Chapter 2

Using Relationship Norms to Understand Consumer Brand Interactions

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Even though marketing practitioners have long imbued brands with human traits with the intuitive objective of making their brands more endearing, distinctive, and desirable, marketing researchers have only recently started exploring the brand-as-person metaphor to get insights about consumer behavior. These insights, drawn largely from social psychology, recast brands not just as passive, economically defined objects to be regarded and judged by consumers but as partners in socially construed relationships. In fact, the idea that consumer-brand relationships are a two-way street much like any interpersonal relationship was first more overtly recognized by Fournier (1998). Unlike the passive way in which consumers were traditionally treated by database marketers, Fournier’s seminal work emphasizes the importance of understanding the consumer’s perspective and it generated research examining different aspects of consumer-brand relationships (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2002; Ji 2002; Swaminathan, Page, and Gurhan-Canli 2007). My own research extends this stream of work by exploring a specific dimension of the complex consumer-brand relationship space with an attempt to develop conceptual tools to better understand the nature of consumer-brand interactions.

My research proposes a theoretical and predictive framework by suggesting that when consumers form relationships with brands, they use norms of behavior underlying these relationships as a guide in their brand interactions in two unique ways: as a lens to evaluate the actions of the brand, and as a tool to guide their own behavior. I find that norms of relationship influence consumers’ responses depending upon whether or not the brand’s action is seen to be
in violation of or in conformity with these norms (Aggarwal 2004) as well as the extent to which consumers are unfairly treated (Aggarwal 2008). Further, relationship norms also influence the strategy adopted by consumers to process brand information (Aggarwal and Law 2005) and the degree of loss aversion they demonstrate (Aggarwal and Zhang 2006). The main insight of this stream of research is that the key to understanding consumer-brand interactions is a better appreciation of the norms that govern the particular consumer-brand relationship. In my research, I focus not just on examining the effect of relationship norms on consumer attitude and behavior but also on understanding the underlying processes. One specific goal of my research has been to empower marketers with the ability to make predictions about consumer behavior that would not be possible using existing theories of brand personality, brand loyalty, or brand imagery. In this chapter, I summarize the key findings from four different research projects which all use the relationship metaphor to better understand consumer-brand interactions.

Norms of Behavior and their Role in Social Interaction

The key premise underlying this work is that social relationships carry with them norms of behavior that each relationship partner is expected to follow. Norms emerge from interactions with others; they may or may not be stated explicitly, and sanctions for deviating from them come from social networks, not the legal system. These norms include general societal expectations for our behavior, our expectations of others’ behavior, and our expectations of our own behavior. Cialdini and Trost (1993) have argued that these norms are acquired by people in a social setting over long time periods of the socialization process. As these norms become internalized, they serve as a valuable guide for everyday behavior and allow people to function in
situations that may otherwise be new. Thus, when faced with new social situations, people use the norms that are salient at the time to guide them on the ‘right’ thing to do. In addition, people also use these norms to judge others’ behavior. A particular action may therefore be a part of the norms of one relationship and be regarded as appropriate by one person while the same action may be seen as a serious violation of the norms of another relationship and perceived to be improper by another person. For example, keeping a close tab on how much money one spends on a relationship partner may be considered appropriate in a commercial transaction, but may be inappropriate in interactions with family. It is this adherence to or violation of the underlying relationship norms that informs our appraisals when we interact with our relationship partner.

The notion that relationship metaphor can help us understand consumer behavior better is based on the insight that when consumers see brands as relationship partners, they are in fact, invoking norms that underlie a particular relationship. And depending upon the relationship that they perceive with the brand, the norms that are salient to the consumers would be different. Consequently, when norms of a particular relationship are salient, consumers use these norms as a lens to view the brand and evaluate the brand’s actions. In addition, these norms also help consumers guide their own actions, that is, suggest to the consumer what might be the ‘right’ way to behave. It is this dual influencing role of relational norms that I explore in my research.

**Norms of Communal and Exchange Relationships**

In my research, I have relied on the distinction made in social psychology between *exchange* relationships and *communal* relationships based on the norms governing the giving of benefits to the relationship partner (Clark and Mills 1979). Exchange relationships are those in which
benefits to the partner are given with the specific expectation of receiving a comparable benefit in return. The receipt of a benefit incurs a debt or obligation to return a comparable benefit. People are concerned with how much they receive in exchange for how much they give, and how much is still owed to the partner. Relationships between strangers and people who interact for business purposes are often characteristic of this type of relationship. On the other hand, in communal relationships the key concern is mutual support by the partners. In such relationships, people give benefits to others to demonstrate a concern for that person and to express attention to their needs. They also expect others to demonstrate a similar concern for their own needs. Most family relationships, romantic relationships and friendships fall in this category. It is important to note here that communal relationships are not completely bereft of a sense of reciprocity and shared giving. Each individual interaction, however, is not scrutinized for balance of the transaction. Instead, the relationship may be evaluated over a longer time period. The norms of behavior of the two relationships are summarized below as outlined by Clark and her colleagues (Clark 1981; Clark 1984; Clark and Mills 1979; Clark and Mills 1993; Clark, Mills, and Corcoran 1989; Clark and Taraban 1991; Mills and Clark 1982).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exchange Relationship</th>
<th>Communal Relationship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Prompt repayment for specific benefits received is expected.</td>
<td>Prompt repayment for specific benefits received is not expected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Desirable to give ‘comparable’ benefits in return for benefits received.</td>
<td>Less desirable to give comparable benefits in return for benefits received.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. More likely to ask for repayments for benefits rendered.</td>
<td>Less likely to ask for repayments for benefits rendered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. More likely to keep track of individual</td>
<td>Less likely to keep track of individual</td>
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</tbody>
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inputs and outcomes in a joint task.

5. Less like to keep track of others’ needs. More likely to keep track of others’ needs.

6. Divide rewards according to each person’s inputs and contributions. Divide rewards according to each person’s needs and requirements.

7. Helping others is less likely. Helping others is more likely.

8. Requesting help from others is less likely. Requesting help from others is more likely.

9. Accepting help with money is preferred to no payment. Accepting help with no monetary payment is preferred.

10. Less responsive to others’ emotional states. More responsive to others’ emotional states.

In sum, exchange relationships involve a careful cost-benefit evaluation and the focus is on keeping track of inputs and outputs. In contrast, communal relationships focus on mutual support and cooperation thus taking a perspective that transcends emphasis on self-interest alone. These two relationship types, however, are not mutually exclusive: it is possible to have both a communal and an exchange relationship with someone simultaneously. For example, a business partnership with one’s brother is likely to lead to the salience of communal and exchange norms concurrently. One reason why such relationships are difficult to manage in practice is that people may often be uncertain about what norms to use in specific situations. Interestingly, given their commercial nature arguably all consumer-brand relationships are inherently exchange-like. However, some marketers often endeavor to position their brand as being focused more on the well-being of the consumers than on maximizing their own profits. Consequently, such brands are likely to have an overlay of communal norms on top of the exchange norms that inform such commercial transactions. In my research, I have focused on the relative salience of exchange versus communal norms in a consumer-brand interaction. Further, in keeping with prior social
psychology research, I have treated them as two ends of a scale rather than two orthogonal dimensions. As such, my research examines the influence of relationship types on consumer behavior without compromising on the validity of either the concepts or the methodologies.

As mentioned earlier, relationship norms influence consumer behavior in two distinct and crucial ways: a) in judging others’ actions, and b) in guiding one’s own actions. The first section of this chapter explores the influence of relationship norms on consumers’ evaluation of the brand and its actions in two different contexts. The second section of this chapter summarizes two projects that look at the role of relationship norms from the other end—how norms guide consumers’ own behavior and actions. Together, the four projects offer a rich set of studies to help us better understand the way in which the types of relationships between consumers and brands, more specifically, the norms of relationships influence consumer-brand interactions.

Using Relationship Norms to Evaluate the Brand

One of the important roles of relationship norms is to act as a lens to judge the behavior and actions of the relationship partner. In this role, the norms help consumers to form an initial expectation, and the subsequent actions from the brand and its representatives are gauged in comparison to that norm-based expectation. Depending upon whether or not the actions of the brand are seen to be consistent with the relationship norms, the evaluation of the brand is more or less positive. This overall premise is examined in two uniquely different contexts next.

Norm Violation and its Mediating Effect on Brand Evaluations
The first project based on my doctoral dissertation examines the role of consumer brand relationships on consumers’ attitudes and behavior by explicitly testing the mediating role of relationship norm violation (Aggarwal 2002; Aggarwal 2004). The model proposed in this paper suggests that when consumers form a relationship with a brand, brands too are evaluated as if they are members of a culture and need to conform to its norms. If the actions of the brand are in violation of the norms of a relationship then the brand is evaluated negatively, but if the actions are in conformity with the norms of a relationship then the evaluation is positive.

This research uses the context of a request for help (or providing benefits) to test the influence of relationship type on consumers’ responses to a particular marketing action. This context was chosen because the key distinction between exchange and communal relationships is based on the motivation for providing benefits to the partner and a request for help captures the essence of that distinction. Three studies were conducted, each examining a very specific aspect of request for help. Participants were first shown a brief scenario description as manipulation of norms of communal or exchange relationship. Participants were then presented with a request for help, and their reactions to the marketing action and overall brand evaluations were then taken. The brand’s action in all three studies was designed to violate the norms of one relationship and simultaneously conform to the norms of the other relationship. Participants’ evaluation of the brand and its action was finally taken as the main dependent variable.

Study 1 examines participants’ reactions to being charged a fee or no fee for a ‘special’ service rendered by a brand in response to a specific request made for that service by the consumer. Help provided for a fee in response to a request conforms to exchange norms since it is in keeping with the principle of quid pro quo. Conversely, providing the service without any fee is in keeping with communal norms of taking care of the partner’s needs. To test this
premise, the participants were first exposed to a description of a relationship between a consumer and a hypothetical bank aimed at triggering either communal or exchange norms. Next, the scenario described a consumer who sought help from the bank requesting it to write a letter to their utility company who had not received some money even though it had been cleared by the bank. The participants were then told that a week later the bank informed them that the issue with the utility company had been resolved for no charge, or for a fee of $20.00.

A demand for a fee by the bank in response to a request for help violates the norms of communal relationship since the help is being given for the fee rather than out of a concern for the consumer. This action, however, conforms to the norms of exchange relationship since the fee highlights the quid pro quo nature of the relationship. Hence it was predicted that consumers’ reactions to being charged would be different across the two relationship types, with communal consumers evaluating the action negatively relative to exchange consumers. The specific dependent variables were two: a three item measure of reaction to brand’s action (willingness to pay, action seems appropriate, good business practice) and a three-item measure of brand evaluation (dislike-like, dissatisfied-satisfied, unfavorable-favorable).

As shown in Table 2.1, the results find support for the proposed hypothesis and indicate that, relative to exchange-oriented participants, communal participants evaluate the brand and its actions more positively when the action is in keeping with the communal norms but in violation of exchange norms (no fee was charged) than when the action is in violation of the communal norms but in keeping with the exchange norms (fee was charged). In addition, the 20-item PANAS scale administered to the participants showed no differences across different conditions, ruling out affect as a potential alternative explanation.

<<TABLE 2.1 NEAR HERE>>
Study 2 examines consumer responses to receiving a comparable or noncomparable benefit back from the brand in response to some help rendered to a brand. Giving a benefit creates a specific debt and a directly comparable return benefit eliminates this debt owed by the exchange partner much more than a noncomparable benefit, and is in keeping with the norms of an exchange relationship. Conversely, a noncomparable benefit acknowledges that the partner’s needs are unique and as a result giving such a benefit is in conformity to the norms of a communal relationship in which the underlying motivation is to take care of the partner’s needs. This study thus explores a different aspect of helping norm.

As before, participants were first exposed to a brief description about a health club aimed at triggering norms of either a communal or an exchange relationship. Next, the health club requests the consumer to help them develop a Web site on healthy living by responding to a questionnaire that requires about an hour of the consumer’s time (nonmonetary help) or donating $15 for it (monetary help). In return, the brand promises to give the consumer either a 1-hr.-free coupon (nonmonetary reward) that is comparable to the request for time but noncomparable to the monetary help, or a $15 discount coupon (monetary reward) that is noncomparable to the request for time but comparable to the monetary help. The participants then filled out two sets of dependent variables: a three-item measure of reactions to brand’s action (agree to help, enthusiastic about helping, support such programs in the future), and a three-item measure of brand evaluation (dislike-like, dissatisfied-satisfied, unfavorable-favorable).

Results of study 2 support the main hypothesis about a significant interaction between relationship and comparability of reciprocal benefit. The results suggest that a brand’s action elicits different consumer evaluations depending upon whether the brand’s actions violate or conform to the norms of the underlying consumer-brand relationship (see Table 2.1). Since in an
exchange relationship, benefits are given with an expectation of getting comparable benefits in return, any such offer, in cash or otherwise, would be seen to be in keeping with the relationship norms. Conversely, in a communal relationship, help is given to show concern for the partner’s needs. A comparable benefit violates the underlying communal norms since it would transform the relationship into a tit for tat one while a noncomparable benefit would be in conformity with communal norms since it de-links the benefit given from the benefit received.

The last study was conducted not just to explore yet another aspect of the helping norm but also to overtly examine the mediating role of relationship norm violation. For this purpose, a direct measure of participants’ perceived norm violation was taken, and a mediation analysis was done to explore if the brand evaluations were in fact influenced by the degree of norm violation experienced by the participants. This study examines if the length of time gap between help given and help sought causes participants in different relationships to respond differently. If a request for help by a partner is immediately countered with a return request, the debt created by the original help is paid off right away—the return request being seen as a quid pro quo would be in keeping with the norms of exchange relationship. However, return request that is delayed in time, being less likely to be connected to the original request, would be seen as a way to extract free help by the partner and hence be in violation of the exchange norms. Thus, exchange-oriented consumers would prefer return requests made immediately afterward rather than those that are delayed in time. On the other hand, an immediate return request is likely to be seen as a repayment for the original help and would thus be in violation of communal norms. Conversely, a delayed return request, being unconnected to the original request, is likely to be seen as an expression of a genuine need of the partner and hence be in keeping with the communal relationship norms. Thus, communally oriented consumers should prefer requests that are
delayed in time over those made immediately following an original request.

As before, the participants read about a hypothetical coffee shop brand such that norms of either communal or exchange relationship were salient. Next, the participants read about a situation in which the brand asks the consumer to put up some promotion material on campus for them in response to the customer’s request to make a fresh cup of coffee, and this request was made either immediately afterwards or a week later. It was expected that relative to participants in a communal relationship, those in an exchange relationship will evaluate the brand’s request negatively when it is delayed compared to when it is not delayed. The dependent variables were a) a measure of likelihood to agree to request; b) a three-item brand evaluation score as before, and c) a six-item measure of norm violation (felt cornered, felt irritated, felt exploited, care about them (reversed), happy to help (reversed), request was appropriate (reversed)).

As expected, the results show that consumer responses depend on the type of relationship norms salient at the time of brand interaction (see Table 2.1). Specifically, the results show that, in keeping with the principles of norm violation, exchange consumers evaluate the brand less positively to a delayed request but more positively to an immediate request compared to the communal consumers. Further, the results of this study also find that the perceived level of norm violation completely mediates the effects on consumers’ assessment of brand and its actions.

Since communal relationships are likely to be more emotionally laden (Park et al. 2008), it was important to examine if emotional attachment (rather than the relational norms) might have driven these results. To rule this out, the three studies used the PANAS scale to take measures of perceived affect. Further, the key hypotheses in all three studies were based on an interaction effect—main effect of relationship was neither expected nor found. Finally, if attachment or affect were the main driving factor, the results of study 3, in particular, should
have been reversed. Overall, results of all three studies support the theory that a violation of or adherence to relationship norms influences consumers’ evaluation of the brand. In addition, the studies also ruled out uniqueness of monetary benefits and differences in quality perceptions across the two relationships as two supplemental alternative explanations.

**Relationship Norms and Consumer Responses to Interactional Fairness**

The second project that examines the effect of relationship norms on consumers’ evaluations of the brand and its actions is a recent working paper that explores issues of fairness in the context of a consumer-brand interaction (Aggarwal 2008). Researchers in organizational behavior have noted that when people assess overall fairness of an action, they first look at aspects of distributive fairness, or the allocation of the final outcome. This aspect of fairness relates to distribution of benefits versus costs. In addition, people also care about issues of interactional fairness, or how people are treated during conflict resolution. This type of fairness relates to whether others exhibit respectful, sensitive, and justifiable behavior. It has been noted by prior research that the extent to which people care about what the final allocation is depends on how the final allocation is arrived at. That is to say that there is an interactive effect between distributive fairness and interactional fairness: the way people are treated has a greater influence on their attitudes and behavior when the outcome itself is unfair than when the outcome is fair. Aggarwal (2008) directly tests for the influence of norms in a context of an interaction between a consumer and a marketer, and examines the moderating effect of relationship norms on the interactive effect of distributive and interactional fairness. It is useful to note that although conceptually distinct, distributive fairness is often highly correlated with favorability of outcome
and interactional fairness with a superior service orientation.

In this research, it is argued that when faced with low distributive fairness, the type of relationship norms salient at the time of interaction with a brand—communal versus exchange—influence how consumers respond to aspects of interactional fairness (or, how people are treated by others). The underlying premise of the research is that since a communal relationship is based on mutual care and concern, low interactional fairness (i.e., being treated shabbily) by the brand especially if accompanied by low distributive fairness will be seen as a lack of concern for the consumer, and thus a breach of the underlying relationship norms. However, high interactional fairness would be a reassurance about the genuine concern underlying a communal relationship, and thus in conformity with communal norms even in the face of low distributive fairness. In contrast, exchange relationships are quid pro quo: people are concerned first and foremost about what they get for what they have given to their partner. Low distributive fairness means that the one thing that exchange consumers care most about is not forthcoming, and that the underlying norms of exchange relationship have been violated. As a result, whether the accompanying level of interactional fairness is high or low may be of little consequence to such consumers. Thus, under conditions of low distributive fairness, relative to exchange consumers communal consumers would evaluate the brand more positively when faced with high interactional fairness.

Two studies test this premise. Since the effects are predicted only for low but not for high distributive fairness conditions, the first study examines the three-way interaction of relationship type, distributive fairness, and interactional fairness using a hypothetical consumer-marketer scenario. The second study uses the context of a real brand and a different operationalization of interactional fairness to replicate the main findings of study 1. Study 2 also specifically tests for the mediating role of perceived violation of the underlying relationship norms for these effects.
In study 1, participants were first exposed to a brief description of a hypothetical takeout restaurant designed to make communal or exchange relationship norms salient. Participants then read about an interaction with the restaurant aimed at eliciting perceptions of distributive and interactional (un)fairness. The scenario described a consumer who had ordered food from the restaurant but received something that was too spicy to be eaten. The consumer complained to the restaurant, and either got a full refund or no compensation, which was the manipulation of high and low distributive fairness. In addition, to manipulate high and low interactional fairness the response from the restaurant was communicated either very politely and respectfully, or very rudely and disrespectfully. It was expected that relative to participants in the exchange condition, those in the communal condition would evaluate the brand more positively when treated with politeness and respect, especially when they get no refund (low distributive fairness).

The main dependent variables were a) a four-item measure of brand evaluation (dislike-like, dissatisfied-satisfied, unfavorable-favorable, and extent of trust for the brand), and b) a three-item measure of future intentions (use the brand again, praise the brand, complain about the brand (reversed)). In addition, checks were performed for assessing the effectiveness of the relationship, distributive fairness and interactional fairness manipulations. The results find support for the hypothesized three-way interaction between relationship norms, distributive fairness and interactional fairness (see Table 2.2). Specifically, the results show that under conditions of low distributive fairness, consumers primed with communal norms show a more positive brand evaluation and future intentions compared to those primed with exchange norms when faced with high rather than low interactional fairness.

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To replicate the main findings of study 1 in a more realistic context, study 2 used a real
brand—Starbucks—and subsequently, measured rather than manipulate communal and exchange norms. Further, study 2 also examined the role of perceived breach of relationship norms as the underlying process variable. Finally, interactional fairness was operationalized differently—by the amount of effort put in to resolve the conflict rather than the politeness shown by the brand.

In study 2, participants were first exposed to the Starbucks brand name, a visual of a Starbucks branded coffee cup, and were encouraged to think of their own interactions, feelings and associations with Starbucks. Participants then responded some questions about Starbucks which were later used to categorize them into communal or exchange oriented consumers. Participants then read about a consumer who had ordered a decaf latte but received regular coffee that was not even hot. When the consumer complained, there was either no effort put in to resolve the issue (low interactional fairness), or the salesperson tried with utmost sincerity to resolve it (high interactional fairness). For all consumers the final outcome was the same—the consumer had to pay for the stale regular coffee and did not get any refund. The main dependent variables were the same as in study 1: a) a four-item measure of brand evaluation, and b) a three-item measure of future intention. In addition, a three-item measure of perceived breach of relationship norms was also administered (violated principles, broke promise, violated rules). Manipulation checks of relationship norms, and interactional fairness were administered.

Results replicate those of study 1. The results show that under conditions of low distributive fairness, consumers who perceive a communal relationship with the brand are likely to have a more positive brand evaluation and future intention scores than those who perceive an exchange relationship when facing high rather than low interactional fairness (see Table 2.2). The results of study 2 are significant since they are observed in the context of a real brand and a real relationship that consumers perceive with it. More importantly, this study shows that the
interactive effects of Relationship Type and Interactional Fairness on consumer evaluations are fully mediated by the extent to which consumers perceive a breach of the relationship norms.

Together, the two projects—responses to request for help and issues of fairness—highlight the crucial role of relationship norms in how consumers assess the actions and behavior of a brand and/or its representatives. Findings from these two projects suggest that actions of a brand that are seen to be in violation of the norms of the underlying relationship between the consumer and the brand are likely to lead to a less positive evaluation of the brand compared to actions that are seen as upholding the norms of that relationship. Significantly, the same action is evaluated differently depending upon whether or not it is perceived to be consistent with the relationship norms. This suggests that it is not the action per se but whether or not that action is in keeping with what is expected in the particular relationship that determines the evaluation of that action and the brand. Interestingly, the results of these two projects are consistent with what is suggested by prior work on consumer satisfaction based on expectation confirmation (Oliver 1980). It is reasonable to think of relationship norms as setting consumers’ expectations, and the subsequent action of the brand being judged good or not based on whether or not the expectation is subsequently confirmed or disconfirmed, that is, in conformity or violation of the relationship norms. Thus, the norm-based thesis of consumer-brand relationship also gives us insights about the degree of consumer satisfaction in a specific consumer-brand interaction.

Using Relationship Norms as a Guide for Own Behavior

The second crucial role of relationship norms is to help consumers guide their own behavior when interacting with a brand or its representatives. When in a relationship, the norms of that
relationship suggest to the consumer the ‘right’ way to behave. As a consequence, how consumers behave in one particular relationship might be very distinct from how they behave in another relationship. Next, I summarize two projects that examine how the norms of relationship are used as a guide for consumers’ own actions and behavior in interactions with a brand.

**Role of Relationship Norms in Processing Brand Information**

This project examines differences in consumers’ strategies when they process brand related information (Aggarwal and Law 2005). In particular, this research suggests that norms of a communal relationship, relative to those of an exchange relationship, make individuals more likely to process brand information at a higher level of abstraction. Prior research suggests that people in an exchange relationship focus on different aspects of information than do people in a communal relationship; more specifically, they are more likely to keep track of their partner’s inputs rather than their partner’s needs (Clark 1984). In a consumer-brand context, we expect this focus on others’ inputs in an exchange relationship to translate into attention to nitty-gritty details about the brand since that way consumers can track the balance of what they get for what they pay. In contrast, since consumers primed with communal norms do not look for immediate quid pro quo (Clark and Mills 1993), these consumers are more likely to evaluate brands more holistically, that is, attend to overall brand attributes at a higher level of abstraction. Further, this research argues that it is not even necessary for consumers to form a relationship with the brand to show this effect. Rather, the effect of relationship norms can also work if the norms are made salient in one context and the effect is assessed in a subsequent unrelated behavior.

Three studies test the effect of relationship type on the level of abstraction of brand
information. The studies use very different operationalizations of level of abstraction to provide strong converging evidence for the moderating role of relationship norms on consumers’ information-processing strategies. Study 1 builds on prior work on categorization to manipulate the level of abstraction by varying the similarity of a proposed extension to the original product; study 2 uses memory measures such as recognition and response latency for brand features that vary in their level of abstraction; and study 3 uses participants’ open-ended responses to examine whether the brand features listed by participants vary by level of abstraction.

In study 1, the context of a near versus far product extension was used to examine the level of abstraction at which consumers process the proposed extension. The logic was that in a communal relationship people will process information at a higher level of abstraction, perceive even the far extensions as being similar to the original product category, and hence will evaluate these extensions relatively positively. Conversely, in an exchange relationship, people process brand information at a lower level of abstraction, perceive greater dissimilarities between the proposed far product extension and the original category, and hence will be less likely than their communal counterparts to evaluate far product extensions positively. However, when the proposed extension is similar to the original product, no differences across relationships were expected since both sets of consumers were likely to see the similarities between the two.

Scenario descriptions of a hypothetical relationship between two people were used to manipulate communal and exchange relationship norms. Manipulation check and PANAS scales were administered to ensure that the manipulation was effective and that affect was not driving any effects. In a presumably unrelated task, participants then evaluated a proposed extension for a product. Iced tea and toffee were the near and far extension for a cola product, but the far and near extension for a chewing gum product. The other pair of extensions was calculator (near/far)
and fashion accessories (far/near) for a pen/jean manufacturer. The extensions were evaluated on a four-item scale (dislike-like, bad-good, low quality-high quality, unpleasant-pleasant).

Results show that the norms of relationship moderate the degree to which far product extensions are seen as similar to the original product, as revealed by the differences in the evaluations of the product extensions: people evaluate the far extensions more positively when the norms of a communal rather than an exchange relationship are salient (see Table 2.3). Since a communal relationship leads to information being processed at a higher level of abstraction, participants are able to see the similarities in extensions that are relatively far from the original product category. Conversely, when the norms of an exchange relationship are salient, people attend to the specific/concrete features of a product; hence they are less likely to see similarities beyond the obvious. These results support the premise of differences in processing strategies adopted by consumers across the two relationship types. Interestingly, these results are consistent with those reported by Monga and John (2008) who report differences in processing styles of consumers across independent and interdependent cultures. Since people from interdependent cultures are more concerned about others, they are akin to consumers who have a communal orientation. Conversely, people from an independent culture focus on their own well-being quite like those who have an exchange orientation. Results from study 1 thus find that the processing style of consumers who have a communal versus an exchange relationship is similar to that of consumers from an interdependent versus independent culture respectively.

<<TABLE 2.3 NEAR HERE>>

Study 2 employs memory measures to more directly examine relationship type induced differences in information processing. It was reasoned that if communal relationship norms more than exchange norms make individuals process abstract or general brand information, then these
encoding differences would be reflected in later memory measures. Accordingly, when presented with both abstract as well as more specific (or concrete) brand information, individuals in a communal relationship would overwhelmingly encode the abstract information, whereas those in an exchange relationship condition would attend more to the concrete brand information.

Participants were presented with a description of a new clothing store brand that contained concrete as well as abstract brand information. A memory test was later administered on the participants. The memory test gauged accurate and inaccurate memory for concrete brand information, accurate memory for the more abstract brand information, and memory for information that, although not presented, was nonetheless a plausible inference. It was expected that consumers in an exchange relationship condition will be relatively more likely to not only correctly recognize such concrete brand information, but also be able to accurately detect inaccuracies. However, the impact of relationship type on memory for abstract brand information and plausible inferences as measured by recognition performance was more complex. It was expected that there would be no differences across the communal and exchange relationship group for accurate recognition since communal participants would simply recall such information from memory while the exchange participants will use their memory of concrete information to generate this information. However, because exchange-oriented consumers are assumed to rely on generating the abstract and plausible information, they would be slower than communal consumers at identifying this information as shown by the response latencies.

Participants were first presented with a relationship manipulation identical to that used in study 1. Next, participants read a 450-word description about a hypothetical clothing store that contained both concrete and abstract brand information (e.g., “stores in 39 countries” vs. “it is an international brand”). Later, following a filler exercise, the participants completed a computer-
based, multiple-choice recognition task. A total of 14 questions were asked, the first two being practice questions. Six of the 12 critical questions tested the participants’ memory for the concrete brand information presented earlier; the other six tested their memory for the abstract information. Each question had four possible responses. The six questions on concrete brand information had one accurate and three inaccurate response options. The six questions on abstract brand information had one accurate, one inaccurate, and two plausible inferences as options. Participants were required to select only one of the four responses for each of the 12 questions, but as quickly and accurately as possible.

The results show that as expected participants in the exchange condition had a higher likelihood to accept correct concrete brand information and a lower likelihood to accept incorrect concrete brand information relative to participants in the communal condition (see Table 2.3). Further, there were no differences in the proportion of accurate, inaccurate or plausible responses for abstract information across conditions. However, participants in communal condition, relative to those in an exchange condition, had faster access to both correct abstract brand information and plausible inferences, suggesting that they particularly attend to brand information presented at a higher level of abstraction. On the other hand, participants in the exchange condition needed the extra time presumably to construct the abstract brand information from the concrete information. As well, even though communal and exchange participants show no reliable differences in the amount of time needed to recognize concrete brand information, their levels of accuracy are significantly different. This suggests that at the time of encoding, participants in the exchange condition attend to the concrete brand information relatively more than their communal counterparts and, at retrieval, are able to access more of the relevant information. Together, these findings support the overall premise that brand-related information
is processed at a higher level of abstraction in a communal relative to an exchange relationship.

The premise of study 3 is the following: if the type of consumer-brand relationship influences the level of abstraction at which the brand’s features are processed, then similar differences in abstraction will be revealed in the way in which a consumer describes that brand to a third party. The study uses a scenario description to first manipulate communal or exchange relationships with a hypothetical pen brand. Next, each participant is asked to describe the features of the pen to a friend. It is predicted that relative to those with an exchange relationship, consumers with a communal relationship would list features at a higher level of abstraction. As in studies 1 and 2, participants were first exposed to the relationship type manipulation, which involved reading a scenario. Unlike the previous two studies, however, the scenario descriptions in this study described interactions between an individual and a product, a fictitious brand of pen. The main dependent variable was the features of the pen as written down by the participants.

In order to focus on the most important features, the analysis was limited to the first three features mentioned by each participant. Two independent judges rated each feature for each participant on a seven-point concreteness-abstractness scale, with the higher score indicating a higher level of abstraction. For example, a feature like “color of the pen” or “ink flow” got a lower rating (1, 2, or 3), but a feature like “classy” or “style” received a higher rating (5, 6, or 7). For each of the three features, the ratings for each participant were averaged and the average rating for the two judges estimated. This average score was compared across the two relationship conditions. Results show that, as expected, participants in the communal condition listed brand features at a higher level of abstraction compared to those in the exchange condition (see Table 2.3). Control groups rule out alternative explanations based on affect, differences in abstractness of the descriptions, perceived quality, amount of effort, and potential demand effects.
In sum, the three studies provide converging evidence in support of the hypothesis that communal norms lead consumers to process brand-related information at a higher level of abstraction compared to exchange norms. This research, thus, highlights the effect of relationship norms not on how consumers evaluate the brand but on how the norms guide them and suggest to them the ‘right’ way to conduct themselves in their interactions with the brand. Finally, this research also shows that the effect of relationship norms extends beyond the context in which the norms are made salient. The norms of relationship affect consumer behavior even if they have been made salient in a context that is unrelated to the subsequent interaction with the brand.

**Relationship Norms and Consumers’ Loss Aversion**

Following this previous research that finds evidence of the effect of the mere salience of relationship norms on consumers’ processing strategies, Aggarwal and Zhang (2006) replicate the important carryover effect of relationship norms beyond the priming context—in a task that assesses consumers’ loss aversion. In particular, this research argues that communal relationship norms will lead consumers to be more loss averse relative to exchange relationship norms for two key reasons. First, given that consumers’ underlying intentions for interaction with the brand are different in the two relationships, relationship norms are expected to change consumers’ cognitive perspective, resulting in gains and losses being treated differently. Because exchange relationships are quid pro quo—what is received is evaluated in terms of what one gives up—people in an exchange relationship are more concerned with the net balance of inputs and outcomes (Clark and Mills 1993). In other words, people are more likely to compute the net of gains and losses from a transaction rather than evaluating them separately as gains versus losses.
And since the value function of losses is steeper than that of gains, aggregating losses with gains will result in a weaker degree of loss aversion. However, matching specific inputs with subsequent outcomes violates the norms of a communal relationship. People avoid linking what they get to what they give up and shun calculating the net of gains and losses. Hence, communal norms would lead to losses being evaluated separately from gains (rather than being aggregated), resulting in consumer behavior that is consistent with a stronger degree of loss aversion.

Second, relationship norms are likely to result in differences in the emotional attachment to the endowed object, engendering different experiences of the loss itself for the two sets of consumers. In particular, communal relationship norms, relative to exchange norms, are likely to inflate the level of perceived loss. When the norms of a communal relationship are salient, consumers see their partner as a close friend or a family member, suggesting that a much higher value would be required by them to break away from this relationship. Thus, when communal norms are salient, consumers will show an increased fondness for and commitment to their current option and a greater resistance to giving it up—demonstrating the relatively stronger degree of loss aversion. Conversely, exchange norms suggest that the endowed option be valued primarily for what it can fetch. Giving up such an item may not be all that painful, resulting in a lower degree of loss aversion. This suggests that the experience of the loss itself will be greater in a communal than in an exchange relationship, contributing to the differences in consumers’ loss aversion. This is consistent with the ‘doctrine of insufficient adulation’ reported by O’Guinn and Muniz Jr. (2008) for brands that have a strong following, according to which consumers sometimes create a biased understanding of reality that leaves little room for negative feedback.

It is also suggested that the effect of relationship norms is likely to be stronger when consumers have had some opportunity to interact with the product (i.e., they already own a
product) than when they have not had this opportunity (i.e., they do not own it): the difference in loss aversion across different relationship types are expected to be driven by the selling rather than the buying prices. Furthermore, given that buying and selling is likely to be seen more as a commercial transaction, the participants in a control group who are not exposed to any relationship manipulation are likely to be similar to the exchange group. Put differently, it is expected that the higher WTA (willingness to accept) in the communal relative to the exchange condition suggested earlier will be driven by an enhanced loss aversion caused by the communal norms rather than by a dampened loss aversion caused by the exchange norms.

The study used scenario descriptions to manipulate communal or exchange relationship norms, or no manipulation for the control group. Participants then assumed the role of a buyer or seller of a plain coffee mug, much like in a typical endowment effect study. The coffee mug was bought from a discount store for $0.99. Buying and selling prices were elicited for each of 24 prices ranging from $.25 to $6.00 (in $.25 increments). At the end of the study a randomly generated price was chosen and all qualifying transactions conducted. The dependent variable was the buying and selling prices indicated by the seller and the buyer groups respectively.

The results suggest that communal norms increase consumers’ degree of loss aversion as revealed by a higher WTA (willingness to accept). Participants in the control group behave no differently from those in the exchange group—both show a lower WTA than the communal group (Communal = $5.32, Exchange = $3.60, Control = $3.42). The WTP (willingness to pay), however, is no different across the three groups (Communal = $1.88, Exchange = $2.02, Control = $2.23). The results suggest that differences across communal and exchange norms are driven by consumers behaving differently from the “average” when primed with communal rather than exchange relationship norms. Also, communal norms do not merely lead to a higher overall
valuation of the product because there were differences in WTA but not in WTP. Finally, this research highlights the contextual effect of relationship norms since the experience of loss is affected even when the item of evaluation and relationship are unrelated. This study together with the one on processing strategies thus highlights the important role of relationship norms in helping consumers determine the appropriate way to behave in their brand interactions.

Conclusions

The four papers summarized here all examine the interpersonal relationship metaphor in the context of consumer-brand interactions to get insights about different aspects of consumer behavior. The common insight guiding all these papers is that each relationship carries with it a distinct set of norms that are unique to that relationship, and when consumers perceive a certain relationship with a brand, they are in fact, invoking the norms of that particular relationship to guide their own behavior and evaluate that of the brand—their relationship partner. The first two papers (request for help, fairness) highlight the effect of norm salience on consumers’ evaluation of the brand. The other two papers (processing strategy, loss aversion) emphasize the role of norm salience on guiding consumers’ own behavior. Together, the four papers underscore the value of using the relationship metaphor to better understand consumer-brand interactions. The framework of relationship norms, importantly, gives us a key tool not just for understanding but also for making predictions about consumer behavior that would otherwise not be possible. Many important questions may be asked relating not just to how might norms get created in the first place, but also why might some consumers form a communal while others form an exchange relationship with the same brand. Clearly, there are different person, product, and context-
specific factors that lead to particular relationships to develop between a consumer and a brand. Some consumers may be intrinsically more communal-minded while others may never see any commercial exchange as anything more than a quid pro quo. Some product categories may be inherently more communal such as the ‘commercial exchanges’ between a doctor and a patient, or those between a school and a student. Aside from these obvious examples, brands that have people as the representatives, such as for most services (e.g., hotels, airlines, etc.), brands that have a combination of product and service as their core offering (e.g., restaurants and some online stores), and brands that require one-on-one personal selling may all be more amenable to being seen as communal relationship partners. Clearly, marketers have a variety of tools that they can use to develop the kind of relationship that they wish to pursue with their consumers. The most important tool that sets the tone for the kind of relationship that might eventually emerge with the consumer is the way the brand is positioned in the mind of the consumer. In addition, the dynamic and repeated interactions pursued by marketers in the form of ads, interactive media, direct mail, and telemarketing as well as the use of brand mascots and spokespersons will strengthen the type of ongoing relationship that is formed between the brand and the consumer.

The communal-exchange relationship framework is but one framework that could potentially be used in the consumer-brand context. Other frameworks, such as the one proposed by Fiske (1992), offer a somewhat more complex model of relationship types. This or some other framework of relationship types could potentially be used in future research to examine more nuanced hypotheses about the research issues relating to issues of consumer behavior. More importantly, as the diverse nature of the four research questions highlighted here suggest, the metaphor of interpersonal relationship is such a versatile framework that future research avenues relating to consumer-brand interactions are only limited by researchers’ imagination.
Notes

I thank my dissertation advisor Ann L. McGill for her guidance on my different projects on consumer-brand relationships as well as for her comments on this chapter. I also acknowledge the contributions of my co-authors on the different projects.

References


Table 2.1
MEAN RATINGS OF COMMUNAL AND EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS ON REACTIONS TO REQUEST FOR HELP

<table>
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<th>Study</th>
<th>Condition</th>
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<th>Not Charged</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communal</td>
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<td>Brand Evaluation</td>
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<td>4.60</td>
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<td>Reactions to Brand’s Action</td>
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<td>STUDY 3</td>
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<td>6.09</td>
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<td>Brand Evaluation</td>
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<td>Norm Violation</td>
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<td>2.98</td>
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Table 2.2
MEAN RATINGS OF COMMUNAL AND EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS ON RESPONSES TO INTERACTIONAL AND DISTRIBUTIVE FAIRNESS

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<thead>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Hi Inter</strong></td>
<td>Hi Inter</td>
<td>Lo Inter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand Evaluation</td>
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<td>Future Intention</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>4.15</td>
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**STUDY 2**

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<td>3.09</td>
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<td>2.64</td>
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### Table 2.3

**MEAN RATINGS OF COMMUNAL AND EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS ON ASSESSING ABSTRACT VERSUS CONCRETE INFORMATION**

#### STUDY 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Evaluation of Near Extensions</td>
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<td>Evaluation of Far Extensions</td>
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#### STUDY 2

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<td>Exchange</td>
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<td>Incorrect</td>
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<td>Correct</td>
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<td>.63</td>
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<td>Plausible</td>
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#### STUDY 3

<table>
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<td>Average Abstractness of Features</td>
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