

Monogamous versus Polygamous Brand Relationships

PANKAJ AGGARWAL AND MENGZE SHI

ABSTRACT Consumer-brand relationship is an important aspect of consumer behavior with both theoretical and managerial implications. Extant research has framed such relationships as dyadic in nature, that is, a one-on-one monogamous relationship between a consumer and a brand. This research is among the first to acknowledge the polygamous nature of consumer-brand relationships and to study its implications for consumer behavior in general and for customer loyalty in particular. We use the context of customer loyalty programs in two experiments to investigate the effect of demotion of the consumer's status on the evaluations of that brand as well as a competing brand, depending upon whether the consumer is in a monogamous or a polygamous brand relationship. Furthermore, we examine the role of self-relevant emotions, and in particular negative emotions, as the underlying factor that drives brand assessments. Relevant theoretical and practical implications are noted.

Recent work in marketing has employed the metaphor of interpersonal relationships to better understand consumer-brand interactions. This stream of work has noted that consumers relate to brands in ways that mirror their relationships with people in a social context (Fournier 1998; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2004; Swaminathan, Page, and Gurham-Canli 2007; Reimann et al. 2012). Although a number of different relationship types have been explored across these studies, almost all of them conceive of a consumer-brand relationship as a dyad, that is, a one-on-one relationship between a consumer and a brand. In actuality, though, consumers regularly interact with and have relationships with more than one brand from a particular category. Simultaneously, marketers obviously do business with more than one customer, even though often their goal is to make each consumer feel that he or she is particularly special and important. In this research, we extend the dyadic nature of the relationship by introducing an alternative brand that the consumer might be interacting with to examine how the monogamous versus polygamous nature of the consumer-brand relationship affects consumer attitudes.

We employ the context of a loyalty program of an airline brand to examine the effect of different consumer-brand relationship types. In particular, we examine how the brand's action (such as demoting a consumer from an elite member-

ship of the frequent flier program to a regular membership) might differentially influence the consumers' evaluations, depending upon whether the consumer is in a monogamous or a polygamous relationship with that brand. Given that the consumer experiences a demotion in his or her "special" status with the relationship partner, we argue and show that this causes the consumer significant emotional distress. We also argue that the consumer's emotional response to being demoted by the brand drives subsequent brand assessments. Further, to gain deeper insights on the polygamous versus monogamous nature of relationships, we examine how the brand's action might influence consumer attitudes not just toward that particular brand but also toward an alternative brand that may be viewed as the "other" relationship partner.

Overall, this research delves into issues of loyalty to a brand and the critical role of emotions in consumer brand evaluations in the face of status demotion. To our knowledge, we are the first to examine the effect of polygamous relationships between consumers and brands, and the extent to which emotions differentially affect consumer attitudes across different relationship types, thereby significantly contributing to the extant knowledge on consumer-brand relationships. The findings from this article will also contribute to extant research on consumer responses to brand transgression (Aaker et al. 2004; Aggarwal and Larrick 2012;

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Park and John 2018) and will trigger further work examining novel issues related to brand betrayal in keeping with recent findings (Reimann et al. 2018). Finally, recent research that has taken a historical perspective on the papers on consumer-brand relationship published in the past nearly 20 years noted that not enough work has examined the role of self-relevant emotions on consumer brand interactions (Albert and Thompson 2018). Our work will, in part, fill that significant gap in the literature.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES AND PAST RESEARCH

Branding and brand-based differentiation are powerful tools for creating and sustaining competitive advantage. One goal of this stream of research is to better understand the concept of brand loyalty, so marketers have a bigger toolkit with which to effectively manage their brands. Although the notion of brand loyalty is quite complex and nuanced, it has often been operationalized, especially in quantitative marketing literature, by the frequency with which consumers actually buy a particular brand (e.g., Guadagni and Little 1983).

Monogamous or Polygamous?

In her foundational work, Fournier (1998) suggested that consumers form relationships with brands that mirror their relationships with other people in a social context. In particular, consumer-brand relationships span a wide continuum from acquaintances, casual friendships, and kinships to arranged marriages, close friends, and committed partnerships. Other researchers have looked at consumer-brand relationships from the perspective of brand personality types (Aaker et al. 2004), consumer self-construal (Swaminathan et al. 2007), and how this relationship evolves over time (Reimann et al. 2012). Researchers have also examined the notion of brand attachment, developing a scale to measure the strength of this construct and distinguishing it from other constructs (Thompson, MacInnis, and Park 2005; Park et al. 2010), as well as laying out the conceptual framework and determinants of this novel construct (Park, Eisingerich, and Park 2013).

Most of this prior research in marketing has implicitly or explicitly conceived of consumer-brand relationships as a dyad, that is, as an interaction between two entities—the consumer and the brand. Recent work has started to explore some different and intriguing types of relationships, such as brand flings (Alvarez and Fournier 2012) and brand flirting (Consiglio et al. 2013), which introduce the possibility of the consumer forming a relationship with a second brand as an alternative or in addition to one's "steady" brand,

thereby suggesting that a consumer could be pursuing multiple brand relationships simultaneously. Other research has examined the notion of a brand community and noted that multiple consumers form relationships with a particular brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). However, these researchers have only hinted at but not overtly examined the idea of polygamous consumer-brand relationships.

The paucity of research in consumer behavior examining issues related to the polygamous nature of consumer-brand relationships is surprising given that in reality, consumers regularly interact with and have relationships with more than one brand, while marketers routinely do business with more than one customer. That is, both consumers and brands are typically polygamous in their relationships with each other. In fact, prior research studying the patterns of buyer behavior acknowledges that (a) few consumers of a brand are 100% loyal over extended periods, (b) 100%-loyal customers usually do not buy the brand heavily, and (c) a brand's customers buy other brands in total far more often than they buy the brand itself (Uncles, Ehrenberg, and Hammond 1995, G73). These trends in consumer buying pattern across multiple categories underscore the need to better understand not just the behavior but also the psychological and emotional bonds that might differentiate those consumers who exhibit 100% loyalty to a brand (monogamous consumers) versus those who are brand switchers, that is, those who buy competitive brands as much as the brand in question (polygamous consumers).

To fill this glaring gap in consumer research, we extend the dyadic nature of the relationship to examine the extent to which the polygamous consumer-brand relationships influence consumer behavior. In this research, we conceptualize polygamous and monogamous relationship in terms of the consumers' behavioral differences. That is to say, the key difference in these two relationship types is the extent to which the consumer uses the brand exclusively (monogamous) or uses at least one other brand as much as the primary brand under study (polygamous). In our conceptualization, we are not making any particular assumptions related to the emotional bonds that consumers might develop with these two types of relationship partners. Arguably, one could make a case for either a monogamous or polygamous relationship to be more emotion-laden than the other. For example, a monogamous relationship being exclusive might suggest greater commitment (e.g., marriage relationship) and hence greater emotional connection with the brand. On the other hand, a polygamous relationship with a brand could take the form of a fling or a one-night

stand, which clearly embodies very intense emotions as well (Fournier 1998). However, instead of forcing a particular relationship type with more or less emotional underpinnings, in this research we operationalize monogamous and polygamous relationships in behavioral terms. Thus, in our conceptualization, a monogamous relationship suggests 100% behavioral loyalty to one brand, while a polygamous relationship suggests loyalty to more than one brand (at least two). Further, we are agnostic about why the consumer develops and exhibits either an exclusive or multibrand loyalty, since people use brands for a variety of reasons. For example, consumers might use multiple brands in the same category because the second brand offers a price discount while giving comparable value or benefit, or because the consumer is facing some situational constraints, or because the consumer is a variety seeker. Similarly, consumers might limit their use to one brand as a matter of habit rather than being emotionally committed, or because there is no other option available in that particular market. Interestingly, even though we think that (conceptually speaking) these two relationship types could be on either side of an emotional bond with the consumer, we predict that, all other things being equal, the consumers will have differing levels of expectation regarding the brand's commitment to them. We base this prediction on the principle of reciprocity (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004): if the consumer and the brand are in a monogamous relationship, then the consumer is in fact using the particular brand exclusively. Furthermore, the consumer will expect the brand to exhibit greater commitment in a monogamous compared to a polygamous relationship. Consequently, if and when the brand's actions violate the consumer's expectations, those in a monogamous relationship are more likely to exhibit negative responses than those in a polygamous relationship.

LOYALTY PROGRAMS: CONCEPTUAL BASIS AND CONTEXTUAL RELEVANCE

Brands are increasingly offering customer loyalty programs (Gronroos 1994; Peppers and Rogers 1997; Payne and Frow 2005) intended to increase sales as well as build a closer bond with the customer. The goal of loyalty programs is to encourage existing customers to give more of their business to the brand and simultaneously to prevent these customers from switching to competing brands (Hartman and Vaird 2008). Thus, loyalty programs aim to turn an increasing proportion of the company's customers into monogamous partners, with a reduced proportion of customers carrying on polygamous brand relationships (Shi and Chiang 2011).

According to the 2015 Colloquy Loyalty Census, an average American household had 29 loyalty program memberships in 2014 (<http://www.colloquy.com>). Similarly, in an earlier study of European business airline travelers, more than 80% of respondents reported having more than one airline loyalty program membership (OAG 1993). Despite the prevalence of such polygamous behavior in practice, to the best of our knowledge, no existing research has investigated how the nature of a customer's monogamous versus polygamous relationship with a brand may affect the customer's response to the brand's loyalty program.

Elite Status and Demotion to Regular Status

A question that may be asked at this stage is why many loyalty programs separate their members into regular and elite groups. Companies reward the elite members with special status because, first, status rewards in the form of priority services can be quite cost-efficient (Kim, Shi, and Srinivasan 2001). The elite customers are a small part of a brand's customer base, and the cost of priority status can be borne by other customers. Second, providing these customers with special status can enhance the strength of their relationship with the firm (Lewis 2004; Dreze and Nunes 2009). Third, the premium image associated with elite membership increases its desirability among regular members who may be motivated to give more business to the brand in order to qualify for elite membership themselves (Heath, Larrick, and Wu 1999; Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Kivetz, Urminsky, and Zheng 2006).

Demotion from an elite status in a loyalty program is likely to be seen by the customer as a fairly negative outcome. Elite status signals that the customers are "special": they are valued due to their large volume of business or because they have a special bond with the brand. A demotion unambiguously highlights a fall from grace and signals that the customer is no longer special. Even if the demotion is due to the customer giving a reduced volume of his/her business to the brand, it is likely to result in disappointment and a consequent negative evaluation of the brand such that the customer may start giving business to other brands and may further reduce or even completely break off interactions with the offending brand.

A question that arises is whether the perception of the brand will differ for customers in a monogamous versus a polygamous relationship with that brand. Will demotion to "regular member" status result in more negative evaluation from consumers with a monogamous or polygamous relationship with the brand?

Attributing Blame: Brand or the Customer?

Another interesting question to consider is whether the customer's negative response to being demoted by the brand would vary depending upon whether the primary fault is attributable to the customer or to the brand. If the customer can attribute the blame for the status demotion to the brand, then one can expect a strong negative response to such an action, not just in terms of the overall brand evaluation but also in terms of negative emotions like anger. On the other hand, if the key blame for the status demotion lies with the customer due to a lowered number of flights bought, one could argue that the negative emotions and a lowered overall assessment should not be observed since the actions are not really due to something the brand did. We propose that even in such a case, the customer will experience a significant level of negative emotions and will assess the brand less positively, since loss has a significant psychological effect and is a particularly moving experience for most people (Kahneman and Tversky 1990). However, we suggest that these negative responses from consumers who are themselves responsible for the loss of status will not be as severe as when the blame is attributed to the brand.

Countering the Negative Effects of a Demotion

How can a brand counter the negative outcomes related to a customer's demotion? One simple and fairly common way in which the brand could try to protect itself against a lowered evaluation by customers is to restore lost status in a subsequent time period. Presumably, restoration of the status in the loyalty program could lead to an increase in the brand evaluation, but it is not clear what the net effect would be of a demotion and a subsequent reinstatement. In this research we examine the extent to which the restoration of status in the loyalty program might be effective in muting the results of the loss of status, and if the corrective action is more or less effective for monogamous versus polygamous customers. A recent review paper on loyalty programs (Henderson, Beck, and Palmatier 2011) emphasized the need for further research that simultaneously examines multiple theoretical mechanisms and looks at customer responses at multiple time periods. Our research is a partial response to that call since we examine the role of behavioral loyalty (monogamous vs. polygamous) to see how these two different forms of customer-brand interactions influence customer responses.

For the purposes of this research, we operationalize polygamous relationship by the percentage of the customer's purchases allocated to a brand. This view is consistent with

commonly used measures such as "share of flights" in the airline industry and "share of wallet" in the credit card industry. Consequently, we term those customers who allocate most of their purchases to the focal brand "monogamous customers" and those who allocate as much purchasing share to the other brand as to the focal brand "polygamous customers." Further, we look at the issue over multiple time periods by examining the effect of demotion of the customer from the elite membership status and then a subsequent reinstatement to that status. Finally, we go beyond the issues raised in recent research by Henderson et al. (2011) to examine the effect of loyalty programs on the brand as well as its closest competitor, thereby highlighting the importance of expanding the meaning of "loyalty" for future investigations.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Customers who attain elite membership in a loyalty program are likely to value this membership for the extra benefits and the perceived increase in their status. A demotion from this elite status will lead to a lowered evaluation of the brand (Wagner, Hennig-Thurau, and Rudolph 2009). The question is how might a monogamous versus polygamous relationship of the customer with the brand affect the response to such a demotion and a subsequent reinstatement of the status? In keeping with prior findings that the brand's strongest consumers react most negatively to brand transgressions (Ashley and Leonard 2009), we expect that the effect of a demotion will be very negative for monogamous customers who have concentrated their purchases with the brand and will lose significantly from such a demotion. However, the effect on polygamous customers is likely to be less extreme. It is reasonable to argue that these polygamous consumers are less affected by such a change in loyalty status because they do limited business with the brand and have readily available alternatives to move their business to. Thus, we expect that the demotion would not result in as strong a negative effect from polygamous consumers as from monogamous consumers. Hence we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: The negative effect due to a loss of elite membership will be greater for monogamous than for polygamous customers of the brand.

Consumers faced with the loss of elite status are likely to experience emotional distress as a consequence of this loss. We argue that the negative emotions experienced by the

consumers will result in the negative change in their attitudes toward the brand.

H2: Negative effect of loss of status will be mediated by negative emotions.

While the customers who regain their elite status will evaluate the brand positively, the net effect of first losing and then regaining the elite status is expected to be negative. We base this prediction on prior research on loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky 1990), which suggests that losses loom larger than gains; that is, the pain of losing something is greater than the joy of getting that same thing. Consequently, we hypothesize that customers will experience greater pain when losing the elite status and significantly less joy when the same status is regained. The net effect of first losing and then regaining elite status will be negative. Following the arguments for hypothesis 1, we also hypothesize that the net negative effect will be stronger for monogamous consumers relative to the polygamous consumers.

H3: After losing and then regaining elite status, there will be a net negative effect on customers' evaluation of the brand, and this negative effect will be stronger for monogamous than polygamous consumers.

A key reason for the proliferation of loyalty programs is the belief that they increase customer loyalty for the associated brand. One factor that indicates the degree of a customer's true loyalty is the customer's attitudes toward the brand's competitors. A customer faced with a demotion from elite to regular membership in the loyalty program may not only evaluate the concerned brand less positively but is likely to evaluate the competing brand more positively. This positive effect on the competitor brand evaluation is akin to a rebound effect in a romance (Wolfinger 2007), which refers to people's inclination to rush into a new relationship soon after breaking up with their current relationship partner. Fournier (1998) refers to such relationships as rebounds or avoidance-driven relationships that are built on the desire to move away from the earlier partner more than on the desire to form a relationship with the new partner.

Prior research has shown that negative emotions are likely to spill over to other aspects of people's behavior. For example, research in the context of work-life balance shows that family-to-work conflict experienced at work and work-

to-family conflict experienced at home are positively related to negative emotions and behavior at work and home (Judge, Ilies, and Scott 2006). Prior research in marketing also points out a negative spillover in evaluations across brands in the face of brand crisis (Lei, Dawar, and Lemmink 2008). Although this past research is conducted in the context of sub-brands, it suggests that the degree of relatedness impacts the degree of spillover. Potentially, a competitor brand from the same category could be seen as quite related to the brand in question, and arguably the negative emotion from the demotion in loyalty status may have spillover effects on consumer evaluations of the other airline brands too.

Following a similar argument as that for hypothesis 1, we propose that the effect on the competing brand would be stronger for monogamous than for polygamous customers. Since the effect of negative emotion subsequent to the status demotion could result in evaluation of the competitive brand as more positive (rebound effect) or more negative (spillover effect), the hypotheses below formally state both those possibilities, which we subsequently explore empirically.

H4a: The loss of elite status will lead to a positive effect on the evaluation of the competing brand such that this effect is stronger for monogamous than for polygamous customers of the brand.

H4b: The loss of elite status will lead to a spillover effect on the evaluation of the competing brand such that this effect is stronger for monogamous than for polygamous customers of the brand.

THE STUDIES

Two laboratory studies were conducted to test hypotheses 1–4. Study 1 focuses on issues related to behavioral loyalty (i.e., monogamy vs. polygamy) and utilizes student subjects to examine the effect of status demotion on consumers' evaluations of the brand. Study 2 replicates the effects of study 1 among potential consumers recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), and it specifically assesses consumers' emotional responses in addition to their brand attitudes to get a sense of the underlying process. In both these studies, we manipulate whether the elite membership is lost due to changes made in the brand's policy that raise the qualifying requirements for elite membership (attribution to the brand), or due to less frequent travel undertaken by the

customer during the previous year (attribution to the consumer). As noted earlier, and in keeping with past research (Wagner et al. 2009), we expect this attribution condition to affect consumer evaluation of the brand.

STUDY 1: IS A MONOGAMOUS RELATIONSHIP ALWAYS BETTER?

The goal of this study was to examine if the effect of a demotion from an elite membership will be significantly different for monogamous versus polygamous customers (hypothesis 1). This study further examines if the positive effect of reinstatement of the elite status results in a negative net effect on customer evaluations (hypothesis 3).

Design

The study was a 2 (behavioral loyalty: monogamous vs. polygamous) \times 2 (blame: airline vs. self) \times 3 (timing of evaluations: before demotion, after demotion, after reinstatement) mixed-factor design with blame and behavioral loyalty serving as between-subjects factors and timing of evaluations as a within-subject factor. In sum, 122 undergraduate management students participated in the study in exchange for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions as they entered the lab. They read a scenario about a fictitious airline and its loyalty program. We sought a variety of evaluations from the participants at different stages of the questionnaire, after which they were debriefed and excused.

Method and Dependent Variables

Participants first read a brief scenario about working for a consulting company that required them to travel frequently. They were told that one of the airlines—Trans Atlantic Airlines—offered very good connections and fares, and that based on his or her annual number of flights the participant had become an elite member in the frequent flier program of this (fictitious) airline. Key benefits of the elite membership were highlighted, including access to the airport lounge, priority check-in and boarding, and priority unloading. Further, it was clarified that they had been either flying exclusively with the airline (monogamous relationship) or that they were flying to the same extent with a competitive airline (polygamous relationship).

Participants were then administered the first set of evaluations. Four items assessed participants' attitudes toward the airline (bad-good, dislike-like, unsatisfactory-satisfactory,

poor quality–high quality). Next, the participants were told that they were recently notified by the airline that they were being downgraded from an elite member to a regular member due to their reduced travel (self-blame condition) or due to a change in the airline's policy (airline-blame condition). Participants' evaluations on the same set of attitudinal measures for the airline were requested again. Finally, participants were told that they received another communication from the airline stating that their elite membership status had been reinstated. The reinstatement was due to their increased travel (self-blame condition) or due to the airline's policy reversal (airline-blame condition). The third set of assessments on the attitude scores was then collected. Finally, participants provided key demographic information.

Analysis and Results

Three of the 122 subjects who participated in the study did not respond to all the questions. The remaining 119 participants' responses on their attitudes toward the airline were analyzed.

Did the Loss of Elite Membership Lead to a Reduced Preference for Airlines? The preference for the brand (the average of four attitude measures) decreased significantly, from 5.86 to 3.52 ($df = 118, p < .001$). Such negative effects are statistically significant for each given type of the reason for the loss. Specifically, if the loss was due to the customer's reduced travel needs, the mean negative effect was 2.13 ($p < .001$); if the loss was due to the airline's change of policy, then the mean negative effect was 2.52 units ($p < .001$). These results clearly show that when a customer loses her elite membership, her preference for the airline is compromised.

Did the Preference Reduction from the Loss of Elite Membership Depend on Whether the Customer Was Monogamous or Polygamous (Hypothesis 1)? Our primary issue of investigation relates to whether the type of behavioral loyalty with the airline—monogamous versus polygamous—influences the customer's response to a loss of elite membership status with that brand. To understand this, we constructed a new variable Air1_2 as the difference of brand preference measures in the first and second stage. Results show that the mean value of Air1_2 is 2.5 under the Monogamy condition and 2.19 under the Polygamy condition. To test hypothesis 1, we then ran a two-way ANOVA using Air1_2 as the dependent variable and Blame (self blame, airline blame) and Behavioral Loyalty (polygamous,

monogamous) as the predictor variables. Notably, we also included female and frequent flier program (FFP) membership status (member or nonmember) as control variables to ensure that there were no effects of membership and gender type on the overall effects. The reason to control for gender was to rule out the argument that our results might be biased because women are more relational and men more transactional (Broverman et al. 1972; Block 1973). We find a marginally significant main effect for blame ($F(1, 111) = 3.57, p = .06$), a significant main effect for behavioral loyalty ($F(1, 111) = 4.07, p < .05$), and a significant effect for gender ($F(1, 111) = 7.83, p < .01$). However, neither the interaction effect between blame and behavioral loyalty nor the effect of FFP membership was significant. Thus, the results do not depend on whether subjects were current members of any frequent flier programs. Since many of our subjects were nonmembers, one possible concern might relate to the external validity of our results and the extent to which these results are applicable to current members. This result alleviates such concern.

The ANOVA results show that when a customer distributes her flights more evenly among airlines, that is, she is a polygamous customer of the brand, the negative effect on her attitude toward the airline due to loss of elite membership is smaller compared to when the customer is monogamous. The stronger perceived loyalty due to a monogamous relationship leads to a stronger negative effect of status demotion. Hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

When the Customer Regained Her Status Later, Did She Recover the Preference for the Airline? After regaining the elite status, customers' preference for the airline increased from 3.52 to 4.60, an increase of 1.07 units. The difference is statistically significant ($df = 118, p < .001$). Such positive recovery effects are statistically significant for each type of the reason for the loss. More specifically, if the previous loss was due to an airline's change of policy, then the attitude toward the airline recovers by 1.44 units ($df = 63, p < .001$). If, however, the previous loss was due to reduced travel needs, the recovery is 0.65 units ($df = 54, p < .001$). To conduct further tests for interactions, we constructed a new variable, Air3_2, as the difference between brand evaluation in periods 2 and 3. An ANOVA using Air3_2 as the dependent variable and blame and behavioral loyalty as predictor variables (with gender and FFP membership as the two control variables) revealed a significant main effect for blame ($F(1, 111) = 12.53, p < .01$), a significant main effect for behavioral loyalty ($F(1, 111) = 5.35,$

$p < .05$), and a significant effect for female ($F(1, 111) = 7.83, p < .01$). Thus, in the conditions where the attitude toward the airline suffered more due to loss of elite membership, the recovery is greater, too, when the customer regained the status.

After a Customer Experiences a Loss and a Subsequent Gain, to What Extent Does the Customer Recover Her Initial Attitude toward the Airline (Hypothesis 3)? To answer this question, we constructed a new variable, Air1_3, which is the difference in attitude from period 1 to period 3. Our results show that recovery is incomplete. In other words, the negative effect due to loss of elite membership is stronger than the amount of recovery after regaining the status. The difference in attitude toward the airline is statistically significant (mean = 1.27, $p < .001$). Moreover, this result holds regardless of reason for the loss of elite membership ($M_{\text{self}} = 1.48$ vs. $M_{\text{airline}} = 1.23$), and regardless of whether the customer was polygamous or monogamous ($M_{\text{mono}} = 1.20$ vs. $M_{\text{poly}} = 1.34$). These results find evidence in favor of loss aversion-based hypothesis 3. However, the relationship between net loss and monogamy/polygamy is not statistically significant ($p > .10$).

Discussion

This study demonstrates a number of interesting results for those "marginal" (to the brand) customers who may experience loss and subsequent gain of their elite membership. First, a loss of status leads to a negative effect on attitude toward the airline, regardless of the reason for the loss. As can be expected, the effect is stronger if the loss is due to the airline's change of policy rather than the customer's reduced travel. But what is interesting is that even when the loss of status is due to a reduced number of flights taken by the customer and hence fully attributable to the actions of the customer, the customer's attitudes toward the brand are negatively affected nonetheless. More predictably, we also find that those customers who are behaviorally loyal to the airline (i.e., monogamous) react more negatively toward the airline when demoted than those who are less loyal (i.e., polygamous).

Second, once the customer regains the status, his or her attitude toward the airline improves; again, this is true regardless of the reason for the loss or the extent of behavioral loyalty to the airline. The recovery is greater if the customer has a monogamous relationship with the airline. Thus, the recovery is greater in exactly the same cases where the loss was more severe.

Third, considering both loss and recovery, overall the customer's net attitude toward the airline is negatively affected. This is a very important result in that for customers who frequently experience loss and gain, one may conjecture that the customer's attitude and hence loyalty to the airline could go down after each cycle. Arguably, over repeated cycles of status loss and recovery, the changes in the loyalty program will lead to a downward spiral in customer attitudes, proving eventually to be detrimental to customer loyalty.

STUDY 2: DEMOTIONS, EMOTIONS, AND MONOGAMY/POLYGAMY RELATION

Four hundred MTurk respondents participated in the 2 (behavioral loyalty: monogamous/polygamous) \times 2 (blame: self/airline) \times 3 (repeated measure: before status demotion, after status demotion, after status recovery) study in exchange for monetary compensation. This study broadly followed the methodology and the measures used in study 1. In addition to three repeated measures of brand preference for the focal airline (Trans Atlantic Airlines), in this study we administered measures for the brand preferences for a competing airline (Global Air) and participants' emotions, as in study 1, which were all assessed three times each. We expect to see a stronger effect on the competing brand for customers who have a monogamous relationship compared to those who have a polygamous relationship (hypotheses 4a–4b), but the valence of that effect could potentially be positive or negative. We included direct measures of emotions using 27 items. In addition to the 20 standard items of emotion measures in the PANAS (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988), we included for this study seven more emotion measures (happy, delighted, relieved, sad, angry, annoyed, anxious). These 27 emotion measures were repeated three times during the study on each participant: once before status demotion (1), once after status demotion (2), and once after status recovery (3).

In analyzing the changes in brand preferences and emotions and their dependence on treatments, we used three somewhat different approaches: difference-in-difference approach by constructing the difference measures (e.g., brand preference changes after status demotion) and then conducting standard ANOVA tests on differences; conducting repeated ANOVA tests on brand preferences and emotions; and using linear mixed models to examine repeated measures. These alternative approaches have subtle differences in assumed error structures. Our analysis indicates that the three approaches lead to virtually identical results in this

study. We include mean preference and emotion change results in table 1.¹

Study 2 replicated all the results observed in study 1. As shown in table 1, after status demotion, the average preference for the focal brand (Trans Atlantic Airlines) decreased 2.467 units, and the preference reduction is statistically significant. Moreover, the preference reduction is greater under the monogamy condition (=2.739) than under the polygamy condition (=2.198). The difference is statistically significant in a two-way ANOVA test ($F(1, 397) = 10.62$, $p = .001$). Similarly, we find a significant main effect for blame ($F(1, 397) = 10.8$, $p = .001$). The results again confirm hypothesis 1.

We also confirm our results on partial recovery and hypothesis 3. While the initial average preference loss was 2.467, the average preference recovery after regaining the status was 1.365, significantly lower than the initial loss. The average net loss of preference was 1.102, which was significantly different from zero. Moreover, the net loss was greater under the monogamy condition (=1.300) than under the polygamy condition (0.905). The difference was statistically significant in a two-way ANOVA test ($F(1, 397) = 7.57$, $p = .006$). Thus, hypothesis 3 is confirmed in this study.

To examine the effect on emotional responses (hypothesis 2), we conducted factor analysis on the 27 items of emotion measures, separately for each of the three measures. Overall, the results of factor analysis point to a two-factor structure, even though technically we could identify three factors. Across three-factor analysis results, on average the eigenvalues dropped from 8.31 for the first factor, 6.54 for the second, to 1.67 for the third factor. The average cumulative variance accounted for by the first two factors was 83% on average. This result is consistent with Watson et al.'s (1988) contention that there are two factors, positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA). Among all 27 items, only two items—alert and attentive—had fairly high loadings on multiple factors, indicating their neutral positions between PA and NA. The remaining 25 items clearly loaded on either the PA or NA factor. Based on the above results, we created a PA measure as the average of 11 positive emotion items (happy, relieved, delighted, interested, excited, strong, enthusiastic, proud, inspired, determined, active) and an NA measure as the average of 14 negative emotion items (sad,

1. We thank the review team for suggesting alternative analysis approaches. Results of other approaches are available from the authors.

Table 1. Mean Preference and Emotion Changes in Study 2

Variables	Monogamy (<i>N</i> = 199)	Polygamy (<i>N</i> = 201)	Self (<i>N</i> = 202)	Airline (<i>N</i> = 198)	All (<i>N</i> = 400)
Trans Atlantic (1_2)	2.739 (1.730)	2.198 (1.613)	2.197 (1.698)	2.742 (1.645)	2.467 (1.691)
Trans Atlantic (3_2)	1.438 (1.514)	1.292 (1.340)	.988 (1.114)	1.750 (1.605)	1.365 (1.429)
Trans Atlantic (1_3)	1.300 (1.566)	.905 (1.291)	1.209 (1.524)	.992 (1.357)	1.102 (1.446)
Global Air (1_2)	.309 (1.382)	.006 (1.091)	.055 (1.088)	.261 (1.394)	.157 (1.231)
Global Air (3_2)	.117 (1.077)	-.037 (.824)	-.111 (.714)	.193 (1.140)	.039 (.960)
Global Air (1_3)	.193 (.991)	.044 (1.040)	.166 (1.083)	.068 (.945)	.118 (1.017)
PA (1_2)	1.582 (1.173)	1.574 (1.311)	1.559 (1.414)	1.598 (1.331)	1.578 (1.372)
PA (3_2)	.967 (1.277)	1.167 (1.335)	1.031 (1.307)	1.105 (1.313)	1.068 (1.309)
NA (2_1)	1.356 (1.173)	1.115 (1.079)	1.196 (1.214)	1.274 (1.044)	1.235 (1.132)
NA (2_3)	.840 (.946)	.799 (.885)	.849 (.976)	.789 (.850)	.819 (.914)

Note.—Results are means and standard deviations appear in parentheses; *N* is sample size. NA = negative affect; PA = positive affect.

1. Preference changes for focal airline:

Trans Atlantic (1_2) = Trans Atlantic1_Trans Atlantic2.

Trans Atlantic (3_2) = Trans Atlantic3_Trans Atlantic2.

Trans Atlantic (1_3) = Trans Atlantic1_Trans Atlantic3.

2. Preference changes for competing airline:

Global Air (1_2) = Global Air1_Global Air2.

Global Air (3_2) = Global Air3_Global Air2.

Global Air (1_3) = Global Air1_Global Air3.

3. Change in positive emotions:

PA (1_2) = PA1_PA2; PA (3_2) = PA3_PA2.

4. Change in negative emotions:

NA (2_1) = NA2_NA2; NA (2_3) = NA2_NA2.

angry, annoyed, anxious, distressed, upset, guilty, scared, hostile, irritable, ashamed, nervous, jittery, afraid).

Overall, results on emotion changes are consistent with brand-evaluation changes. First, with a status demotion, there is a reduction in positive emotion and an increase in negative emotion. Specifically, average PA decreased from 4.17 to 2.59, and average NA increased from 1.48 to 2.72. Both the reduction in PA (=1.58) and the increase in NA (1.24) are statistically significant. The results are significant even under the self condition, when the demotion was due to a reduction in travel frequency. Second, we further explored the effect of behavioral loyalty (monogamy/polygamy) on emotion changes. After status demotion, the increase

of NA is greater under the monogamy condition than under the polygamy condition, and the difference is significant ($F = 4.560, p = .033$). However, we do not observe a significant relation between the reduction in PA and monogamy/polygamy conditions.

Third, after the recovery, there is a significant gain in positive emotion (average PA increased from 2.59 to 3.66) and a significant loss in negative emotion (average NA decreased from 2.72 to 1.89). Again, both changes are statistically significant. The recovery is only partial, as in the case of brand-preference measures. Further, we do not observe significant relation between the changes in emotions and monogamy/polygamy conditions.

Competitor Brand Evaluations

As mentioned, in addition to the focal airline Trans Atlantic, this study assessed participants' evaluations of the competitor, Global Air. The results show the impact on the attitudes toward Global Air, which decreased by 0.157 (from 5.17 to 5.02) after the customers were demoted from elite status ($p = .06$). Interestingly, after customers regained the elite status at Trans Atlantic Airlines, although their attitudes toward the focal airline improved, their attitude toward Global Air changed only by 0.039. Thus, preference changes to Global Air persisted when customers were reinstated at Trans Atlantic Airlines. This result suggests that the emotional response to status demotion by the focal brand can be partially extended to the competing brand—a clear suggestion of the spillover effect of negative emotion rather than the rebound effect, as was also hypothesized. Consistent with this suggestion, the loss of preference for Global Air was greater when customers had a monogamous relationship (0.309) with the focal airline than when they had a polygamous relationship (0.006) ($F = 5.930$ and $p = .015$). Similarly, the reduction in preference for Global Air was greater when the loss of status was attributable to the airline (0.261) than when the loss of status was attributable to the consumer (0.055) ($F = 2.730$ and $p = .0995$). The above results confirm the hypothesis stated in hypothesis 4b over that in hypothesis 4a.

Mediating Role of Emotion (Separate Mediation for Positive Emotion and Negative Emotion)

To better understand the processes underlying the observed effects of status changes on brand evaluations, we explored the potential mediating role of positive and negative emotions. We first calculated the effect of status changes by subtracting the prechange from postchange emotion measures, including positive (PA) and negative emotion (NA). We repeated the calculation for status loss and reinstatement conditions, and conducted a series of mediation tests.

Bootstrap mediating test results (based on 5,000 bootstrap samples; Preacher and Hayes 2008) revealed that for the focal brand (Trans Atlantic Airlines), the difference between pre- and postchange negative emotion (NA) mediated the effect of demotion on preference for the focal brand (the 95% confidence interval did not include 0: [.0202, .3896]), thus confirming hypothesis 2. The difference in positive emotion (PA) did not mediate (the 95% confidence interval included 0: [−.1503, .1505]). After the status reinstatement, the change in PA did not mediate the effect of recovery on brand preference (95% confidence interval included

0: [−.0327, .2372]), nor did the change in NA mediate (95% confidence interval included 0: [−.1657, .0832]). We also ran mediation analysis on overall effect (loss of status plus reinstatement) on brand preference by subtracting the emotions at the beginning from the emotions at the end. The results show that the change in NA mediated the overall effect of demotion and reinstatement on preference for the focal brand (the 95% confidence interval did not include 0: [.0334, .2928]), whereas the difference in positive emotion (PA) did not mediate (the 95% confidence interval included 0: [−.0076, .2827]).

We ran similar mediation analyses for the competing brand (Global Air) and found that the difference in PA did not mediate the effect of status demotion on preference for Global Air (the 95% confidence interval included 0: [−.0221, .0302]), nor did the difference in NA (the 95% confidence interval included 0: [−.0158, .0612]). After the status reinstatement at Trans Atlantic Airlines, the change in PA did not mediate the effect of recovery on brand preference for Global Air (95% confidence interval included 0: [−.0025, .0632]), nor did the change in NA mediate (95% confidence interval included 0: [−.0201, .0080]). But the change in PA mediated the overall effect of demotion and reinstatement on preference for Global Air (the 95% confidence interval did not include 0: [.0035, .0813]), and the change in NA also mediated the overall effect on brand preference for Global Air (the 95% confidence interval did not include 0: [.0063, .1149]).

In summary, for the preference changes toward the focal brand (Trans Atlantic), we found a significant mediation effect of the changes in negative emotion (NA), both after the loss of status and after going through the process of status loss and reinstatement. For the overall preference changes toward the competing brand (Global Air) after going through status loss and reinstatement, both the changes in PA and NA showed strong mediating effects.

Discussion

The results of this second study build on the findings of study 1 and extend our understanding in a number of areas. First, this study replicates the overall effects of study 1 in the context of consumers who are average adults rather than undergraduate students who arguably have much less experience with airline frequent flier programs. Second, this study sheds light on the underlying process by underscoring the important role of emotions, and in particular, negative emotions, in driving consumer evaluations of the focal brand both after their status demotion as well as subsequent to

the reinstatement. Third, the results find evidence for the spillover effect of negative emotion on the evaluation of a competitor brand of airline by showing that there is a significant decline in the overall evaluation of the “other” relationship partner too. This is a very interesting result in that it suggests the possibility that consumers may be getting upset with the category per se and form a general negative attitude toward all brands in the category. Fourth, we find evidence in support of the differential effect of relationship type whereby the negative effects are stronger for those consumers who pursue an exclusive monogamous relationship with the airline brand compared to those consumers who pursue a “promiscuous” polygamous relationship, highlighting the context in which pursuing a nonexclusive relationship with a consumer can potentially buffer the brand from negative consequences. Finally, our mediation results show the significantly stronger effect of negative emotions over positive emotions.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this research we examine the moderating effect of monogamous versus polygamous customer-brand relationships on the changes in customers’ brand attitudes due to a demotion from their elite membership status. Results of study 1 provide strong evidence to suggest that loss of status leads to a negative effect on customers’ attitudes toward the focal brand, and that this effect is stronger for monogamous customers than for polygamous customers. We also find that the effect is stronger when the cause for the loss of status is attributed to a change in company policy, compared to when the cause is attributed to a reduced number of flights taken by the customer. Second, when the elite status is reinstated, there is a positive effect on customer evaluations—stronger for monogamous customers than for polygamous customers, and stronger for those who assign the blame to the airline. Third, the positive effect of the reinstatement of the elite status does not fully compensate for the negative effect on customers’ attitudes due to the initial loss of that status, resulting in an incomplete recovery such that the net effect is a lowered evaluation of the airline even when the customer is restored to his/her original elite status.

The results of study 2 fully replicate the effects of study 1 using a different population. Importantly, this study finds a significant effect of emotional measures using the PANAS scale—for both positive affect as well as negative affect. Further, we included additional measures of emotions beyond the PANAS scale that were expected to be particularly

relevant to the context of this study—anger and relief. We find that a status demotion from the brand results in a significant emotional response that is stronger for monogamous compared to polygamous loyalty, and presumably drives the overall attitudes of the consumers. The results of study 2 also give some interesting insights into the effect of monogamous versus polygamous relationship on the evaluation of competing brands. These results are consistent with findings from other articles in this issue, which underscore the importance of self-relevant emotions in consumer brand relationships. In particular, the role of emotions like envy has been noted as being important in the context of desirable products (Kristofferson, Lamberton, and Dahl 2018; Malar et al. 2018). While we don’t directly measure envy, it is possible that envy with the favored “other” consumer who has the elite membership in a brand’s polygamous relationship could potentially be playing a significant effect here as well. Future research could more directly assess this effect. Interestingly, the positive emotions such as pride of ownership associated with strong brand relationships (Ahuvia et al. 2018) is something that we too observe as being important especially when the consumer is reinstated with the elite membership.

Even though in this study we used the context of an airline rather than other categories that have similar loyalty programs, it is worth noting that such demotions are not uncommon in other contexts too. For example, not-for-profit organizations often publish a list of top donors. When the organization expands with more donors, sometimes they raise the threshold for being the top donors, and consequently some donors no longer appear on the front page of donor lists. It is conceivable that such a change might negatively impact the motivation of the donors, especially those not included in the highlighted list of donors as a consequence of the change.

Future Research

The results of this article have some interesting theoretical and practical implications. On the theoretical front, we find that the effects of loss of elite status and its subsequent reinstatement are consistent with prospect theory. In the likely scenario of repeated cycles of loss and gain of elite status among marginal loyalty program members, one can reasonably expect this pattern to result in a downward spiral in customer evaluations. It might be fruitful to examine potential moderators of this effect. As an example, it is possible that if the regular membership rather than elite membership were the reference point, the losses would be perceived as nongains, resulting in a weaker negative effect.

Further, prior research has noted the effect of regulatory focus on customer attitudes (Lee, Aaker, and Gardner 2000) such that customers with a promotion focus might be happier with the reinstatement of the elite status compared to those with a prevention focus, thereby resulting in a weaker negative effect.

This research also highlights the value of examining loyalty from a relatively understudied perspective, namely, behavioral loyalty. It must be noted, however, that our use of the terms monogamous and polygamous hides an important distinction between consumers within each of the two categories. As noted earlier, it is possible that some consumers will be categorized as monogamous because they use a particular brand due to habit or inertia, while others are monogamous because they are unable to find any viable options, and some others who are particularly in love with the focal brand. Similarly, polygamous consumers could be those who are multibrand loyal customers or those who do not feel particularly loyal to any brand and merely respond to the best available deal. Future research might find it useful to explore this interesting behavioral construct to unravel further nuanced differences in the underlying motivations across different consumers who apparently exhibit the same behavioral patterns.

Our results also point to the value of evaluating competing brands to arrive at a true assessment of a brand's equity. Prior research has used brand maps for brand equity assessment (John et al. 2006). It may be useful for future researchers to assess what role competing brands might play in a brand's equity map. Other work in this area has looked at brand attachment (Thompson et al. 2005) and at the effect of attachment style on consumer retaliation in the face of brand transgression (Johnson, Whelan, and Thompson 2012). It might be interesting to examine the role of competing players when studying the consumer's attachment to a brand, and whether the customers' "true" attachment to a brand should incorporate some measure of their preference for the competitors too.

Our results indicate some noteworthy but somewhat unexpected gender effects whereby women perceive a greater loss of status and exhibit stronger negative effects relative to their male counterparts. This may be due in part to the fact that for the same amount of loyal behavior, women perceive that they have been in fact more loyal, or perhaps they respond more negatively to an undesirable brand interaction due to putting a greater value on loyalty. Future research might wish to further examine these interesting gender differences and the potential explanations.

Finally, future research could address a potential limitation of our studies. Given that our interest was to study the consumers' responses over time and consequently we presented the scenario of a demotion and a subsequent reinstatement within a short time period, the possibility of a demand effect cannot be ruled out. Future research would benefit from longitudinal studies that address this limitation of the current set of studies.

Practical Implications

Our research calls for the need to distinguish polygamous customers from monogamous customers. For a typical loyalty program, customers know whether they are monogamous or polygamous, but unfortunately brand managers typically do not have measures in place to observe their own customers' purchases of competitive brands. The presence of this information asymmetry poses challenges for marketers. An accurate assessment of the customer's monogamous versus polygamous relationship with the brand is likely to be very informative and a good predictor of the customers' current and future attitudes toward the brand (Lal and Martone Carrolo 2001). Further, while monogamous marriages are what we might wish to achieve for a stronger and deeper bond with the customer, it is important to understand that such a marriage has a dark side—when faced with the slightest signal of rejection from the brand, the customer may be one step closer to parting ways permanently and breaking the marriage vows!

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