Consumer devotion and brand love have recently attracted rising interest in consumer research. Due to their high emotional attachment, brand devotees love and adore their brands and even fervently defend them against all odds. Yet, some of these relationships break down. This article addresses the question why strong emotional bonds with brands are weakened, and how consumers experience the process of emotional detachment and relationship termination. Phenomenological interviews with brand devotees revealed that – similar to personal relationships – personal transformation and physical and psychological injuries are two main categories of reasons for brand love to vanish.

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ABSTRACT

Consumer devotion and brand love have recently attracted rising interest in consumer research. Due to their high emotional attachment, brand devotees love and adore their brands and even fervently defend them against all odds. Yet, some of these relationships break down. This article addresses the question why strong emotional bonds with brands are weakened, and how consumers experience the process of emotional detachment and relationship termination. Phenomenological interviews with brand devotees revealed that—similar to personal relationships—personal transformation and physical and psychological injuries are two main categories of reasons for brand love to vanish.

INTRODUCTION

Apple, the iconic cult brand (Belk and Tumbat, 2005) is undoubtedly one of the brands which is said to be loved by its users and fans. Apple fans are devoted brand evangelists and defend the brand fervently, if necessary. However, even the most convinced Apple devotees were at least irritated by Steve Jobs’ pricing policy of the recently introduced Apple iPhone in the US. People were eagerly awaiting the new iconic iPhone. They were spending their nights in front of the stores in order to pay 599 $ and get one of the first iPhones. When Apple reduced prices to 399 $ after two months, some were furious and ended their relationship with the brand, although they still loved Apple. Sounds like personal relationship problems? Probably very much so.

The Apple story is just one out of many examples of brand relationship termination with a loved brand. Literature on brand switching behavior and relationship termination in general is rich (Andreasen, 1984; Schouten, 1991; McAlexander, 1991; Fajer and Schouten, 1995; van Trijp et al., 1996; Fournier, 1998; Mathur, Moschis and Lee, 2003 Perrin-Martinnenq, 2004). However, we have only limited evidence of dissolutions of consumer-brand relationships that were once highly emotional and committed partnerships (see: Fournier, 1998; Aaker, Fournier and Brasel, 2004; and Price, Arnould and Folkam Curasi, 2000 about older consumers’ disposition of possessions). Firstly, consumers who are highly committed are brand loyal by definition. Secondly, enthusiast consumers and brand devotees are usually much more forgiving and tolerant in case of transgressions from the side of the brand (Fournier, 1998). But when, and under what circumstances do they decide to cut these strong emotional bonds? How do they experience this break up?

This article aims to research and theorize about the termination of strong consumer-brand relationships and contribute to a more thorough understanding of brand love dissolution. To this end we will briefly review the literature on brand relationships and strong emotional bonds with brands in general. We will further summarize literature on possible reasons for brand relationship dissolution, and provide empirical insights into consumer stories of breaking up with a brand they love. In the discussion section we draw a parallel to marital relationship dissolution, and add some thoughts for future research.

STRONG EMOTIONAL BONDS BETWEEN CONSUMERS AND THEIR BRANDS

Susan Fournier’s (1998) expanded relationship perspective entailed a wealth of empirical and theoretical insights into emotional bonds between consumers and their brands, which was fuelled from mainly two streams of research. While one of them is rooted in a quantitative view on consumer-brand relationships, and called (product) attachment (Ball and Tasaki, 1992), attachment to brands (Thomson, MacInnis and Park, 2005), or brand love (Ahuvia, 2005), the other stream of research is more qualitative and interpretive in nature and comprises work on brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Aaker, Fournier and Brasel, 2004), and devotion (Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007, 2008). In general, the importance of such relationships for consumers’ identity projects, personal style, social categorization, and self-definition is unquestioned.

Brand attachment is a construct which has been introduced in consumer research in order to explain high degrees of emotional attachments to brands (Thomson, MacInnis and Park, 2005). Individuals form attachment to a myriad of objects (Belk, 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988; Richins, 1994), brands (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), film series (Kozinets, 2001), places (Maclaren and Brown, 2005), or activities (Hemetsberger, 1999), which evoke feelings of connection, affection, love, and passion. Attachment theory in psychology predicts that individuals who are attached to a person are more likely to be committed to, invest in, and make sacrifices for that person. Emotional attachment to brands is expected to lead to similar results with regard to beloved objects, which has major implications for brand loyalty and emotional commitment, in particular.

Ahuvia (2005) introduced a similar construct, termed brand love. He contends that love objects have a strong influence on our sense of who we are. Hence, they determine our self-concept, contribute to our self definition, and also demarcate the boundaries between ourselves and the identities that we reject. Viewed from this perspective, brand love may actually be highly relevant for times of change, and personal transformation. As a matter of fact, research on brand detachment has found particular life events, and phases of transition to be major causes for brand detachment or brand switching (Andreasen, 1984; Mathur, Moschis and Lee, 2003). It is thus unclear when, and under what circumstances, times of transition foster brand love or rather constitute a peril to the consumer-brand relationship.

Devotion is defined as a somewhat distinct concept in that it concentrates on the private side of consumer-brand relationships on the one hand, and on the behavioral patterns and acts of devotion as a proof for a balanced self- and other-related concerns, on the other hand (Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2008). Devotion is said to be similar to mature love relationships which are defined by passion, intimacy, and dedication. Researchers (Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004; Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007) also emphasize that devotion implies feelings of spiritual and religious excitement, fervor, zeal, and adoration. Similar to love
relationships, brand devotees’ adoration is not very likely to vanish out of the blue.

Although Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007), for instance, criticize the view that brand love and consumer devotion may be seen as an ideal state of ‘endless love’ and highest consumer-brand relationship quality, they leave the question untouched when and why consumers would terminate strong brand relationships, and how consumers emotionally detach themselves from their brands.

**TERMINATING BRAND LOVE**

Consumers terminate brand relationships and change their brand preferences several times in their lifetime. From research into brand-switching behavior we learn that some consumers tend to get bored more easily with brands and products, are variety seekers (van Trijp, Hoyer and Inman, 1996). Other reasons include marketing strategies employed by marketers, or situational influences.

Drawing on literature on interpersonal relationships, Fajer and Schouten (1995) identified three typical patterns of termination: (1) physical separation, (2) new brands replace old ones, or (3) a partner in the dyad reveals or does something to alienate the other. In the case of highly committed partnerships we propose that these patterns are likely to be accompanied by strong triggers, as for instance severe transgressions on the side of the brand, or important transitory stages on the side of the consumer that cause the relationship to deteriorate.

Fournier (1998) suggests two general models of relationship deterioration. The entropy model is based on the assumption that relationships fall apart if they are not actively maintained. As brand devotees are active maintainers by definition, the entropy model as a single cause for relationship termination seems implausible. The stress model (Andreasen, 1984; Fournier, 1998) refers to forceful deconstructions of brand relationships through brand dyadic, personal, or environmental stress factors which are not relationship specific. Consumers may move to another place where they cannot buy the brand, or other alternatives are found to be even more tempting.

Brand dyadic stress is caused by someone breaking the rules of a relationship, a breakdown of trust, or failure to keep a promise. Other failures refer to poor conduct in the relationship, such as poor brand performance, or a failure to reinforce consumer commitment. Similar failures might also occur in consumer-brand love relationships yet such failures are likely to be forgiven and/or downgraded by real brand devotees (Fournier, 1998). Some relationships even show signs of reinvigoration after such transgressions, primarily with exciting as opposed to sincere brands, and in response to recovery efforts (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel, 2004). Although transgressions vary in severity and cause, all are significant in their potential to affect consumer-brand relationships. ‘Sudden death’ refers to utterly devastating transgressions which lead to immediate termination of the relationship.

Personal stress factors occur with life disturbances, role changes, or changes in personality, caused by important life events (Andreasen, 1984, Schouten, 1991, Mathur, Moschis and Lee, 2003). Life events and role transitions are associated with significant changes in consumer behavior in general. New brands can help to cope with distress associated with the adoption of new roles and relinquishing old ones. However, loved brands may also serve as a refuge in turbulent times. It is therefore unclear whether, and which life events do actually have an impact on strong consumer-brand relationships.

Termination of brand love is certainly not a spontaneous decision but rather an ongoing process of dissolution (Duck, 1982). Drawing on Duck’s work, Fajer and Schouten (1995) describe ending processes of brand relationships as a sequence of break-down, decline, disengagement, and dissolution. The time needed to end a relationship most certainly depends on whether termination had been triggered by a disruptive event, or had been rather a series of experiences or developments which contribute to a continuous ‘fade-out’. It is important to distinguish between relationship termination and brand detachment. Brand relationships may be terminated although consumers are still emotionally attached to the brand; on the other hand, consumers may still stick to a brand but affectively detach from the brand (Perrin-Martinenq, 2004). We argue that it is important to look at the process of relationship deterioration, the idiosyncratic sequence of disturbances and related reactions, in order to understand why love relationships fall apart. We aim to elicit stories of relationship termination: the triggers, reactions, and subsequent processes of dissolution that, in combination, mark the end of a brand love story.

**METHOD**

Our empirical work followed a 2-step process. First we identified brand proponents who have had strong emotional bonds with brands that for some reason were terminated. Participants were asked to briefly outline their ‘love story’ with a favorite brand of theirs. To determine whether brand commitment was really strong and emotional we used the brand-relationship-quality dimensions and respective descriptions suggested by Fournier (1998), and additional scale items (Kressmann et al., 2003) and indicators (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel, 2004) for strong brand relationships. Content analysis of the stories, guided and categorized by these dimensions enabled us to decide, if the participants qualified. The final sample consisted of 4 female and 6 male respondents from age 20 to 62, and comprised 10 stories of 10 different passed brand-relationships, including diverse products like cars, clothing, cosmetics, drinks, electronics, and skis. Participants were informed about the goal of the study and ensured confidentiality.

In the second step we conducted phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989) to attain first person experiences on the relationships with their beloved brand, and their end. We chose this form of interview to attain deep insights into this very personal, not always easy to verbalize, and in some cases even painful process. To stimulate the expression of emotions undergone during the process we applied the photo-elicitation technique (Zaltman, 1997). Respondents were asked to bring 3 photos or pictures illustrating or symbolizing their brand relationship and their feelings during the termination process. The pictures were used either at the beginning to stimulate stories about the brand relationship, or in the course of the interview. Some respondents used the pictures to express their feelings. If the pictures were not mentioned by the respondent, the interviewer asked for their deeper symbolic meaning, in order to stimulate additional narratives. At the end of the interview the researchers also asked for a picture which is most representative for the ending of the relationship, again with the intention to eventually evoke additional memories or feelings of the detachment process (Zaltman, 1997).

We tape-recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Analysis followed a two step process (Thompson, 1989). An idiographic analysis documented the single termination experiences including motives, triggers, emotions and processes. Integrative analysis revealed similarities and differences and allowed us to formulate themes, and relate them to processes of brand detachment.

**FINDINGS**

Consumers’ stories of breaking up with the brands they loved revealed how important those brands are for real brand devotees,
and thus how central relationship termination and emotional detachment are for consumers’ selves and identities. Some stories sound quite familiar, some are extreme in a way, some seem to belong to the category of ‘never-ending stories’, and some are even heartbreaking. We found two main categories of relationship termination of brand devotees, which are related to self healing on the one hand and personal transformation on the other hand. In the following we will describe how relationship termination develops, and how behavioral (re)actions of both partners and brand detachment are related to relationship ending.

**Personal transformation**

*My™ just couldn’t keep up with me and my new life*

Sebastian, 29 years old and self-employed with a creative agency told us about his detachment from the Sony brand and his Sony notebook in particular. He had admired Sony since he was a child and all electronic equipment he owned was Sony. His love for Sony culminated in his notebook which he even took along to parties and evenings with friends.

“… at that time I was really crazy. I even took my notebook when going out. I took photos with the first digital cameras and there just was my notebook to transmit them right on spot (to the notebook). … Everybody could have a look and we emailed them immediately. At that time you were really important and cool if you did that. Looking backward I have to say that I had bats in my belly, but at that time it was important.” (…) (My Sony-Laptop) was something like my best friend who I could share with everything and who I took everywhere. (…) Who never lets you down, my Sony Notebook never crashed. Like your very best friend, who you can rely on and who is always with you.”

Sebastian’s passion for Sony started to lag when he quit his job in an advertising agency (which he had started right after college) and started his own business.

“When starting my own business, I also went through a strong personal transformation. I started to refuse run-of-the-mill products, which somehow everybody seemed to have. … Now I am self-employed, experienced in my job, I am successful and in this situation I wanted new things, not these ordinary ones. (…) I frequently looked at Apple-ads. After all, their claim is “think different”. This seemed like the right motto for me and my life.”

During this transition he actually buys an Apple Notebook + iPod and after a while gives away his Sony Vaio as a gift to a friend who needed a computer for college. He describes his feelings when he passed on his Sony to his friend.

“It was quite ok. I already had my Powerbook and was super happy with it. I had my new profession, my self-employment and was full of pleasant anticipation, expecting what future might bring for me. So it was not bad to let loose my Sony. And of course I was happy that my friend would still use it. After all I had been really proud of “the Thing” and I was happy that it is in good hands and that it will be treated with diligence. If I had given it to a stranger it would definitely have been different.”

Actually Sebastian never completely detached from his Sony brand but rather decided to let it ‘fade-out’. It was quite okay for him; a new (love) brand replaced the old one (Fajer and Schouten, 1995) but he could not bear throwing it away; it was so much part of him and part of his former life that he wanted his old brand to find a good place, a refuge. Sebastian actually still shows much respect for his former love brand but feels unable to treat it with the same passion as before. Hence, he passes it on in an attempt to help the brand have the life it deserves; a behavior common for brand devotees (Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2008). Price, Arnould and Folkman Curasi (2000) reported similar findings with older consumers who pass on symbolic-laden special possessions to their heirs. Brands may actually want to help with these rituals in order to preserve the object from becoming secularized.

*Falling in love with another™*

Susanne, 26 works as an office clerk in a medium sized company in a small town in upper Bavaria. Before she was an active athlete within the German Skiing Union and participated in World Series ski-races. She drove “Völkl ski” as a child and also during her career as a ski-racer where she was happy and proud to be selected by Völkl to be sponsored.

“When she finished her active racing career she continued to buy Völkl for her private use until she got to know Hermann Maier [Austrian top skiing athlete] who drove Atomic skis.

“I simply adored him. (…)the way he skied, with all his power. And also this bundle of muscles, that was impressing. … and he drove Atomic.”

She started looking for and test-driving Atomic-skis and Völkl just was not so important any more. For about two years she drove Völkl and Atomic skis and then changed completely to Atomic.

“No I am a confident driver of Atomic skis. I could not say that I dislike Völkl or so, but that just occurred because I admired Hermann Maier so much. Ok, now I also need Atomic skis. They are, of course, really good skis, nothing can be said against that. It’s simply different from driving Völkl. That’s how it was.”

Susanne actually exhibits typical adolescent behavior where falling in love with someone and adoring him is part of this transitory phase. At first sight Susanne’s case looks like a typical brand switching behavior in light of perceived superior alternatives. Yet leaving someone whom she used to love is difficult for her, even if another option seems much more tempting. That is why Susanne actually needs two years of parallel relationship. What is interesting though is that actually the brand testimonial infatuated her which seems decisive for her brand switching behavior. Her admiration for his skiing skills, and the prospect of getting closer to her ‘ideal skier self’ exceeded the fascination with the new brand. Personified brands are strong attractors. Particularly when they enjoy iconic status, they are seductive and predestined objects for adoration.

*De-Glorification*

Simone, a student of the social sciences in her early twenties was a Benetton fan from the age of 5. At that age she “inherited” most of her clothes from older friends. When she occasionally got new outfits, she traveled with her Mum to the next small city to go
to a Benetton store. She remained a devoted Benetton customer for many more years, being particularly fond of the quality, the cosmopolitanism, and the cultural diversity.

“It was a little bit like a part of me in a certain way, also their advertising campaigns. The cheerful children from the diverse nations, and all dressed up with the bright colors of Benetton. So everywhere on the world children wear these garments and I got to do so as well. I am among them. That’s what impressed me when I was a girl.”

Towards her high school graduation she started being less satisfied. She has some bad experiences with the quality of the materials and also senses a drawback in style; too dysfunctional for her changing lifestyle (more travel). She starts buying other brands but keeps buying Benetton. After about 2 years she completely turns to other brands without finding any particular favorite. Simone’s story elicits a quality of brand love that we may actually call ‘glorification’ at a rather young age. In the course of the years, and when naivety changes into informed and emancipated consumer decision-making, the brand cannot keep up. Similar to Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) have called desacralization, de-glorification is a process of brand deterioration, here caused by an eye-opening personal transition into adulthood.

We slowly drifted apart

The following case demonstrates that it may actually be the brand that changes personality in the eye of the relationship partner, which led to a slow but destructive alienation (Fajer and Schouten, 1995). Hans, 62 years old, worked as an engineer and retired last year. For almost his whole life he had a strong emotional bond to Volkswagen (VW), especially the old beetle. He owned beetles, sometimes more than one at a time, and enjoyed almost anything with them like driving, traveling, fixing and tuning it, trading second hand spare parts, Volkswagen ads, and the company behind. VW, especially the beetles were for him exactly what the literal translation of Volkswagen means: a car for all people-solid, sound technology, good value, and suitable for young and old alike. His passion for the brand faded very, very slowly and after 15 years of whole disappointment and to let bygones be bygones. The brand became too fierce in its rejuvenation efforts. Furthermore, when the brand refused to let him engage in ‘labor of love’, he decided to let go. This is actually a commonly observed reaction of brand devotees, who want their brand to develop continuously but who refuse to accept radical changes. This particular process of relationship ending takes years or even decades of slowly drifting apart.

From the Hurt to the Healing Self

The torn self

Maria is 37 and works and lives in her own Living-Design Studio in Munich. Her first true love with an Italian guy entailed her love for “Prosecco Valdobbiadene” (light sparkling wine). This Prosecco “Valdo” saw the two of them through all special occasions of their relationship and was also part of her boyfriend’s family life back in Italy. The Valdo actually became the embodiment of this love affair and had a very special significance in her life. The end of this love affair was very painful and disappointing, and also determined the end of her relationship with the Valdo.

“I wanted to ban everything that I related to him (former boyfriend) from my life. Yes, also the Valdo. Once during that time I bought one more bottle together with a girlfriend, because I liked it so much-maybe to drown my grief a little bit. The next morning I had a terrible headache. Maybe it was simply too much (laughs). Anyway, I decided to buy Valdo never again…. to protect myself a little…. so that it does not hurt when I see it. Especially at the beginning of the first year (after the break up) it was fairly bad.”

During that year of grief she occasionally checks in the stores if the Valdo is still available, but does not buy again.

“I had to separate irrevocably from the Valdo to cope with the whole disappointment and to let bygones be bygones. The memories kept being too strong. Even if I had adored the Valdo; it would not work any more. I would have destroyed myself.”

Even today, 7 years after the breaking, memories of this tremendous disappointment come up when by chance she sees a Valdo. As we know from research on special possessions (Belk, 1988), when brands become imbued with strong meanings and memories, they become symbols and manifestations of our experiences. They become part of the extended self thus are hard to let go. The torn self engages in a healing process of emancipation from persons/things that hurt.

A ‘healing hand’

Andreas has had a strong emotional relationship with Audi. He is hotelier and this year he is going to celebrate his 50th birthday. He brought the picture of a red heart which symbolized his feelings for Audi, “this strong feeling that I felt for Audi, almost love”. He switched from Audi to Ferrari recently, a pretty radical move. Andreas’ left leg was severely injured in a ski accident last year which partly explains his dramatic break up with Audi. He underwent a hard process of physical rehabilitation and cannot do his favorite sports like skiing or golfing any more.

“I simply have to avoid sports. (…) I cannot live like I used to live before. I had to realign my life and in the course of it I replaced my Audi and bought a Ferrari. (…) I just hoped that my parting from Audi would ease the farewell from my
He also finished the relationship with his wife and experienced hard times. A picture showing a teardrop is what he considers most representative for the whole change process, including the change from Audi to Ferrari. He still holds Audi in high respects and still uses Audis for his hotels, but “it’s not my life to that extent any more”; for his new, private life it’s definitely Ferrari now. From a psychological perspective, Andreas faced a similar challenge of physical and psychological ‘healing’. As described by Schouten (1991), consumption activities, including disposition and acquisition, play vital roles in the restoration of harmony to an ambiguous and, in Andreas’ case, physically hurt self. He gave up his wife and his Audi—symbols of his old life. Ferrari, a much stronger brand, serves as a support in times of re-orientation, because it could compensate at least his bodily disabilities, and act as a symbol of regaining strength. With Andreas, too, the personifications of the two brands were decisive for his move. In times of troubles you need a helping hand, in times of recovery, Andreas needed a healing Hero.

Breach of faith
Stefan, a passionate biker was sure to own the best road bike of the world. After having desperately longed for an “Eddy Merckx-Bike” (named after the legendary German bike racer Eddy Merckx) he finally bought (credit financed) the “Ferrari among bikes” for 10,000 German Marks. He was very proud and enjoyed the admiration from his fellows and other bikers.

“It was the most exquisite (bike) one could think of, It was the dream of every biker” (…) It meant incredibly much to me. It symbolized success and a great technical standard. It gave me the feeling to be better, more successful and unbeatable against myfellows. Actually it was sheer lunacy to have myself decorated with this device (…) but I was possessed by it.”

The “dream” did not last long. Despite being “death sure to have the very best material” the frame broke without any premonition on a downhill passage of a dolomite mountains pass and Stefan had a horrible accident. He was catapulted off the road and by great chance survived with minor injuries. Stumberg (1991) explains that the reactions from the company were more then disappointing and hardly went beyond the attitude that “shit happens. There is no 100% safety.” Stefan never again touched this or any other Eddie Merckx bike not to speak about driving one. “So from blind enthusiasm for the bike I hit the zero point or was even below that.”

If the company had reacted differently, he thinks, he might have overcome his fear related to the product. But after this reaction he set seals on this chapter and bought a conventional and simple bike without a “big name” and did not have any problems ever since. Stefan’s detachment from the brand could actually have been prevented if the brand had reacted differently. But the brand turned his back on him and Stefan lost his faith in it. From a psychological standpoint Stefan—similar to Andreas—had to cope with substantial fears, which he managed by making a clear cut. However, although Stefan was deeply hurt by the brand in a physical and in a psychological sense, he refrained from buying another “big name”. Similar to other cases where the brand spoiled the relationship, consumers’ feelings are so deep hurt that they never again engage in another love relationship within the same product category.

Humiliation and contempt
Manfred, Head of Logistics of a big Bavarian company located in Munich was enthused by the car brand Audi and DKW (the former name of the brand who at that time also manufactured motor bikes). Being a child he already adored his fathers DKW bike (see Picture 1). Right after getting his drivers license he kept owning and loving different Audi models for decades. He was always very proud of his cars and convinced to get good value for money until several problems and unpleasant experiences with his last A6 provoked a reevaluation of the brand and finally a break of the relationship.

The problem started on the 3rd day with his last A6. Heading for a meeting he parked in front of his head office and locked the car with the remote key. The car not only locked but opened all 4 windows at the same time. … Once, twice, three times he tried with the same results and an increasing crowd of spectators was giving him advices. Running late for his meeting he called the hotline that kept being busy. Finally he reached somebody who told him that this was not a new problem and that he should just keep trying.

“I was pissed off. I was the mock of the people. My meeting had long begun and my windows kept opening. I called the hotline again and was told by a friendly voice to disconnect the battery
Three weeks later he went to the Audi-garage because his back door would not close, or reopened when he closed the drivers-door. The serviceman closed it almost forcibly without checking the mechanism and accused him of not being able to shut doors himself and making up complaints. Manfred ran mad again, and had his problem solved by another mechanic.

“First the window story, then the garage, where they proofed to be extremely arrogant and treated me like I was no Audi-customer at all, though this was my 6th Audi. I was nobody for Audi. Well, so other cars started to attract me; according the motto there are plenty more fish in the sea.”

He also started to look at car statistics and tests in magazines and realized that other cars might be better value. When the period of mounting unpleasant events added up to about 2–3 years he broke up with Audi, and ended up choosing a Skoda as his next car.

“I would never have put aside Audi overnight. No, no, I was far too attached to them. But as things go, there is one straw that breaks the camels back.”

Manfred’s story is the typical story of several severe transgressions from the side of the brand, which eventually leads to relationship termination. What is stunning though is the fact that it took him years to terminate the relationship and detach from the brand. Detachment itself was an active process of looking for a car with purely functional value. No love involved here at all.

Marion, a housewife, 54 years old, told us about her story with the cosmetics mail-order (internet) supplier Yves Rocher (YR) with limited direct distribution in YR-stores in some cities. More than 20 years she loved and used her YR products and convinced many friends of her beloved products.

“I simply could trust the brand and I knew I was right when I used the brand and that they were just the thing for me. These cosmetics very soon became a part of me. It was a ritual to go to the bathroom and use my cosmetics which almost seemed to have waited for me well arranged in the mirror cabinet. (...) It was my one and only. (...) Using the cosmetics in the morning was like the sun rising in the morning, simply fantastic.”

When she moved to Skopje, Macedonia with her husband, the relationship came to a sudden end. After having settled in Skopje she wanted to restock her inventory of personal care items. Her new address was fairly long and did not fit into the online-form provided. So she called an operator for help. After a few unpleasant calls and emails she was informed that there was no solution for this problem and that she could not order to this address.

“I had to abandon the products I needed. That really annoyed me. The whole bureaucracy, I was really frustrated and disappointed. I was angry at YR. I could not order and I will not order because I was so furious. I had ordered for decades and spent a lot of money (...). I was an absolutely loyal customer and this makes me just sad. You do not expect such things. (...) It still offends me, when I talk about it. The whole anger comes back up in me. ...I even asked her, if she could eventually write the address by hand on the parcel, but even that was too much for them. They told me it’s not possible because everything is automatized. Bullshit, nobody can believe that, right?”

On her occasional visits back home in Germany she could actually buy YS products in one of the stores, but now she refuses to buy them.

“I could not even imagine a life without YR products. Now I realized that it does go without. Nobody can take me back to one of the stores... it hurts being disappointed so deeply. I still think a lot of my YR creams and such. For some I still haven’t found alternatives ... They are the ones I miss particularly. Nonetheless I will not buy from them again. Who do they think I am!”

At this point of enrage, forgiveness is not possible any more. As Gottman (1993) contends, at this stage of hypervigilance, attribution bias would cause even negative interpretation of positive behavior. Humiliation and contempt are the worst that could happen in a relationship, because they communicate disgust (Gottman, 1993). Inevitably contempt leads to greater conflict and negativity, the remaining wounds are hard to heal, if ever. What is interesting though is that Manfred made a clear cut, whereas Marion is still emotionally attached to the brand. One possible interpretation could be a gender effect. Another interpretation Marion’s highly emotional decision to take revenge and not to buy any more. As she immediately terminated the relationship she was lacking time to emotionally detach from the brand. Hence, she reported that she is still suffering from the painful break up.

**DISCUSSION**

Consumers and brands divorce. Whereas it is not new that consumers are more or less brand loyal, terminating relationships with brands they love is no impulse reaction, goes much deeper in its emotional quality, and–as indicated above–has a deep impact on consumers’ lives. Although our research is exploratory in nature, and many more stories might exist, we could carve out two main factors that contribute to the termination of a love relationship with brands: personal transformation and coping with physical and psychological injuries. When consumers break up with their brands, it is always connected to a major life event and/or phase of personal development and emancipation, or with a changing brand personality, which contributes to a growing incompatibility of the consumer and his brand. Hence, our findings support current knowledge, particularly regarding transitions of change and changes in consumption patterns (Andreasen, 1894, Schouten, 1991, Fajer and Schouten, 1995), but also clearly transcend what is currently known in literature in at least two ways.

First, the findings indicate that the termination of a love relationship with a brand has to be clearly distinguished from the process of emotional detachment. Consumers may break up but still love their old brands, as is the case with Andreas’ Audis, or Marion’s story with Yves Rocher. Even in cases where the company has caused relationship termination, it seems hard for consumers to let their love brand go. Vice versa, consumers may need years of detachment from a brand before they actually terminate the brand relationship. As our study shows, emotional detachment is a long (see also Coulter and Ligas, 2000) and active process. The findings indicate that consumers need to actively detach themselves from their love brands, either through cognitive degradation or behavioral engagement in retaliation, searching for alternatives, passing...
it on, or similar. These processes of detachment are accompanied by ambiguous feelings and behavior, as exemplified in several cases.

Secondly, we found that breaking up with a love brands exhibits parallels to breaking up with a strong personal relationship. In some cases people fall in love with another brand, which is qualitatively different from a typical ‘fling’ (Fournier, 1998) where relationship termination is foreseeable; in other cases, proactive sustaining behavior and communication is missing for a long time; other stories reveal that consumers are not willing to accept the personality development of the brand in the course of the years. In cases of relationship endings that are ‘caused’ by the love brand, transgressions are either severe, causing highly affective reactions, or relationship ending is an extremely long process of steadily growing misfits between the person and the brand. Emotions that were triggered by brand transgressions range from anger and enrage, to grieve, feeling betrayed, or even fear, and eventually lead to relationship termination or even retaliation (Grégoire and Fisher, 2008). Accordingly, triggers that cause such strong emotions are much more severe and usually occur not only once.

Drawing on research about marital divorce, we can distinguish several deteriorating factors, which contribute to the termination of a love relationship. Gottman, in an interview (2007), contended that the best predictors of breakup are ‘criticism’, ‘defensiveness’, ‘stonewalling’, and ‘contempt’. Interestingly, all four of these “Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (Gottman, 1993) have been reported by our informants as behaviors enacted by the brands they loved and broke up with, probably the most devastating being stonewalling and contempt as exemplified by the Yves Rocher story. Defensiveness is a rather common ‘brand behavior’, portrayed by Stefan’s Eddie Merckx story, and brought to perfection by Audi’s reaction to Manfred’s quest for help, which was additionally spiced with criticism.

Viewed from a positive perspective, brands that are loved can do a lot to support a positive, life-long love relationship by treating consumers with respect and showing affection. Several of our cases indicate that, even after severe transgressions, consumers are reluctant to give up their emotional relationships. Similarly, times of transition could open up new opportunities for consumer-brand relationships and deepen the emotional bonds. Ahuvia (2005) has pointed out the importance of love brands for supporting personal identity that combines potentially conflicting aspects of selves, enable personal growth, and renewal of the self. Future research into consumer-brand relationships that successfully mastered turbulent times could elicit possible courses of action. Future research is also needed to highlight whether gender differences, or other personality characteristics, influence processes of emotional detachment. Love stories and strong emotional relationships might be highly idiosyncratic in their particular development and thus need emphatic brands that are familiar with ‘The Art of Loving’ (Fromm, 1956).

REFERENCES


