

Research Dialogue

Relating badly to brands

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Abstract

Our commentary focuses on the negative pole of Park et al.'s Attachment–Aversion continuum. We argue that the distinction between positively- and negatively-valenced relationships matters, and open opportunities to further our knowledge about what makes a brand relationship “bad.” Two theoretical extensions are offered: (1) additional negativity dimensions beyond brand–self distance including pathology, power, and self- versus brand-focused emotionality; and (2) distinctions between neutrality and variations of emotional ambivalence “in the middle” of the Attachment–Aversion spectrum. Our call is for a science of negative relationships concerning the negative outcomes, processes, states, and attributes of consumers’ relationships with brands.

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Introduction

Park, Eisingerich, and Park’s (2013—this issue) Attachment–Aversion model of consumer–brand relationships offers a rare and welcomed example of theory development and integration in brand research. With foundational threads in early research on the functional/experiential/hedonic attribute bases of strong brands (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986), leverage of the cognitive and affective drivers of brand attachment (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010), and the addition of new theoretical elements concerning self-distance, the current framework holds promise as a “unifying conceptual model of customer–brand relationships” (p.3). It is in the model’s capacity to cover the “entire range of relationship valence and salience” (p.3) that we find its most promising contribution. Relationship valence, i.e., whether a given relationship is positive or negative in tonality and experience, has been identified as a fundamental dimension defining how people think about both personal and commercial brand relationships (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996; Wish, Deutsch, & Kaplan, 1976). The

Attachment–Aversion model is the first comprehensive theory-based account of brand relationships that includes consumers’ negative brand engagements.

A bias toward positive brand relationships permeates existing branding models and practices, as evidenced in popular metrics for brand attachment (Park et al., 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), brand connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), brand love (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012), and brand relationship quality (Fournier, 2009). While these frameworks inform the development of strong brand relationships and the strengthening of weak or indifferent ones, they are silent on the negative tonality that strong and weak brand relationships might obtain. This oversight is a significant one that misrepresents the lived reality of consumers’ brand interactions. Negative brand relationships are in fact more common than positive relationships, with an average split across categories of 55%/45% for negative and positive relationships, respectively (based on the sign value of relationship valence scores per collaborative research with GfK, to be detailed below). Without a formal accounting of negative relationships, our brand management frameworks are misleading and incomplete.

Many forms of negative relationality have been documented in the consumer behavior literature. Miller, Fournier, and Allen (2012) provide evidence of the consumer relevance of abusive relationships, master–slave entrapments, and conflicted secret

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affairs. Addictions, compulsions, and other forms of dependency have also been highlighted (Albright, 2012; Hirschman, 1992; Mick & Fournier, 1998; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989; Patterson, 2012; Pechmann, Biglan, Grube, & Cody, 2012). The proliferation of habit-forming technologies (Belk & Llamas, 2013), easy access to credit (Peñaloza & Barnhart, 2011), and over-indulgence (Schor, 1999) facilitates the propagation of dysfunctional brand associations. One-to-one marketing outreach can also foster aversive brand relationships when these advances are uninvited, persistent, or extreme (Godfrey, Seiders, & Voss, 2011). These relations are significant in that they affect not only the quality of the focal brand engagement, but also the quality of the consumer’s life overall.

Negative brand relationships can be damaging not only to consumers, but also to the companies involved. Service marketing researchers document relationships characterized by a host of dysfunctional customer behaviors, and these expressions of opportunism and breaches of ethics or etiquette can translate directly into financial losses for the firm (Berry & Seiders, 2008; Fisk et al., 2010). Antagonistic anti-brand relations waged for reasons of politics, values, or transgression (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009; Johnson, Matear, & Thomson, 2011; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2009) can plague companies and engender harmful effects. Brand antagonists foster parodies and doppelgänger images (Giesler, 2012; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006) that can dilute brand meanings and equity; at the extreme, they destroy valuable company assets in retaliatory response (Luedicke et al., 2009). A contemporary marketing environment laced with distrust, hyper-criticism, and increased consumer power (Fournier & Avery, 2011a) exacerbates this problem and encourages malevolent brand relationships. Strong positive brand relationships can easily transform into hateful and vengeful associations (Grégoire et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2011), which further highlights the importance of diluting or otherwise managing negative brand relationship forms.

Our gaps in understanding negative relationships become especially problematic when the greater power of negatives over positives is considered. Numerous psychological studies document that negative information is more memorable, more diagnostic, more salient, processed more deeply, and more likely to be shared than positive information (Fiske, 1980; Ito, Larsen, Kyle, & Cacioppo, 1998; Pratto & John, 1991). The prospect of negative outcomes also evokes more potent psychological response than the prospect of positive outcomes (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). There is more discrimination of negative than positive experience (Averill, 1980). Negative emotions are also more valuable than positive ones in an adaptive sense, because avoiding danger is more critical for survival than seeking pleasure or other types of gains (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). In a close relationship context, how people cope with negative events has greater impact on the success and strength of the union than positive maintenance-promoting features (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). “Bad” interactions and emotions far outweigh “good” ones in the course of a long-term relationship such that it takes five positive interactions to cancel the deleterious effects that one negative interaction can cause (Gottman, 1994). By analogy, negative brand relationships may weigh heavier in consumers’

lived experiences and yield detrimental consequences that go beyond individual brands to affect perceptions of marketing more broadly. The hyper-visibility of antagonistic actions toward high profile brands in online environments can aggravate this fact. Managing negatives may actually be more important for brand equity development than cultivating positive connections with brands.

Park et al.’s Attachment–Aversion model goes beyond the simple articulation of specific negative brand relationships to proffer a unified and integrated theoretical account of the full spectrum of positive to negative relationships. The model identifies two key conceptual components of Attachment–Aversion relationships: brand prominence and brand–self distance. Brand prominence is a cognitive construal concerning the salience and accessibility of brand knowledge. Brand–self distance, an indicator of personal (dis)connection, “fully reflects one’s relationship valence” (p. 5) such that close distance to the brand defines a positive relationship and far distance defines a negative relationship “accompanied by feelings of contempt, frustration, hatred and aggression” (p. 7). In the Attachment–Aversion model, brand–self distance and brand prominence are related but not co-varying factors. Park et al. support a U-shaped relationship between these focal constructs wherein attachment is defined by high brand-prominence plus close distance, aversion is defined by high brand prominence and far distance, and indifferent relations have low brand prominence and mid distance from the self. The Attachment–Aversion relationship model considers brand–self distance and brand prominence together such that attachment and aversion are opposite ends of a spectrum defining consumers’ relationships with brands. In addition to inherent implications for relationship valence, the framework also has “inherent self-implications” (p. 12) and builds squarely from Aron and Aron’s (1986) theory of self-expansion in close personal relationships. In this context self-expansion motives create positive emotions and attachment while the threat of self-contraction creates negative emotions and aversive relationships.

Acknowledging the wealth of knowledge accumulated about strong, positive brand relationships and how to make them stronger, Park et al. took the first step and extended theories of attachment into the “negative” side. We engage in this dialogue to welcome this contribution and encourage the amplification of theoretical threads opened by the authors. Our commentary places a magnifying lens on the negative pole of the Attachment–Aversion spectrum, as an invitation for a second step in a theory-building exercise that considers the ways in which attachment relationships differ from aversive ones. We start with reflection on the U-shaped Attachment–Aversion model and its conceptualization of relationship valence as self-distance: more specifically, we suggest the relaxation of the assumption that all negative brand relationships are far from the self. This exercise leads us to consider the model’s core theories of attachment and self-expansion, and invites a reflection on the extent to which these theories contribute to our understanding of negative relationships in the brand space. Building from this reflection, we offer opportunities for more focused theory development on two topics: additional factors beyond self-distance that could usefully characterize negative brand relationships

and distinctions between neutrality and emotional ambivalence that help conceptualize “the middle” of the Attachment–Aversion spectrum.

Where and as appropriate throughout this commentary, we make references to brand relationship data collected in collaboration with GfK, a global marketing research and consulting firm, and for the sake of efficiency, we explain the methodology here. Using an online survey among 4000 respondents from four countries (U.S., Spain, Germany, China), we collected information about the degree to which 48 relationship attributes (e.g., positive feelings, uncomfortable, strong, weak, integral part of my life, easy to exit, under my control, one-sided, helps express who I am) described 53 different types of relationships (e.g., best friendship, casual acquaintances, teammates, arranged marriage, enemy, stalker–prey, love/hate, one-night-stand, secret affair). These data were analyzed using correspondence analysis to identify the dimensionality of the relationships space. In a second study, again conducted in Spain, Germany, U.S. and Germany, data were collected for a total of 253 brands: approximately six from each of 11 categories (i.e., automobiles, detergents, confection, shampoo, mobile phones, beverages, fast food restaurants, airlines, fashion, television/media, and non-commercial brands). Respondents in the brand task scrutinized the list of 53 relationship metaphors and selected the types that could be used to describe their relationship with each focal brand; respondents then identified the relationship metaphor that “best captured each focal brand relationship” from this reduced list. In addition to standard brand attitude and behavior metrics, a subset of respondents also rated each brand in terms of brand–self distance using a visual of a park bench on which a person was seated at the far left end. Using drag and drop functionality, respondents were asked to place each focal brand on the virtual park bench: “If you were the person sitting on the bench, where would you position the brand?” Brand–self distance was operationalized as a continuous physical distance measure of the space between the person and the brand, from 0 (where the brand and the person are exactly next to each other) to 100 (where the brand and the person are furthest apart on the bench). We leverage the brand data to qualify the scope and nature of negative brand relationships and to illuminate the role of brand–self distance in this space.

Are we really distant from all the “bad” brands in our lives?

The commendable point of departure for Park et al.’s model is its goal of capturing both the positive and negative ends of the consumer–brand relationship spectrum. In this effort, the authors propose a U-shaped model of brand prominence and brand–self distance that distinguishes attachment versus aversion, and hence positive versus negative brand relationships, in terms of the perceived distance between the brand and the self. Following this conceptualization, consumers are averse and negative toward brands that they perceive to be distant from them, and attached and positive toward brands that they perceive to be close to them. The model holds that consumers cannot and should not feel aversion to brands that they perceive as close to their self-concepts; in other words, the Attachment–Aversion framework assumes that no close negative relationships exist. This assumption does not

hold in the interpersonal domain, where examples of close negative relationships such as abusive spouses (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006) and strained marriages (Fincham & Beach, 1999) can be found.

Not unlike interpersonal relations, people can find themselves in aversive product or brand relationships which are similarly negative and close to the self. An extreme version of a close negative attachment in the consumer realm is addiction: a relationship in which the object of addiction is at the same time the center of the addict’s life and the force that leads to self-less chaos and destruction (Hirschman, 1992). Addiction is an extremely close relationship in which consumers lose their own personal identities as they deepen their relationship with the object(s) of addiction. The addictive relationship is very destructive and progresses despite consumers’ awareness of the harm that it inflicts to their lives and the lives of others around them. A similar entrapment process has been documented with credit cards (Bernthal, Crockett, & Rose, 2005). As people use credit cards to fulfill self-related goals of lifestyle building and social signaling, they sometimes accumulate unmanageable amounts of debt. To move out of this “debtor’s prison” into a trajectory of freedom from the relationship, entrapped consumers engage in practices that establish and maintain boundaries in their credit card usage. This less destructive and more controlled relationship successfully places distance between the product and the self (Bernthal et al., 2005).

The discussion above suggests a potential gap in theorizing that emanates from equating far distance with negative valence. Not considered in this conceptualization is the fact that a given relationship can be negative precisely because one *cannot* get distance from it, not because the perceived distance is far. Research by Miller et al. (2012) provides evidence of the consumer validity of two such negative brand relationships: master–slave and abusive engagements. In a master–slave relationship, the person cannot get distance because of legal/contractual or social barriers; in abuse, the factors prohibiting distance and exit are more psychological. A commercial relationship in which the consumer feels s/he is the prey to a stalking predator armed with the tools of one-to-one targeted marketing provides another example of a relationship where the consumer cannot get the distance that s/he may want (Bloomgarden-Smoke, 2012; Godfrey et al., 2011; Morimoto & Macias, 2009).

The more general point of this argument is that there exist many types of negative and aversive relationships and this diversity matters. Most important for the current theory: negative relationships do not all involve distanced self-connections and low interdependence between partners. Fig. 1 provides a two-dimensional correspondence map plotting the 53 types of brand relationships along two empirically-derived relationship dimensions, valence (positive/negative, conflicted versus harmonious) and strength/closeness (interdependent/strong versus weak/not interdependent). The presence of close negative relationships is readily apparent, including for example villain–victim, dealer–addict and master–slave. A second anomaly versus the proposed theory is the presence of mixed-valence relationships that are not moderate on closeness: close ambivalent brand relationships such as the love–hate engagement and flings

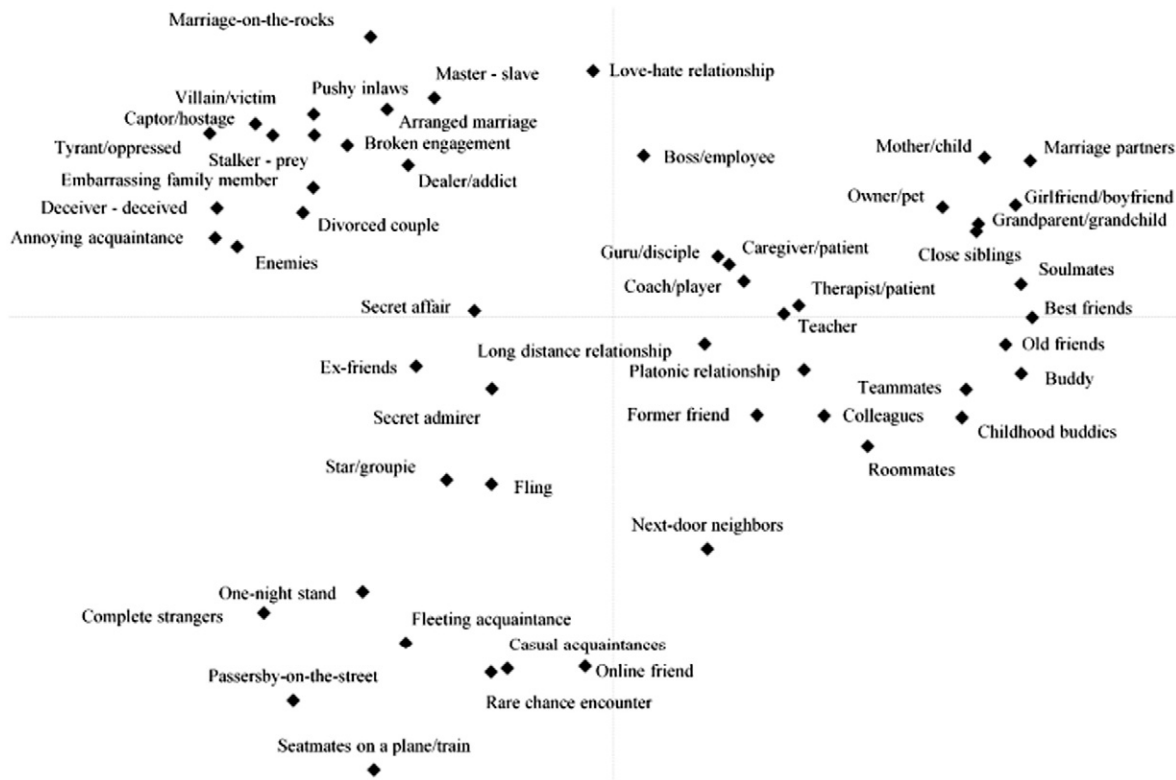


Fig. 1. Brand relationships correspondence map.

exist. Lastly, the plot reveals examples of positive but non-close relationships between people and brands, as with childhood buddies, platonic relationships, and teammates. Profiling negative relationships on their perceived brand–self distance scores further supports this point. Examining the correlation of relationship type profiles with perceived brand–self distance across brands, we found positive correlations for positive relationship types such as marriage partners ($r = .79$) and mother–child ($r = .68$), but also for negative relationship types, such as dealer–addict ($r = .58$) and master–slave ($r = .54$). These results provide evidence that relationship closeness and relationship valence, while correlated ($r = .45$), may be empirically distinct constructs. If this is the case, the question of whether a theory built in the context of close relationships provides the optimal framework to explain negative consumer–brand relationships must be posed.

How well can theories of attachment explain brand aversion?

Park et al. expand the construct of brand attachment (Park et al., 2010; Thomson et al., 2005) to create a bipolar dimension that ranges from brand attachment to brand aversion and captures the full relationship spectrum at any point in time. An important point for discussion is therefore how well theories of attachment relationships can illuminate negative brand relationships. We approach this question by first examining the use of self-expansion and self-contraction to motivate the causal variables in the Park et al. model. We then discuss the core construct of brand aversion based on attachment theory and more recent theorization in consumer behavior. We conclude this section by discussing

potential differences in the types of outcomes associated with positive and negative relationship aspects, and building a case for disentangling the positives from the negatives. Our contention is that while it is commendable to service a goal of parsimony in the articulation of a comprehensive model for consumer–brand relationships, the theory grounding the Attachment–Aversion model is more suitable for understanding positive brand relationship forms. The distinction between positively- and negatively-valenced relationships matters, and opens opportunities for additional theorization more directly grounded in the negative pole.

Self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991) posits self-development and self-enhancement in the form of increased skills, knowledge, and novel experiences as basic human motivations driving the development of close (romantic) relationships. In line with this theory, Park et al. propose that a brand’s hedonic, functional, and/or symbolic benefits can help consumers achieve their self-related goals and thereby bring a brand closer to the self. In formulating the process explanation for aversion, the authors posit an opposing process of self-contraction through which aesthetically displeasing experiences, poor product or service performance, and negative symbolic meanings hinder the attainment of self-relevant goals and result in greater brand–self distance. Little support for this opposing process of aversion is evident in self-expansion theory. First, the self-expansion motive is positively-oriented in that the process of exploration is inherently pleasing and involves approach—not avoidance—motivations (Mattingly, McIntyre, & Lewandowski, 2012). Mattingly et al. (2012) in fact present a case that avoidance motivation is unrelated to self-expansion.

Second, self-expansion theory was specifically developed to explain the formation and maintenance of close, romantic relationships as a process fundamentally distinct from how we relate to strangers or disliked others (Aron et al., 1991). In this sense, the extension of self-expansion theory into branding research provides a more solid grounding for understanding the antecedents of close, positive rather than negative brand relationships. The conceptualization of self-contraction within Aron and Aron's theoretical framework further illustrates limitations in applying the self-expansion theory to understand negative relationships. Within Aron and Aron's model the self contracts as a consequence of relationship dissolution: the aspects of the partner and the relationship that were incorporated into the working self-concept through the process of self-expansion have to be extricated when the relationship comes to an end (Aron & Aron, 1986). The threat of self-contraction motivates the individual to maintain a close relationship (Aron & Aron, 1986), especially a self-expanding one (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006). From our reading of the literature, self-contraction as a basic motivation to form a distanced or aversive relationship is not relevant to this theoretical frame.

Similarly, no direct correlate of brand aversion exists within attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). The closest concept is avoidance, which is characterized by a negative perception of relationship others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Brand avoidance has been associated with two of the three causal variables in Park et al.'s model: poor product performance and symbolic incongruence (Lee, Motion, & Conroy, 2009). However, Park et al. do not seem to be referring only to brand avoidance in their model, as their use of the broader term "aversion" implies. The target article uses the terms "averse to," "distant from," and "anti-" [brand] indistinctly, seemingly encompassing two constructs that have been treated separately in previous consumer research studies: "avoidance" and "revenge" (Grégoire et al., 2009) or "attack" (Johnson et al., 2011). For example, Johnson et al. (2011) support the idea that it is relatively easier for consumers to avoid having a relationship with a brand—by switching to a competitor, for example—than to engage in effortful actions to attack it. These constructs are distinctly different within a relationship lens: avoidance connotes the absence of an ongoing brand relationship or movement away from claiming a relationship status; attacking implies the maintenance of a strong enemy relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998). In fact, brand attack is more (less) likely to happen after the dissolution of a more (less) self-relevant consumer–brand relationship (Johnson et al., 2011). Attack also taps different constellations of emotions than avoidance, as evidenced by the work of Romani, Grappi, and Dalli (2012). These authors dimensionalized the space of negative emotions toward brands in terms of six distinct emotions (i.e., anger, sadness, worry, embarrassment, discontent, and dislike), each associated with different behavioral outcomes. Most relevant to our point, anger was associated with "attack" actions (e.g., complaining and negative word-of-mouth), whereas worry and discontent were associated with "avoidance" (i.e., brand switching) and sadness was associated with inactivity (Romani et al., 2012). Attack and avoidance are very different theoretical ideas, and attachment theory is focused on the latter. Attachment

theory does not help us understand brand aversion and brand attack.

If on one hand the underlying theories for the Attachment–Aversion model seem to be silent on the negative pole of aversion, there is also reason to believe that these two poles should be conceptualized independently. We have already mentioned some of the well-documented asymmetric effects of good versus bad events (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). There is also evidence that positive and negative emotions operate in different dimensions: they are processed by different areas of the brain (Davidson & Irwin, 1999; Tomarken & Keener, 1998) and are associated with different outcomes (Watson, Clark, & Carey, 1988). More specifically, positive and negative emotions involve different action tendencies (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989) that are associated with either promotion or prevention regulatory foci (Higgins, 1997; Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1999). In the context of interpersonal relationships, promotion goals are directed toward positive outcomes such as the partners' (or own) happiness, increased intimacy, or personal growth, whereas prevention goals involve moving away from negative outcomes such as conflict, betrayal, or rejection. The same action will take on different meanings depending on regulatory focus (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005), which also drives qualitatively different relationship outcomes (Gable, 2006; Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008). By analogy, promotion and prevention goals may be associated with different behaviors in the brand relationship realm. For example, positive brand relationships may activate promotion goals such as self-expansion, and these may be associated with pro-brand actions (e.g., advocacy efforts on the part of the brand), whereas negative brand relationships may activate prevention goals (e.g., avoiding self-harm) associated with brand avoidance or negative biases in the attribution of causal events. Although the evidence consistently supports the claim that approaching the positive and avoiding the negative impacts consumer behavior distinctly (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Chernev, 2004), a single Attachment–Aversion construct sets these fundamental differences aside.

The above discussion yields two observations: (1) the core theories of self-expansion and attachment do not seem to provide solid theoretical support for understanding the space of negative consumer–brand relationships; and (2) the reported asymmetry between "good" and "bad" events, emotions, and mental states suggests that brand aversion is more than the simple flipside of brand attachment. This leaves unanswered a question that matters significantly to the goals of the target paper: how to best capture the negative relationships that form between consumers and brands? As an invitation for further theorization about the negatives, we offer thoughts about the dimensionality of negative relationships and the nature of people's mixed-valence relationships with brands.

Additional dimensions of consumer–brand relationship "negativity"

An opportunity for additional theorization of the negative brand relationship space involves moving beyond brand–self distance to identify additional dimensions of relationship

negativity which may support a more comprehensive model. Embedded in Park et al.'s discussion of Attachment–Aversion is one such dimension: conflict. The conflict notion, which indicates action against an object, is especially relevant for the subset of negative aversion-based relationships defined in confrontational terms. The valence dimension in Wish et al.'s (1976) interpersonal relationship mapping exercise reflects the competitive/hostile versus cooperative/friendly character of conflicted relationships, as does work by Iacobucci and Ostrom (1996) in marketing. Based on existing research, we suggest three additional dimensions that are conceptually orthogonal to brand–self distance and are of use in qualifying relationship negativity: pathological/healthy; unequal power/equal power; and brand-focused/self-focused negativity source. These dimensions not only add useful explanatory and diagnostic power for understanding the nature and process of negative brand relationships, but also suggest refined levers beyond reduced brand–self distance to guide managers' actions in this space.

Brand pathology was inducted by Buchanan-Oliver and Schau (2012, June) in their in-depth investigation of the “monstrous relationships” that fans have with the Twilight media brand. These authors found that while Twilight's strongest fans take the brand message to heart and use the brand narrative to create personal meaning in their own romantic relationships, the brand narrative is interpreted in such a way that it justifies partner violence and emotional abuse as an ultimate act of protection and love. Based on their interpretations, Buchanan-Oliver and Schau define brand pathology as a relationship that deviates from normality in the manifestation of maladaptive behaviors. In line with this conception, brand pathology includes other types of maladaptive behaviors such as compulsive consumption (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), addictions (Hirschman, 1992) and dependencies (Mick & Fournier, 1998). The management and resolution of pathology is a complex, protracted, and highly emotional process with significant implications for brand managers and consumers. Because consumers that engage in pathological brand relationships tend to be highly invested, they may stand as the brand's most visible and vocal meaning makers (Morey, 2012), representing the brand to other customers and the society at large. Brand pathologies represent perhaps the darkest side of consumer behavior (Hirschman, 1991), and thus provide the most valuable opportunity for consumer research that directly benefits society (Bazerman, 2001; Mick, 2006). A second form of pathology, more prevalent in relationships with service brands, concerns “aberrant” consumer behaviors (Fullerton & Punj, 1993) that include theft, fraud, vandalism, and verbal or physical abuse of other customers or firms' employees (Berry & Seiders, 2008; Fullerton & Punj, 1993). Aberrant consumer behaviors have clear implications in the form of lost revenues and employee morale (Fisk et al., 2010; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). Based on these findings and their implications, a case could be made for the relevance of a healthy-pathological dimension to further characterize the valence of people's relationships with their brands.

Hill and Kozup (2007) provide a different perspective on negative relationships in their study of the experiences of impoverished consumers with predatory subprime lenders, and

this suggests a second dimension of power/control. These authors describe how consumers are lured into lending relationships with a courteous attitude and quick, easy credit offered under conditions that are not fully disclosed. Secrecy also defines the relationship wherein modifications to the initial loan package are concealed. Consumers learn that lenders expect them not to ask questions, to increase borrowing over time, and to pay on time. The relationship is such that if these contract rules are violated, an aggressive response follows, in which the customer is blamed for any negative consequences that ensue. Hill and Kozup's exploration of predatory lending demonstrates how power imbalances may characterize negative relationships, particularly in the case of vulnerable consumer groups (Baker, Gentry, & Rittenburg, 2005). The stalker–prey relationship (Bloomgarden-Smoke, 2012; Dutton & Winstead, 2006; Zona, Palarea, & Lane, 1998) and the best customer template (Avery & Fournier, 2012) are similarly grounded in power imbalance, the former favoring the marketer and the latter favoring the consumer. In Our research with GfK, the dimension of power and control (equal–unequal) usefully characterizes positive and negative relationships and helps distinguish negative brand relationship types. Power is a rich construct with a respected multi-disciplinary theoretical tradition spanning organizational behavior, negotiations, political science, and gender studies, to name a few. Over the past decade, power has become more relevant for marketers as digital technologies shift the balance of power back and forth between consumers and firms. On one hand, the increased amount of information and the ability to process individual-level consumer data through Customer Relationship Management programs grant increased power to companies who control access to customized offers and communications (Fournier & Avery, 2011b). Consumers are increasingly fired (Avery & Fournier, 2012; Elberse, Gourville, & Narayandas, 2007) in the wake of lifetime value calculations, and many report feeling “jilted” by data-driven downgrades in the premium relationships they maintain with brands (Aggarwal & Shi, unpublished manuscript). On the other hand, consumers hold increased power over meaning making in digital environments (Deighton & Komfeld, 2009) and leverage their status as best customers to make expensive demands (Reinartz & Kumar, 2002). Empowered consumers can form anti-brand collectives that criticize, parody, and expose the actions and intentions of brands (Fournier & Avery, 2011a). Power imbalances and abuses of power constitute critical sources of tension for consumers and marketers, and can extend insight into people's negative relationships with brands.

Insight into the dimensionality of relationship negativity can also be obtained by leveraging existing knowledge concerning emotions, a construct with direct relevance to the notion of relationship valence. Drawing from the appraisal theory of emotions (Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990), we can expect that consumer–brand relationships may become negative not only because of the way consumers feel about the brand (i.e., aversion), but also because of the way consumers feel about themselves when in the relationship with the brand. In the appraisal theory framework, distance to the self—the core element of the Attachment–Aversion model—plays a central role, albeit in a

different fashion. The appraisal theory states that negative events which are perceived to be self-caused lead to guilt, shame, and regret, whereas other-caused negative events lead to anger, contempt, or dislike. Self-caused negative emotions are associated with action tendencies related to the self, i.e., move against self, move self away, or move away from self; other-caused emotions, in contrast, have the other as the target of action, i.e., move against other, move other away, or move away from other. Applying this self–other distinction to consumer emotions, which Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer (1999) claim to be legitimate, we may speculate that while some consumer–brand relationships involving negative emotions toward the brand may lead to increased brand–self distance, relationships that are negative because of the way a consumer feels about him/herself when with the brand are quite different and likely not associated with increased brand–self distance. In line with this proposition, consumers have been shown to cope with anger triggered by a purchase situation through the use of confrontational strategies, while regret tends to lead to acceptance and positive reinterpretation of the situation (Yi & Baumgartner, 2004). Theories of negative brand relationships, including the present treatment, consider only brand-focused negative emotions such as anger, contempt and hate and the distanced relations that result. Given the different process mechanisms and outcomes, we need also to focus on the phenomenology of the relationship and how people feel about themselves when they are with the brand.

In-depth explorations of specific negative or mixed-valence brand engagements such as master–slaves, secret affairs, unrequited love, one-night stands, and love–hate relationships may illuminate yet other unexplored dimensions of negative relationships and the processes whereby relationships become “bad.” Wish et al. (1976) extract a public–private dimension, for example, in characterizing relationship space. Secrecy is a powerful concept in relationship phenomenology and drives a host of behaviors, attitudes, and tendencies (Lane & Wegner, 1994). Secrecy goes beyond salience as indicated in the notion of brand prominence to highlight a dangerous lived-quality of people’s relationships with their brands.

Inside the “middle”: differentiating mixed from neutral-prominent relationships

Another opportunity for further theorization about relationship negatives involves clarifying the middle ground in the Attachment–Aversion spectrum. This task is critical given Thomson et al.’s (2005) finding that consumers tend to rate brands around the mid-point of the attachment scale, yielding a majority of consumer–brand relationships not in the extreme poles of strong attachment or aversion but rather at the midpoint of the Attachment–Aversion spectrum. Our work with GfK also supports the significance of “relationships in the middle”: on a scale from 0 (far from me) to 100 (close to me), the overall mean in brand–self distance for 237 different brands in four countries was 57, and less than 20% of the brands had average scores below 30 or above 70. Greater conceptual clarity can be gained by acknowledging the varieties of relationships

halfway between attachment and aversion and the processes whereby they come to occupy this space.

Park et al.’s Attachment–Aversion model distinguishes relationships “in the middle” solely in terms of prominence and this distinction leaves much variance unexplained. Of note, the model does not strive to differentiate prominent relationships that are neutral from those that are ambivalent, with the implication that the mixed emotions that characterize ambivalent relationships are not disentangled from neutral emotional states. Although the classic U-shape characterizing valence/activation has been traditionally used in studies of attitude and persuasion (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997), applying this conceptual treatment in the brand relationship realm overlooks stark differences in phenomenology. A prominent but neutral relationship such as an online friendship or a marriage of convenience (Fournier, 1998) provides a distinctly different lived experience than a love–hate relationship and suggests the operation of different nomological webs. Further complications are introduced when research on mixed emotions is considered (c.f., Larsen, Peter, & Cacioppo, 2001). Mixed emotions are fundamentally different from single and neutral emotions, with different patterns of recall (Aaker, Drolet, & Griffin, 2008) and persuasive impact (Williams & Aaker, 2002). A comprehensive theory of negative relationships arguably should accommodate different patterns of mixed emotions since the nature, causes, and consequences of these relationships will likely vary in kind.

The interpersonal literature provides numerous examples of mixed-emotion relationships that are generally perceived to be positive but have negative undertones captured under closer scrutiny. Consider, for example, parent–child relationships where the burden of care may be experienced as overwhelming (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Lupton, 2000), and marriage, which evokes love and passion but jealousy and anger as well (Fitness & Fletcher, 1993). The fling template provides another predominantly-positive-but-mixed example, and evokes excitement and passion but also regret and shame (Alvarez & Fournier, 2012). From the point of view of the consumer, relationships with counterfeit products also involve mixed emotions. On the positive side, counterfeits yield pleasure and self-esteem from owning a luxury product and provide the thrill of the adventure; on the negative side, they involve shame and fear of being exposed (Penz & Stöttinger, 2012). Mixed relationships are best understood by their culturally-evocative blends of emotions (Lindholm, 2007): emotions which are not contradictory but result in ambivalence. This ambivalence may be so strong as to lead to negative redefinitions of the relationship, such as in the case of marriage-on-the-rocks or divorce (Baxter, 1984). Additional theorization may yield a different take on relationship negativity by highlighting the undesirable aspects that otherwise positive and self-expanding relationships may obtain.

A second variant of mixed emotional relationships is operative and this distinction gets lost by placing mixed valence on the Attachment–Aversion continuum along with emotionally-neutral and other blended emotional relationship forms. These are relationships defined by emotional paradox: they comprise co-occurring constellations of emotions that are inherently

conflicting and directly contrasting at their core (Mick & Fournier, 1998). The love–hate relationship offers an evocative and clear example of relational paradox. This relationship metaphor has been used extensively to characterize relations as diverse as those between business schools and ranking institutions (Bradshaw, 2007), journalists and public relations managers (Sallot & Johnson, 2006), and immigrants and their host countries (Rangel, 1987). Secret affairs provide another paradoxical example and comprise both guilt and pleasure (Fournier, 1998), not unlike impulsive consumption (Rook, 1987). Consumer desire (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003) may also be understood as an object relationship that is characterized by the paradox of seduction and morality. Paradoxical relationships are rich and complicated. The experience of mixed emotions that defines a paradox is uncomfortable and dissonant (Mick & Fournier, 1998), but successful negotiation of paradox is a mark of personal growth (Pizer, 1998) and maturity (Williams & Aaker, 2002). It has been suggested that paradoxical brand and product relationships are highly functional in that they allow consumers to negotiate their own internal tensions and contradictions as they navigate consumer culture (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Paradox can also (re)invigorate brand meanings, keeping retro brands alive and strong (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003), and can facilitate markets for branded innovations (Giesler, 2012), thus yielding value for brand managers in kind.

Ambivalent relationships characterized by paradox cannot be managed the same way that other ambivalent relationships are managed: minimizing the negatives in a strained marriage or parent–child relationship will improve them whereas diluting the negatives in a paradoxical relationship violates and destroys the relationship at its core. Of note, neither form of mixed-valence relationship is best managed by decreasing self–brand distance or building brand prominence: the dynamics are completely different. Focused research on the various forms of ambivalent relationality may yield clearer guidance to managers who seek to identify and manage negative emotions and experiences in their brand relationship portfolios.

Toward a science of negative brand relationships

“It is easier to hate those we love, than love those whom we have hated.” (Macdonald, 1827)

In conclusion, we offer a thought experiment. In the first scenario, you are a brand manager with a relationship portfolio populated by committed partners, best friends, buddies, casual friends, neighbors, boyfriends–girlfriends, teammates, soul mates, and even a few allies and groupies. Now imagine a different management assignment in which your brand portfolio is plagued by troubling relationships: marriages-on-the-rocks, enemies, one-night-stands, dysfunctional addictions, abusive marriages, master–slave entrapments, power plays between brands and consumers, guilt-ridden secret affairs, stalkers and their anxious prey. Building from a solid base of theories established over the past decades, the academy has much to offer the manager in the first scenario who seeks to solidify, maintain, and leverage close consumer–brand relationships, or strengthen weak-but-positive brand

engagements by applying these insights over time. Helpful frameworks are also available for understanding and managing people’s hostile brand relations, or repairing close relations that have been transgressed. But beyond this, theoretically-grounded advice for managing relationship negatives is scarce.

We do not reject the value or significance of frameworks that illuminate positive brand relationships: a focus on loyalty, trust, commitment, and the bonds of emotional attachment, for example, is crucial for understanding brand equity and how it is built. Our point is that perhaps without conscious awareness, our brand theories and prescriptions have adopted assumptions and constructs that are more aligned with a positive brand relationship worldview than a negative worldview. The target paper by Park and colleagues provides a meaningful contribution to the goal of righting the positivity bias in brand relationship research and is to be commended for taking the initial step in accounting for the full range of relationship valence: from negative to positive and in-between. Brand–self distance, a construct that builds thoughtfully from a solid history of consumer research, offers a sensible theoretical frame for illuminating the problems of negative brand relationships. Still, we raise the question as to whether theorizing based on attachment and self-expansion—constructs that stand solidly in the realm of positive, self-implicating, and close relationships—yields an optimal model for understanding negative relationship processes and forms.

Our call in this commentary is for a science of negative brand relationships wherein we advance Park et al.’s research through a dedicated focus on phenomena that capture and illuminate relationship negatives—phenomena that have received limited scholarly and practitioner attention in branding models to date. What we are proposing is much like the revolution known as positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and its application in positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011), but the paradigm shift we advocate is in the reverse. The field of close interpersonal relationships evolved similarly, with a wake-up call for a science of the “dark side” of relationships (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994) that stimulated much scholarly research (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004, 2010; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998).

A science of negative relationships would involve the study of negative outcomes, processes, states, and attributes of peoples’ relationships with brands. Emphasis would be put on ideas of “badness,” negative relationship potential, and relational systems in disequilibrium—from the perspectives of both consumers and firms. To propel this effort, existing consumer research can be integrated and further articulated under the negative relationships umbrella, including for example theory on brand transgressions (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004), service failure and recovery (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999), unruly customer behavior (Berry & Seiders, 2008; Fisk et al., 2010), brand crisis (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000), consumer addictions (Hirschman, 1992), anti-branding ideologies and actions (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Lee et al., 2009; Thompson & Arsel, 2004), doppelgänger brand images (Giesler, 2012; Thompson et al., 2006), dissociative reference groups (White &

Dahl, 2006), and consumer behavior in vulnerable moments (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2008; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009). Of central concern is the phenomenological study of negative subjective brand experiences and the motivators and enablers (in terms of capabilities, traits, values, and structures) of negative brand relationship phenomena. Theories of emotion—negative emotions, group emotions, ambivalent and mixed emotions, emotion blends, and related notions of negative energy—are centrally implicated in a science of negative relationships and much opportunity for development exists here. Underexplored constructs such as civility, character, self-interest, despair (hope), pessimism, pathology, power, victimhood and vulnerability, or cruelty and inhumanity may offer rich and insightful process explanations. A process agenda for negative relationship scholarship may consider “downward relationship spirals” (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), escalating negative phenomena, and other protracted and nonlinear patterns of exchange that deviate from expected patterns (see Avery, unpublished dissertation; Avery & Fournier, 2012 for applications in marketing). Additional process insights could derive from research on conflicted interpersonal relationships with relevance to marketing: the unrequited love relationship (Bratslavsky, Baumeister, & Sommer, 1998), for example, wherein a conspiracy of silence results from motivations to avoid painful rejection on the part of both relationship parties, or the seduction–disenchantment process in fatal attractions (Felmlee, 1998). The concepts of equivocation (Chovil, 1994), misunderstanding of relationship rules and templates (Sillars, 1998), and conversational dilemmas (Daly, Diesel, & Weber, 1994) suggest a vital role for communications as a causal process. Subjective well-being (Diener, 2000) will figure prominently as a core dependent variable within negative relationship scholarship and in this sense, the call has much to gain from transformative consumer research (Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, & Ozanne, 2011). Whatever the content, a science of relationship negatives would operate under different and yet unarticulated assumptions, pose different questions, and strive toward different goals.

Through our commentary, we have sought to inform awareness of the positivity bias in marketing and the counter-posed reality of a brand relationship space beleaguered by pathology, conflict, power imbalance, and negative emotional experience—from the perspectives of both consumers and companies. There is no doubt that developing a science of negative relationships presents a challenge. Park and colleagues offer a strong base for extending theory on relationship negatives in meaningful ways. Herein we have attempted a start at further theorizing, and we acknowledge the humble beginnings of this work. It is our hope that through research that more formally accounts for brand relationship negatives, we might obtain a more holistic and balanced understanding of brand relationships, one that encompasses what is good and what is bad.

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