Why Feelings Stray: Affective Misforecasting Drivers of Consumer Satisfaction
Vanessa M. Patrick Deborah J. MacInnis

Why Feelings Stray: Affective Misforecasting Drivers of Consumer Satisfaction  Vanessa M. Patrick (University of Georgia) Deborah J. MacInnis (University of Southern California)  While experienced affect has been identified as a predictor of consumer satisfaction, limited research has examined how affective misforecasting (AMF) —the gap between predicted and experienced affect impacts satisfaction judgments. Based on prior research that links AMF and satisfaction, the current study uses qualitative and quantitative data to examine the sources of AMF (i.e., why it occurs) in the consumption domain. The authors find evidence supporting some sources of AMF identified in the psychology literature, develop a fuller understanding of others, and, find evidence for novel sources of AMF not previously explored. Importantly, they find considerable differences in the sources of AMF depending on whether feelings are worse than or better than forecast.

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**ABSTRACT**

Affective misforecasting (AMF) is defined as the gap between predicted and experienced affect. Based on prior research that examines AMF, the current study uses qualitative and quantitative data to examine the sources of AMF (i.e., why it occurs) in the consumption domain. The authors find evidence supporting some sources of AMF identified in the psychology literature, develop a fuller understanding of others, and, find evidence for novel sources of AMF not previously explored. Importantly, they find considerable differences in the sources of AMF depending on whether feelings are worse than or better than forecast.

**INTRODUCTION**

Before purchase: “I can’t wait to use this all the time, it is going to be so much fun, I’m going to go out with my buddies and use it all the time. I am so happy.”

After purchase: “It does not play a significant role in my life now, and I use it only on occasion.”

-Male (21)

Before purchase: “This is going to be great. I am going to pay so much attention to my new dog. I will walk her everyday. I am so excited.”

After purchase: “I am upset with myself for not thinking about the future. I was blinded by excitement at the time of purchase. I just am tired of it and don’t want to spend time with it anymore.”

-Female (20)

Research in psychology suggests that when people think about their emotional futures, they are often wrong (Gilbert et al. 1998; Loewenstein and Schkade 2000). In other words, they will exhibit Affective Misprediction (hereafter AMF), experiencing a gap between predicted and experienced feelings. This paper is designed to determine whether the sources (or reasons) for AMF identified in the psychology literature is generalizable to consumer contexts. More importantly, we contribute to the AMF literature by determining whether different sources of AMF cause feelings to be better than forecasted vs. worse than forecasted. We also identify novel sources of AMF not previously revealed in the extant literature.

**AFFECTIVE FORECASTING AND MISFORECASTING**

A growing body of research indicates that decision-making is based on individuals’ predictions or forecasts about how a given product will make them feel in the future (Baggozi et al. 1998; Mellers and McGraw 2001; Perugini and Baggozi, 2001; Shiv and Huber 2000). A different body of research in psychology, however, also indicates that these forecasts are often wrong—as individuals feel quite differently about an outcome or decision than they predicted they would (e.g., Mellers et al. 1999; Gilbert et al. 1998; Loewenstein and Schkade 2000; Wilson et al. 2000). The fact that choices are based on predictions about how consumption will make the consumer feel, coupled with a tendency for inaccuracy in these forecasts suggests considerable potential for heightened satisfaction when consumers feel better than forecast, or dissatisfaction when they feel worse than forecast. Therefore, understanding the drivers of AMF has considerable import for consumer behavior, particularly in the area of consumer satisfaction, brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth.

Figure 1 depicts the process by which affective misforecasting occurs (for greater detail see MacInnis, Patrick and Park 2005). As Figure 1 suggests, affective forecasts are based on a representation of a future event and an assessment of the possible affective reactions to this event. AMF occurs when experienced affect deviates from the forecasted affect on one or more of the following dimensions: valence, intensity and duration.

Since forecasts can be made regarding the valence of the feelings, the specific emotions expected to be experienced, the intensity of feelings or the duration of a projected affective response, consequently affective misforecasting can occur along any of these dimensions. In this research we are particularly concerned with misforecasting along intensity and valence dimensions, such that feelings are either better than forecast (BTF) or worse than forecast (WTF).

**SOURCES OF AFFECTIVE MISFORECASTING**

A growing literature in psychology has examined the sources of affective misforecasting—or why predictions of future affect are often erroneous. As shown in Figure 2, in some cases, consumers feel different from forecasted because they initially represented the future erroneously, failed to consider critical details, were influenced by other influences at the time, or failed to consider other things that might make them happy. In other cases, consumers felt different from expected because they did not adequately or accurately imagine their affective reaction to the future outcome. In some cases consumers failed to adjust their forecasts based on their current emotional state. In other cases, the actual outcome was as expected, but simply did not produce the intensity of emotion imagined. Within these broad categories, several subcategories of AMF sources are identified and described briefly in Figure 2 (see MacInnis, Patrick and Park 2005 for more detailed discussion).

**Research Objectives**

While interesting, the framework in Figure 2 was based on studies that involved neither consumption nor satisfaction. As such, it is useful to consider (a) whether the sources of AMF identified in Figure 2 generalize to such contexts and (b) whether these contexts evoke novel sources of AMF unique to the consumption domain. Since satisfaction deals with outcomes that are not only different from expected but either better than or worse than expected (i.e., they are valenced judgments) it is also useful to consider (c) whether the sources of AMF differ depending on whether consumers feel better than forecast or worse than forecast. The study described below was designed to assess these three issues.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Design**

Given the exploratory nature of the study coupled with the notion that satisfaction is a process that evolves over time, we used a critical incident paradigm where (a) consumers could choose the purchase incident and (b) where the time frame in question (i.e., immediately following purchase, a short time or a longer time post-purchase) would vary across respondents. Respondents were divided into three groups: one group reported on a consumption
FIGURE 1
Affective Forecasting and Misforecasting


FIGURE 2
Categorization of the Sources of Affective Misforecasting in the extant literature

incident in which they felt better than forecasted (referred to as BTF, henceforth) \( (N=25); \) a second reported on a consumption incident in which they felt worse than forecasted (referred to as WTF, henceforth) \( (N=22); \) a control group \( (N=40) \) was asked to report on a situation in which they felt different from forecasted. The qualitative data from the respondents in this latter group would reveal whether consumption episodes that are better than forecasted are more or less salient in memory than those that are worse than forecasted.

### Quantitative Measures

Respondents used a 9-point happiness scale to indicate how happy they felt when thinking about their purchase now \( (1=\text{not at all}; 9=\text{extremely}) \). As expected, happiness with the purchase in the “better than forecast” condition was significantly greater than happiness in the “worse than forecast” condition \( (8.03 \text{ vs. } 3.51, F(1,85)=145.41, p<.05) \).

Respondents were also asked to report how frequently an incident like the one they reported occurred on a 7-point scale where \( 1=\text{not at all}; \) and \( 7=\text{very often} \). They also responded on 1-9 point agreement scales to a set of statements designed to represent some of the most frequently mentioned sources of AMF in past literature; namely, misconstrual, focalism, the hot-cold empathy gap, see Table 2 for items.

### Qualitative Measures

A qualitative analysis of the data was then conducted, with responses placed within the categories represented in Figure 2 or placed in novel content categories. Inter-rater agreement among two coders knowledgeable about the categorization scheme provided by MacInnis, Patrick and Park 2004 (as shown in Figure 2) was \( .98 \).

**RESULTS**

### Memory Salience

The results reveal that worse than forecasted experiences are more salient in memory than better than forecasted experiences. As evidence, 90% of control subjects \( (36 \text{ of } 40) \) reported experiences that were worse than forecasted. Furthermore, subjects reported that feeling WTF occurred more frequently than feeling BTF \( (M=5.47 \text{ vs. } M=4.58, F(1,60)=3.72, p<.05) \). The responses of control group subjects were subsequently combined with subjects in the BTF (if they reported a BTF experience) or WTF conditions (if they reported a WTF experience).

### Sources of Affective Mismatching

The results of the qualitative data, as summarized in Table 1 (a) replicate the sources of AMF identified from prior research, (b) identify novel sources of AMF, and (c) show differences in the sources found for BTF vs. WTF experiences. The results that correspond with the table and above noted conclusions are described below.

### Sources Linked to the Initial Representation of the Future

**Misconstruals.** Misconstrual occurs when individuals consider one way in which an outcome might turn out and fail to consider others. Failing to take into consideration the temporal location of an event influences how we imagine it (Liberman and Trope 1998), how we appraise or evaluate it (Loewenstein and Elster 1992) how often we think about it (Finger and Perlmutter 1995) and how optimistic we are about it (e.g., Shepperd et al. 1996) are all dimensions of misconstrual. We found considerable evidence for misconstrual both when consumers felt WTF and BTF.

Moreover, we also found evidence of misconstrual of things besides outcomes (the focus of past research on AMF). We also found more variation in the types of misconstruals consumers used in the WTF compared to the BTF condition. These conclusions are illustrated below.

Consistent with past research on AMF, **misconstrual of outcomes** was observed:

- In planning my trip I felt confused, overwhelmed, inexperienced, and unsure about lodging. I am extremely happy about my decision now because what I feared might turn out to be a mistake was actually the best vacation I have ever had. (BTF)

- Although I really liked the shoes at the time of purchase, I didn’t think about how many times I would get to wear them, and now it’s been so long, I would rather buy a new pair of nice shoes that make me happy. (WTF)

Interestingly, while these were the only types of misconstrual for consumers in the BTF condition, those in the WTF condition showed additional types, including **misconstrual of changes in the marketplace, changes in the economy, the need for the product in one’s life, and social disapproval**. The following examples illustrate each type respectively:

- Times change and so do trends. I was very excited about the purchase because it was new and “in” at the time. Although only a few months have passed, I already feel like it is out of style. (WTF)

- I feel that I should have held off on the purchase because the prices of property came crashing down after an economic shakeout in Asia. If I were to try to sell it now, I would not be able to recover my cost, let alone think of making profit like I did when I made my first purchase. (WTF)

- [I thought] This is going to be so fun. I’m going to go out with my buddies and use it all the time. The item does not play a significant role in my life now. (WTF)

Relatively, some consumers anticipated feeling happy from product purchase because it would bring **social acknowledgement**. They felt worse than forecast at finding this social acknowledgement not forthcoming:

- I thought the girls would notice my watch and perceive something good. Instead. I found that college age women don’t really appreciate the prestige of an Omega watch. Even though I love the quality, beauty, reliability and workmanship of my Omega, it didn’t help my status with women. (WTF)

Others failed to anticipate **post-consumption social comparisons** and their impact on future feelings. As one respondent noted:

- After a year I saw all by friends driving nicer cars than mine and I was jealous. (WTF)
The Isolation Effect. The isolation effect occurs when individuals focus on some criterion in making their decisions but fail to realize that it is actually other criteria that will make them happy. We also found considerable evidence for the isolation effect, in both the BTF and WTF condition. For example, though one respondent in the BTF condition believed that happiness from his new car would be based on how cool it was, he later discovered that happiness was tied to its reliability:

After a month or so, I thought the car was not as cool as some other cars that had come out. But now that I have owned it for two years with no major problems, I have found that it is a reliable automobile that I can depend on, transport my stuff and go on vacations with. (BTF)

Another respondent in the WTF condition believed that happiness with the apartment he rented would be predicated on the services offered by apartment complex; he failed to consider that happiness would really be a function of distance to campus.

I thought it would be great because of the services it provided and I was really excited about it, but then I realized that it...
TABLE 2
Self-Reported Sources of AMF in the Better than Forecast vs. Worse than Forecast Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of AMF</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>BTF Means</th>
<th>WTF Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Misconstrual</td>
<td>I did not consider how useful the product really was</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>4.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focalism</td>
<td>I had not taken into account all the other possessions I have when I made this purchase.</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>5.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inaccurate Lay Theories</td>
<td>When I imagined how I would feel after the purchase, I did not imagine that I would be feeling this way</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>6.94*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After I purchased and used it I knew I was just wrong about what I thought I would feel.</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>5.75*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot-Cold Empathy Gaps</td>
<td>Before purchase I was excited and charged up, but reality hit me after I purchased and used it.</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projection Bias</td>
<td>I bought the product when I was in a good mood</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>7.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinization</td>
<td>I did not take into consideration that I would get bored or fed-up with the product after a while</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>6.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Evanescence</td>
<td>I did not anticipate that the pleasure I would get from the product would fade so quickly.</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>6.33*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means based on 9-point agreements scales (1= strongly disagree; 9= strongly agree)
* Differences significant at the p<.05 level

wasn’t so great because it was too far from campus and I felt weighed down with having to drive in every day. (WTF)

Interestingly, while past research has identified the isolation effect in terms of using the wrong criteria, in the WTF condition we also found evidence of the isolation effect as a source for AMF due to reliance on others’ vs. one’s own when making a purchase decision. For example, one respondent noted:

The store made me feel that I really ‘needed the shirt when, if I thought about it, I really didn’t. (WTF)

Conjunctive Probabilities. AMF tied to conjunctive probabilities reflects the fact that we often make a prediction about how happy a future event (e.g., going on vacation) will make us feel without adequately considering the number of discrete events that must occur in between the event’s representation and its actualization (e.g., getting airline tickets, finding the right place to stay, having good weather, etc.). However, since any one of these contingent events may not occur as expected, AMF is possible. We found evidence (albeit limited) for this source of AMF but here only in the WTF condition:

The [computer] is still relatively new and I’m sure it will satisfy me in the future more but as of right now, I’m just waiting for it to work out. (WTF)

In this case, predicted happiness from buying a new computer was stymied because several events prior to its working went wrong (e.g. the operating system; installing a CD drive).

Focalism. With focalism AMF is tied to an individual’s failure to consider what other outcomes (e.g., whiny and hungry kids; mosquitoes) might occur at the same time as that future event (e.g., a family swim before dinner). Wilson et al (2000) demonstrated that affective forecasts are erroneous when people focus only on the most salient event and fail to take into consideration other factors that might play a role. Similarly, Schkade and Kahneman (1998) illustrate this tendency to focus on the one factor that is salient at the time of judgment or decision-making and to downplay others, a phenomenon they termed the “focusing illusion”. Although past research has focused a great deal on focalism, we found evidence for this source of AMF only in the WTF condition:

I purchased a pair of Oakley sunglasses last summer but due to my corrective glasses, that would require me to get sunglasses. I have been just too lazy and too stressed out to go get my eyes examined and get contacts. (WTF)

This consumer predicted that purchasing Oakley sunglasses would make her feel happy; however, she also failed to consider the other things that would happen along with the purchase of the sunglasses (exams, needs for relaxation) that would fail to produce the happiness she envisioned.

Sources Linked to the Imagined Affective Reaction to the Event

Inaccurate Lay Theories. We may mispredict how much pain/pleasure we are likely to feel because we hold inaccurate theories as to whether certain outcomes will indeed evoke specific affective reactions. If the theory is wrong, the affect we predict will arise in the future may also be wrong. Already evidence for AMF due to
inaccurate theories has been presented in the consumer behavior literature as several studies have shown that consumers hold theories about variety which cause them to overpredict how much variety will make them feel happy in the future (e.g., Ratner et al 1999). We also observed evidence for the use of inaccurate lay theories in this study, but here only in the BTF condition. For example, one consumer used her theory that “families that have had problems will be very difficult to be around” to predict that her vacation to her boyfriend’s family’s house would make her feel anxious. She found that in this case her theory was wrong.

I felt somewhat nervous and worried because of personal issues with my boyfriend’s family. Contrary to my worries, I found that his family was very open and accepting. They made me feel at ease, almost like I was an actual member of the family. (BTF)

Sources Linked to the Affective Forecast

After imagining a future outcome, consumers use the affect linked to this imagined outcome to predict how they will feel when the outcome does occur. Two potentially related sources of AMF have been linked to the affective forecast itself: The hot-cold empathy gap and the projection bias (see Figure 1).

Hot-Cold Empathy Gap. Research on the hot-cold empathy gap proposes that people have difficulty predicting future affect if their current affective state differs from the state they will ultimately be in when the experience actually happens. When in a “cold” (non-affect laden) state people often have difficulty imagining how they would feel or what they might do if they were in a “hot” state—for example, angry, hungry, in pain or sexually excited. It may also be the case that, when in a “hot” state people frequently have difficulty imagining that they will inevitably eventually cool off (Loewenstein and Schkade 2000). We found some, though not extensive evidence for the hot-cold empathy gap, but only in the WTF condition. As one consumer wrote:

I am upset with myself for not thinking about the future. I was blinded by excitement at the time of the purchase. (WTF)

The Projection Bias. A related bias in the literature is called the projection bias, said to occur when individuals use their current feelings as a proxy for the feelings they will experience in the future (Loewenstein et al 2003). For example, consumers who are in a good mood at the time of purchase may misattribute their mood to the product and mistakenly believe that subsequent product use will make them feel the same way. We found some (although again, limited) evidence for this bias as well. For example, one consumer who reported feeling unhappy about a purchase of a leather coat wrote:

I was in a really good mood because the music in the store was music that I really enjoyed. I became more excited while looking around at the leather coats. I thought of how good I will look in [leather coats] and how long I have wanted one because they are so expensive. (WTF)

Sources Linked to the Actual Outcome

Ordinization. Affective misforecasting can sometimes be tied to a process called “ordinization”, or the failure to consider that novel experiences may become ordinary when they are repeated over and over (Wilson, Gilbert and Centerbar 2002). Because they become ordinary they may fail to have the same affective impact that they had when they first occurred. Some evidence was found for ordinization, but again only in the WTF condition. As one consumer wrote:

Right now I feel the car is ordinary because I drive it every day (WTF).

The thrill that he imagined from driving a new car became ordinary, and his happiness declined.

Sources Linked to Experienced Affect

Emotional Evanescence. Ordinization is a special case of a broader category of sources—emotional evanescence. Wilson et al (2002) suggest that intense emotions are physiologically taxing and distract cognitive processing resources from the environment. As such, it may be adaptive to experience intense emotions for only a short time. Rapid recovery from intense emotions is also adaptive as it allows individuals to remain attuned to the immediate (and not always benign) environment. Because we do not consider how fleeting our emotions are, we over-predict how intensely and for how long we will feel good (bad) following positive (negative) outcomes. We observed evidence for emotional evanescence in the WTF conditions as illustrated by the following quote:

Before purchasing this stereo system I was enthralled with its appearance and the sound it provided. But in less than a year it went away and I am no longer extremely excited that I have this product. (WTF)

However, we also observed that in the BTF condition, consumers had positive emotions that failed to dissipate over time.

Within a week I was still elated to have [the speakers]. (BTF)

Motivated Distortion. Gilbert et al (1998) suggest that one reason why we may mispredict how bad we will feel after something negative occurs is that we don’t take into account the fact that our psychology works to minimize the psychological discomfort caused by negative events. People are skilled at re-construing what happens to them in a positive light and use a number of tactics to reframe negative outcomes as less negative than they might have been. We did observe evidence that motivation distortion did occur and perhaps minimized the AMF gap when the experience was WTF:

Maybe I should have gone with the convertible. But I am trying to love the SUV as it is now. (WTF)

If I really wanted to improve my status with women I should have bought a Tag Huer. But …older people do take notice. (WTF)

Selective Memory. While experiences can sometimes be different from what was anticipated, with time, memories are distorted and so too are memories of the extent, nature and duration of feelings experienced in response to an outcome (Klaaren, Hodges and Wilson 1994). As such, while affective misforecasting may occur, over time selective memory distorts the experience and what one remembers becomes more and more congruent with what one had predicted. Selective memory reduces the gap between the affective forecast and the remembered experience. We found no evidence for selective memory in either the BTF or WTF condition, perhaps because this source operates largely outside of conscious awareness.
In addition to confirming some of the sources of AMF identified in past research outside of consumption and elaborating on others (e.g., misconstrual, the isolation effect) we also observed sources of AMF that have not yet been identified. Sources that occurred when outcomes were BTF and WTF are discussed sequentially below.

Novel Sources of AMF When Outcomes were BTF

_Felt Security in Thoughtfulness of Decision._ Some consumers reported feeling BTF because they realized that their conscientious efforts at information search and decision making brought them as much if not more happiness than they had anticipated by finding a product they really loved. For example:

_I was content with my decision because I felt I made a rational choice. I am very happy that I made the choice I did._ (BTF)

_I feel that I have made a good choice and others agree with me._ (BTF)

_External Validation._ As exemplified in the quote above, some people had not anticipated social acknowledgement or social approval from their purchase but found that they felt BTF when their purchase was externally validated:

_Hearing that other people liked the product helped to reinforce my own satisfaction with it._ (BTF)

_I get a lot of compliments on it so that made me feel even better._ The good compliments I got had a big effect on how I feel about the dress now._ (BTF)

_These comments once again underscore the social aspects of the satisfaction process._

Novel Sources of AMF When Outcomes were WTF

_Novel sources of AMF were also identified when outcomes were WTF._

_Failure to heed Gut Instincts/or Internalized Decision Rules._ One source that explained why consumers felt WTF occurred because occurred because consumers ignored internal gut instincts that the purchase might be good. Alternatively, they ignored true decision rules. For example:

_Before I bought the shoes I felt a feeling of uncertainty or rather discomfort because I believed that there were many opportunity costs that I would give up. That went on for 2 minutes and then I bought them._ (WTF)

_I bought a product that I thought was equal to the more expensive brands. I should have remembered—you get what you pay for._ (WTF)

_Failure to Discount Buying Impulses/Purchase with Limited Search._ Relatedly, consumers who felt WTF attributed their AFM to the fact that they did not think through the decision process, acting impulsively and with limited thought.

_It was a waste of money. I was acting impulsively._ (WTF)

_I feel like I should have asked more questions about it, because if I had then maybe I wouldn’t have bought it. I realize that the purchase was not intelligent and should have been thought out more._ (WTF)

Differences in Sources by Condition

To further differentiate whether and the extent to which various sources were more likely to occur in the BTF vs. WTF conditions, t-tests were conducted on items designed to reflect many of the sources identified in Figure 1. Mean scores corresponding to these t-tests are reported in Table 1. As shown, there were differences in use of these sources between respondents in the BTF and WTF conditions, with respondents reporting greater agreement that differences in their forecasted affective experiences were attributable to focalism, inaccurate lay theories, ordinization, and emotional evanescence. Though subjects in the WTF condition also reported greater use of misconstrual and the projection bias, differences between the two groups were not significant.

CONCLUSION

This research finds evidence for many of the sources of AMF identified in non-consumption contexts. The most prevalent were sources tied to misconstruals and the isolation effect. Misconstrual was not, however simply failure to consider other possible outcomes or potential product failure, but also misconstrual of usage, social approval, social acknowledgement, of marketplace exchanges, of economic changes, of product needs, and of the product’s larger role in one’s future. The next most prevalent were ordinization and motivated distortion.

Patrick et al (2007, forthcoming) found that while affective misforecasting occurs in a variety of consumption domains, its impact is strongest when feelings are WTF. Perhaps for this reason, we observed a greater number of sources of AMF when feelings were WTF compared to BTF. Most of these were related to the initial representation of the future outcome or event and included failure to deeply consider the purchase, ignore gut instincts or consider the long-term viability of the product in relationship to longer term vs. shorter term goals. In general, the sources of AFM were more numerous and hence more complex when the outcome was WTF than when the outcome is BTF.

_Limitations and Future Research._ While use of a critical incident methodology enables the study of AMF across a variety of “real” consumption experiences, it affords little control over factors that might impact the frequency of sources, such as time since the consumption experience or the types of consumption experience. This limitation is not critical to the interpretation of the results of this study, since the main objective was to identify sources of affective misforecasting in the consumption domain. Moreover, the fact certain sources were not observed does not mean that they do not exist; perhaps they are simply not accessible (they are unconsciously used) or are not easily articulated.

Future research may link the various sources of affective misforecasting to consumer satisfaction, demonstrating the unique influence of these sources of misforecasting on satisfaction. Furthermore, the implications of these sources on the nature and quality of brand-consumer relationships, brand loyalty, etc. is worthy of study.

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