Inferring brand integrity from marketing communications: The effects of brand transparency signals in a consumer empowerment context[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Persuasion literature suggests that consumers increasingly seek brand integrity, yet this advertising outcome remains underexplored, despite the clear need for managerial guidance from academic research. Drawing on signaling theory, this study investigates the signaling effect of brand transparency in marketing communications on brand integrity perceptions, in the timely context of advertising for consumer-ideated new products. Four experiments compare transparency signaling effects across various levels of product complexity-to-design and reputation. The data indicate causal relationships between transparency signals and brand integrity, and this robust effect persists across studies, independent of the level of product complexity-to-design. Perceived empowerment mediates the relationship, with downstream effects on behavioral intentions. The advertising response variables exhibit greater sensitivity for poor reputation brands, suggesting a transparency-repairing mechanism. Two single-paper meta-analyses confirm the theoretical value of transparency as a signal. The findings encourage brand managers to seek greater word–deed alignment, to achieve the most significant social benefits.

1. Introduction

Consumers' disregard for marketing claims has intensified, arguably as a result of recent brand scandals (e.g., Volkswagen emissions scandal, Toyota recalls), exaggerated claims of product performance (e.g., Danone Activia's claim to be a "booster of the immune system"), and the information asymmetry that characterizes market practices in general (Darke & Ritchie, 2007; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010; O'Hern & Rindfleisch, 2010). Consumers accuse marketers of being misleading, being inauthentic (Guèvremont, 2017), and lacking integrity (Abela & Murphy, 2008). The 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer confirms that 81% of respondents cite the requirement "I must be able to trust the brand to do what is right" as a key purchase consideration, and a majority of people surveyed believe brands use marketing ploys simply to sell more. To develop more positive attitudes and behaviors, consumers likely need "reasons to believe"— credible signals that a brand keeps its promises (Ipsos, 2017) and exhibits integrity (Batra & Keller, 2016).

Brand integrity encompasses brand credibility, promise fulfillment, and trustworthiness, as perceived by consumers (Kotler et al., 2010). Few systematic studies focus on brand integrity as a focal persuasion variable though, leaving several managerially relevant questions unanswered (Danbury, Palazzo, Mortimer, & Siano, 2015; Li & Miniard, 2006). For example, what advertising signals effectively drive brand integrity perceptions (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014)? Do all brands benefit from the same signals (Li & Miniard, 2006)? Do integrity-inducing signals have downstream effects on behavioral intentions (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014)?

Drawing on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), this research suggests that transparency, or the level of information detail that an entity reveals about its internal processes and performances (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2012), might offer a credible, persuasive signal of brand integrity. Business ethics research and mainstream media also describe transparency as an organizational goal (Jain & Jain, 2018; Kotler et al., 2010), though few empirical studies confirm this relationship, and transparency is rarely manipulated in experiments. Published studies

anchored in ethics literature tend to refer to crisis-related contexts, such as those affecting the apparel industry (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014), greenwashing practices (Lin, Lobo, & Leckie, 2017), or public governance (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2012).

Instead, we consider a more mainstream context—namely, marketing communications for consumer-ideated new products—in an attempt to address the paucity of empirical insights about the drivers and consequences of brand integrity in mainstream advertising settings (Davis & Rothstein, 2006; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). We address debates about how and when consumers deem a transparency signal credible and rely on it to prime their brand integrity perceptions, then detail the process by which this effect occurs, as well as some boundary conditions (e.g., Meissner, Haurand, & Stummer, 2017; Schreier, Fuchs, & Dahl, 2012). To do so, we contrast marketing-controlled (branded advertising messages) with nonmarketing-controlled (peers' comments on social networks, journalistic content) signals, noting that the latter tend to be perceived as more credible and less biased (Akdeniz, Calantone, & Voorhees, 2013), as well as particularly relevant in association with consumer-ideated new products. In this context, dual reactions are common: On the one hand, brand audiences value other consumers' integration into new product development, as enabled by consumer empowerment strategies (CES; Fuchs & Schreier, 2011) that give participants "a voice in—and an opportunity to change—a company's general offerings" (Fuchs, Prandelli, & Schreier, 2010, p. 66) and greater control over the firm's traditionally internal processes (Atakan, Bagozzi, & Yoon, 2014; Kull & Heath, 2016). On the other hand, they might question the brand's integrity or motivation for adopting such empowerment processes (Acar & Puntoni, 2016; Meissner et al., 2017; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013).

We develop a conceptual model and eight hypotheses that predict these links and influences, as well as their boundary conditions. We then test the predictions with an exploratory study, four experimental studies, and two single-paper meta-analyses. The findings offer a series of theoretical contributions, as well as practical implications. First, they illustrate the benefits of signaling transparency and provide a novel theoretical framework for persuasion research that identifies brand integrity perceptions as a key variable (Batra & Keller, 2016; Li & Miniard, 2006; Lan, Li, Zhou, Yang & Miniard, 2011; Xu et al., 2011). The current study thus enriches insufficient research on trust-related issues in advertising (Danbury et al., 2015; Soh, Reid, & King, 2009). Second, we formally identify transparency as an antecedent of brand integrity, according to robust causal relationships that replicate across studies. Third, the findings contribute to signaling theory by establishing transparency as another credible signal from which consumers may infer brand quality aspects. For brand practitioners, we demonstrate that signaling transparency in CES-related advertising can be a compelling opportunity for firms that already endorse integrity principles. In so doing, this study also answers innovation scholars' calls for research on these topics (Nishikawa, Schreier, Fuchs, & Ogawa, 2017) and identifies alternative options for boosting consumer-ideated product attractiveness.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Consumer-ideated claims under uncertainty

Signaling theory (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Spence, 1973) is particularly relevant for this research, because it focuses on information asymmetries between firms and consumers (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Information asymmetry results when different pertinent information is available to different parties. It is characteristic of brand audiences exposed to CES-related advertising, as the example of advertising for Lay's potato chips reveals. These campaigns emphasize that new chip flavors result from the firm's annual "Do us a flavor" innovation contest. Signaling theory posits that Lay's (i.e., empowering brand) and the consumers who participate in the CES are "insiders" with access to

information that is unavailable to "outsiders" (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). The outsiders in this context are brand audiences exposed to the CES-related advertisements, who have no direct interaction with the brand and no direct effect on decision making. According to prior innovation research, their evaluations of the new consumer-ideated products (i.e., flavors) may be positive (Dahl, Fuchs, & Schreier, 2014; Fuchs & Schreier, 2011; Nishikawa, Schreier, & Ogawa, 2013; Nishikawa et al., 2017; Schreier et al., 2012), or they might express doubts about the authenticity of the brand's empowering efforts (Acar & Puntoni, 2016; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). Uncertainty and doubts arise because of the informational asymmetry brand audiences experience with regard to the CES process (Connelly et al., 2011). For example, a consumer-ideated claim may be less influential or even backfire if audiences doubt participants' expertise or actual contributions (Meissner et al., 2017), without additional background information about the creator (Thompson & Malaviya, 2013).

One strategy to resolve information asymmetries is to use extrinsic cues or signals (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). A psychological approach instead asserts that signals only work to the extent that consumers deem them useful and credible (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993). That is, consumers search for available and credible information about products and brands to forge opinions and inform their behaviors (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Spence, 1973). Signals can be broadly categorized, as non–marketing-controlled and marketing-controlled (Akdeniz et al., 2013; Jiang, Jones, & Javie, 2008). Non–marketing-controlled signals include expert ratings, consumer reports, consumers opinions on social networks, or journalistic content (Akdeniz et al., 2013). The primary role of such third-party information is to reduce evaluation uncertainty (Basuroy, Desai, & Talukdar, 2006). Independent by nature, such third-party information can offer consumers some further degree of confidence in the credibility of the claims (e.g., De Maeyer & Estelami, 2011; Pemer and Skjølsvik, 2019), because a trustworthy, independent third-party agent has no reason to emit quality-arousing signals when quality is actually low. In the same sense, third-party agents may give negative signals and question quality, in the form of low ratings or negative feedback (Akdeniz et al., 2013).

The most extensive stream of research in this domain has focused on marketing-controlled signals, examining price (Erdem, Keane, & Sun, 2008), warranties (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993), additional investments (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Kirmani & Rao, 2000), the brand (Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Pecot, Merchant, Valette-Florence, & De Barnier, 2018), and advertising expenditures (Kirmani, 1990; Stigler, 1961) as credible quality-inducing signals. However, a brand communication strategy typically covers a variety of media and channels, allowing firms to spread both marketing-controlled information and non-marketing-controlled information (e.g., earned content, journalistic coverage). To account for this variety, we compare the results stemming from two types of messages.

2.2. Brand integrity inferences and signaling theory

Quality pertains to a broad range of outcomes in signaling theory literature (Connelly et al., 2011). From a consumer perspective, quality is perceived, such that it reflects consumers' judgments of superiority or excellence (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993). Therefore, quality also may derive from brand integrity inferences. Although no definition of brand integrity is universally accepted (Mende, Scott, Lemon, & Thompson, 2015), we draw on business ethics literature (Maak, 2008; Murphy, Oberseder, & Laczniak, 2013) to define it as related to honesty, moral courage, reliability, and self-awareness (Murphy, 1999). It is best reflected by the notion of integration or "being integral" (Audi & Murphy, 2006); in organizational contexts, it implies a lack of divisions over adherence to a code of standards, alignment between words and deeds (coherence), responsible actions, responsible commitments, and continuity (Maak, 2008; Palanski & Yammarino, 2007; Simons, 2002; Venable, Rose, Bush, & Gilbert, 2005). Brand integrity is a "master

virtue" (Maak, 2008, p. 360) that integrates several desirable qualities applicable to brands (Kotler et al., 2010); it has also been used as a proxy for a more generalized form of brand trustworthiness (Kotler et al., 2010; Morhart et al., 2015). As such, it can reflect the importance that audiences place on a brand's perceived commitment toward stakeholders, honesty, reliability, and reputability (Venable et al., 2005). Integrity is a relational phenomenon that others evaluate (Maak, 2008), and perceived integrity refers to an external assessment of alignment in words and deeds (Davis & Rothstein, 2006).

Valuable information can drive integrity perceptions (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). For example, details about the brand's motives, means, and ends specifically reinforce brand integrity perceptions (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015). Displaying a consistent set of principles through communication also conveys credible signals to differentiate trustworthy online sellers from untrustworthy ones (Lee, Ang, & Dubelaar, 2005; Lee & Turban, 2001; Wu, Chen, & Chung, 2010). We build the case for the relation between a brand transparency signal and perceived integrity in a CES-related advertising context.

2.3. Transparency as a brand integrity signal

To be ascribed with integrity, marketing activities must feature forthrightness in dealing with consumers (Murphy, 1999). A general definition of transparency refers to "the extent to which an entity reveals information about its own decision process, procedures, functioning and performance" (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2012, p. 139). Transparency may involve disclosures of a company's business activities, such as corporate social reports, (Vaccaro & Sison, 2011), or shared information about decision processes or operational aspects (Cucciniello, Porumbescu, & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017). Although rigorous conceptualizations are still lacking (Jain & Jain, 2018; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016), the concept of transparency has clear positive connotations. This positive valence is also illustrated in a CES context: Transparency requires clear explanations of the rules, so participants can develop their expectations (Djelassi & Decoopman, 2013), in terms of which ideas might get chosen, which criteria are in place, who may participate, and what happens to ideas that are not selected (Füller, 2012). Transparency also implies that participants receive feedback (Füller, 2010; Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013), in the form of clear, accurate, relevant responses to their contributions that indicate why they did not win and offer follow-up suggestions (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016). Such process transparency helps participants feel that they have had an impact and evinces an alignment between brands' claims and actions. Without such transparency, participants may become irritated (Djelassi & Decoopman, 2013; Gebauer, Füller, & Pezzei, 2013; Ind et al., 2013) or feel powerless and stop participating (Pitt, Berthon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002; Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005).

Because brand audiences are heterogeneous in terms of self–brand connections (Parmentier & Fischer, 2014), their relationships with the empowering brand may be weaker than that of CES participants, which may arouse negative reactions if they perceive a misalignment between the brand's behavior and audiences' expectations (Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes & Vogel, 2010). A positively valenced transparency signal may help substantiate a CES-related claim and be more persuasive, especially by inspiring integrity. Therefore, we expect:

H1: A positive brand transparency signal together with a consumer-ideated claim improves the brand audience's perceptions of brand integrity.

2.4. Mediating role of perceived empowerment

For CES to succeed, participants must perceive that they are empowered and competent, they have control over resources and firm processes (Christens, Peterson, & Speer, 2011; Füller, MüHlbacher, Matzler, & Jawecki, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000), and the brand seriously listens to their ideas (Ind et al., 2013). Transparency can reinforce such perceptions, encourage collaborative co-creation dialogues (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), and keep participants committed to the project (Ind et al., 2013). We expect a similar empowerment effect of transparency among nonparticipating brand audiences. Dahl et al. (2014) show that nonparticipants feel empowered vicariously when exposed to the participation of other consumers "like themselves," and accordingly, we predict:

H2: A positively valenced transparency signal, together with a consumer-ideated claim, improves the brand audience's perceived empowerment.

Participants' empowerment perceptions positively influence the belief that the brand has fulfilled its promises. A signaling perspective (Füller et al., 2009; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016) predicts that providing outsiders with signals in a convincing fashion may help solve asymmetrical situations (Gefen et al., 2003) and that coupling the needed information with simultaneous empowerment may help outsiders build perceptions of brands' integrity (Tzafrir, Harel, Baruch & Dolan, 2004).

H3: Perceived empowerment positively influences perceived brand integrity.

In this sense, signaling brand transparency credibly primes empowerment from the brand, which in turn enhances its brand integrity image:

H4: Perceived empowerment acts as a mediator between a brand transparency signal and the brand audience's perceptions of brand integrity.

Consumers who perceive credible signals of a brand's behavioral adherence to a set of principles also have a higher propensity to buy its products (Connelly et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2005). Thus, it is plausible to relate brand integrity positively to behavioral intentions (Davis & Rothstein, 2006; Hajli, Sims, Zadeh, & Richard, 2017; Xu, Li, Zhou, Yang, & Miniard, 2011). The greater tendency to offer favorable word of mouth (WOM) after a positive interaction with a brand is also well established (De Matos and Rossi, 2008). We formally hypothesize:

H5: Perceived integrity positively influences (a) purchase and (b) word-of-mouth intentions.

From this hypothesis, we predict two serial mediations on behavioral intentions:

H6: Perceived empowerment and brand integrity act as serial mediators between a brand transparency signal and audiences' (a) purchase and (b) word-of-mouth intentions.

2.5. Boundary conditions

We also hypothesize two boundary conditions. First, we test the moderating impact of product complexity-to-design. Fuchs and Schreier (2011) identify replicated effects across various complexity-to-design levels, but other researchers suggest attenuated effects for products perceived as highly complex to design (Schreier et al., 2012) and for technological brands (Meissner et al., 2017). Thompson and Malaviya (2013) identify negative attitudes toward consumer-generated advertisements. All these scholars attribute the attenuated effects to audiences' beliefs that the design task had become too complicated to be addressed effectively by users. This finding contradicts the development

of empowerment inferences; perceiving empowerment presupposes that brand audiences sense control over and impacts on the innovation process and outcomes. We posit that there is no reason to believe that a transparency signal informing brand audiences about, for example, follow-up on ideas not selected, the number of ideas submitted, clear rules, or selection criteria changes audiences' perceptions of consumers' inability to create or sense of disempowerment.

Moreover, the innovation processes for highly engineered products usually involve multiple skills, complex knowledge, various components, technological and market uncertainty, stringent validation stages, and technical obstacles (Damanpour, 1996). This complexity might preclude brand audiences from deeming a transparency signal credible and useful. The signaling effect of brand transparency then may be attenuated if consumers are doubtful about the ability of a firm that produces and sells complex products to inform the outside world straightforwardly. Accordingly, we predict a moderating role of product complexity-to-design in the relationships of a transparency signal affixed to a consumer-ideated label with perceived empowerment and perceived brand integrity:

H7: High product complexity-to-design moderates (attenuates) the positive effect of a transparency signal on perceived (a) empowerment and (b) brand integrity.

Second, the effectiveness of a transparency signal may depend on the brand's or firm's existing reputation, established by its quality in previous periods (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993). In each encounter with a brand, consumers reassess its reputation (Kotler et al., 2010; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Morhart et al., 2015). Performance-related (e.g., product defects) and value-related (social and ethical issues) scandals may leave consumers distrustful of a brand's adherence to its proclaimed values (Dutta & Pullig, 2011), which may alter their perceptions of its reputation. Boulding and Kirmani (1993) show experimentally that firms with good reputations benefit from signals, but consumers perceive a high potential for cheating among those with poor reputations, so a signaling strategy can lead to negative consumer reactions. Accordingly, audiences' judgments about the CES process and beliefs may differ with the brand's reputation. Transparency is usually more associated with good-reputation brands (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2018), whereas a transparency signal likely appears inconsistent with the previous behaviors of a poor-reputation brand (Mayer et al., 1995). Therefore, consumers might devalue transparency signaled by poor-reputation brands and question how genuine consumer empowerment is in their CES process. As Morhart et al. (2015) point out, communication activities emphasizing a brand's virtues have more benefit for reputed brands. Building on this notion (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993), we expect that signaling brand transparency is an effective strategy for good-reputation brands; inversely, the signal will not be influential or even may be detrimental to poor-reputation brands.

H8: Brand reputation moderates the effects of transparency signals on perceived empowerment, such that transparency signals increase perceived empowerment of good-reputation brands but is neutral or detrimental for poor-reputation brands.

Fig. 1 graphically summarizes the conceptual model to be tested.

3. Methodology

3.1. Overview of studies

A pilot study first reveals a significant relationship between transparency and brand integrity perceptions. Study 1 tests H1–H4 among fictitious brands. Fictitious brands allow us to tease apart the interactions between prior brand reputation and the experimental

manipulation. Studies 2 and 3 aim to confirm the phenomena (H1–H4), examine the mediation effects (H5–H6), and test the boundary conditions (H7–H8). Overall, these studies robustly establish a full conceptual model, with evidence from both fictitious and famous brands. Study 4 contrasts these results with a marketing-controlled signal. Prior literature suggests that trustworthy third-party agents, such as other consumers or journalists, often are perceived as more credible and less biased than brand discourse. Thus, marketing-controlled signaling might appear less credible, leading to attenuated effects (Akdeniz et al., 2013). Study 4 manipulates a direct, brand-emitted signal and brand reputation, by citing a brand scandal. This study and two single-paper meta-analyses that refer to our focal variables confirm the robustness of our results.

3.2. Recruitment of respondents

All the online studies included herein rely on adult consumer samples. For the pilot study, Study 1, and Study 2, students from a large European university were asked to recruit, as part of a course assignment, at least 15 respondents each, outside the university community, and to send these respondents a Qualtrics questionnaire link. In exchange for class credit, students were also responsible for raw sample quality and required to control for several variables (e.g., IP address, duration, respondents' profile diversity, previous participation in studies on the same topic). Across the three data collection episodes, the recruiting students varied in terms of campuses (two locations) and types of courses (undergraduate vs. postgraduate). Although the students also collected convenience samples, the final samples are heterogeneous, nonstudent, and likely similar to a real online brand audience (Parmentier & Fischer, 2014), which should increase the generalizability of the findings (Reips, 2002).

Participants for Studies 3 and 4 were recruited through Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is generally regarded as a reliable sample source for marketing and psychology research and offers responses of better or equal quality than professional panels or student samples (Barone & Jewell, 2014; Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013; Kees, Berry, Burton, & Sheehan, 2017). Following Kees et al. (2017) recommendations, recruited respondents had to complete several quality and attention checks, and a safeguard was implemented to ensure that all respondents were from the United States.

3.3. Variables and measures across studies

We used validated measures from existing research whenever possible and adapted them to suit the study context as needed (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). We used seven-point response formats, either Likert (ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree) or bi-polar scales, unless otherwise indicated. Table 1 displays all items and Cronbach's alphas.

4. Pilot study

4.1. Method

The pilot study, which uses a between-subjects experimental design, explores the differential effects of a brand transparency signal on existing brand integrity perceptions across three well-known food brands. We used food brands because CESs are most commonly employed for food category products, both in research (Fuchs & Schreier, 2011; Nishikawa et al., 2017; Van Dijk, Antonides, & Schillewaert, 2014) and by brands (see Lay's "Do Us a Flavor" ad campaign, Doritos' Super Bowl ad, MyStarbucksIdea, and MyOreoCreation platforms and contest). The first brand is a famous global fast-food brand and is perceived as having low integrity (Low_Integrity). The second brand is a national cookie brand and is perceived as having higher integrity (High_Integrity). The third is a local brand, which is less familiar and evokes neutral
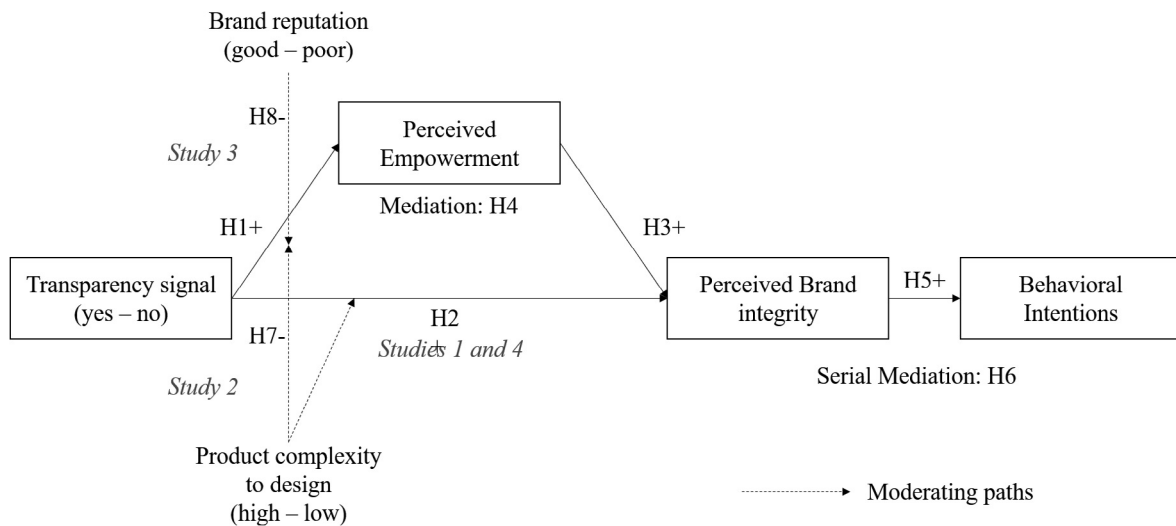
Fig 1. Conceptual model.

perceived integrity (Neutral_Integrity). Two thousand nine respondents participated in the study (58.8% women, M_{age} = 38.2years) and were allocated randomly to one of the three groups. We measured their brand awareness (yes-no) and perceived brand integrity, in response to one of the three brand logos. Then respondents received the treatment. They read a scenario in which, as part of a new product launch campaign, marketers might send a press release to several news organizations. If the news organizations were interested, they could freely write about the brand news in their publications. Our stimulus then consists of a press headline layout, as if written by a journalist working for a reputable daily online news source in the country of the data collection. The stimuli described a CES, and they all included the same transparency signals (e.g., information about the process, a counter displaying the number of participants). The brand name and brand picture were the sole differences across the three stimuli. Respondents completed a questionnaire containing our measures, an attention check, and a few demographic items.

4.2. Findings

The manipulation check proved the manipulation was successful: $F(2,2506)$ = 413.56, p < .001. The Bonferroni post hoc tests also confirmed significant mean differences, as intended ($M_{LOW\_INTEGRITY}$ = 3.34, $M_{HIGH\_INTEGRITY}$ = 4.66, $M_{NEUTRAL\_INTEGRITY}$ = 4.21, p < .001 for each pairwise comparison).

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed significant mean differences in perceived transparency across brands: $F(2,2506)$ = 10.70, p < .001, with $M_{LOW\_INTEGRITY}$ = 4.18, $M_{HIGH\_INTEGRITY}$ = 4.39, and $M_{NEUTRAL\_INTEGRITY}$ = 4.41. The mean is significantly lower for the brand with low brand integrity perceptions relative to the other two groups, whereas no significant differences arise between high- and neutral-integrity brands. The data show a similar pattern for perceived empowerment: $F(2,2506)$ = 18.28, p < .001, with $M_{LOW\_INTEGRITY}$ = 4.33, $M_{HIGH\_INTEGRITY}$ = 4.63, and $M_{NEUTRAL\_INTEGRITY}$ = 4.62. These results suggest that negative brand integrity perceptions acquired through previous encounters with the brand decrease brand audiences' evaluations of transparency, despite the positive impacts of consumer-ideated claims identified in prior literature (e.g., Fuchs & Schreier, 2011; Nishikawa et al., 2017). We thus have initial evidence of a relationship between transparency and brand integrity perceptions. We designed Study 1 to confirm this relationship, as well as to overcome the differences in product categories in the pilot study and the different associations with famous brands.

5. Study 1

5.1. Method

Two hundred forty respondents (53.8% women, M_{AGE} = 33.0 years) participated in a between-subjects design with two experimental groups and one control group (consumer-ideated new product advertisement with transparency signal; consumer-ideated new product advertisement without transparency signal; traditional, firm-driven new product advertisement), featuring an electronic alarm clock (Nishikawa et al., 2017). Alarm clocks offer a sufficient number of features that might be consumer-ideated (e.g., tone, time display, progressive lighting) but are also reasonably low in complexity.

The respondents first answered questions about control variables (i.e. product complexity-to-design and product category involvement), then were randomly allocated to one of the three experimental conditions. In all conditions, respondents were exposed to a Facebook post, reportedly written by the brand, containing a picture of a new product and a short caption. Facebook posts are increasingly relevant marketing communications (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014) that allow two-way interactions; we manipulated the transparency signal by adding a comment from a consumer, thanking the brand for providing feedback about his or her idea or questioning the absence of such feedback. Respondents then answered to the measures and questions related to age and gender. To check the manipulation of the consumer-ideated source of design and the transparency signal, two items asked whether the brand requested that consumers generate ideas for its new products, and gave clear rule explanations and offered follow-up on ideas generated.

5.2. Findings

Designing an alarm clock was perceived as fairly low in complexity (M = 2.77). The three groups were equivalent in terms of respondents' average age and perceived product complexity-to-design (p > .05) but not in their perceptions of the credibility of the advertisement ($M_{TRANSPARENCY}$ = 4.67, $M_{NO-TRANSPARENCY}$ = 4.01, $M_{CONTROL}$ = 4.08; $F(2,237)$ = 6.00, p = .003). One-way ANOVAs confirm that the manipulations for transparency ($F(1,238)$ = 105.7, p < .001; $M_{TRANPARENCY}$ = 5.11 > $M_{NO-TRANSPARENCY}$ = 2.70) and CES ($F(1,238)$ = 212.89, p < .001; M_{CES} = 5.60 > $M_{CONTROL}$ = 2.61) are successful.

Another one-way ANOVA yields significant means differences for both perceived brand integrity ($F(2,237)$ = 21.63, p < .001) and perceived empowerment ($F(2,237)$ = 10.93, p < .001). The

Table 1
Measures, items, and Cronbach's α values.

Measures and items (7-point Likert scales)	Cronbach's α
Perceived Transparency (ad hoc)	
– The brand was transparent about this initiative	
– Participants got feedback about the ideas they submitted.	$\alpha_{S0} = 0.76$
– The activity goal was clear to participants.	
– I know what was expected from participants.	
Perceived Brand Integrity (Mayer & Davis, 1999)	
– I like this [brand's] values.	$\alpha_{S0} = 0.88$
– Sound principles seem to guide [brand's] behavior.	$\alpha_{S1} = 0.91$
– [Brand's] words and deeds are not very consistent.	$\alpha_{S2} = 0.91$
– [Brand] appears to try hard to be fair in dealings with others.	$\alpha_{S3} = 0.90$
	$\alpha_{S4} = 0.96$
Perceived Empowerment (Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989)	$\alpha_{S0} = 0.92$
– [Brand] seems to have a strong sense of justice.	$\alpha_{S1} = 0.95$
– Consumers count for [brand].	$\alpha_{S2} = 0.94$
– Consumers are taken seriously by [brand].	$\alpha_{S3} = 0.96$
– Consumers are important to [brand].	$\alpha_{S4} = 0.96$
– Consumers can make a difference.	
– Consumers are valued by [brand].	
– Consumers are useful to [brand].	
– Consumers are trusted by [brand].	
– [Brand] has faith in its consumers.	
– [Brand] thinks that its consumers are effective.	
– [Brand] thinks that its consumers are cooperating.	
Purchase Intentions (ad hoc)	
– I am likely to purchase products from [brand].	$\alpha_{S1} = 0.91$
– I could consider buying products from [brand] if I need a	$\alpha_{S2} = 0.93$
product of this kind.	$\alpha_{S3} = 0.93$
– It is possible for me to buy [brand] products.	$\alpha_{S4} = 0.91$
WOM (ad hoc)	
– I could talk positively about [brand] to my friends and	$\alpha_{S1} = 0.91$
relatives.	$\alpha_{S2} = 0.93$
– I could recommend [brand] to my friends and relatives.	$\alpha_{S3} = 0.96$
– I could talk positively about [brand] on community forums to	$\alpha_{S4} = 0.96$
people who might be interested.	
Product complexity-to-design (Fuchs & Schreier, 2011)	
– These are highly engineered products.	$\alpha_{S1} = 0.87$
– Developing such products is technically highly demanding.	$\alpha_{S3} = 0.92$
– These products are technologically very complex.	$\alpha_{S4} = 0.93$
Product category involvement (Strazzieri, 1994)	
– I am interested in this product category.	$\alpha_{S1} = 0.93$
– This product category really counts to me.	$\alpha_{S2} = 0.95$
– I give special importance to products in this category.	
Advertisement credibility (Prendergast, Liu, & Poon, 2009)	
Overall, I think that this communication is…	$\alpha_{S1} = 0.88$
– credible.	$\alpha_{S2} = 0.88$
– plausible.	$\alpha_{S3} = 0.96$
– realistic.	$\alpha_{S4} = 0.96$

Bonferroni post hoc pairwise comparisons indicate that brand audiences perceive significantly higher empowerment ($M_{TRANSPARENCY} = 4.96$) and brand integrity ($M_{TRANSPARENCY} = 4.08$) in the CES with transparency condition compared with either of the other two conditions. We observe no significant differences between the CES without transparency and control conditions (empowerment $M_{NO-TRANSPARENCY} = 3.97$, $M_{CONTROL} = 3.72$, n.s.; integrity $M_{NO-TRANSPARENCY} = 3.25$, $M_{CONTROL} = 3.40$, n.s.). These findings confirm causal relations of a transparency signal with both perceived empowerment and brand integrity, in support of H1 and H2.

A simple linear regression of perceived empowerment on perceived brand integrity also shows support for H3 (significant ANOVA, $F(1,238) = 197.13$, $p < .001$, $\beta_{EMPOWERMENT} = 0.61$ (SD = 0.04), $t = 14.04$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = 0.45$). To test H4, we specified perceived integrity as a response variable in the mediation model, using Hayes (2017) macro (PROCESS Model 4, 5000 bootstraps, percentile confidence intervals [CI]). The bootstrapping results reveal a significant transparency signal → perceived empowerment → perceived brand integrity mediation process (indirect effect = 0.753, $CI_{95\%}$ [0.493; 1.043]). The mediation effect is insignificant in the no transparency

condition (indirect effect = 0.122, $CI_{95\%}$ [−0.067; 0.324], in support of H4.

These analyses reveal the process by which a transparency signal enhances brand integrity perceptions. A credible transparency signal adds to the CES-related message, and together, they converge toward empowerment-priming effects, which explain why brand integrity perceptions increase. The absence of brand transparency cancels the empowerment and brand integrity priming effects, so the effect is similar to a traditional firm advertisement. In line with our theoretical framework, transparency appears equally instrumental for brand audiences and participating ideators. Study 2 examines whether these causal relations also hold when product complexity-to-design increases (H7).

6. Study 2

6.1. Method

Five hundred sixty-six adult respondents (57.4% women, $M_{age} = 31.4$ years) participated in a 2 (transparency signal: present vs. absent, CES ad context) × 2 (product complexity: low vs. high) between-subjects experimental design. In line with market realities and previous research (Fuchs & Schreier, 2011; Meissner et al., 2017; Schreier et al., 2012), we included a t-shirt as the low-complexity product and a laptop as the high-complexity product. Respondents first assessed product complexity-to-design, on the basis of pictures representing several t-shirts or laptops, and completed the control variables. After receiving their treatment (similar to Study 1), they responded to our measures and demographic items. To check the transparency signal and perceived complexity after treatment, we asked whether the product presented was complex to design and whether the brand gave clear rule explanations and follow-up on ideas generated.

6.2. Findings

One-way ANOVAs reveal successful experimental manipulations for transparency ($M_{TRANSPARENCY} = 5.21 > M_{NO-TRANSPARENCY} = 2.43$, $F(1,564) = 456.10$, $p < .001$) and product complexity-to-design ($M_{HIGH-COMPLEXITY} = 4.49 > M_{LOW-COMPLEXITY} = 3.01$, $F(1,564) = 139.37$, $p < .001$). The Bonferroni pairwise comparisons indicate significant differences in advertisement credibility across groups ($F(3,562) = 10.02$, $p < .001$) but equivalence in ages.

Next, two-way ANOVAs reveal insignificant interaction effects of transparency signals and product complexity-to-design on both perceived brand integrity ($F(1,562) = 1.33$, n.s.) and perceived empowerment ($F(1,562) = 1.21$, n.s). The effect of transparency on the two focal variables thus does not appear to differ by the level of product complexity-to-design (Fig. 2). In addition, the main effect of product complexity yields a nonsignificant F-ratio for both perceived brand integrity ($F(1,562) = 0.21$, n.s.) and perceived empowerment ($F(1,562) = 1.19$, n.s.). The main effect of transparency significantly improves perceived brand integrity ($F(1,562) = 98.73$, $p < .001$) and perceived empowerment ($F(1, 562) = 51.21$, $p < .001$), similar to the Study 1 findings. Including advertisement credibility (given the statistical difference across groups) does not alter the nonsignificance of the interaction. In other words, we find no evidence to support an interaction effect of transparency signals with the levels of product complexity on perceived empowerment and brand integrity (H7a and b not supported). However, the significance of the main effect of transparency on the same response variables provides further support for the findings from Study 1.

Simple linear regressions of perceived brand integrity on purchase intentions ($F(1,564) = 204.12$, $p < .001$, $\beta_{INTEGRITY} = 0.62$ (SD = 0.04), $t = 14.29$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.27$) and WOM ($F(1,564) = 386.43$, $p < .001$, $\beta_{INTEGRITY} = 0.75$ (SD = 0.04), $t = 19.66$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.41$) support H5. To test H6, we specified

PERCEIVED BRAND INTEGRITY
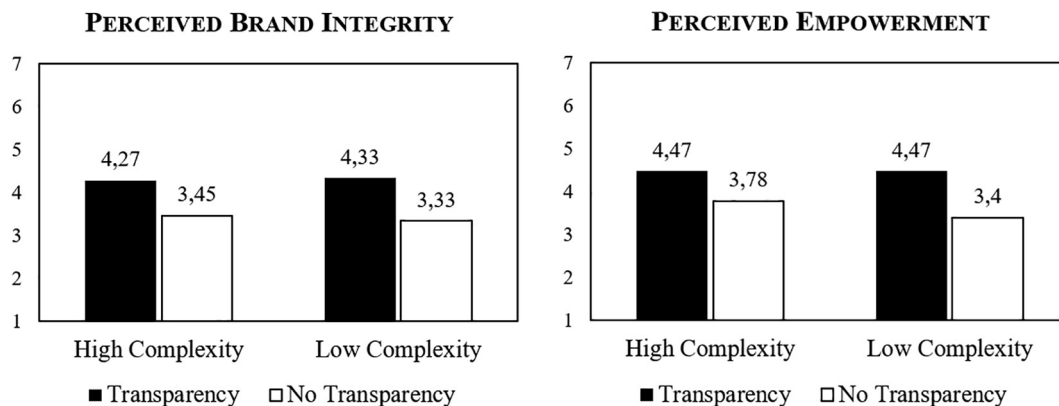

PERCEIVED EMPOWERMENT

Fig 2. Study 2, Transparency × product complexity-to-design effects.

behavioral intentions (purchase and WOM) as response variables in a serial mediation model (Hayes, 2017, PROCESS Model 6, 5000 bootstraps). The bootstrapping results show a significant transparency signal → perceived empowerment → perceived integrity → behavioral intentions serial mediation process (purchase intentions indirect effect = 0.247, $CI_{95\%}$ [0.17; 0.34]; WOM indirect effect = 0.246, $CI_{95\%}$ [0.17; 0.34]). These results support H6 and reveal the process by which brand transparency signals influence behavioral intentions. Different levels of product complexity-to-design do not provide an alternative explanation, in contrast with prior innovation literature (Meissner et al., 2017; Schreier et al., 2012). With Study 3, we seek to combine and confirm these results while also integrating existing brand reputation in the experimental design to test it as boundary condition (H8).

7. Study 3

7.1. Method

Study 3 includes famous U.S. brands and a 2 (transparency signal: present vs. absent) × 2 (brand reputation: good vs. poor) between-subjects experimental design. Online documentation (press articles and published U.S. online brand reputation rankings) guided the brand selection. Thus, we selected the top brand in The Harris Poll (2017) Reputation Quotient 100 as the good-reputation company (famous e-commerce brand) and a low-ranked brand (#90) for the poor-reputation brand (television service provider). The good-reputation brand consistently has been labeled one of the most reputable brands in the United States, whereas the poor-reputation brand has been cited as the "worst company in America" twice in recent years, due to its poor consumer service, pricing, and regulatory transgressions. To confirm their relevance, we conducted an online pretest of the two brands' logos (MTurk, N = 156, 38.3% women, M_{age} = 34.3 years). Paired-sample t-tests highlighted significant mean differences, with the intended directionality, on three 7-point measures of reputation (Berens & Van Riel, 2004): "I believe that this brand meets its consumers' expectations competently" ($M_{HIGH-INTEGRITY}$ = 6.00 > $M_{LOW-INTEGRITY}$ = 3.44; t = 15.38, p < .001), "This brand has high ethics" ($M_{HIGH-INTEGRITY}$ = 5.53 > $M_{LOW-INTEGRITY}$ = 3.35; t = 13.57, p < .001), and "This brand is reliable" ($M_{HIGH-INTEGRITY}$ = 5.98 > $M_{LOW-INTEGRITY}$ = 3.60; t = 14.95, p < .001).

Then 193 U.S. MTurk participants (43.2% women, M_{age} = 35.8 years) participated in the final study and were randomly allocated to one of the four experimental treatments. We again manipulated the transparency signal in an online press headline that publicized CES (as in Study 1). In the transparency treatment, respondents could read details about the CES process and selection criteria, and they saw artifacts such as counters displaying votes online in real time. The nontransparency treatment had filler text instead and described the process in vague terms. Immediately after viewing their treatment, participants responded to the measures, the manipulation check for brand process transparency, and demographic questions.

7.2. Findings

The transparency signal manipulation check is significant, such that the transparency scenario scores higher ($M_{TRANSPARENCY}$ = 5.53) than the nontransparency scenario ($M_{NO-TRANSPARENCY}$ = 3.89, F (1,191) = 6.44, p < .001). The groups are equivalent in age but not advertisement credibility (F(3,189) = 3.96, p = .003).

We conducted two-way ANOVAs on perceived empowerment to test H8. An existing poor reputation significantly lowers perceived empowerment (F(1,189) = 65.79, p < .001). Transparency signals positively influence perceived empowerment (F(1,189) = 13.15, p < .001). When combined, the analyses reveal a significant interaction effect of transparency signals and existing brand reputation on perceived empowerment (F(1,189) = 13.32, p < .001). In line with Boulding and Kirmani (1993), we predicted that the transparency signal is beneficial only to the good-reputation firm, but the simple effects analysis does not support H8 (Fig. 3). The signaling effect of transparency is nonsignificant for the good-reputation brand (F (1,189) = 0.000, n.s.), and the transparency signal improves perceived empowerment for poor-reputation brands (F(1,189) = 24.80, p < .001). We find significant differences across groups in terms of advertisement credibility, but its inclusion as a covariate does not change the results. We also observe a similar result pattern for perceived brand integrity, in relation to its interaction (F(1,189) = 3.26,
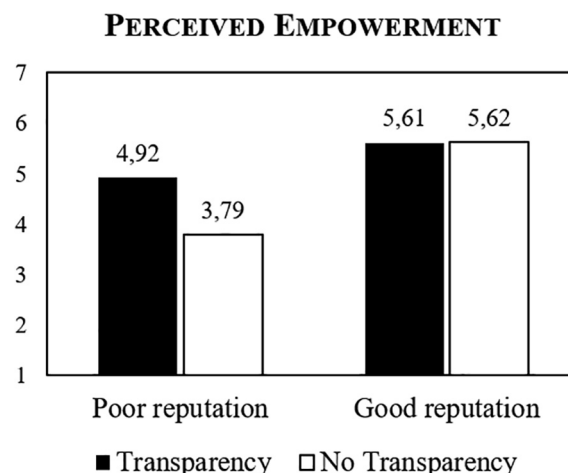
PERCEIVED EMPOWERMENT

Fig 3. Study 3, Transparency × brand reputation effects.

$p = .07$), main brand reputation effect ($F(1, 189) = 79.63, p < .001$), main transparency effect ($F(1,189) = 5.98, p = .02$), and simple effect, which are again significant only for the poor-reputation brand ($F(1,189) = 8.46, p = .004$).

The high levels of perceived empowerment for good-reputation brand suggest that virtually any brand can benefit from transparency signals in its marketing campaigns for new consumer-ideated products. Moreover, a good-reputation brands is less vulnerable when process transparency is questioned by a third party, like a journalist. Brands with lower levels of reputation may gain the most from credible signals signaled by a third party that highlights transparency along the CES process. Audiences tend to infer higher perceived empowerment from these brands, as an offsetting mechanism for their existing poor reputation.

Using Hayes (2017) macro (PROCESS Model 85, 5,000 bootstraps, percentile CI), we tested our full conceptual model (transparency signal × brand reputation → perceived empowerment → perceived brand integrity → behavioral intentions). The bootstrapping results reveal significant serial mediation processes on both purchase intentions (indirect effect = 0.570, $CI_{95\%}$ [0.240; 1.017]) and WOM (indirect effect = 0.790, $CI_{95\%}$ [0.374; 1.298]) in the poor-reputation condition. In the good-reputation condition, these indirect effects yield insignificant outcomes (indirect effect$_{PI}$ = −0.002, $CI_{95\%-PI}$ [−0.175; 0.180], indirect effect$_{WOM}$ = −0.003, $CI_{95\%-WOM}$ [−0.232; 0.256]).

8. Study 4

8.1. Method

Study 4 was designed to replicate the mere transparency effect on our focal variables when the transparency signal directly comes from the brand. Two hundred forty-two U.S adult respondents (MTurk, 37.2% women, M_{age} = 35.0 years) participated in a 3 (CES with transparency vs. CES without transparency vs. control without CES) × 2 (brand scandal: yes-no; fictitious brand) between-subjects design. The respondents randomly saw a brand scandal manipulation text (i.e., electronics brand willing to enter the U.S. market, described as involved in an unsafe component scandal a few years ago, or filler text), then received their transparency treatment. The CES with transparency condition highlighted empowerment and transparency values in the website content, whereas empowerment and expertise were emphasized in the CES without transparency condition, and expertise and solutions were mentioned in the control condition (no CES). After receiving their treatment, respondents responded to our measures, questions about brand awareness, manipulation checks, and the age and gender questions.

8.2. Findings

One-way ANOVAs for the three manipulation checks show significant mean differences, indicating effective manipulations of transparency ($F(1,240) = 15.70, p < .001, M_{TRANSPARENCY} = 5.77 > M_{NO-TRANSPARENCY} = 4.96$), CES ($F(1,240) = 99.80, p < .001, M_{CES} = 5.83 > M_{CONTROL} = 3.76$), and brand scandal ($F(1,240) = 44.07, p < .001, M_{BRAND-SCANDAL} = 5.56 > M_{NO-BRAND-SCANDAL} = 4.31$). The scenario groups are equivalent in age, product complexity, and advertisement credibility. The perceived integrity score, subjected to a two-way ANOVA, reveals two main effects. First, past involvement in a brand scandal significantly lowers integrity perceptions ($F(1,236) = 33.45, p < .001; M_{NO-BRAND\_SCANDAL} = 5.48, M_{BRAND\_SCANDAL} = 4.56$), as expected. Second, we observe a marginal transparency effect ($F(2, 240) = 2.90, p = .057; M_{CES-TRANSPARENCY} = 5.29, M_{CES-NO-TRANSPARENCY} = 4.86, M_{CONTROL} = 4.92$). The interplay of the two variables is not significant ($F(2, 236) = 1.26$, n.s.). A two-way ANOVA with perceived empowerment also indicates a significant main effect of the brand scandal (F

($1,236$) = 15.61, $p < .001$; $M_{NO-BRAND-SCANDAL} = 5.66, M_{BRAND-SCANDAL} = 5.12$) and a marginally significant transparency effect ($F(2,236) = 2.91, p = .056; M_{CES-TRANSPARENCY} = 5.56, M_{CES-NO-TRANSPARENCY} = 5.44, M_{CONTROL} = 5.16$). The interplay of the two variables is not significant ($F(2,236) = 0.77$, n.s.).

9. Single-paper meta-analyses

To confirm the transparency effect, independent of the signal sources, we meta-analyzed Studies 1–4. Single-paper meta-analyses yield estimates of the studied effect that are, on average, more accurate than those of any individual study, and the statistical power also increases (McShane & Böckenholt, 2017). To support comparisons between studies, we consider only the scenarios in which we manipulated transparency signals and excluded any control groups (i.e., from Studies 1 and 4). We used fixed effects and weighted the mean effect size (i.e., mean correlation) by sample size. We first converted Cohen's d into Pearson's correlations for the analysis. All correlations underwent Fisher's z transformation for the analysis and were converted back to Pearson correlations for the presentation (Goh, Hall, & Rosenthal, 2016).

The effects are significant (Table 2). The positive Cohen's d and correlation coefficients indicate that a transparency signal increases perceived brand integrity ($M\ r = 0.33, Z = 10.16, p < .001$, two-tailed). A fully random effect test of the overall effect is significant too,

Table 2

Meta-analyses across Studies 1–4 (CES-only scenarios), main effects of transparency signals.

	Studies			
	S1 (n = 160)	S2 (n = 566)	S3 (n = 193)	S4 (n = 163)
Perceived brand integrity				
M_{TRANSP} (SD)	4.08 (1.23)	4.30 (1.09)	4.71 (1.29)	5.31 (1.36)
$M_{NO-TRANSP}$ (SD)	3.25 (1.21)	3.38 (1.12)	4.31 (1.62)	4.87 (1.49)
t	4.28	9.95	1.92	1.97
df	158	564	191	161
p	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.05
Cohen's d	0.68	0.84	0.27	0.30
r	0.32	0.39	0.14	0.15
$M\ r_z$		0.33		
$M\ r$		0.32		
Combined Z		10.16***		
Perceived empowerment				
M_{TRANSP} (SD)	4.96 (1.28)	4.95 (1.26)	5.29 (1.05)	5.57 (1.00)
$M_{NO-TRANSP}$ (SD)	3.97 (1.21)	4.21 (1.19)	4.77 (1.47)	5.45 (1.28)
t	5.05	7.17	2.83	0.64
df	158	564	191	161
p	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.52
Cohen's d	0.80	0.60	0.41	0.10
r	0.37	0.29	0.20	0.05
$M\ r_z$		0.26		
$M\ r$		0.25		
Combined Z		8.40***		

Notes: $M\ r_z$ = weighted mean correlation (Fisher's z transformed). $M\ r$ = weighted mean correlation (converted from r_z to r). In all analyses, transparency signal is coded as 1 and no transparency signal is 0. The positive Cohen's d and positive correlation coefficients indicate that a transparency signal increases both perceived brand integrity and perceived empowerment. Both Q-statistic and I^2 values suggest substantial heterogeneity (perceived integrity: Q-value = 14.96, p < .001, I^2 value = 80%; perceived empowerment: Q-value = 11.09, p < .001, I^2 value = 73%), confirming the value of the previously unaccounted for moderators that can enrich theory (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2011; Chang & Taylor, 2016; McShane & Böckenholt, 2017).

***p < .001; two-tailed.

according to a one-sample *t*-test of the mean effect size relative to 0 (M r = 0.25, t(3) = 3.97, *p* = .03, two-tailed). The transparency signal increases perceived empowerment (M r = 0.25, Z = 8.40, *p* < .001, two-tailed), and the fully random effect test of the overall effect again is significant, according to the one-sample *t*-test of the mean effect size relative to 0 (M r = 0.23, t(3) = 3.31, *p* = .046, two-tailed).

10. Discussion

In market environments marked by consumers' increasing quest for brand integrity, we demonstrate the persuasive effect of brand transparency signals in marketing communications about CES. In particular, giving feedback to participants and offering clear rules for the idea selection process represent integrity-inducing persuasive tools. The meta-analyses confirm the robustness of this result across various signal sources, such that the overall effects of the transparency signal differ significantly from 0, for both perceived empowerment and perceived brand integrity. We also identify a mediation process, such that perceived empowerment mediates the signaling effect of transparency on brand integrity, and we find a downstream effect on the brand audience's behavioral intentions.

We confirm these signaling effects independent of product complexity-to-design, so communicating transparency is desirable for all cocreation processes (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Yet this result contrasts with some extant literature, and we show that brand audiences' positive perceptions of brand transparency cause product complexity-to-design to lose its importance, in favor of a more diagnostic transparency signal. Furthermore, participants perceive the ideation stage as less complex than, for example, the product development stage and thus believe the signaled transparency.

A signal from a third party (e.g., journalist, consumer) produces larger effect sizes in the meta-analyses, in line with previous empirical research (Akdeniz, Calantone, & Voorhees, 2014; Archibald, Haulman, & Moody, 1983). The manipulation in Study 4 relied on two positive differentiating strategies, which might evenly contribute to the diminished effect sizes (i.e., transparency-present treatment valued empowerment and transparency; transparency-absent treatment valued empowerment and expertise). Study 3 also shows that a brand that already enjoys a good reputation is less vulnerable when its transparency is questioned by a third party, but it does not benefit in any other way. Perhaps the brand already serves as a credible signaling phenomenon (Erdem & Swait, 1998), so information encapsulated in the brand is perceived as more relevant and useful than the third party's information, such that it can counterbalance that information. The focal variables thus score equally high as in the transparency signal condition. Furthermore, as we show in Studies 3 and 4, brands suffering from reputation issues may benefit more from both marketing-controlled and non–marketing-controlled transparency signals. This result is interesting, because previous research indicates that extrinsic cues (e.g., warranty, Boulding & Kirmani, 1993) do not signal quality for poor-reputation brands. Instead, our findings suggest that the transparency signal might serve to repair previous word–deed misalignments by the brand (Jahansoozi, 2006). The future orientation of a warranty signal—in contrast with the past orientation of signaling transparency during a CES—and its underlying bonding component strength (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993) might explain this difference. Our finding also is consistent with research on brand scandals (Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Palmer & Strelan, 2015) that notes the effectiveness of corrective actions aimed at repairing performance- or value-related brand scandals. Because the transparency signal has positive effects, it might act as an offsetting mechanism that obscures previous, unrelated brand scandals.

Theoretically, the present research makes several contributions. First, it enriches the body of knowledge on trust-related issues in advertising, which previous researchers have called insufficient (Danbury et al., 2015; Soh et al., 2009). Among the various consumer paths to purchase (Batra & Keller, 2016), the current study identifies brand

integrity perceptions as a key persuasion variable and transparency signals as persuasive and credible when signaled through advertising. Second, we establish transparency signals and perceived empowerment as antecedents of perceived brand integrity (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). The relationship between transparency and integrity has been insufficiently tested empirically, despite its widespread and recommended use in practice. We also find positive effects on behavioral outcomes (Davis & Rothstein, 2006). Third, this research contributes to the signaling theory it draws from; it establishes transparency as another credible signal from which consumers may infer brand quality aspects. The presented studies are among the first to manipulate brand transparency experimentally in an advertising context. Fourth, our findings contribute to extant innovation literature, by challenging some previous research: A moderating effect of product complexity-to-design does not prevail. Innovation scholars' call for research (Nishikawa et al., 2017) into additional ways to boost consumer-ideated product attractiveness also finds a response here. Marketing new products as consumer ideated might lose effectiveness if this approach spreads, but a genuine and credible transparency signal can effectively persuade nonparticipants about influential brand integrity, which in turn enhances their behavioral intentions toward the brand's products.

Routes for further research can be derived from the limitations of this study. The present research only focuses on the positive aspects of brand transparency related to its CES. This choice has important implications for the outcomes. Being transparent implies that the brand may also be vulnerable (Rawlins, 2008); transparency could lead to polarization, indecision, delegitimization, or blaming attitudes for small mistakes (Cucciniello et al., 2017; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2012). Thus, further research should determine what happens when a brand signals its process transparency, including negatively-valenced information, for which the effects might be different (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2012).

Moreover, in a specific CES context, insiders are highly heterogeneous, spanning both the brand and participants, who have different motivations and objectives. Participating consumers might have unique insights into the empowerment process and distill messages that conflict with brand messages. Outsiders' brand integrity perceptions then might diminish, considering that they likely focus on negative information (Miyazaki, Grewal, & Goodstein, 2005). Further research should clarify transparency mechanisms across contexts, by manipulating messages to conflict between the brand and participants.

We conducted this research in both Europe and the United States; as such, it sheds initial light on replicated effectiveness of transparency signals across countries. However, a more formal investigation of different consumer characteristics (Erdem, Swait, & Louviere, 2002) and cultural effects (Erdem, Swait, & Valenzuela, 2006) would be valuable for enriching extant signaling and persuasion literature. Although CES is an increasingly popular strategy, it is still new; practitioners and researchers alike may need insights into how the outcomes of this research might evolve as consumers become more familiar with it. Brand audience members might be more or less receptive to consumer ideation and brand process transparency signals if they previously participated in CES for other brands or product categories, for example. More generally, replications in other advertising contexts are needed to confirm brand transparency as a credible quality signal and to shed light on other important boundary conditions.

Finally, in addition to identifying a mere transparency effect across studies, the present research outlines the complexity of the relationships between multiple marketing- and non–marketing-controlled signals. Empirical research that provides simultaneous empirical examinations of multiple signals remains scarce (Akdeniz et al., 2014); disentangling the interdependence of the different signals' impacts might provide a fruitful avenue for continued research in market signaling.

Managerially, this study provides guidance for how to address consumers' increasing quest for brand integrity through advertising.

Knowing that brand audiences also value brand transparency should encourage managers to embrace genuine transparency in their empowerment processes. They can design effective integrated marketing campaigns, focusing on differentiating claims and relying on their own content, public relations, and WOM for increased effects (Batra & Keller, 2016). The positive findings—transparency can increase empowerment perceptions even for brands that suffer poor reputation—suggest it might serve to restore consumers' evaluations after a corporate scandal. This encouraging finding should not be taken to suggest a free pass for brands though. For decades, Enron was heralded as a paragon of integrity and ethics, but its massive accounting scandal caused the brand to be associated invariably with corruption (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003). Brand managers must be zealous about managing signal consistency (Erdem et al., 2002).

Finally, this research addresses the debate about how and when signaling genuine transparency details can be valuable (Cucciniello et al., 2017). Our identification of a causal relationship between transparency and integrity suggests a competitive advantage that brands can leverage for enhanced market performance. Of course, managers must consider the limits of staging transparency (Thøger Christensen, 2002). The trade-off between market conditions and marketing strategy must be acknowledged. We hope these findings encourage brand managers to align their words and deeds, genuinely and actively, to achieve the most significant social benefits.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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