

WORK-IN-PROGRESS PAPER:

**WHERE IS THIS RELATIONSHIP GOING: TURNING POINTS IN CONSUMER-
BRAND RELATIONSHIPS**

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ABSTRACT

This research offers a longitudinal look at multiple relationship templates and uses the notion of turning points to explain fundamental relationship changes over time for a given consumer-brand dyad, as for instance, how a servant brand may become a friend. We identify four bipolar dimensions that capture differences across relationship templates and help explain relationship evolution processes. The data suggest that relationships reach turning points when a consumer's experience challenges the existing configuration of the brand relationship template in one or more of these dimensions.

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Despite the appeal of a relationship lens (Fournier 1998) for understanding consumers' brand engagements, the types of relationships consumers form with brands and the process mechanisms that govern interactions remain underspecified. On the one hand, previous research exploring relationship types has focused on a small subset of templates (Aggarwal 2004), with little attention paid to how these templates develop or change over time. On the other hand, research investigating longitudinal patterns in brand relationships has largely ignored differences in relationship templates, instead segmenting customers on unidimensional constructs such as relationship strength or customer value (Netzer, Lattin, and Srinivasan 2008; Homburg, Steiner, and Totzek 2009). As a result, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of the multiple forms that brand relationships may take and the processes that promote stability and change in these relationships. For instance, can a consumer develop friendship with a brand that was initially a servant to her? How does this change process work?

The relational marketing paradigm centers on the core contrast between relationship and transactional orientations (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995), which presents managers with the choice of whether to develop a relationship with consumers or focus on the transactional exchange.. Aggarwal (2004) articulated this contrast in terms of two types of relationships, communal and exchange, and their associated norms. The communal/exchange contrast spearheaded a rich program of research on how these relationship norms influence consumer responses (Aggarwal and Law 2005; Liu and Gal 2011; Scott, Mende, and Bolton 2013). Other relationship forms, such as friendship (Price and Arnould 1999; Heide and Wathne 2006) and brand love (Batra,

Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012), have also been empirically investigated, but it is still not clear in what ways these types are similar or different from each other or from the more general construct of communal relationships. Given the multitude of meaningful relationship templates (Fournier 1998) and findings that highlight core differences in these templates (Miller, Fournier, and Allen 2012), our current emphasis on the communal-exchange dichotomy risks blinding managers to the more subtle choices about which relationship(s) to foster, rather than whether to take a relationship or transactional orientation. It also restricts the generalizability of findings and limits theory development to the use of relationship norms and roles in this dichotomy, posing critical gaps in our understanding of the different forms that brand relationships may take.

Moreover, no previous study has systematically investigated how brand relationship templates evolve and change over time. Prior research exploring longitudinal patterns has largely ignored differences in relationship templates, instead segmenting customers on unidimensional constructs such as relationship strength or customer value (Netzer et al. 2008; Homburg et al. 2009). The underlying assumption is that a given brand relationship follows a linear developmental process from initial awareness to eventual commitment and dissolution (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987). This assumption focuses attention on the specification of processes governing specific stages, such as relationship dissolution, precluding an explicit articulation of variations according to relationship type (Coulter and Ligas 2000; Pressey and Mathews 2003; Michalski 2004). Most importantly, despite mounting evidence for qualitative shifts in the nature of brand relationships over time (Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009; Johnson, Matear, and Thomson 2011), we know very little about the processes through which a relationship may change from one relationship type to another.

The authors embarked on a longitudinal inquiry of the phenomenological experience of consumer-brand relationships in everyday life with the goal of better characterizing the various relationship templates that consumers develop with brands and the mechanisms that govern interactions between consumers and brands over time. In the process of data analysis and interpretation, we found inspiration in the construct of turning points (Bolton 1961) from the interpersonal relationships literature, which has been extensively used to explain how relationships change over time across a broad spectrum of relationship types (Bullis, Clark, and Sline 1993; Omer 1994; Baxter and Erbert 1999; Kellas et al. 2008; Becker et al. 2009; Docan-Morgan and Manusov 2009; Dun 2010; Mumm and Cupach 2010). In the following sections, we review our research design and provide a select review of key sensitizing constructs that proved relevant for the analysis. Next, we present our interim findings and discuss potential implications of our work.

Methodology

Our data collection method sought to better capture the inherently dynamic nature of relationship phenomena through a longitudinal design. Data were collected during a two-year, four-phased study of eighteen consumers' experiences with an Internet grocery service provider. Each consumer was interviewed 3-4 times, with interviews scheduled four months apart. Interviews were unstructured and engaged in the phenomenological tradition (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) toward the general goal of exposing the lived meaning of the relationship at hand. Free-flowing discussions were supplemented with interviewing tools capable of probing deep meanings, including ZMET (Zaltman 1997) and projective storytelling

techniques. Informants were paid \$250 for their participation. Informants were randomly recruited from a list of subscribers to the service and chosen to achieve variance in key demographic and key consumer variables, such as wave of product adoption and involvement with shopping.

Idiographic analysis began with the dissection of each individual informant's experiences with his/her brand. More specifically, our idiographic analysis was conducted in three levels: (1) we first tried to understand how the informant constructed each interaction between customer and brand described within a particular interview (e.g., purchase and delivery of products, customer service call); (2) we looked across consumer-brand interactions to capture a more holistic perspective on the relationship at the time of the interview; (3) we looked across interviews to capture relationship patterns over time.

Analysis continued with nomothetic analysis across participants. We sought to uncover between-informant patterns to induct a structural framework for the codification of different types of consumer-brand relationships and longitudinal patterns of relationship change. The process of data analysis and interpretation evolved through vigorous rounds of iteration between our data and different theoretical perspectives, including relationship development stages (Dwyer et al. 1987), relational contracts (Macneil 1980), psychological contracts (Rousseau 1998), and relationship roles or schemas (Baldwin 1992; Heide and Wathne 2006). However, a pattern of paradoxical movements within brand relationships emerged from the data that could not be accounted for by these previous theories, which led us to the construct of relationship turning points (Bolton 1961) from the interpersonal domain.

Turning Points in Interpersonal Relationships

Turning points are events that fundamentally change the nature of a relationship, for instance transforming passionate love into a committed romantic relationship (Conville 1988; Bullis et al. 1993) or changing what it means to be connected to the partner (Goldsmith 1990). They may involve dramatic, highly memorable incidents like a couple's first big fight (Siegert and Stamp 1994) or much less consequential occurrences that produce a gradual change process (Bernat 2003).

Rather than assuming that interpersonal relationships follow a linear pattern of growth and decline, research on turning points typically adopts a dialectic perspective that explores the ups and downs of a relationship as the enactment of contradictory forces or demands, such as autonomy and connection (Altman, Vinsel, and Brown 1981; Conville 1991; Baxter and Montgomery 1996). For instance, in the dialectic of autonomy and connection, these are not separate demands; the needs to be independent and interdependent are intertwined and constrain each other. Disclosure-privacy and stability-change are other key contradictions inherent to interpersonal relationships (Altman et al. 1981; Baxter and Erbert 1999). These contradictions may be experienced both between relationship partners, if people have conflicting needs or expectations about the relationship, and within partners, when each person faces an internal conflict of opposing needs (Baxter and Erbert 1999).

From this dialectical perspective, turning points gain a more precise definition as the events during which the interplay between contradictory forces generates change in a relationship. For instance, a long weekend trip may be a turning point through which a couple negotiates the need for more quality time together while struggling with each partner's individual

demands for time. In this case, the turning point marks a shift of focus from one pole to the other, i.e., from autonomy to connection. Other mechanisms through which turning points may help people manage relationship contradictions involve compromises, integration, compartmentalization, or less functional practices such as the denial of one of the opposing demands as illegitimate (Sahlstein and Baxter 2001).

Preliminary Findings

Our preliminary analysis reveals four main contradictions in the brand relationships domain: connection-independence, equality-hierarchy, partnership-opportunism, and novelty-predictability. First, consumers want to connect with the brand, making it a bigger part of their life, while at the same time reinforcing their independence. Second, the tension between equality and hierarchy relates to the contrasting needs for equal treatment and for a unique or special treatment. Third, partnership and opportunism exert the opposing pressures of investing in the relationship for the long run while also aiming to extract any short-term gains possible. Finally, consumers need both novelty and predictability in their relationships with the brand.

These contradictions gain different meanings and levels of importance depending on the specific template that governed the consumer-brand relationship. For example, the novelty-predictability tension plays a central role in the evolution of brand flings; connection gains more emotional connotations in a brand friendship whereas in a business partnership it encompasses a more transactional-oriented sense of interdependence. These contradictions are also centrally implicated in the events or interactions that consumers report as playing an important role in their relationships with the brand, which we refer to as turning points.

Turning points generate change in the consumer-brand relationships studied because they heighten the tensions in one or more contradictions, which demand some sort of resolution that reframes the relationship. At times the contradiction emerges because consumer and brand act in opposing ways, for instance when a “business partnership” turns into an “exchange” relationship because a consumer was investing in the relationship (e.g., by forgiving mistakes) while the brand was acting opportunistically (e.g., by giving coupons for increased purchase). At other times consumers face contradictions internally, such as when an “exchange” turns into a “committed” relationship as a consumer relinquishes his sense of independence in the relationship (e.g., by forfeiting competitors). In both cases, the resolution of these contradictions implicated relationship change, either in terms of temporary swings from one opposing pole to the other (e.g., from independence to connection) or in the way the relationship itself is defined.

Discussion

By illuminating the key contradictions in a brand relationship and how they are experienced differently according to the operative relationship template, our longitudinal inquiry provides a more concrete and comprehensive description of the relationship spectrum, with new and richer relationship templates (or types) fleshed out beyond the communal/exchange dichotomy and with clearer points of similarity and distinction across types.

From a managerial perspective, this study contributes to the development of more customer-centric relationship management approaches, whereby firms may identify the different relationship templates used by their customers as well as movements within a customer from one template to another. The identification of the key relationship contradictions and how they propel

change also yields clear directions for companies who seek to promote the development of more favorable relationships and avoid the de-escalation of existing bonds. These tools enable firms to more effectively manage a portfolio of different relationship types.

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Author Commitments

The authors confirm that this work is original.

If accepted, the first author, Claudio Alvarez, agrees to attend the full workshop and present the work.