

Humanising Brands: Impact of Communal and Exchange Relationship Types on Brand Evaluation by Consumers

Megha Agarwal

Assistant Professor (Department of Commerce), Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi, New Delhi

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the role of brands in the lives of consumers and the type of relationship that binds the two. Specifically, this research explores the broad framework of perceiving brands-as-people, and examines the appropriateness of applying this metaphor in better understanding consumer behavior and their interaction with brands. It does a brief review of recent research on the topic of consumer-brand relationships in general, and in particular how the distinction between communal and exchange relationships can be applied to get better insights in a brand context. Thus, this research takes the view that consumers form relationships with brand much like the relationship that forms between two people in an interpersonal context. And depending upon the type of relationship that consumers form with the brand, for example, a ‘close friend’ versus a ‘business partner’, the consumers’ assessment of the brand and their pattern of interaction would be very different. The paper reviews academic research conducted by leading marketing researchers in the field. Thus, it attempts to highlight the theoretically rich contribution of using the brand-as-person metaphor to examine consumer-brand interaction, which surely can provide some unique insights for brand managers who are constantly looking for practical ways to build deeper connections with their consumers, and to better understand the multi-faceted interactions that consumers have with brands.*

KEYWORDS: *Consumer-Brand Relationships, Communal Relationship, Exchange Relationship, Interactional Fairness, Distributive Fairness*

I. CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

The idea that consumers form relationships with brands much like they form relationships with other people in a social context is not new. Marketing practitioners, for a long while, have been trying to understand the immense value of ‘humanizing’ their brands. Thus, brands like Dr Fixit, Mr Muscle, Uncle Chips humanize the brand as is evident in the very name of the brand. Other brands use brand characters such as the Pillsbury Doughboy, Michelin Man, Tony the Tiger, as well as McDonald’s Ronald McDonald. Still other brands such as M & M’s give their product humanlike form while the Coke bottle is the quintessential example of endowing a product with the curves that are characteristic of a shapely woman. Even though marketing practitioners have long imbued brands with human traits with the intuitive objective of making their brands more endearing, distinctive, and desirable, marketing researchers have only recently started exploring the brand-as-person metaphor to get insights about consumer behavior.

Academic research on the topic of consumer-brand relationships is drawn largely from the field of social psychology. The idea of consumers forming a relationship with brands recasts brands not just as passive objects to be evaluated and consumed by consumers but as equal and valued partners in socially-constructed relationships. Although the whole notion of relationship marketing implicitly acknowledges the idea of forming a relationship with the consumer, the idea that consumer-brand relationship is a two-way street much like any interpersonal relationship was first more overtly recognized by Susan Fournier (1998). Unlike the passive way in which consumers were traditionally treated by database marketers, Fournier’s seminal work emphasized the importance of understanding the consumer’s perspective and generated research examining different aspects of consumer-brand relationships. More recent research on the topic extends this stream of work by exploring a specific dimension of the complex consumer-brand relationship space with an attempt to develop conceptual tools to better understand the nature of consumer-brand interactions. Recent research by Aggarwal (2004) proposes a theoretical and predictive framework by suggesting that when consumers form relationships with brands, they use norms of behavior underlying these relationships as a guide in their brand interactions in two unique ways: as a lens to evaluate the actions of the brand, and as a tool to guide their own behavior. This research finds that norms of relationship influence consumers’ responses depending upon whether or not the brand’s action is seen to be in violation of or in conformity with these norms (Aggarwal 2004) as well as the

extent to which consumers are unfairly treated (Aggarwal and Larrick 2012). The main insight of this stream of research is that the key to understanding consumer-brand interactions is a better appreciation of the norms that govern the particular consumer-brand relationship. One specific goal of this research has been to empower marketers with the ability to make predictions about consumer behavior that would otherwise be not possible. In this paper, I summarize the key findings from two different research projects which use the relationship metaphor to better understand consumer-brand interactions.

II. NORMS OF BEHAVIOR IN A RELATIONSHIP

The key premise underlying this work is that social relationships carry with them norms of behavior that each relationship partner is expected to follow. Social norms emerge from interactions with others; they may or may not be stated explicitly, and sanctions for deviating from them come from social networks, not the legal system. These norms include general societal expectations for our behavior, our expectations of others' behavior, and our expectations of our own behavior. These norms are acquired by people in a social setting over long time periods of the socialization process. As these norms become internalized, they serve as a valuable guide for everyday behavior and allow people to function in situations that may otherwise be new. Thus, when faced with new social situations, people use the norms that are salient at the time to guide them on the 'right' thing to do. In addition, people also use these norms to judge others' behavior. A particular action may therefore be a part of the norms of one relationship and be regarded as appropriate by one person while the same action may be seen as a serious violation of the norms of another relationship and perceived to be improper by another person. For example, if a friend needs some help, such as a ride to the airport, we may be happy to help, and of course the norm is that we don't ask for or expect any monetary compensation for it. If, however, our friend drops us to the airport but then asks us to pay for the ride, it would certainly be seen as a gross violation of the norm of a 'friend' relationship. However, the same behavior of seeking money for a ride to the airport will be perfectly 'normal' behavior expected from a cab driver since that relationship is governed by norms that are more businesslike and different from those that characterize our 'friend' relationships.

When consumers see brands as relationship partners, they are in fact, invoking norms that underlie a particular relationship. And depending upon the relationship that they perceive with the brand, the norms that are salient to the consumers would be different. Consequently, when norms of a particular relationship are salient, consumers use these norms as a lens to view the brand and evaluate the brand's actions.

III. COMMUNAL AND EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIPS

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

As is clear from Table 1, exchange relationships involve a careful cost-benefit evaluation and the focus is on keeping track of inputs and outputs. In contrast, communal relationships focus on mutual support and cooperation thus taking a perspective that transcends emphasis on self-interest alone. These two relationship types, however, are not mutually exclusive: it is possible to have both a communal *and* an exchange relationship with someone simultaneously. For example, a business partnership with one's brother is likely to lead to the salience of communal and exchange norms concurrently. One reason why such relationships are difficult to manage in practice is that people may often be uncertain about what norms to use in specific situations. Relationship norms influence consumer behavior in two distinct and crucial ways: a) in judging others' actions, and b) in guiding one's own actions. This paper explores the influence of relationship norms on consumers'

evaluation of the brand and its actions in two different contexts. The second aspect, i.e. the one that looks at the role of relationship norms from the other end—how norms guide consumers' own behavior and actions, though left out of the purview of this paper, if combined with the contents of this paper offer a rich set of studies to help us better understand the way in which the types of relationships between consumers and brands, more specifically, the norms of relationships influence consumer-brand interactions and can help brand managers predict the behavior of the consumer with comparatively more accuracy.

IV. USING RELATIONSHIP NORMS TO EVALUATE THE BRAND

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

Norm Violation and its Mediating Effect on Brand Evaluations

The first project examines the role of consumer brand relationships on consumers' attitudes and behavior by explicitly testing the mediating role of relationship norm violation as tested by Aggarwal (2004). The model proposed in this paper suggested that when consumers form a relationship with a brand, brands too are evaluated as if they are members of a culture and need to conform to its norms. If the actions of the brand are in violation of the norms of a relationship then the brand is evaluated negatively, but if the actions are in conformity with the norms of a relationship then the evaluation is positive. This research used the context of a request for help (or providing benefits) to test the influence of relationship type on consumers' responses to a particular marketing action. This context was chosen because the key distinction between exchange and communal relationships is based on the motivation for providing benefits to the partner and a request for help captures the essence of that distinction.

Three studies were conducted, each examining a very specific aspect of request for help. Participants were first shown a brief scenario description as manipulation of norms of communal or exchange relationship. Participants were then presented with a request for help, and their reactions to the marketing action and overall brand evaluations were then taken. The brand's action in all three studies was designed to violate the norms of one relationship and simultaneously conform to the norms of the other relationship. Participants' evaluation of the brand and its action was finally taken as the main dependent variable. Study 1 examined participants' reactions to being charged a fee or no fee by a brand for rendering a special service in response to a specific request made by the consumer. Participants were first exposed to a description of a relationship between a consumer and a hypothetical bank aimed at triggering either communal or exchange norms. Next, the scenario described a consumer who sought help from the bank requesting it to write a letter to their utility company who had not received some money even though it had been cleared by the bank. The participants were then told that a week later the bank informed them that the issue with the utility company had been resolved for no charge, or for a fee of Rs 100. A demand for a fee by the bank in response to a request for help violates the norms of communal relationship since the help is being given for the fee rather than out of a concern for the consumer. This action, however, conforms to the norms of exchange relationship since the fee highlights the quid pro quo nature of the relationship. The response in terms of the dependent variable under study, viz. Brand evaluation indicated that, relative to exchange-oriented participants, communal participants evaluate the brand and its actions more positively when the action is in keeping with the communal norms but in violation of exchange norms (no fee was charged) than when the action is in violation of the communal norms but in keeping with the exchange norms (fee was charged).

Study 2 examined consumer responses to receiving a comparable or non-comparable benefit back from the brand in response to some help rendered to a brand. Giving a benefit creates a specific debt and a directly comparable return benefit eliminates this debt owed by the exchange partner much more than a non-comparable benefit, and is in keeping with the norms of an exchange relationship. Conversely, a non-comparable benefit acknowledges that the partner's needs are unique and as a result giving such a benefit is in conformity to the norms of a communal relationship in which the underlying motivation is to take care of the partner's needs. This study thus explores a different aspect of helping norm. As before, participants were first exposed to a brief description, only this time it was about a health club aimed at triggering norms of either a communal or an exchange relationship. Next, the health club requested the consumer to help them develop a Web Site on healthy living that requires about an hour of the consumer's time (non-monetary help) or donating Rs 500 for it

(monetary help). In return, the brand promised to give the consumer either a 1-hr free coupon (non-monetary reward) that is comparable to the request for time but non-comparable to the monetary help, or a Rs 500 discount coupon (monetary reward) that is non-comparable to the request for time but comparable to the monetary help. The participants then filled out the dependent variables: a three-item measure of brand evaluation (dislike-like, dissatisfied-satisfied, unfavorable-favorable). Results of the study suggested that a brand's action elicits different consumer evaluations depending upon whether the brand's actions violate or conform to the norms of the underlying consumer-brand relationship. Since in an exchange relationship, benefits are given with an expectation of getting comparable benefits in return, any such offer, in cash or otherwise, would be seen to be in keeping with the relationship norms. Conversely, in a communal relationship, help is given to show concern for the partner's needs. A comparable benefit violates the underlying communal norms since it would transform the relationship into a tit-for-tat one while a non-comparable benefit would be in conformity with communal norms since it de-links the benefit given from the benefit received.

The last study, Study 3, was conducted to explore yet another aspect of the helping norm and also to examine the mediating role of relationship norm violation. This study examined if the length of time gap between help given and help sought causes participants in different relationships to respond differently. If a request for help by a partner is immediately countered with a return request, the debt created by the original help is paid off right away. However, return request that is delayed in time, being less likely to be connected to the original request, would be seen as a way to extract free help by the partner and hence be in violation of the exchange norms. Thus, exchange-oriented consumers would prefer return requests made immediately afterward rather than those that are delayed in time. On the other hand, an immediate return request is likely to be seen as a repayment for the original help and would thus be in violation of communal norms. Conversely, a delayed return request, being unconnected to the original request, is likely to be seen as an expression of a genuine need of the partner and hence be in keeping with the communal relationship norms. Thus, communally oriented consumers should prefer requests that are delayed in time over those made immediately following an original request. The participants were made to read a hypothetical case, this time – a coffee shop brand such that norms of either communal or exchange relationship were salient. Next, the participants read about a situation in which the brand asks the consumer to put up some promotion material on campus for them in response to the customer's request to make a fresh cup of coffee, and this request was made either immediately afterwards or a week later. The dependent variables were a) a three-item brand evaluation score as before, and b) a six-item measure of norm violation (felt cornered, felt irritated, felt exploited, care about them, happy to help, request was appropriate). The results showed that consumer responses depended on the type of relationship norms salient at the time of brand interaction. Specifically, the results show that, in keeping with the principles of norm violation, exchange consumers evaluate the brand less positively to a delayed request but more positively to an immediate request compared to the communal consumers. Overall, results of all three studies support the theory that a violation of or adherence to relationship norms influences consumers' evaluation of the brand.

Relationship Norms and Consumer Responses to Interactional Fairness The second project explores issues of fairness in the context of a consumer-brand interaction (Aggarwal 2008; Aggarwal and Larrick 2012). Researchers in organizational behavior have noted that when people assess overall fairness of an action, they first look at aspects of distributive fairness, or the allocation of the final outcome. This aspect of fairness relates to distribution of benefits versus costs. In addition, people also care about issues of interactional fairness, or how people are treated during conflict resolution. This type of fairness relates to whether others exhibit respectful, sensitive, and justifiable behavior. It has been noted by prior research that the extent to which people care about what the final allocation is, depends on how the final allocation is arrived at. That is, the way people are treated has a greater influence on their attitudes and behavior when the outcome itself is unfair than when the outcome is fair. Aggarwal and Larrick (2012) directly tests for the influence of norms in a context of an interaction between a consumer and a marketer, and examines the moderating effect of relationship norms on the interactive effect of distributive and interactional fairness.

In this research, it was argued that when faced with low distributive fairness, the type of relationship norms salient at the time of interaction with a brand—communal versus exchange—influence how consumers respond to aspects of interactional fairness (or, how people are treated by others). The underlying premise of the research is that since a communal relationship is based on mutual care and concern, low interactional fairness (i.e., being treated shabbily) by the brand especially if accompanied by low distributive fairness will be seen as a lack of concern for the consumer, and thus a breach of the underlying relationship norms. However, high interactional fairness would be a reassurance about the genuine concern underlying a communal relationship, and thus in conformity with communal norms even in the face of low distributive fairness. In contrast, exchange relationships are *quid pro quo*:

people are concerned first and foremost about what they get for what they have given to their partner. Low distributive fairness means that the one thing that exchange consumers care most about is not forthcoming, and that the underlying norms of exchange relationship have been violated. As a result, whether the accompanying level of interactional fairness is high or low may be of little consequence to such consumers. Thus, under conditions of low distributive fairness, relative to exchange consumers communal consumers would evaluate the brand more positively when faced with high interactional fairness. Two studies tested this premise. Since the effects are predicted only for low but not for high distributive fairness conditions, the first study examined the three-way interaction of relationship type, distributive fairness, and interactional fairness using a hypothetical consumer-marketer scenario. The second study used the context of a real brand and a different operationalization of interactional fairness to replicate the main findings of Study 1. Study 2 also specifically tested for the mediating role of perceived violation of the underlying relationship norms for these effects.

In Study 1, participants were first exposed to a brief description of a hypothetical restaurant designed to make communal or exchange relationship norms salient. Participants then read about an interaction with the restaurant aimed at eliciting perceptions of distributive and interactional (un)fairness. The scenario described a consumer who had ordered food from the restaurant but received something that was too spicy to be eaten. The consumer complained to the restaurant, and either got a full refund or no compensation, which was the manipulation of high and low distributive fairness. In addition, to manipulate high and low interactional fairness the response from the restaurant was communicated either very politely and respectfully, or very rudely and disrespectfully. It was expected that relative to participants in the exchange condition, those in the communal condition would evaluate the brand more positively when treated with politeness and respect, especially when they get no refund (low distributive fairness). The main dependent variables were a) a four-item measure of brand evaluation (dislike-like, dissatisfied-satisfied, unfavorable-favorable, and extent of trust for the brand), and b) a three-item measure of future intentions (use the brand again, praise the brand, complain about the brand). The results find support for the hypothesized three-way interaction between relationship norms; distributive fairness and interactional fairness. Specifically, the results show that under conditions of low distributive fairness, consumers primed with communal norms show a more positive brand evaluation and future intentions compared to those primed with exchange norms when faced with high rather than low interactional fairness.

To replicate the main findings of Study 1 in a more realistic context, Study 2 used a real brand—Starbucks—and subsequently, measured rather than manipulate communal and exchange norms. Further, Study 2 also examined the role of perceived breach of relationship norms as the underlying process variable. Finally, interactional fairness was operationalized differently—by the amount of effort put in to resolve the conflict rather than the politeness shown by the brand. Herein, participants were first exposed to the Starbucks brand name, a visual of a Starbucks branded coffee cup, and were encouraged to think of their own interactions, feelings and associations with Starbucks. Participants then responded to some questions about Starbucks which were later used to categorize them into communal or exchange oriented consumers. Participants then read about a consumer who had ordered a decaf latte but received regular coffee that was not even hot. When the consumer complained, there was either no effort put in to resolve the issue (low interactional fairness), or the salesperson tried with utmost sincerity to resolve it (high interactional fairness). For all consumers the final outcome was the same—the consumer had to pay for the stale regular coffee and did not get any refund. The main dependent variables were the same as in study 1: a) a four-item measure of brand evaluation, and b) a three-item measure of future intention. In addition, a three-item measure of perceived breach of relationship norms was also administered (violated principles, broke promise, violated rules). Manipulation checks of relationship norms, and interactional fairness were administered. Results replicate those of Study 1. The results showed that under conditions of low distributive fairness, consumers who perceive a communal relationship with the brand are likely to have a more positive brand evaluation and future intention scores than those who perceive an exchange relationship when facing high rather than low interactional fairness. The results of Study 2 are significant since they are observed in the context of a real brand and a real relationship that consumers perceive with it. More importantly, this study showed that the interactive effects of relationship type and interactional fairness on consumer evaluations are fully mediated by the extent to which consumers perceive a breach of the relationship norms.

Together, the two projects—responses to request for help and issues of fairness—highlight the crucial role of relationship norms in how consumers assess the actions and behavior of a brand and/or its representatives. Findings from these two projects suggest that actions of a brand that are seen to be in violation of the norms of the underlying relationship between the consumer and the brand are likely to lead to a less positive evaluation of the brand compared to actions that are seen as upholding the norms of that relationship. Significantly, the same action is evaluated differently depending upon whether or not it is perceived to be

consistent with the relationship norms. This suggests that it is not the action per se but whether or not that action is in keeping with what is expected in the particular relationship that determines the evaluation of that action and the brand.

V. CONCLUSION

The papers summarized here examine the interpersonal relationship metaphor in the context of consumer-brand interactions. The common insight guiding the papers is that each relationship carries with it a distinct set of norms that are unique to that relationship, and when consumers perceive a certain relationship with a brand, they are in fact, invoking the norms of that particular relationship to evaluate the behavior of the brand. The papers (request for help, fairness) highlight the effect of norm salience on consumers’ evaluation of the brand. Together, they do provide an implication for the brand managers in using the relationship metaphor to better understand consumer-brand interactions. These papers also give us a key tool for making predictions about consumer behavior (though in a limited context) that would otherwise not be possible at all.

Many important questions may be asked relating just to how might norms get created and why might some consumers form a communal while others form an exchange relationship with the same brand. Clearly, there are person, product, and context-specific factors that lead to particular relationships to develop between a consumer and a brand. Some consumers may be intrinsically more communal-minded while others may see commercial exchange as just a monetary transaction. Some product categories may be inherently more communal such as the ‘commercial exchanges’ between a doctor and a patient, or those between a school and a student. Aside from these obvious examples, brands that have people as the representatives, such as for most services (e.g., hotels, airlines, etc.), brands that have a combination of product and service as their core offering (e.g., restaurants and some online stores), and brands that require one-on-one personal selling may all be more amenable to being seen as communal relationship partners. In addition, the dynamic and repeated interactions pursued by marketers in the form of ads, interactive media, direct mail, and telemarketing as well as the use of brand mascots and spokespersons will strengthen the type of ongoing relationship that is formed between the brand and the consumer. As the diverse nature of the research questions highlighted here suggest, the metaphor of interpersonal relationship is a versatile framework that future research avenues relating to consumer-brand interactions are only limited by researchers’ imagination.

TABLE

Norms of Exchange and Communal Relationships

Exchange Relationship	Communal Relationship
Prompt repayment for specific benefits received is expected.	Prompt repayment for specific benefits received is not expected.
Desirable to give ‘comparable’ benefits in return for benefits received.	Less desirable to give comparable benefits in return for benefits received.
More likely to ask for repayments for benefits rendered.	Less likely to ask for repayments for benefits rendered.
More likely to keep track of individual inputs and outcomes in a joint task.	Less likely to keep track of individual inputs and outcomes in a joint task.
Keeping track of others’ needs is less likely.	Keeping track of others’ needs is more likely.
Divide rewards according to each person’s inputs and contributions.	Divide rewards according to each person’s needs and requirements.
Helping others is less likely.	Helping others is more likely.
Requesting help from others is less likely.	Requesting help from others is more likely.
Accepting help with money is preferred to no payment.	Accepting help with no monetary payment is preferred.
Less responsive to others’ emotional states.	More responsive to others’ emotional states.

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