Role of Relationship Norms in Processing Brand Information

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In the present research, we propose relationship norms as a moderator of the specific information-processing strategy adopted by consumers when evaluating a brand. Two types of relationships are examined: communal relationships, in which concern for a partner’s need is paramount, and exchange relationships, in which a matched benefit is expected back from the partner. Across three studies, we test the hypothesis that norms of a communal relationship lead to brand attributes being evaluated at a higher level of abstraction relative to those of an exchange relationship. Dependent variables ranging from product evaluations, memory measures, and feature listings provide converging evidence to support the overall hypothesis.

A number of researchers have examined peoples’ information-processing strategies so as to gain insight into factors that influence attitude formation and decision making (for a review, see Chaiken and Trope 1999). Researchers in marketing and social and cognitive psychology have identified a number of individual (e.g., gender, cultural orientation), stimulus (e.g., argument quality, source credibility), and task factors (e.g., goals, stimulus similarity) that predict when and how consumers employ different information processing strategies. The current research adds to this body of work by investigating the impact of a new antecedent variable, relationship type, on information processing strategy. Prior work in social psychology suggests that the nature of relationship between partners influences the information that is attended to, and the consequent evaluation of the partner. For example, existence of a positive bias can lead people to form less accurate impressions of their romantic partners (Goodwin et al. 2002), turn their partner’s fault into a virtue through a social constructionist process (Murray and Holmes 1993), and devalue attractive alternatives that pose a threat to their committed relationship (Johnson and Rusbult 1989). Research has also shown that compared to an exchange relationship (such as that between business partners), partners in a communal relationship (such as that between family members and friends) attend more to others’ needs relative to their contributions and inputs. Given these findings, we formally explore the possibility that relationship type (communal, exchange) might well predict the type of information processing strategy that ensues.

Recent research in marketing has noted that consumers relate to brands in ways that mirror their relationships with people in a social context (Aggarwal 2004; Fournier 1998; Muniz Jr. and O’Guinn 2001). Research has also shown that consumers’ attitudinal and behavioral responses to a brand’s action are influenced by the relationship norm (communal, exchange) salient at the time of their brand interactions. Specifically, Aggarwal (2004) finds that when a brand’s action violates the relationship norms salient at the time of evaluation, consumers assess the brand more negatively than when the brand’s actions are consistent with those relationship norms. Thus, informed by the findings that consumers use social relationship norms to guide their interactions with brands, and given the potential role of relationship types in influencing the particular information that people attend to, this research uses the relationship metaphor in a consumer-brand context to examine differences in consumers’ strategies when processing brand related information.

MODELS OF INFORMATION PROCESSING

A number of researchers in social cognition and cognitive psychology have proposed dual models of information processing as a framework for understanding the different types of cognitive processes people employ. For example, both

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the elaboration likelihood model, where individuals are said to process information either centrally or peripherally (Petty and Cacioppo 1984), and the heuristic versus systematic processing model (Chaiken 1980) have been applied extensively in marketing to gain insights into the psychological underpinnings of consumer behavior. Other models of information processing distinguish between related but distinct constructs, such as relational versus item specific (Hunt and Einstein 1981), holistic versus analytic (Foard and Kemler Nelson 1984), data driven versus conceptually driven (Bassili, Smith, and MacLeod 1989), shallow versus deep (Craik and Tulving 1975), gist versus verbatim (Reyna and Kiernan 1975), and general versus specific (Sherman, Beike, and Ryalls 1999), among others.

Although a number of these studies have focused on the consequences of adopting the different processing strategies, such as changes in attitudes or evaluations, other researchers have examined a variety of antecedents that may well help predict which processing strategy will be adopted. For example, Foard and Kemler Nelson (1984) suggest that the antecedents influencing the choice of processing strategy can be categorized into one of three types: stimulus factors, task factors, and individual factors. Stimulus factors such as the number of product features (several claims vs. a small set of similar claims) have been shown to influence whether people engage in a relational or item-specific processing strategy (Meyers-Levy 1991). Chaiken and Maheswaran (1994) demonstrated effects of source credibility and argument quality on the nature of the processing strategy. Task factors such as goals (Aaker and Lee 2001), degree of comparability across choices (Johnson 1984), and task importance (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994) have also been shown to predict consumers' processing strategies. Finally, researchers have highlighted the role of individual variables such as gender (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991), level of involvement (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983), and cultural orientation (Aaker and Maheswaran 1997), among others, in influencing consumers' information-processing strategies. This research proposes one additional antecedent variable of the specific processing strategy adopted by consumers: the type of relationship norms salient at the time of processing the information.

**RELATIONSHIP NORMS AS AN ANTECEDENT VARIABLE**

Recent work in marketing has shown that consumers sometimes cross the threshold of commercial transactions; they bring the brand alive by giving it quasi-human qualities. Fournier (1998), in particular, has outlined a broad spectrum of social relationships that consumers use to describe their interactions with brands; for example, best friends, flings, arranged marriages, and committed partnerships. And McGill (1998) notes that people attribute qualities of animism to objects as well—qualities suggesting that, like people, products also have souls and intent.

Building on this work, Aggarwal (2004) has shown that consumers’ responses to a brand’s action are influenced by the type of relationship norms that are salient at the time of their interaction with the brand. Based on prior work (Clark and Mills 1993), Aggarwal (2004) examined norms of two different relationships: communal relationships and exchange relationships. Exchange relationships are those in which people give benefits to others in order to get back a comparable benefit (e.g., a relationship between business partners). In such relationships, people are concerned with how much they receive in exchange for how much they give; they like to share rewards in proportion to their inputs. Conversely, communal relationships are those in which people take care of others’ needs and have a genuine concern for their well-being (e.g., relationships with friends and family members). In such relationships, people take a perspective that transcends an emphasis on self-interest alone: they keep track of their partner’s needs. Aggarwal has demonstrated that consumers use relationship norms as a lens to evaluate brands. He found that consumer attitudes and response to a brand’s action are moderated by the type of relationship norms salient at the time of the interaction.

Given the importance of relationships in influencing our everyday interactions, and prior research that highlights the role of relationships in making certain types of information more relevant, this research examines relationship type as an antecedent variable of information processing strategies. In particular, in this research we propose that consumers’ information processing strategies and product evaluations are influenced by the type of relationship norms salient at the time of brand interaction. Specifically, we suggest that norms of a communal relationship, relative to those of an exchange relationship, make individuals more likely to process brand information at a higher level of abstraction. There is some evidence suggesting that people in an exchange relationship focus on different aspects of information than do people in a communal relationship. Specifically, people in an exchange relationship, relative to those in a communal relationship, are more likely to keep track of their partner’s inputs or contributions to the interaction rather than their partner’s needs. For instance, Clark (1984) had dyads complete a joint task involving circling number sequences in a matrix. Asked to choose the ink color of their pen, a majority of individuals in an exchange relationship chose a color different from that of their partner’s. In contrast, individuals in the communal relationship reliably opted for the same color of ink as that used by their partner. Since individual inputs would have been obscured if pens of the same color were picked but highlighted if different colors were chosen, these results suggest that people in an exchange relationship like to keep track of their partner’s inputs separately from their own. Yet such detailed record keeping is shunned in a communal relationship since focusing on the balance between inputs and outcomes violates the relationship norms.

In a consumer-brand context, we would expect this focus on inputs and outcomes in an exchange relationship to translate into attention to nitty-gritty details about the brand. That is, it is likely that the norms of an exchange relationship
will prompt greater attention to detailed, item-specific information about a brand since that is the only way consumers can track the balance of what they get for what they pay. In contrast, since consumers primed with norms of communal relationship do not look for an immediate quid pro quo (Clark and Mills 1993), we expect that they will attend to information about the overall brand benefits, and evaluate brand attributes more holistically. In other words, consumers in a communal relationship are more likely than those in an exchange relationship to attend to product attributes at a higher level of abstraction. Indeed, we argue that it is not even necessary for consumers to form a relationship with the brand to show this effect. Similar to research showing the impact of priming mood states on subsequent unrelated behaviors (e.g., helping, creativity), we expect that behavior in a consumer-brand context will be influenced by simply increasing the salience of relationship norms in an unrelated, consumer-consumer context.

Three different studies are presented that test the effect of relationship type on the level of abstraction of brand information. Study 1 builds on prior work on categorization to manipulate the level of abstraction by varying the similarity of a proposed extension to the original product and assessing whether the type of relationship leads to differences in consumers’ evaluations. Study 2 uses memory measures such as recognition and response latency to gain deeper insights into the differences across the two relationships when processing brand features that vary in their level of abstraction. These two studies prime relationship norms as an antecedent variable and examine its influence on consumer processing strategies. Study 3 extends the findings of these two studies to examine the influence of consumer-brand relationship type more directly: participants’ open-ended responses are used to examine whether the brand features listed by participants vary by level of abstraction in a specific brand context as well. Together, these three studies provide converging evidence for the moderating role of relationship norms on consumers’ information-processing strategies.

**STUDY 1: NEAR VERSUS FAR PRODUCT EXTENSIONS**

Prior work on cognitive representation of concepts suggests that a hierarchy of representation exists for most concepts (Collins and Quillian 1969; Rosch 1975). Studies show that the basic level is the one that is easiest to access and use and that it has the greatest amount of feature-related information (e.g., a chair). Going from a specific to a more general representation involves moving up the hierarchy to a superordinate level (e.g., furniture). Conversely, one can also move down the level of hierarchy and make the information even more specific (e.g., a garden chair). Depending on the context, consumers have been found to use product features at different levels of abstraction. For example, Johnson (1984) finds that the degree of comparability between alternatives influences the level of abstraction used: things that look relatively dissimilar at a specific feature level start appearing more similar to each other at a broader, overall level of comparison. In other words, alternatives like a television and a stereo that cannot be compared in terms of specific features since they have few specific features in common (e.g., screen size) can be compared in terms of more abstract attributes since they have more such features in common (e.g., enjoyment or status). Johnson thus argues that attributes can be thought of as lying on a continuum going from the concrete to the abstract and that people can move up or down this continuum depending on the context.

Other research in marketing extends prior categorization literature by demonstrating that as the degree of judged similarity between a product and its proposed extension increases, so too, do the positive evaluations of the extensions (Keller and Aaker 1992; Loken and John 1993; Zhang and Sood 2002). Research reported in the mood literature also supports the relationship between categorization and product evaluation and proposes mood as an antecedent of the level of abstraction at which the information is processed. Positive mood states, relative to negative mood states, have been found to induce more holistic processing and less critical analysis, resulting in a broader categorization (Isen and Daubman 1984) as well as greater acceptance of far extensions (Bless and Fiedler 1995).

In this study, the context of a product extension is used to examine whether the type of relationship norm (communal vs. exchange) influences the level of abstraction at which consumers process the proposed product extension and their consequent evaluation of the product extension. Our logic is that when norms of a communal relationship are salient, people will process information at a higher level of abstraction, will perceive even the far extensions as being similar to the original product category, and hence will evaluate these extensions relatively positively. Conversely, when norms of an exchange relationship are salient, people will process brand information at a lower level of abstraction, will likely perceive greater dissimilarities between the proposed far product extension and the original category, and hence will be less likely than their communal counterparts to evaluate far product extensions positively. However, when the proposed extension is similar to the original product, we expect to see no differences between communal and exchange relationships since both sets of consumers are likely to see the similarities between the two. In other words, we expect the impact of relationship type on information processing to mimic those reported in the mood literature. Formally stated, our hypothesis is as follows:

**H1:** Compared to a communal relationship, when the norms of an exchange relationship are salient people evaluate far extensions of a product poorly relative to near extensions.

**Method**

*Design and Participants.* A 2 × 2 between-participants design with Relationship Type (communal, exchange)
and Type of Extension (near, far) as the two factors was employed. Sixty-four undergraduate students participated in this 15-min. study, which was embedded among a set of unrelated studies, and received bonus course credit for their participation.

Stimuli and Procedure. Separate scenario descriptions were developed in order to manipulate the two relationship norms. Clark (1986) has demonstrated that individuals’ behavior toward a partner can be influenced by whether a communal or exchange relationship is made salient at the time of interaction. Furthermore, Aggarwal (2004) finds that social relationship norms (communal vs. exchange) are equally applicable to a consumer-brand interaction. Together, these findings suggest that even if relationship norms are made salient in a social context, when participants perform an unrelated task, such as evaluating a product, the salient relationship norms will likely influence the product evaluations. Thus, in this study, we test communal and exchange relationship norms purely as contextual constructs and examine their influence on a subsequent, unrelated decision task. As such, we manipulated the relationship norms using a social situation unrelated to the product extensions evaluated later.

Participants first read a brief description of their interaction with another person intended to manipulate either the exchange relationship or communal relationship norms. In the exchange condition, the scenario description used such phrases as “keep things even,” “return favors as early as possible,” and “expect to reciprocate.” In the communal condition, the description used such phrases as “is there whenever they need her,” “does things to show she cares,” and “expects friends to be there for her” (see appendix). To strengthen the manipulation, participants then responded to an open-ended question that required them to assume the role of the person described in the scenario and decide how to split a lunch bill with a friend. This open-ended question also served as a manipulation check and was coded on a seven-point scale with lower numbers indicating more of an exchange-oriented response (e.g., pay for only what each person ate) and higher numbers indicating more of a communal-oriented response (e.g., pay for the friend’s lunch too). Participants’ responses confirm the effectiveness of the manipulation, with those in the communal condition revealing significantly higher score than their exchange counterparts ($M_{\text{com}} = 4.03$, $M_{\text{ex}} = 2.79$; $F(1, 62) = 4.56$, $p < .05$).

Following this, participants completed a 12-item main manipulation check questionnaire adapted from Clark (1986). Eight of the scale items tapped into communal norms (e.g., enjoy responding to others’ needs) and combined into a Net Communal score. The remaining four items tapped into exchange norms (e.g., like to keep things even) and combined into a Net Exchange score. High (low) ratings on the Net Communal score and low (high) ratings on the Net Exchange score would be consistent with the manipulation of communal (exchange) norms. Confirming the success of this manipulation, the participants in the communal condition had a significantly higher Net Communal score (Cronbach’s alpha = .82) than that of participants in the exchange condition ($M_{\text{com}} = 4.94$, $M_{\text{ex}} = 3.99$; $F(1, 62) = 17.19$, $p < .001$). In addition, participants in the exchange condition had a significantly higher score on the four-item Net Exchange score (Cronbach’s alpha = .84) than that of participants in the communal condition ($M_{\text{com}} = 4.66$, $M_{\text{ex}} = 5.75$; $F(1, 62) = 16.59$, $p < .001$).

Next, in a seemingly unrelated study, the dependent measure, involving the evaluation of proposed product extension, was administered.

Control Groups. Prior work by Bless and Fiedler (1995) suggests that a positive mood is associated with the use of a holistic processing strategy. Isen and Daubman (1984) have also noted the association between positive affect and the formation of broader categories. Since in a communal relationship the partner is expected to have a genuine concern for the other’s well-being, it could be argued that such a relationship would make everyone feel good and lead to a more positive affect. Hence, a potential alternative explanation of differences observed across the two relationships could lie in the differences in positive affect experienced by the participants. Thus, to ensure that the scenario descriptions developed to manipulate relationship norms did not simultaneously influence people’s perceived affect, a control group of 48 participants were administered the 20-item PANAS scale (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988) to assess the level of participants’ positive and negative affect. Participants in this control group first read either the communal or the exchange scenario and then completed the PANAS scale. There were no significant differences in participants’ positive affect across the two relationship type conditions ($M_{\text{com}} = 3.45$, $M_{\text{ex}} = 3.77$; $F(1, 46) = 1.42$, $p > .10$). Surprisingly, however, participants’ negative affect differed across relationship type conditions with those in the communal condition showing a significantly higher negative affect score than their exchange counterparts ($M_{\text{com}} = 2.65$, $M_{\text{ex}} = 1.99$; $F(1, 46) = 4.52$, $p < .05$). It is likely that this difference in negative affect across conditions was due to some peculiarity of the scenario descriptions (e.g., the communal description mentions how the person was let down by her friend). Nevertheless, this result rules out the positive affect-based alternative explanation that would suggest that participants with a higher negative affect (in this case the communal condition) should focus more on the concrete information—exactly the opposite of what we predict.

To ensure that the two scenario descriptions used to manipulate communal and exchange relationships were comparable in the level of abstraction, a separate control group was conducted in which 61 participants were asked to evaluate the level of abstractness of the phrases used in the scenario descriptions on a four-item scale (abstract—concrete, broad—detailed, general—specific, indirect—direct) adapted from prior work (Newell and Olejnik 1982–83). No significant differences were found in participants’ evaluation of the level of abstraction of the two descriptions (Cronbach’s...
Dependent Measure. The main dependent variable was the participants’ evaluation of a proposed extension for a product, with each participant having to make four such evaluations. The products and the extensions were matched reciprocal pairs (near, far) and were pretested for levels of similarity with the two product categories. Thus, adapting from Zhang and Sood (2002), we chose iced tea and toffee as near and far extensions for a cola manufacturer but as far and near extensions for a chewing gum manufacturer. We based the other pair of extensions, calculator (near/far) and fashion accessories (far/near) for a pen/jeans manufacturer, on the results of the pretest. The participants evaluated these extensions on a four-item, 1–7 semantic differential scale (bad–good, dislike–like, low quality–high quality, unpleasant–pleasant).

Results and Discussion

Dependent Measure. To analyze participants’ evaluations of near versus far product extensions, an average was taken across the four product categories. Next, an overall average of the four items was taken to form a combined measure of participants’ evaluation of the product extensions (Cronbach’s alpha = .96). An analysis of a 2 × 2 ANOVA performed on this measure yielded a significant main effect of Type of Extension (Mnear = 4.33, Mfar = 3.16; F(1, 60) = 40.46, p < .001), but no main effect of Relationship Type (Mcom = 3.78, Mex = 3.64; F(1, 60) < 1). However, consistent with hypothesis 1, there was a significant interaction of Relationship Type × Type of Extension (F(1, 60) = 8.47, p < .01). Results showed that compared to near extensions, the far extensions were evaluated more positively by participants in the communal condition than by those in the exchange condition (Near: Mcom = 4.10, Mex = 4.56; Far: Mcom = 3.48, Mex = 2.88). Specific contrasts revealed no significant differences in the evaluation of participants in the communal and exchange conditions for near extensions (F(1, 60) = 2.99, p > .05). In contrast, participants in the communal condition evaluated the far extensions more positively than did those in the exchange condition (F(1, 60) = 5.80, p < .05). The other set of contrasts revealed that the near product extensions were evaluated more positively than the far product extensions by participants in both the communal condition (F(1, 60) = 5.80, p < .05) and the exchange condition (F(1, 60) = 44.19, p < .001).

Results of this study show that the norms of relationship moderate the degree to which far product extensions are seen as similar to the original product, as revealed by the differences in the evaluations of the product extensions across communal and exchange relationships. Since a communal relationship leads to information being processed at a higher level of abstraction, participants were able to think more broadly, to see the similarities even in product extensions that were relatively dissimilar to the original product category. Conversely, when the norms of an exchange relationship were salient, people attended to the specific/concrete features of a product; hence they were less likely to see similarities beyond the obvious. People thus evaluated the far extensions of a product more positively when the norms of a communal rather than an exchange relationship were salient. In addition, results of the control group run to assess participants’ mood found no difference in positive mood across the relationship type conditions, thereby ruling out this potential alternative explanation for our findings.

It is noteworthy that the participants in this study did not form a relationship with a brand/product. Instead, relationship norms had been made salient by a priming task prior to the product evaluation task. As such, our results provide evidence of the effect of relationship norms as a contextual antecedent variable on consumers’ processing strategies. We expect that an actual consumer-brand relationship should lead to even stronger effects.

In sum, the obtained pattern of evaluations provides evidence for the role of relationship type as a contextual variable. The findings suggest that the salience of communal relationship norms are more likely than exchange relationship norms to lead to brand information being processed at a higher level of abstraction. The next two experiments further explore the role of consumer-brand relationships on information-processing strategies.

STUDY 2: MEASURING MEMORY FOR BRAND INFORMATION AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ABSTRUCTION

In study 1, differences in the level of abstraction of information were inferred from differences observed in consumers’ evaluations of product extensions. Study 2 employs memory measures to more directly examine relationship-type induced differences in information processing. It is reasoned that if communal relationship norms make individuals process abstract or general-level brand information, then these encoding differences would be reflected in later memory measures. Accordingly, we propose that when presented with both abstract as well as more specific (or concrete) information about a brand, individuals in a communal relationship condition would overwhelmingly encode the abstract information, whereas those in an exchange relationship condition would attend relatively more to the concrete brand information.

To determine whether individuals in communal or exchange relationships are more likely to rely on abstract or concrete brand information, we presented participants in both relationship conditions with a description of a new clothing store brand that contained concrete as well as abstract brand information. We later administered a memory test on the participants. The memory test gauged accurate and inaccurate memory for concrete brand information, gauged accurate memory for the more abstract brand information, and gauged memory for information that, al-

alpha = .86; Mcom = 4.69, Mex = 5.08; F(1, 59) = 2.04, p > .10).

Dependent Measure. The main dependent variable was the participants’ evaluation of a proposed extension for a product, with each participant having to make four such evaluations. The products and the extensions were matched reciprocal pairs (near, far) and were pretested for levels of similarity with the two product categories. Thus, adapting from Zhang and Sood (2002), we chose iced tea and toffee as near and far extensions for a cola manufacturer but as far and near extensions for a chewing gum manufacturer. We based the other pair of extensions, calculator (near/far) and fashion accessories (far/near) for a pen/jeans manufacturer, on the results of the pretest. The participants evaluated these extensions on a four-item, 1–7 semantic differential scale (bad–good, dislike–like, low quality–high quality, unpleasant–pleasant).

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though not presented, was nonetheless a plausible inference. We expect that if consumers in an exchange relationship condition differentially encode concrete brand information relative to those in a communal relationship condition, the former will be more likely to not only correctly recognize such information, but also be able to accurately detect inaccuracies. Hence the hypothesis regarding concrete brand information is as follows:

**H2a:** Relative to participants in the communal condition, those in the exchange condition will show higher recognition rates for correct concrete brand information and lower rates of acceptance of incorrect concrete brand information.

However, the impact of relationship type on memory for abstract brand information and plausible inferences as measured by recognition performance is more difficult to predict. First, we expect that communal participants’ focus on encoding abstract brand information will facilitate their accurate recognition of this information as well as endorsement of plausible inferences. Yet, we also expect that exchange participants’ access to concrete brand information will allow them to generate both, appropriate abstract brand information and plausible inferences, thereby obscuring any recognition advantages the communal participants may have had. In other words, exchange-oriented individuals’ recognition performance for abstract brand information as well as plausible inferences may well be equivalent to those in a communal relationship condition. Nevertheless, because exchange-oriented consumers are assumed to rely on generating the abstract and plausible information from their memory of feature-level information encoded earlier, we expect them to be slower than communal consumers at identifying this information. The hypotheses concerning abstract brand information and plausible inferences are thus:

**H2b:** Relative to participants in the communal condition, those in the exchange condition would respond more slowly when correctly identifying abstract brand information.

**H2c:** Relative to participants in the communal condition, those in the exchange condition would respond more slowly when identifying plausible inferences.

Method

**Design and Participants.** A between-participants study with Relationship Type (communal, exchange) as the main factor was employed. Fifty-six undergraduate students volunteered for this study. They earned 1% bonus course credit for their participation.

**Stimuli and Procedure.** Participants were first presented with a relationship manipulation identical to that used in study 1. As before, participants then completed the two manipulation check measures, one open-ended and the other a 12-item questionnaire. Again, the open-ended recoded responses indicated a significantly higher score for communal participants than for their exchange counterparts ($M_{com} = 4.96, \ M_{ex} = 2.84; F(1, 50) = 20.03, p < .001$). Analysis of the eight-item Net Communal score (Cronbach’s alpha = .75) also confirmed that participants in the communal condition had a significantly higher score than participants in the exchange condition ($M_{com} = 4.93, \ M_{ex} = 4.31; F(1, 48) = 5.67, p < .05$). Furthermore, participants in the exchange condition had a significantly higher score on the four-item Net Exchange score (Cronbach’s alpha = .83) than the participants in the communal condition ($M_{com} = 5.34, \ M_{ex} = 6.02; F(1, 49) = 5.29, p < .05$). Thus, the scenario descriptions were successful in manipulating relationship norms.

Next, in a seemingly unrelated study, participants were asked to read a 450-word description about a hypothetical clothing store, Trendz, that contained both concrete and abstract brand information (e.g., “stores in 39 countries” vs. “it is an international brand”). Later, following a filler exercise, the participants completed a computer-based, multiple-choice recognition task. A total of 14 questions were asked, the first two being practice questions. Six of the 12 critical questions tested the participants’ memory for the concrete brand information presented earlier; the other six tested their memory for the abstract information. The 12 questions were presented in a random order. Each question had four possible responses. The six questions on concrete brand information had one accurate and three inaccurate response options. The six questions on abstract brand information had one accurate, one inaccurate, and two plausible inferences as options. Participants were required to select only one of the four responses for each of the 12 questions, but as quickly and accurately as possible.

**Dependent Measure.** The responses to the 12 multiple-choice questions described earlier constituted the primary dependent measure. As mentioned, six questions dealt with concrete brand information (e.g., how many stores is the company planning to open), and six questions dealt with abstract brand information (e.g., the overall philosophy of the company). The responses were first coded as correct or incorrect for the six concrete attribute questions and correct, incorrect, or plausible for the six abstract attribute questions. Next these responses were aggregated across the different categories for the concrete and abstract questions separately, and comparisons of the proportion of the responses in each category were made across the two relationship conditions. The use of proportions required that a variance-stabilizing arcsine transformation be used on the data before the ANOVAs (Kirk 1982). In addition, the response times for each participant were measured and averaged for each category of responses for the 12 questions; they were then compared across the two relationship conditions.
Results and Discussion

Dependent Measure. The mean value of each type of recognition response—expressed as a proportion of total number of responses and average response time—is indicated in Table 1. An analysis of the six questions dealing with abstract brand information was conducted first. For this, the proportions of correct, plausible, and incorrect responses were averaged across the six questions for each participant. Separate ANOVAs for the three categories of responses revealed no differences across the two relationship conditions for the correct responses ($F(1, 54) = 2.83, p > .05$), plausible inferences ($F(1, 54) = 3.09, p > .05$) or incorrect responses ($F(1, 54) < 1$). Thus, as expected, there were no significant differences in the accuracy of recognition of abstract brand information for participants in the communal and exchange relationship conditions. Next, separate ANOVAs for the two response categories for the concrete questions showed that participants in the exchange condition had a higher likelihood of accepting correct concrete brand information ($F(1, 54) = 5.39, p < .05$) and a lower likelihood of accepting incorrect concrete brand information ($F(1, 54) = 5.39, p < .05$), relative to participants in the communal condition. Since an exchange relationship makes consumers focus more on concrete brand information, such participants would encode more such information and perform better in a subsequent recognition task when compared to participants in a communal relationship. Hypotheses 2a is thus supported.

Next, to test hypotheses 2b and 2c, the response times for the abstract brand information across the two relationship types were compared. Results of ANOVA revealed that, as expected, there was a significant difference in the response times of participants in the communal and exchange conditions for the correct and plausible responses. Specifically, consistent with hypothesis 2b, participants in the communal condition were significantly faster than those in the exchange condition when correctly identifying the abstract brand information ($F(1, 52) = 4.22, p < .05$). Similarly, consistent with hypothesis 2c, participants in the communal condition were faster than their exchange counterparts to label the plausible responses as correct ($F(1, 49) = 4.46, p < .05$). There were no reliable differences across the two relationship types when accepting incorrect abstract brand information as correct ($F(1, 18) = 1.40, p > .10$).

Finally, response times for concrete brand information were compared across the two relationships. Results revealed no significant differences for either the correct responses ($F(1, 52) = 2.88, p > .05$) or the incorrect responses ($F(1, 46) < 1$). Thus participants in both communal and exchange conditions were equally fast in retrieving whatever concrete brand information they had encoded earlier.

It is worthy of note that consistent with previous memory research findings that suggest that it takes longer to retrieve general information about objects than to retrieve specific facts (Collins and Quillian 1969), participants in both communal and exchange conditions took longer to respond to questions concerning abstract brand information relative to those pertaining to the concrete brand information.

The results of study 2 thus demonstrate that participants in a communal condition, relative to those in an exchange condition, have faster access to both correct abstract brand information and plausible inferences, suggesting that they particularly attend to and elaborate on brand information presented at a higher level of abstraction. On the other hand, participants in the exchange condition apparently needed to construct the abstract or general brand information by relying on their knowledge of concrete information. It is this reconstruction of information in memory that requires the extra time that translates into the differences observed in this study. As well, even though communal and exchange-oriented participants show no reliable differences in the amount of time needed to recognize the concrete brand information, their levels of accuracy are significantly different. This suggests that at the time of encoding, participants in the exchange condition attend to the concrete brand information relatively more than their communal counterparts and, at retrieval, are able to access more of the relevant information. Together, these findings support the overall premise that brand-related information is processed at a broad overall level in a communal relationship, compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STUDY 2: RECOGNITION PROPORTIONS (SDS) AND RESPONSE LATENCIES BY RESPONSE CATEGORY AND RELATIONSHIP TYPE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concrete information:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>.61 (.20)*</td>
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<td>4,959</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.39 (.20)*</td>
<td>7,438</td>
<td>6,903</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract information:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
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<td>.53 (.19)</td>
<td>11,314</td>
<td>9,375*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plausible</td>
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<td>.40 (.15)</td>
<td>13,350</td>
<td>9,859*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>.07 (.10)</td>
<td>.07 (.10)</td>
<td>10,494</td>
<td>8,474</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.
to an exchange relationship in which it is processed at a more detailed and nitty-gritty level.

In sum, the first two studies support the premise that when evaluating brand-related information, type of relationship norm influences the processing strategy adopted by consumers. One limitation of these studies, however, is that they manipulated relationship norms by using scenarios unrelated to a brand context. Even though these results arguably provide a conservative test of the theory about the role of relationship norms, it will be important to test the validity of our theory in an overt consumer-brand relationship context. Study 3 addresses this issue. The third study differs from the first two in one other way: whereas the first two studies use evaluative and memory measures to examine differences in processing strategies across the two relationships, study 3 uses consumers’ own words as a measure of the level of abstraction at which brand information across the two relationships is processed.

**STUDY 3: GENERATING BRAND FEATURES AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION**

The premise of study 3 is the following: if the type of consumer-brand relationship influences the level of abstraction at which the brand’s features are processed, then similar differences in abstraction will be revealed in the way in which a consumer describes that brand to a third party. The study uses a scenario description to first manipulate communal or exchange relationships with a hypothetical pen brand. Next, each participant is asked to describe the features of a pen in writing to help a friend decide whether to buy the pen. It is predicted that relative to consumers with an exchange brand relationship, those with a communal relationship would list features at a higher level of abstraction. Hence the hypothesis:

**H3:** Compared to consumers with an exchange relationship, those with a communal brand relationship will generate brand features at a higher level of abstraction.

**Method**

**Design and Participants.** This was a between-participants study with Relationship Type (communal, exchange) as the main factor. One hundred and fourteen undergraduate students voluntarily participated in a 15-min. paper-and-pencil study conducted as a filler task for an unrelated computer-based study. The two studies took about 45 min., and the students earned 1% bonus grade in a course for their participation.

**Stimuli and Procedure.** As in studies 1 and 2, participants were first exposed to the relationship type manipulation, which involved reading a scenario. Unlike the previous two studies, however, the scenario descriptions in this study described interactions between an individual and a product, a fictitious brand of pen. Participants were encouraged to imagine themselves in the position of the person being described in the scenario. The participants then responded to a 10-item manipulation check questionnaire, adapted from prior work (Aggarwal 2004), in which six items tapped into communal norms and four items tapped into exchange norms. Analysis of the six-item Communal score (Cronbach’s alpha = .81) showed that the participants in the communal condition had a higher score than those in the exchange condition (M<sub>com</sub> = 4.91, M<sub>ex</sub> = 4.45; F(1, 111) = 4.66, p < .05). An analysis of the four-item Exchange score (Cronbach’s alpha = .65) showed that participants in the communal condition had a significantly lower score than those in the exchange condition (M<sub>com</sub> = 5.21, M<sub>ex</sub> = 5.68; F(1, 112) = 9.34, p < .01). To further assess the effectiveness of the manipulation, participants were asked to rate the extent to which the brand was like a close friend, a family member, a businessperson, and a merchant. High (low) ratings on the first two and low (high) ratings on the latter two would be consistent with communal (exchange) norms. Participants in the communal condition, relative to those in the exchange condition, saw the brand more as a friend or family member (M<sub>com</sub> = 4.84, M<sub>ex</sub> = 3.91; F(1, 112) = 10.56, p < .01) and less as a businessperson or merchant (M<sub>com</sub> = 4.78, M<sub>ex</sub> = 5.38; F(1, 112) = 6.90, p < .01).

To ensure that the relationship manipulations did not simultaneously lead to differences in perceived quality, participants also responded to a two-item measure of quality (quality of products, quality of services). There were no differences across the two relationship conditions on perceived brand quality (M<sub>com</sub> = 6.28, M<sub>ex</sub> = 6.22; F(1, 112) < 1). As in previous studies, participants’ affect was assessed through the 20-item PANAS scale, and no significant differences were found on this measure across the relationship types for either positive affect (M<sub>com</sub> = 3.79, M<sub>ex</sub> = 3.66; F(1, 112) < 1) or negative affect (M<sub>com</sub> = 2.15, M<sub>ex</sub> = 2.07; F(1, 112) < 1). Finally, as before, a separate control group of 59 participants rated the level of abstraction of the relationship scenario descriptions on a four-item scale. This control group was run to ensure that any differences in the abstractness of the features listed in the main study were not being driven by the level of abstractness of the scenario descriptions. No reliable differences were found in the level of abstraction used in the two scenario descriptions (Cronbach’s alpha = .81; M<sub>com</sub> = 4.40, M<sub>ex</sub> = 4.74; F(1, 57) = 1.13, p > .10).

The main dependent variable was the participants’ response to the request to write down all the features of the pen brand to help their friend make a decision.

**Results and Discussion**

**Dependent Measure.** An analysis of the average number of words used by participants to describe the brand showed no differences across the two relationship types, suggesting that the amount of effort put in was equivalent
across the two conditions ($M_{\text{com}} = 10.28$, $M_{\text{ex}} = 8.23$; $F(1, 112) = 2.80$, $p > .05$). In order to focus on the most important features, we decided to limit the analysis to the first three features mentioned by each participant. Two independent judges rated each feature for each participant on a seven-point concreteness-abstractness scale, with the higher score indicating a higher level of abstraction. For example, a feature like “color of the pen” or “ink flow” got a lower rating (1, 2, or 3), but a feature like “classy” or “style” received a higher rating (5, 6, or 7). For each of the three features, the ratings for each participant were averaged and the average rating for the two judges estimated. Correlation across the two judges was relatively high (correlation = .82). Finally, this average score was compared across the two relationship conditions. Results of an ANOVA show a significant main effect of Relationship Type. Consistent with hypothesis 3, participants in the communal condition listed brand features at a significantly higher level of abstraction compared to those listed by participants in the exchange condition ($M_{\text{com}} = 4.87$, $M_{\text{ex}} = 4.32$; $F(1,108) = 8.01$, $p < .01$). To convincingly rule out a demand-based explanation of these findings, a control group of 40 participants were required to complete a hypothesis guess questionnaire at the end. None of the participants revealed an awareness of the experimental hypothesis.

The results of this study show that the type of relationship with a brand in fact leads consumers to focus on different features that vary on their level of abstraction. As well, the results of this study, along with those of the control group, rule out a number of alternative explanations. First, the results suggest that the differences in the level of abstraction of the features were not driven by the differences in the abstractness of the scenario descriptions used to manipulate the two relationships. Second, the consumers’ PANAS scale ratings show that the results were not driven by differences in the levels of participants’ perceived positive or negative affects. Third, participants’ perceived brand quality was similar across the two conditions, suggesting that perceived brand quality did not drive the results. Finally, the amount of effort expended in the two relationship types was not significantly different. If anything, the means for the number of features listed by the participants suggest a directional difference, with greater effort expended in the communal condition than in the exchange condition. Since greater effort has been shown to lead to an item-specific processing strategy (Chaiken 1980), these results suggest that participants in the communal condition should process information at a lower level of abstraction—a prediction opposite to what was observed in this study. Hence, our results cannot be explained by differences in the amount of effort across the two relationships.

These results are important in that they replicate the findings of studies 1 and 2, but in a completely different context and using a very different manipulation for relationship norms. Overall, these results suggest that when interacting with a brand, the type of consumer-brand relationship influences what information becomes salient. Hence in an exchange relationship, since the focus is on balancing the inputs and outcomes, people tend to focus on every nitty-gritty detail, which results in processing information at a lower level of abstraction. Conversely, in a communal relationship, the focus is on satisfying the partner’s needs rather than ensuring a balance of each individual transaction. As such, consumers focus on the overall benefits being delivered by the brand, thereby processing information at a higher level of abstraction.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of these three studies show the moderating effect of relationship type on consumers’ processing strategies. The results suggest that communal relationships lead consumers to evaluate brands at an overall holistic level, thereby processing brand information at higher levels of abstraction. Conversely, exchange relationships lead people to evaluate brands in an item-specific manner, thereby processing brand information at lower levels of abstraction. The results are important in that the three studies used very different dependent measures (evaluations, recall and recognition, and self-generated features) and very different contexts (product extension, clothing store launch, and pen purchase). Furthermore, the influence of relationship type was examined not only as a purely contextual factor (studies 1 and 2) but also as a specific consumer-brand interaction (study 3). The results of the three studies and the different control groups also rule out a number of potential explanations that could be offered as alternatives to the proposed thesis. Together, the results of these three studies provide converging evidence, thereby giving us confidence to propose relationship type as a moderating variable in a consumer’s choice of information processing strategy.

Theoretically, this research makes two important contributions to the field. First, our understanding of how consumers interact with brands is amplified with the demonstration that different relationship types are associated with alternative processing strategies. These findings provide a deeper insight into why different consumers respond in distinct ways to the same brand information depending on the specific relationship with that brand. As such, these results demonstrate the usefulness of applying the relationship framework to get a better understanding of certain aspects of consumer behavior. Second, these findings add to the already rich body of literature on information processing with the proposed relationship type as a moderator of consumers’ choice of processing strategy. Although all three studies used products and brands to test the proposed hypotheses, our findings can be abstracted to the broader fields of decision making and social psychology.

The results of the three studies are limited to the extent that further investigation is still needed before the nature of the underlying process can be fully understood. For example, the first study’s finding that communal and exchange relationships do not necessarily lead to significant differences
for near product extensions suggests that the differences are located primarily at the abstract end of the spectrum. However, the results of studies 2 and 3 suggest that, in fact, the type of relationship leads to significant differences when participants process information at a lower level of abstraction as well. Future research is needed to outline the boundary conditions of such differences.

In addition, our results offer interesting avenues for future research. First, if a communal relationship makes people more likely to process at a higher level of abstraction relative to an exchange relationship, it might be interesting to examine whether this difference also cuts across time. In other words, is it possible that the consumers in a communal relationship, being more sensitive to seeing the overall picture, take a longer-term focus relative to those in an exchange relationship? Along with earlier research on the weighting of high-level versus low-level construal features (Trope and Liberman 2000), our research suggests that the type of relationship with a brand may be important in understanding how consumers make decisions about the near versus distant future.

Second, our work could advance previous research on the importance of analogical reasoning as a tool for knowledge transfer and consumer learning (Gregan-Paxton and John 1997). If consumers in a communal relationship are more likely than those in an exchange relationship to see the big picture, for example, they might also be more adept at identifying the underlying relationships across different brand attributes and, hence, at using analogical reasoning. Future research could examine the veracity of this hypothesis and identify conditions when analogical reasoning could be more or less useful as a tool for knowledge transfer.

Third, recent work on folk biology by Medin and Atran (2004) suggests that the way people categorize concepts is influenced by factors like culture and expertise, with lesser familiarity leading to abstracting concepts to a higher level. This suggests that the effect of relationship on the choice of processing strategy might be further moderated by culture and expertise level. Future research could examine this premise.

Finally, on a more practical level, the results of our research could be extended to help managers make more effective marketing-mix decisions. For example, as our results suggest, managers might be well advised to highlight different brand features, or gainfully extend a brand name to different products, depending on the type of consumer-brand relationship. Furthermore, the type of relationship might also influence consumers’ response to a brand’s pricing structure. Thus consumers with an exchange brand relationship may prefer itemized pay-as-you-go pricing policy to keep track of specific input-output trade-offs, while those with a communal relationship may be more willing to accept a lump-sum price.

This research has critical implications not just for academics and managers but also for people in their everyday interactions. Our results suggest that type of relationship is a key factor in influencing which information is highlighted when interacting with others. In fact, if people understand how others evaluate them and what type of features are considered relevant, they might be able to ensure, not only continuous, smooth, and more efficient interactions, but also longer and more meaningful relationships.

**APPENDIX**

**STUDY 1: MANIPULATION OF RELATIONSHIP NORMS**

**COMMUNAL DESCRIPTION**

Chris is a student at the University of Toronto, and is now in the third year of the management program. Chris likes to go to movies with her friends. In fact, Chris is very close to her friends and is always there for them whenever they need her. She is caring, and is a good listener. She likes to do things for people just to please them and to show them that she cares for them. In turn, she expects her friends to be there for her when she needs them. Once she called a friend late in the evening and requested him to drive out and give her a ride home when her car got stranded on campus. Her friend asked her to take a cab instead, since he wasn’t feeling up to driving (but offered to pay the cab fare). This disappointed Chris, who would have gladly helped this friend out if he had made a similar request to her. She just couldn’t imagine how someone who was a friend would not be there for her when she needed some help.

The other day she had gone out with one of her dear friends for a quick lunch after school. When the bill came, she looked at it and decided to . . . (please complete the sentence by putting yourself in Chris’s position and imagining what she might have done).

**EXCHANGE DESCRIPTION**

Chris is a student at the University of Toronto, and is now in the third year of the management program. Chris likes to go to movies with her friends, but is careful in her interactions with them. She believes that relationships should be quid-pro-quo. In fact, she always likes to keep things as even as possible and generally keeps a track of her exchanges with others. In fact, she is also very uncomfortable if others give her more that what she has been able to give them, and tries to find a way to return the favor as early as possible. When she helps other people, she generally makes a mental note and expects them to reciprocate in kind. Once she got very upset when she had lent a book to a friend, but the friend forgot to return the book to the library within the due date. She felt that the least her friend could do was pay the late fee that the library would levy on her.

The other day she had gone out with one of her dear friends for a quick lunch after school. When the bill came, she looked at it and decided to . . . (please complete the sentence by putting yourself in Chris’s position and imagining what she might have done).
[Dawn Iacobucci served as editor and Durairaj Maheswaran served as associate editor for this article.]

REFERENCES


Sherman, Steven J., Denise R. Beike, and Kenneth R. Ryalls

