Disadoption

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While the extant literature treats product/service/behavior adoption as a unified construct, the opposite process, disadoption, has yet to receive systematic attention as a stand-alone, general phenomenon. This paper takes the first steps toward proposing a general theory of disadoption and suggests a research agenda on this topic.

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Disadoption

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Paper #1: Disadoption
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Paper #2: Disadoping Unsustainable Consumption
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Paper #3: Disadoption through the Relationship Lens
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Paper #4: When Firms Disadopt Consumers: Exploring How Consumers Respond to Firm-Initiated Relationship Disengagement
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Katherine Lemon, Boston College, USA
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SESSION OVERVIEW
The purpose of this session is to focus attention on a fundamental and understudied area: disadoption. While considerable effort has been focused on the adoption of innovations (e.g., Rogers 1995), stopping doing something is an equally intriguing topic. While various specific disadoption behaviors have been studied and or encouraged (e.g., churn/customer defection, health behaviors related to smoking and eating), little effort has been directed toward studying disadoption as a general topic and integrating perspectives into a unified “theory” of disadoption. The purpose of this session is to make progress in that direction.

The session will begin with a paper by Lehmann and Parker which discusses disadoption as a general phenomenon. Aspects discussed will include reasons for disadoption (including whether it is voluntary or forced and long or short term), which forces speed or retard it, how to model it, and what consequences arise (e.g., is it accepted or resisted?) Then three very different types of disadoption will be discussed.

Specifically, Min Ding will discuss cessation of behaviors that relate to sustainability. Susan Fournier will take a different tack, viewing disadoption from the lens of a relationship breakup. Finally, Kay Lemon will focus on modeling forced disadoption in the area of customer defections, e.g., when companies decide to delete a customer and how the customer responds. The session will conclude with a general discussion aimed at integrating the talks and creating an agenda for future research.

Disadoption

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The breadth of studies investigating diffusion and adoption processes is impressively extensive (for excellent reviews, see Majaj, Muller, and Bass 1990; and Sultan, Farley, and Lehmann 1990). For instance, factors affecting product and/or innovation adoption that have been investigated include, but are not limited to, advertising (Doekner and Jorgensen 1988; Horsky and Simon 1983; Kaushik 1985), word of mouth and social influence (Godes and Mayzlin 2009; Iyengar, Van den Bulte, and Valente 2011) consumer expertise (Moreau, Lehmann, and Markman 2001), product categorization (Moreau, Markman, and Lehmann 2001), product warranties (Bearden and Shimp 1982), and price and product benefits (Horsky 1990).

Needless to say, product/innovation adoption has received a great deal of attention. While the variety of topics covered under the adoption umbrella has been vast, they have all contributed to a systematic investigation and understanding of when, why, and how fast individuals adopt products and innovations. In other words, adoption is considered a unified, unique, and general process with many inputs, moderators, and consequences.

By contrast, the opposite process, disadoption (i.e., the discontinuance of use of a product or behavior), has yet to be considered as a stand-alone, general phenomenon and has received relatively little systematic attention. While specific disadoption related behaviors have been studied (e.g., smoking cessation, dieting, product disposal, etc.), the focus has been on the specific activity rather than the general process of disadoption. The purpose of this paper is to consider disadoption as a general phenomenon and outline its antecedents, processes, and consequences in the spirit of Greenleaf and Lehmann’s (1995) analysis of reasons for decision delay. In contrast to that work, however, we consider a broader range of instances in our conceptualization and include a more diverse population in our experiments.

One perspective on disadoption is that stopping doing something is merely the adoption of a new (or non-) behavior, which suggests that disadoption and adoption can be characterized, conceptualized, and modeled in the same way (e.g., a Bass model can be used to model disadoption as well as adoption). From this perspective, choosing to quit smoking is identical to choosing to live a smoke free life functionally, behaviorally, and psychologically. At first glance, this seems to be a reasonable position. After all, given a choice between A and B, choosing “A” is equivalent to choosing “not B.”

However, there are several aspects of disadoption which are unique. First, when a person disadopts something, there is relatively little uncertainty about what they are foregoing, in contrast to adoption processes where uncertainty is inherent. Second, while adoption is generally modeled in a binary fashion (yes or no), disadoption can be gradual and partial, occurring over time or in steps or stages. Third, whereas adopting a product requires taking possession of it, it is possible to disadopt a product without disposing of it. Fourth, giving something up brings into play several psychological processes such as loss aversion and possession utility which play less of a role in adoption decisions. Further, the psychology of choice has been shown to differ significantly from the psychology of rejection (Cherny 2009; Laran and Wilcox 2011; Park, Jun, and MacInnis 2000; Shafir 1993). Consequently, a broad examination of disadoption seems warranted.

Broadly described, we define disadoption as the process of cessation or substantial reduction in the use of a previously valued behavior or possession. This process can be fairly complex. Disadoption can occur either abruptly (“cold turkey”) or over the course of a long period of time. It can be triggered by a variety of external (e.g., availability or social pressure) and internal (e.g., a new or increasingly salient goal) factors, whose effects may be cumulative. It may be a permanent or temporary change. And, importantly, the subsequent reaction to the disadoption may be positive and reinforcing or negative and regret inducing.

This paper takes four major steps toward formalizing the concept and investigation of disadoption. First, we propose a conceptual
model of the disadoption process. This model illustrates how a large variety of factors including (i) internal and external influences (triggers), (ii) the perceived ease and permanence of the disadoption, and (iii) the ultimate response to the disadoption can impact the likelihood that a consumer will consider (at all) and ultimately choose to disadopt.

Second, we draw from and integrate a wide array of literature that addresses impactful disadoption triggers. This conceptual analysis is supplemented with empirical data on disadoption triggers collected from over 600 student and non-student participants across two studies. Study 1 presents preliminary evidence that the reasons for disadoption are fairly consistent within subpopulations (e.g., students), but can vary significantly across different populations (e.g., students vs. a more diverse national sample). Study 2 factor analyzes consumers’ reasons for disadoption and finds evidence that a wide variety of specific reasons for disadoption can be explained by five factors (general reasons): (i) life transitions, (ii) negative aspects/social pressure, (iii) irritation, (iv) variety seeking, and (v) future viability.

Third, we present an initial discussion on the opportunities and challenges of modeling disadoption. Fourth, and finally, we outline a research agenda for studying disadoption. It is our hope that this paper and session will stimulate conversation and research on the topic of disadoption, a largely ignored yet very important general phenomenon.

**Disadopting Unsustainable Consumption**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Sustainable development (SD) has now become a guiding force in policy making at various government levels, from township to city to state to country, and to inter-nation organizations. For example, many city governments now approve new development with sustainability in mind, and demand their contractors to practice sustainable development. Firms, in turn, have incorporate sustainable development in their strategic planning and daily operation, and further demand their own suppliers and distributors to practice sustainable development. Walmart, for example, asks its suppliers to complete a sustainability report and a supplier that fares badly on this report might lose their business with Walmart. Most importantly, citizens are demanding it and practicing it. In the words of a senior executive at a major consumer product company, “customers will punish us if we don’t do it”.

The modern definition of SD is proposed in the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, also known as the Brundtland Commission). This commission enriched the definition to include both social and environmental concerns and this modern definition is the most important contribution from its report, Our Common Future (a.k.a. the Brundtland Report). Specifically, it defines SD as “the kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In 1992, UN Conference of Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (also known as Earth Summit) published Agenda 21, in which almost all nations committed to implement specific items consistent with SD. In 2002, World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, heads of state agreed to implement Agenda 21. This year (2012), the United Nation Conference on Sustainable Development (also called Rio+20) will review the progress of SD and set agenda for the future.

The biggest challenge in SD is to change our behavior, change how we normally do things. Government needs to change their policies, firms need to change their practice, and individuals need to change their consumption habits. We study how individuals change their behavior in this paper.

The behavioral change involves disadoption of routines an individual is practicing now, even already habitualized. Such disadoption requires a different theoretical understanding of the process than adoption. To the best of our knowledge, there is no systematic study of disadoption behavior driven by concern on SD. The closest research to this is the disadoption of behaviors that are not healthy, such as smoking, drinking, or uncontrolled eating.

However, there are at least three major differences between the SD driven disadoption and existing disadoption behavior:

- **Existing disadoption research studies behavior that will have an effect on oneself, for example, one’s chance of dying of lung cancer will decrease substantially if he stops smoking. On the other hand, SD related disadoption research studies behavior that has no effect on oneself, instead, it studies behavior that will have an effect on future generation whom the individual will not even meet. For example, if one uses less energy now, the future generation will have more energy reserve (e.g., oil).**

- **Existing disadoption research studies behavior that will have an effect independent of what other people will do. Again, for smoking, if one stops smoking, the benefit of this disadoption is assured regardless of what other people do. On the other hand, SD related disadoption research studies behavior where the effect depends on other people doing the same thing. If only one person reduces energy use, and the other people do not, future generation will unlikely benefit from this person’s action. Furthermore, there is a free riding concern. If enough people save energy, future generation will have enough reserve even if one doesn’t do it.**

- **The third difference is that we study willingness to disadopt, in terms of quantitative measures ($). This will provide a more rigorous understanding of this behavior, and provide more actionable guidelines to managers and policy makers, in addition to individuals.**

The types of SD related disadoption behavior we are interested in include the following examples (but not limited to). We will not study duel-purpose disadoption, where disadoption has benefit for SD as well as for oneself (e.g., reducing energy use can save money as well). Here are some examples in SD related disadoption:

- **Disadoption of leather cloth/accessories (to contribute to biodiversity, and reduce animal cruelty).**
- **Disadoption of plastic bags as much as one can (to contribute to low landfill).**
- **Disadoption of disposable plastic water bottles (to contribute to low landfill).**
- **Disadoption of less SD friendly (to environment, to their employees, to the community they are in) business’ products (to contribute to both environment and society).**
- **Disadoption of products with fancy packages (to reduce waste).**
- **Disadoption of eating unnecessary meat (it takes substantial environmental resource to produce meat).**
- **Disadoption of showering too long and too often**

Our research should help understand how consumers make SD related disadoptions, and may help us develop more effective communication strategies to encourage individuals to disadopt such behavior.
Disadoption through the Relationship Lens

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This presentation offers an expanded perspective on disadoption as viewed through the relationship theoretic lens. Our inquiry builds from three brand relationship tenets (Fournier 1998): relationships as processes; relationships as contextualized and meaning-laden experiences involving a person, his/her social networks, and a product, service, or brand; and relationships as multiplex phenomena that vary in strength and kind. These principles stand in stark contrast to the frame of diffusion theory typically applied to the disadoption problem and thus offer the potential to extend our understanding of disadoption in meaningful ways.

First, relationship theory forces us to move beyond popular conceptualizations of disadoption as a yes/no brand decision to consider the process aspects of the experience at hand. Relationships, at their core, are dynamic phenomena that evolve and change in response to reciprocating signals exchanged over time. The process of ending a relationship has been variously described as separation, termination, dissolution, withdrawal, disengagement, divorce, break-up, discontinuity, decline, exit, and rejection—each possessing a process phenomenology worthy of investigation in its own right (Duck 1982). While relationship discontinuity has received attention in consumer research (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2004; Fournier 1998), theory is limited by a focus on brand transgressions as precipitators of relationship decline. Clearly, the transgression-recovery process is important to an understanding of relationship dissolution, but this event-based and brand-centric framework far from exhausts the processes whereby consumers and brands are driven apart. Even within the transgression framework, certain frames have yet to be fully leveraged. Rich constructs from relationship contracting theory including opportunistic contracting (MacNeil 1985) or contract drift and misalignment (Rousseau and McLean Parks 1992) can help explain the deterioration of relationships between consumers and brands. Disadoption viewed through a relationship theory lens can shift basic conceptions of a process that is not always constituted as termination and dissolution, but rather gradual separation or a more liminal state of disengagement and detachment over time.

Second, relationship theory forces deeper acknowledgement of the person and how the experience of disadoption flows from and affects that person’s life. One of the major criticisms of diffusion research concerns its source bias: the tendency to examine diffusion phenomena almost exclusively from the perspective of the change agency itself (Rogers 1995). Despite noteworthy exceptions (Johnson, Matear and Thomson 2011; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000), not enough consumer research has explored what happens when something is dis-adopted: we lack a comprehensive exposition of the lived experience and consequences of disadoption through the person’s eyes. Of interest is the implicit assumption that a discontinued relationship is a “failed” relationship, and that breakups are inherently bad. But dissolution may rescue a person from an abusive relationship or provide paths for growth not possible when a particular relationship is engaged. Recent approaches (Specher and Fehr 1998) treat dissolution holistically as an integral part of a person’s life projects and activities, not as a separate process. Moreover, disadoption can be a very social process that implicates not only the person but also networks of family and friends. A relationship always takes place within a set of other relationships and yet we know little of the role, experience and influence of third parties on the disadoption process itself.

A third relationship principle highlights the diversity of relationships and the variability of processes relating to these different relationship forms. Although there are literally hundreds of types of relationships, consumer research applications of relationship theory designed to enrich our understanding of disadoption focus on but one relationship type: the marriage between consumer and brand. Within this implicit framing, our understanding of relationship dissolution is conceptualized metaphorically as divorce (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987). Perrin-Martinenzq (2004) depicts relationship dissolution as a multi-phased exit process similar to Duck’s (1982) four-phased model of breakdown, decline, disengagement and dissolution in divorce (Perrin-Martinenzq, 2004). Still, consumer researchers have yet to unpack the complexity of the divorce phenomenon as illuminated through relationships research (Baxter 1984; Duck 1982; Simpson 1987). Divorce is a messy, protracted, and embedded experience through which a relationship other becomes dis-integrated from a person and his/her social life.

Still, few brand engagements qualify as marriages (Miller, Fournier and Allen 2012), and emotionally-laden divorces are likely rare. Brand relationships research supports a range of valid templates (Fournier 1998) that are not yet accommodated in theories of disadoption of brands. The character of the dissolution experience will be fundamentally different depending on the type of brand relationship disengaged. For certain relationship types, disadoption plays a different role altogether. For example, separation of brand and person serve not as the ending of a given relationship, but rather as the qualifier for relationship initiation in the case of adversaries, brand enemies and former friends (Johnson, Matear and Thomson 2011).

This study uses findings from three qualitative datasets that collectively enliven the lived experience of disadoption as viewed through a relationship lens. First is a two-year longitudinal inquiry involving twenty-five consumers’ experiences with an Internet grocery service, fifteen of whom eventually disadopt the service. A second database includes comments posted by consumers on blogs, discussion boards and social media sites in response to controversial brand decisions, and focuses on those who disengage from the brand. Lastly, we consider interview data from sixteen loyal, “best customers” whose relationships were terminated unexpectedly at the company’s hands. Collectively these studies allow multiple perspectives on disadoption as manifest in different contexts, thereby addressing our exploratory research goals.

In this presentation we leverage the above theories of relationship deterioration and our data to present alternate conceptualizations of disadoption for five different brand relationships: marriages, flings, adversaries, abusive partnerships, and functional business exchange. Stress factors precipitating breakdown, patterns of break-up, processes of dissolution, and consumer responses to dissolution are considered as they vary by relationship type. We close with propositions intended to improve the accuracy of our disadoption predictions and stimulate research on disadoption through the relationships lens.

REFERENCES


**When Firms Disadopt Consumers: Exploring How Consumers Respond to Firm-Initiated Relationship Disengagement**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Firm-initiated consumer disadoption (firms choosing to disengage from or end a relationship with a consumer) is increasingly common. For instance, in 2007, telecommunications firm Sprint terminated more than 1,000 consumers who called customer service ("too") frequently. Two studies reveal how mechanisms of blame attribution, judgments of deservingness, and social exclusion influence consumer responses to disadoption (e.g., in terms of perceived firm integrity, anger, negative attitude).

Because companies are concerned about their reputation and perceived integrity when abandoning consumers, Study 1 (field study) examines how non-targeted, observing consumers respond. Grounded in deservingness and attribution theories, this study shows that observers’ responses to the firm (Sprint) are influenced by whether they believe targeted consumers deserve being disadopted.

Study 2 (experiment), examines how targeted consumers respond to distinct configurations of disadoption. Grounded in social exclusion theory, it shows that the interaction between how firms disadopt consumers (via direct dissolution vs. costly inclusion) and why firms disadopt them (via dispositional vs. non-dispositional blame) influences consumer response. This study suggests that consumer-perceived firm integrity and anger play mediating roles in consumer response to firm-initiated consumer disadoption.

**Study 1**

The study context is a popular consumer website which posted two stories on Sprint’s decision to terminate consumers in July 2007. The stories described Sprint’s actions and policies around the disadoption of some of its customers, and included a copy of Sprint’s termination letter blaming those consumers for excessive complaining. Commenting on these stories, observing consumers posted a total of 173 comments. These consumer reactions were content analyzed. Coders rated each message from −3 to +3 based on two variables: the poster’s portrayal of the firm’s (Sprint’s) integrity and the poster’s emotional response. Scores at the extreme (−3, +3) indicate the message portrayed firm integrity negatively (−3, e.g., dishonest, unethical, greedy) or positively (+3, honest, ethical, not greedy).

The ANOVA on firm integrity revealed a significant main effect of blame attribution, F(1, 172) = 168.80, p < .01. When Sprint was blamed, perceived firm integrity was negative (M = −1.46). However, when observers blamed the fired consumers, firm integrity was portrayed positively (M = .78). An example posting: “I think many people would disagree with me, but I think this is an honorable way for them [Sprint] to end this.”

The ANOVA on emotional responses revealed a significant blame main effect, F(1, 172) = 86.97, p < .01. Messages blaming Sprint contained negative emotional responses (M = −1.20). An example posting: “Sprint sucks and I hope this idiotic decision hurts their bottom line.” However, when observers blamed the terminated consumers, the messages reflected a slightly positive emotional response (M = .23).

We conducted a bootstrapping analysis (Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010) with blame attributions as the IV, firm integrity as a potential mediator, and emotional response as the DV. Confidence intervals with 5000 bootstrap samples at the 95% level excluded zero (a × b = −1.24; 95% CI = −1.60 to −.91), indicating an indirect effect of firm integrity.

**Study 2**

Study 2 was a 2(blame content: dispositional, non-dispositional) × 2(approach: direct dissolution, costly inclusion) between-subjects experiment. We asked participants to imagine being a member of a bookstore discount club similar to a large U. S. bookstore. Participants were told they intended to renew their membership ($25 annual fee), but one month before the membership expiration the bookstore sent a letter informing them of the disadoption. In this letter, we manipulated two factors. Because excessive complaining and lack of profitability are major reasons for disadoption, we manipulated the (non-)dispositional blame accordingly. We manipulated the disadoption approach by specifying either direct dissolution or costly inclusion through a price increase. Participants then indicated their attitude toward the firm, their perception of the firm’s integrity, and their feelings of anger.
**Negative Attitude.** ANOVA of negative attitude revealed a blame content main effect \(F(1, 177) = 13.44, p < .001\), qualified by its interaction with the disadoption approach \(F(1, 177) = 8.30, p < .005\), see Figure 1. The disadoption approach main effect was non-significant \(F<1\). Contrasts revealed that when the blame is dispositional, negative attitudes were greater under costly inclusion \(M_{CI} = 6.43\) than under direct dissolution \(M_{DD} = 5.94; F(1, 177) = 3.84, p < .05\). The reverse pattern was present when blame was non-dispositional; negative attitudes were greater for a direct dissolution \(M_{DD} = 5.80\) than costly inclusion \(M_{CI} = 5.23; F(1, 177) = 4.46, p < .05\).

**Firm Integrity.** ANOVA of firm integrity \((\alpha = .70)\) revealed a blame content main effect \(F(1, 177) = 12.45, p < .001\), qualified by its interaction with the disadoption approach \(F(1, 177) = 11.96, p < .001\), see Figure 2. The disadoption approach main effect was non-significant \(F < 1\). Contrasts revealed that for dispositional blame, firm integrity was higher with direct dissolution \(M_{DD} = 1.90\) than costly inclusion \(M_{CI} = 1.38; F(1, 177) = 3.96, p < .05\); for non-dispositional blame, firm integrity was lower with direct dissolution \(M_{DD} = 1.91\) than costly inclusion \(M_{CI} = 2.71; F(1, 177) = 8.26, p < .005\).

Using a bootstrapping procedure (Preacher and Hayes 2008), our model included the blame-by-disadoption interaction as the independent variable, blame content and disadoption approach as covariates, and negative attitude as the dependent variable. Potential mediators were firm integrity and anger. Confidence intervals with 5000 resamples at the 95% level excluded zero for firm integrity \((a \times b = - .59; 95\% CI = - 1.10 \text{ to } - .26)\) and anger \((a \times b = - .15; 95\% CI = - .44 \text{ to } - .01)\), indicating an indirect effect of firm integrity and anger.

**Discussion:**

Study 1 suggests that the allocation of blame and judgments of deservingness influence how non-targeted consumers respond to relationship dissolution. Observers who feel that targeted consumers deserved their firing tend to portray the firm positively. Study 2 suggests that the interaction between why and how firms disadopt consumers determines their response. The results show that costly inclusion – under certain circumstances – can be superior to direct dissolution for consumers and firms.