Relationship Stages and Consumption Patterns: Variations in Object Attachment and Importance of the Brand

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This paper presents a conceptualization of relationship stages and links it to object attachment and the importance of brands. The relationship cycle refers to intimate relationships and is proposed to consist of four stages: single life, infatuation, committed relationship, and dissolution. Each stage is consumer-perceived rather than actual, and is signified by a distinct combination of object attachment levels, in which the importance of brands also varies. These fluctuations are proposed to be driven by consumers’ need to communicate or maintain their self-identity throughout the different stages.

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Improving Consumer Quality-Efficiency By Using Simple Adaptive Feedback in a Choice Setting
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This paper proposes a feedback control based adaptive scheme for providing choices for users in a web setting. We hypothesize that using this scheme for updating the number of choices presented produces an efficient method of user interaction. We conducted an experiment with seventy-five subjects who had to choose a computer they would buy, given monetary constraints from a large choice set. We used various algorithms for number of choices to be presented to the users in a time-sequential manner. One algorithm was the proposed Simple Feedback Algorithm, which was proven by the data collected to be the most quality-efficient.

The Negative Stigma of Coupon Redemption
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The present research explores the possibility that the positive act of redeeming coupons to save money is a socially stigmatized behavior. Further, we suggest that not only does a stigma exist for the consumer who redeems a coupon but that the negative stigma extends to influence other shoppers in close proximity to the consumer. The results of a laboratory and a field investigation confirm that coupon redemption is a negatively stigmatized behavior and that its negative implications extend to impact other non-involved bystanders.

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Consumers’ interpersonal relationships have often been excluded as explanatory variables in consumption behavior (Richins, 2001), despite their ability to affect consumption practices (Johnson and Thomson, 2003). As intimate interpersonal relationships relate to consumers’ happiness, feelings of self-esteem, fulfillment, goal achievement, and general well-being (e.g., Leary, 1999; Leary and Downs, 1995; Peplau and Perlman, 1982; Mikulincer, et. al, 2003) they are likely to influence both the type and the volume of products consumed.

We propose that the effect of interpersonal relationships on consumption behavior can be observed by taking into account different relationship stages. For example, research has shown that divorced men and women dine out more often than their married counterparts, and women spend more money on shoes and hair care if they are divorced rather than married (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003).

If consumption patterns differ across stages of the relationship cycle, marketers could approach consumers with more targeted advertising messages when their relationship stage could be identified. Similarly, consumers could better protect themselves from persuasive messages by recognizing that a particular relationship stage might leave them vulnerable to such claims.

The purpose of this paper is to present a framework of consumption patterns across relationship cycle stages. We propose four different relationship cycle stages—single life, infatuation, committed relationship, and dissolution—and relate them to object attachment and the importance of brands. Each stage is signified by a distinct combination of object attachment and brand importance, in which brand importance can be high or low and object attachment broad or narrow, and deep or shallow. Breadth of attachment denotes the volume of objects that the consumer is attached to, whereas depth signifies the meaningfulness of the attachment. Brands are separated from objects, as they are vehicles of self-expression used for the creation of an ideal-self (Hogg et al., 2000).

Consumer lifecycle stages and consumption

In the single life stage consumers are seeking to define their self-identity. An identity is effectively communicated through the brands the consumer chooses. For example, a woman can choose to be a sporty Esprit girl, or a classy Armani woman. Product categories that are often used for the purpose of communicating one’s identity are those that are highly observable in nature, such as clothing, beauty products, and services, which can communicate the status and attractiveness of the owner. Therefore, we predict the importance of brands, as well as the object attachment to increase. More specifically, we predict that the object attachment increases both in breadth (as there are many objects the consumer is likely to be attached to) and in depth (as the meaning the consumer attaches to objects is likely to be very elaborate).

In the infatuation stage, a consumer has found a potential partner that s/he is infatuated with. To maintain harmony and ensure the success of the relationship, consumers often try to communicate their ideal self-identity to their partner. As a result, the importance of brands (as they signal status and quality) is likely to remain high. However, the breadth of the attachment to objects is likely to decrease. With the advent of the new partner, the objects no longer play such a central role they used to do. Thus, as compared to the single life stage,
in which object attachment was broad and deep and brands important, the broadness of the attachment as well as the importance of brands, is likely to decrease in the infatuation stage.

In the **committed relationship** stage consumers focus their attention on the relationship they have. In this stage, the breadth of object attachment decreases, as consumers are shifting their attention from objects to the relationship, and no longer feel the need to communicate a distinct identity. In contrast, the depth of object attachment increases, since the objects acquire bring additional symbolic meaning that is likely to be linked to the relationship (e.g., romantic dinners or holidays). Similarly, the importance of brands decreases, since consumers no longer need brands as much to reinforce their ideal-self.

During the **relationship decline and dissolution** stage consumers begin to separate themselves from the relationship identity, and start seeking a new individual identity. As a consequence, the breadth of their attachment to objects grows in view of the fact that consumers begin to experiment with new products. At the same time, the depth of the attachment decreases, as the objects are just trials, i.e., not meaningful per se. Simultaneously, brands are increasing their importance, since consumers start paying more attention to what brands can signal about their identity and use it for creating a new identity.

The existence of a link between a consumer relationship stage and his or her consumption pattern has several implications for both marketers and consumers. Consumers are likely to be more influenced by certain types of persuasive messages in particular stages of their relationships. Marketers could use this information to their advantage to better target those consumers who are likely to be most receptive towards the message. For example, consumers in the decline stage are more likely to be receptive towards innovations and products that involve excitement. As they seek for a new identity they are willing to experiment with a variety of products. Brands of the products, on the other hand, should be communicated to single consumers or those in the beginning of a relationship, as they are more susceptible to use a brand as a signal of status and quality.

Consumers, on the other hand, could overcome vulnerability associated with particular stages (such the decline stage), if they can link their feelings to a particular stage. Recognizing that consumption might be a reflection of a particular relationship stage that might leave the consumer insecure can help the consumer limit or control excessive spending.

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**Attributional Processes during Product Failures – The Role of the Corporate Brand as Buffer**

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Michaela Waenke, University of Basel
Andreas Herrmann, University of St. Gallen
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Information about product failures is expected to deteriorate brand attitudes. However, our research indicates that the harmful impact is attenuated if the responsibility for the failure can be assigned to a superordinate brand. We found a significant interaction between the favorability of product information and the strength by which a product brand is endorsed by a corporate brand. Negative information reduced attitudes towards the product brand but only when the product brand was not strongly endorsed by a corporate brand. These findings call for the incorporation of the corporate brand’s function as buffer into the models of brand architecture.

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**People We Love to Love and People We Love to Hate: Predicting Desired Outcomes of Reality TV Scenarios**

Jennifer L. Young, University of Texas, Austin
Julie Irwin, University of Texas, Austin

This study seeks to uncover the qualities of participants that people look for when deciding on a reality TV contestant to root for or root against. We examine the relationship between a number of respondent ratings (e.g., similarity to self, attractiveness, intelligence) and the respondents’ desire to see the contestant win or lose. We expected, and found, that preference for contestant success depended on the type of reality show (we tested four basic types: relationship drama, sadism, trickery and glamour).

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**The Sphere of Pure Consumption: Outsourcing the Production of Sacred Commodities**

Teresa Davis, University of Sydney
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This paper explores the phenomenon of outsourcing of production of sacred ‘commodities’. The example of the international markets for adoption is examined as one manifestation of such outsourcing. The creation of distance and separation between the ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ cycles is offered as one of the ways consumer markets seek an utopian market where production does not taint consumption. The industrialised late capitalist economies are seen as becoming a sphere of pure consumption, while the less industrialised economies in transition are seen more and more as bearing the lion’s share of production of these ‘products’.