backfire and even increase his/her determination to act aggressively against the brand (see also Gruca and Sudharshan 1995). And if the "bullying" of potential saboteurs became public, it could also cause substantial damage to the brand's image among other consumers. Future studies need to conceptually discuss and empirically evaluate these different CBS prevention options and also to examine how to best implement them. This idea leads us to the following research question:

RQ<sub>7</sub>: Which CBS prevention approach should be taken by companies, and how should each approach be implemented? Should companies mollify potential brand saboteurs or, rather, actively deter them from engaging in CBS?

The future insights from research on the damage potential of CBS, prevention of CBS, and adequate response to CBS once it has occurred need to be expanded beyond our conceptual framework by investigating the implications for marketing organization and capabilities. Given the tremendous damage that can result from CBS, we need to examine which organizational and marketing resources are best suited to prevent and to adequately respond to CBS. We need to understand which organizational structures, processes, cultures, and capabilities are best suited to deal with CBS. As an example, to recognize potential saboteurs and also to detect CBS immediately after occurrence, a company's monitoring and market-sensing capabilities could play an important role (Day 1994). Also, once CBS has occurred, crisis management and communication capabilities could be relevant in order to reduce the negative impact of sabotage. This leads us to the following research question:

RQ<sub>8</sub>: Which organizational structures and processes, cultures, and marketing capabilities enable firms to prevent CBS and to adequately respond to CBS once it has occurred?

Such a resource-based research perspective is also needed in a more specific area of marketing: companies might need to adapt their customer relationship management (CRM) strategies, systems, and processes to account for the new phenomenon of CBS. Prior CRM-related research has focused primarily on the opportunities and positive outcomes of customer-brand relationships. A key point of our conceptualization is that there is also a dark side of branding that

needs to be taken into account in CRM. This point leads us to our final research question:

RQ<sub>9</sub>: When and how should companies adapt their CRM strategies, systems, and processes to deal with the phenomenon of CBS?

## Managerial Implications

Our study also provides important insights and recommendations for managers. On a conceptual knowledge level, our study provides managers with the key insight that CBS is not only a new and distinct form of negative consumer behavior but is also destructive, with a huge damage potential for brands, whereby even a seemingly weak consumer can attack a strong brand. Our framework also highlights that CBS is not a spontaneous action; rather, it results from a conscious mental process that often involves an escalation of repeated negative interactions with a brand. Thus, managers might have the opportunity to detect CBS before it occurs. In contrast, many other brand crisis phenomena (e.g., severe product failures, accidents; Pearson and Mitroff 1993) arise suddenly, without sufficient prior warning signs, such that managers can often only react to situations that have already damaged the brand.

Furthermore, it is important for managers to realize that brand saboteurs are different from instrumental aggressors, who often are only dissatisfied customers who want to restore equity or vent negative emotions. Instrumental aggressors are usually still interested in (re)establishing and improving their relationship with the brand and, therefore, tend to be more constructive and more open to a reconciliation with the brand. In contrast, brand saboteurs have a hostile mindset and have burned all bridges with the brand. In other words, they are in a kind of a personal war with the brand. Often, they will demonstrate excessively harmful behavior and invest significant effort and creativity into their activities. Saboteurs often confront managers with highly innovative and even unprecedented sabotage activities. Also, many saboteurs are ideology-inspired consumers and are therefore especially determined. Taking into consideration these different characteristics, managers should expect a much higher damage potential from CBS than from instrumental aggression. What makes matters worse is that the negative outcomes of CBS can arise very fast and, due to the potentially viral character of CBS, become destructive in a very short time.

Against that background, CBS requires special managerial attention, which brings us to a managerial action level. Given the potential severe consequences of CBS, there are two key questions that merit managerial attention: (1) How can companies detect CBS before its occurrence? and (2) How should companies respond immediately after CBS has occurred, so that the damage can be contained? Therefore, the insights from our study could change how marketing managers operate in the future, with regard to both preventing and responding to CBS.

For CBS prevention and response, there is a strategic and an operational level. At the strategic level of CBS prevention, a key contribution from our research is that, given the extreme damage potential of CBS and also the high



relevance of value-based brand stimuli, managers should consider more defensive branding strategies. Currently, brand managers differentiate and even polarize brand positioning strategies to focus on specific customer segments and to more effectively implement their intended brand personalities (e.g., Malär et al. 2012). Such a highly differentiated approach to brand positioning is risky in a networked marketing environment challenged by the threat of CBS. As a result, managers should consider more balanced brand positioning strategies that combine the focus on attractive customer segments with the defensive intention not to affront too many consumers who might even not be customers of the brand. In this context, a company should have a clear position and strategy regarding what its managers can publicly state about the brand and what specific values can be communicated. This was an important issue in one of our brand sabotage interviews, wherein a fashion brand CEO's public comments communicated values that so strongly conflicted with the interviewee's values that the saboteur decided to engage in CBS activities.

Concerning the strategic level of CBS response, managers need to understand that, given the huge damage potential of CBS, it is a strategic must to develop an explicit response strategy for how to deal with CBS once it has occurred (Copulsky 2011). Not only is the CBS attack public but the managerial response to it is as well. Therefore, managers need to define explicit and clear strategies for how to respond to CBS. Response strategies could include (1) appeasement, or apologizing to both the saboteur and the public (e.g., by writing a personal apology to the saboteur and also making a public one, such as in a press statement); (2) counterstatements that objectively address, for example,

an initial performance failure for which the company was blamed by the saboteur (e.g., by making it clear that the alleged performance failure was due to external factors not controllable by the firm); or even (3) a counterattack that, for example, questions the honesty and objectiveness of the saboteur (e.g., claiming that the saboteur made false accusations).

On an operational level of CBS prevention and response, managers can improve their social media monitoring and CRM systems in such a way that they can effectively and quickly detect the imminent outbreak of sabotage (even at the individual consumer–brand relationship level). More specifically, companies can train their big-data algorithms to monitor social media. For example, Dell actively monitors social media with such algorithms in real time in their social media “war room.” In the current context, these algorithms can focus on the appropriate CBS-detecting keywords (e.g., those that indicate strong hatred, frustration, hostile thoughts, or rumination concerning the brand that are expressed among individual consumers through social media). Ideally, such a CBS monitoring system could alert managers that a CBS attack was imminent (e.g., because an individual consumer showed an extremely high level of negative emotions after several failed interaction loops with the brand), which would then allow managers to try to prevent CBS by reconciling with potential saboteurs through de-escalation techniques. Companies can also adapt their CRM systems so that they do not only track transactional exchanges between the brand and its customers but also are able to monitor and detect negative emotions and cognitions toward the brand expressed by customers during their interactions with employees.

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