

The Effects of Brand Relationship Norms on Consumer Attitudes and Behavior

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The key premise underlying this work is that when consumers form relationships with brands they use norms of interpersonal relationships as a guide in their brand assessments. Two relationship types are examined: exchange relationships in which benefits are given to others to get something back and communal relationships in which benefits are given to show concern for other's needs. The conceptual model proposes that an adherence to or a violation of these relationship norms influences the appraisal of the specific marketing action and also the overall brand evaluations. Results of three experiments provide converging evidence in support of the theory.

Branding and brand-based differentiation are powerful means for creating and sustaining competitive advantage. Prior research has examined differences in how consumers perceive and evaluate brands, for example, through investigating brand equity (Keller 1993; McQueen, Foley, and Deighton 1993), brand personality (Aaker 1997; Plummer 1985) and brand extensions (Aaker and Keller 1990; Nakamoto, MacInnis, and Jung 1993). More recently, researchers have noted that consumers differ not only in how they perceive brands but also in how they relate to brands (Fournier 1998; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). This line of research has suggested that people sometimes form rela-

tionships with brands in much the same way in which they form relationships with each other in a social context.

Support for consumer-brand relationships also emerges from marketing practitioners. For example, a recent paper in the strategy journal published by the consulting firm Booz-Allen and Hamilton argues that some consumers, termed "brand zealots," experience a relationship that goes well beyond the fulfillment of a functional need (Rozanski, Baum, and Wolfsen 1999). These brand zealots animate the brand giving it quasi-human qualities and relate to it in a way similar to how they relate to human beings. Further, there is abundant anecdotal evidence of people being crazy about some brands. For example, consumers have been known to give names to their VW Beetle and have been observed talking to them and stroking them with affection.¹ The love affair that some consumers have with their favorite bug can be seen on the innumerable Web sites where consumers have shared their intimate experiences with the brand. Mac users, reputed to be very passionate about their brand, have Web pages known to feature an altered picture of Bill Gates that includes devil-style horns, entitled "Save Us from the Gates of Hell" (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 420). I personally know an advertising executive who got the Apple logo of Macintosh tattooed on his chest—next to his heart! All these examples suggest that people sometimes form a very intimate bond with brands and, in some extreme cases, a passion that is often associated only with a close circle of friends and family.

Even though there is a growing interest of both researchers and practitioners in consumer-brand relationships, work in this area has been fairly limited. Much of the prior work has been qualitative (Fournier 1998; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), with some recent longitudinal work studying the

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¹VW Beetle has sold over 20 million cars—more than any other single car brand in history.

causal connections between relationships and other brand dimensions (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). An objective of this work is to fill the critical gap in consumer research by studying specific brand-oriented hypotheses derived from the relationship theory. As such, this research draws upon the social relationship metaphor in order to develop conceptual tools to better understand the nature of consumer-brand relationships and their effects on consumer behavior and attitudes.

Social relationship theory suggests that relationships carry with them norms of behavior that guide people's evaluations of their relationship partner. Using this framework, the current research proposes that when people form relationships with brands that mirror their social relationships, norms of social relationships are used as guiding principles in their interactions with brands. In other words, when brands behave like socialized members of a culture then they are evaluated by the rules that govern the society and have to act in accordance to these rules. Consumer-brand interactions, thus, extend beyond mere utilitarian benefits to what is perceived as the right thing to do in that relationship. A deeper understanding of the consumer-brand relationships would thus help us make specific predictions about consumer behavior that would not be possible using existing theories of brand personality, brand loyalty or brand imagery.

BRANDS AS RELATIONSHIP PARTNERS

The idea that people form relationships with brands is not without controversy. Prior research has noted that people and objects differ in many ways and different approaches may be needed to examine them. Kardes (1986) found that the effect of initial judgment on subsequent judgments of products is different from the extent of this effect on social judgments. Further, judgments of social stimuli (i.e., people) are likely to depend on inferred, abstract information (e.g., traits) whereas judgments of nonsocial stimuli (e.g., products) depend on concrete attributes (Lingle, Altom, and Medin 1984). One reason for expecting nonsocial judgments to differ from social judgments is that people often judge others using self as a frame of reference (Fong and Markus 1982) but not in judging nonsocial objects (Fiske and Taylor 1991).

Since relationships are a sequence of interactions between parties where the probable course of future interactions between them is significantly different from that of strangers (Hinde 1976), consumer interactions with brands could also be characterized as relational. Further, the types of brand relationships outlined in prior work suggest a continuum. For example, Fournier (1998) describes her different participants' relationships with Coke Classic and Ivory as best friendships and with Gatorade as committed partnerships but with trial size shampoos as flings. There is further evidence suggesting why consumers might interact with brands in ways that closely mirrors their social interactions. First, consumers often do not distinguish between brands and manufacturers of brands. To them, the company is often the

brand and the brand is the company.² This perception is more likely for service brands (e.g., hotels and airlines) and for brands that have a combination of products and services (e.g., many online stores). When people interact with humans (in person or online) as representatives of the brand, it is easy to fall back on social relationships as a guide in their interactions. Second, even when companies focus primarily on selling physical products, some consumers may think of the brand as a living being. Animism, the belief that objects possess souls, has long been recognized in the domain of products (Gilmore 1919). McGill (1998) has suggested that people treat some products as if their characteristics are produced by an underlying, defining essence, analogous to a genetic code. Moon (2000) has demonstrated that many of the social rules and conventions that govern interpersonal relationships also apply to human-computer interaction. Thus, people sometimes think of products as having a soul or, at least, more human-like properties. Once products and brands are associated with human qualities people may interact with them in ways that parallel social relationships, and their interactions are guided by the norms that govern these relationships.

Whatever view one takes, it is reasonable to suggest that even though people's relationships with brands do not necessarily share the same richness and depth as their relationships with human partners, they sometimes do behave with brands as if they have a relationship with them. This work studies the effect of the type of relationship that consumers have with a brand on their behavior and attitudes in response to specific actions of the brand.

NORMS OF COMMUNAL AND EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIPS

The present research relies on a distinction made in the social psychology literature between relationships that are based primarily on economic factors and those based on social factors (Clark and Mills 1993). These authors distinguish between what they term exchange relationships and communal relationships based on the norms of giving benefits to the partner. Other authors have suggested more elaborate breakdowns (e.g., Fiske 1992), but for the sake of simplicity, this research adopts the two-relationship version of Clark and Mills.

In exchange relationships the motivation for giving a benefit to the partner is to get something back in return, that is, *quid pro quo*. Relationships between strangers and people who interact for business purposes are typical exchange relationships. On the other hand, in communal relationships people give benefits to others to demonstrate a concern for them and to attend to their needs—taking a perspective that transcends emphasis on self-interest alone. Most family relationships, romantic relationships, and friendships fall in

²With some practitioners (King 1991) arguing for companies to actively advertise the "company as brand" rather than the specific products, over time it is likely that the brand is indistinguishable from the organization itself.

this category. Further, the two relationships have distinct norms of behavior. For example, people in an exchange relationship expect to receive monetary payments for providing help, prefer to get comparable benefits in return, and expect prompt repayment for benefits given to a partner. Conversely, people in a communal relationship do not expect monetary payment for helping their partner, prefer to get noncomparable benefits in return and do not expect prompt repayment for benefits given. The norms of the two relationships have been studied by Clark and her colleagues and are summarized in table 1 (Clark 1981; Clark and Mills 1993; Clark, Mills, and Corcoran 1989).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND OVERVIEW OF THE EXPERIMENTS

The present research is based on three key premises. First, the communal and exchange distinction is a useful one to make when studying relationships that people form with others. Second, these two relationship types have their own distinct norms of behavior. Third, and most important, if these distinct relationship norms are salient in a brand interaction, then consumers use these norms to guide their behavior and their evaluations of the brand. The conceptual model being proposed in this research is that consumers evaluate the brand and its actions depending upon whether the actions violate or conform to the norms of their relationship with that brand (see fig. 1). As the model suggests, when consumers form a particular relationship with a brand, the brand is assessed in much the same manner as other members of the society—according to the norms of social behavior. In other words, when consumers form relationships with brands, brands too are evaluated as if they are members of a culture and need to conform to its norms. If the actions of the brand are in violation of the norms of a relationship then the brand is evaluated negatively, but if

the actions are in conformity with the norms of a relationship then the evaluation is positive.

However, it is important to note here that consumer-brand relationships are not identical to interpersonal relationships in all respects. Relationships with brands almost always involve some degree of monetary exchange. In addition, the relationship with the brand is a mix of personal and impersonal, more like a celebrity and a fan than like two people who know each other intimately. Given such obvious differences between social relationships and consumer-brand relationships, it is important for researchers to not overextend the relationship metaphor when studying consumer behavior. Hence one goal of this research is to potentially identify some boundary conditions for applying the social relationship framework to a consumer context. More specifically, this work offers two key ideas: (a) that relationships with brands imply normative rules of behavior of the sort that we see with people and (b) that the norms are likely to be similar but not just exactly the same as those we see with people.

This research uses the context of a request for help (or providing benefits) to test the influence of relationship type on consumers' responses to a particular marketing action. This context was chosen because the key distinction between exchange and communal relationships is based on the motivation for providing benefits to the partner and a request for help captures the essence of that distinction. In exchange relationships people are concerned with how much they receive for what they give. Benefits are given to partners with the specific expectation of receiving comparable benefits in return. If a comparable reward is not forthcoming in this relationship, a person is less likely to be responsive to a request for help. People in exchange relationships also expect to receive the return benefit promptly since a delay leaves the input-outcome trade-off of the relationship imbalanced for long. On the other hand, in communal rela-

TABLE 1

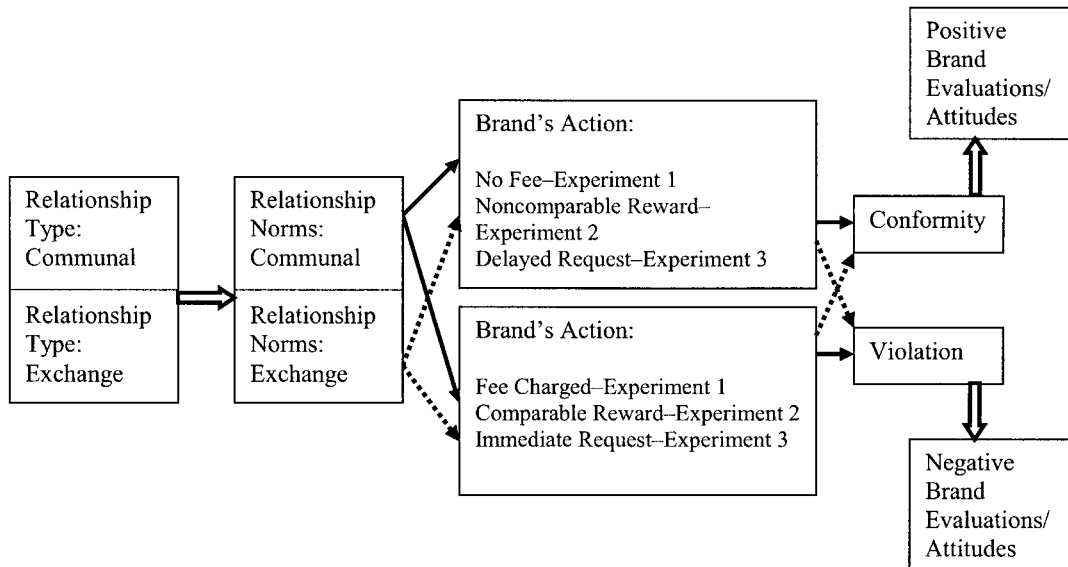
NORMS OF EXCHANGE AND COMMUNAL RELATIONSHIPS

Exchange relationship norms	Communal relationship norms
Accepting help with money is preferred to no payment.	Accepting help with no monetary payment is preferred.
Desirable to give comparable benefits in return for benefits received.	Less desirable to give comparable benefits in return for benefits received.
Prompt repayment for specific benefits received is expected.	Prompt repayment for specific benefits received is not expected.
More likely to ask for repayments for benefits rendered.	Less likely to ask for repayments for benefits rendered.
More likely to keep track of inputs and outcomes in a joint task.	Less likely to keep track of individual inputs and outcomes in a joint task.
Divide rewards according to each person's inputs and contributions.	Divide rewards according to each person's needs and requirements.
Helping others is less likely.	Helping others is more likely.
Requesting help from others is less likely.	Requesting help from others is more likely.
Keeping track of others' needs is less likely.	Keeping track of others' needs is more likely.
Less responsive to others' emotional states.	More responsive to others' emotional states.

NOTE.—The first three norms are tested in experiments 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

FIGURE 1

CONCEPTUAL MODEL SHOWING THE INFLUENCE OF RELATIONSHIP TYPE ON BRAND EVALUATIONS AND THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED NORM VIOLATION AND NORM CONFORMITY



tionships people feel responsible for other's welfare and feel obligated to respond positively when the partner has a need. People avoid giving benefits directly comparable to the benefits they receive since a tit for tat approach transforms the relationship into an economic one and expresses a reluctance to be a communal partner (Batson et al. 1978; O'Malley and Andrews 1983). However, if the reciprocal gesture is noncomparable to the original benefit, and made as an expression of gratitude, it is valued for signaling reinforcement of the relationship. Additionally, people prefer to receive the reward if it is delayed rather than immediately after they have given a favor, since a temporal distance breaks the quid pro quo nature of the interaction and signals the care and concern motivation that underlies a communal relationship.

These potential reactions to requests for help are tested in three experiments where norms of the two relationships were first manipulated with a brief scenario description. Participants were then presented with a request for help, and their reactions to the marketing action and overall brand evaluations were then taken. The request for help scenario manipulated a different relationship norm in each experiment such that across the three experiments three different norms were tested to provide greater confidence in the overall hypothesis about the influence of consumer-brand relationship norms on consumer attitudes and behavior. The brand's action in all three experiments was designed to violate the norms of one relationship and simultaneously conform to the norms of the other relationship. It was expected that if the marketing action were inconsistent with the relationship norms then the specific action as well as the overall brand evaluation would be negative. Conversely, if the action were consistent with the relationship norms then the

evaluation of the brand and its specific action would be positive.

EXPERIMENT 1: CHARGING A FEE FOR RENDERING HELP

This experiment examines participants' reactions to being charged a fee for a special service rendered by a brand. The participants were first exposed to a description of a prior relationship between a consumer and a hypothetical bank and were asked to project themselves into the role of the consumer. These descriptions were aimed at triggering either communal or exchange norms. Next, the scenario described a consumer who seeks help from a bank to resolve a conflict with a utility company and later either gets charged for the bank's assistance or not. A demand for payment by the bank in response to a request for help violates the norms of communal relationship, which is based on concern for each other's needs, but conforms to the norms of exchange relationship, which is based on quid pro quo. Hence it is predicted that consumers' reactions to being charged would be different across the two relationship types, with communal consumers evaluating the action negatively relative to exchange consumers. On the other hand, when the brand does not charge any fee for the service, it is in conformity with communal norms (since help is given out of concern for the partner and not for a repayment) and in violation of exchange norms (since it breaks the quid pro quo rule). Consequently, exchange participants would evaluate the action negatively relative to the communal participants. Further, a violation of the relationship norms would also man-

ifest itself in poorer overall brand evaluation. Hence, the following hypotheses:

- H1a:** Relative to participants in an exchange relationship, those in a communal relationship with a brand will evaluate the fee for a special service negatively than when no fee is assessed
- H1b:** Relative to participants in an exchange relationship, those in a communal relationship with a brand will evaluate the brand negatively when assessed a fee for a special service than when no fee is assessed.

Design and Participants

The experiment was a 2×2 design with Relationship Type (communal, exchange) and Service Fee (fee charged, no fee charged) as the between-participants conditions. Forty students from a midsized university were recruited through notices posted on campus and received \$5.00 for a 20-min. set of studies. This experiment took about 10 min.

Stimuli and Procedure

Participants were presented with a brief description of their relationship with a fictitious bank (see details below). One might wonder if the relationship norms that are formed over long periods of time can at all be triggered in an experimental setting. Prior work indicates that even without actual long-term relationships, the effects of relationship norms may nevertheless be observed—suggesting that these norms can indeed be triggered in laboratory studies (Clark and Mills 1993). Participants were thus presented with scenario descriptions to trigger relationship norms and were randomly assigned to either exchange or communal conditions.

Exchange Relationship Scenario Description. You have been banking with Grove Bank for the last five years. You have used the bank quite extensively and have been very happy with their efficiency and the quality of their services. You have taken a loan from the bank and in fact they were able to get the paperwork done quite quickly. Their interest rates are also among the best in the city. You also use their credit card because they offer a large credit limit and very good interest rates. Grove Bank also periodically makes some offers to you that appear to be of great value. In the past, whenever you have gone to the branch you have gotten your work done very fast—they respect your time, and get the job done fast. Their executives seem to be quite well trained and smart. Overall your experience with Grove Bank has been excellent.

Communal Relationship Scenario Description. You have been banking with Grove Bank for the last five years. You have used the bank quite extensively and have been very happy with the quality of their services. When you first joined school, you had opened an account with them. You still re-

member how thrilled you were when you got your first credit card from them. You have always associated the bank with positive feelings since you often visit the bank whenever you receive money from home. The bank has always treated you well. Over the past few years, whenever you have visited the bank you have had a very pleasant and warm interaction. They seem to be taking a personal interest in you, and have often taken the initiative to suggest ways to better manage your idle funds in the bank. Overall your experience with Grove Bank has been memorable.

After showing the relationship scenario description, the participants were presented with the request for help scenario as well as the response from the bank in terms of (no) charges for it, as shown below, with the fee charged condition in brackets and the no fee charged condition in parentheses. Participants were then administered the main dependent variables.

Request for Help Scenario Description. Recently, you faced a problem. You had written a check to ComEd for \$35.47. You later received a letter from ComEd saying that the money was never received by them. As soon as you got this letter, you called up Grove Bank, and asked the clerk to find out what had happened. The clerk told you that the money was sent to ComEd on the specified date. You requested the clerk to write to ComEd and let them know about it. [One week later you received a letter in the mail from Grove Bank that the problem was resolved at a charge of \$20.00.] (One week later you received a letter in the mail from Grove Bank that the problem was resolved at no charge to you.)

Dependent Variables

Participants responded to three questions about the brand's marketing action to charge (or not charge) for the extra service rendered (willingness to pay, action was appropriate, a good business practice) aimed at testing hypothesis 1a. Next, brand evaluation measures were taken on three items (dislike-like, dissatisfied-satisfied, unfavorable-favorable) aimed at testing hypothesis 1b. All items were measured on a seven-point scale.

Control Group

A separate control group of 65 students was exposed to the relationship manipulations but not to the request for help scenario. They were administered a detailed questionnaire designed to assess the effectiveness of the relationship manipulations consisting of 10 questions of which seven tapped into the communal relationship norms (have warm feelings, help in times of need, you'd miss them if you moved away, they treat you special, they care, they like you, you care for them). Another three questions tapped into the exchange relationship norms (good value for money, give service to get business, you get money's worth). These three items were reverse scored and combined with the first seven to form a Net Communitality Score. To further assess if the

TABLE 2

MEAN RATINGS OF COMMUNAL AND EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS ON REACTIONS TO MARKETING ACTION AND OVERALL EVALUATION: EXPERIMENT 1

	Charged		Not charged	
	Communal	Exchange	Communal	Exchange
Reactions to marketing action* (3-items)	1.37	2.57	5.27	5.30
Overall evaluation* (3-items)	3.33	4.60	6.04	5.27
N	10	10	10	10

*Interaction effect is significant at $p < .05$ level.

relationship manipulations actually occurred, the participants were asked to imagine the brand coming alive and becoming a person. They then rated the extent to which the brand was like a close friend, a family member, a businessperson, and a merchant. High (low) ratings on the brand as a friend or a family member, and low (high) ratings of the brand as a businessperson or a merchant would be consistent with priming of communal (exchange) norms. In order to ensure that the relationship manipulations simultaneously did not lead to differences in quality perceptions, participants also responded to a two-item measure of quality (quality of products, quality of services). Finally, the 20-item PANAS scale was administered and the level of positive affect perceived by the participants was assessed, to rule that out as an alternative explanation as well (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988). Again, all the questions were administered on a seven-point scale.

Results

Manipulation Check. Communal participants provided a higher Net Commuality Score than exchange participants ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 4.37$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 3.65$; $F(1, 63) = 16.68$, $p < .001$) and were more likely than participants in the exchange condition to see the brand as a friend or family member ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 4.53$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 3.23$; $F(1, 63) = 10.73$, $p < .01$) and less likely to see it as a businessperson or a merchant ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 4.61$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 5.19$; $F(1, 63) = 4.63$, $p < .05$). There were no differences across the two relationship conditions on perceived quality ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 6.09$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 6.05$; $F(1, 63) < 1$) nor on the PANAS scale for positive affect perceived by the participants ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 3.67$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 3.87$; $F(1, 63) < 1$).

Reactions to Marketing Action. The three questions assessing participants' evaluation of the brand's action were combined to create one measure termed Reactions to Marketing Action (Cronbach's alpha = .81). An ANOVA conducted on this measure revealed a main effect of Relationship Type, with communal participants evaluating the action negatively relative to exchange participants ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 3.31$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 3.93$; $F(1, 36) = 5.67$, $p < .05$). In addition, the main effect of Service Fee was also significant ($F(1, 36) = 164.20$, $p < .001$), with the participants in the no fee condition evaluating the action more positively than

when fee was charged ($M_{\text{NoFee}} = 5.28$, $M_{\text{Fee}} = 1.97$). As predicted by hypothesis 1a, these effects were qualified by a significant Relationship Type \times Service Fee interaction ($F(1, 36) = 5.08$, $p < .05$; see table 2). Specific contrasts revealed that when charged, communal participants assessed the action negatively compared to exchange participants ($F(1, 36) = 10.73$, $p < .01$), but no differently when not charged a fee ($F(1, 36) < 1$). The other contrasts showed that communal participants assessed the action negatively when charged a fee than when not charged ($F(1, 36) = 113.50$, $p < .001$), as was also the assessment of the exchange participants ($F(1, 36) = 55.77$, $p < .001$).

Brand Evaluations. Participants' responses to the three questions evaluating the brand were collapsed into one factor termed Overall Evaluation (Cronbach's alpha = .88). The main effect of Relationship Type was not significant ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 4.68$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 4.93$; $F(1, 34) < 1$), but the main effect of the Service Fee was significant ($F(1, 34) = 19.50$, $p < .001$), with the overall evaluation being poorer when fee was charged than when no fee was charged ($M_{\text{NoFee}} = 5.63$, $M_{\text{Fee}} = 4.00$). In addition, consistent with hypothesis 1b, there was a significant Relationship Type \times Service Fee interaction ($F(1, 34) = 7.13$, $p < .05$; see table 2). Specific contrasts revealed that when charged, participants in communal condition evaluated the brand negatively relative to those in the exchange condition ($F(1, 34) = 5.51$, $p < .05$). By contrast, communal and exchange participants did not differ in their brand evaluations when no fee was charged ($F(1, 34) = 2.04$, $p > .10$). Considered alternately, communal participants evaluated the brand negatively when charged than when not charged ($F(1, 34) = 23.82$, $p < .001$), but exchange participants' evaluation did not differ across the two conditions ($F(1, 34) = 1.61$, $p > .10$).

Discussion

Experiment 1 was designed to assess if the type of relationship that consumers have with a brand influences their evaluations. The results find support for this hypothesis and indicate that, relative to exchange-oriented participants, communal participants evaluate the brand and its actions more positively when the action is in keeping with the communal norms but in violation of exchange norms (no fee

was charged) than when the action is in violation of the communal norms but in keeping with the exchange norms (fee was charged). Further, results of the contrast analysis show that relative to exchange participants, communal participants react negatively to being charged for help. However, the contrast analysis did not find significant differences in the evaluations of communal and exchange participants when no fee was charged. Similarly, there were no differences in the evaluations of the exchange participants whether they were charged a fee or not (at least for the overall brand evaluation measure). Further, the significant main effect of Relationship Type (for the reactions to brand's action) suggests an asymmetry in consumer responses, with the norm violations being perceived much more by the communal than by the exchange participants.

One possible explanation for this asymmetric result is that there is something unique about the commercial context that made the exchange participants respond differently from what the social relationship norms would have predicted. In other words, it is possible that the monetary benefit resulting from the brand's action (due to no fee being charged) mutes the negative effect of the norm violation experienced by the exchange participants. In order to test this premise, a separate control group of 32 participants was run to assess participants' expectations about free services. Results suggest that participants across the two conditions expected to get such services for free as part of doing business with the bank ($M_{Comm.} = 5.63$, $M_{Exch.} = 5.69$; $F(1, 30) < 1$), suggesting that the effect of norm violation (of no charge) for exchange participants was in fact muted in this commercial context.

However, there is an alternative explanation that can be put forward to explain the asymmetric results of the experiment. Prior work suggests that monetary payments carry different meanings in different relationships creating a distinct currency even though it is the same legal tender (Zelizer 1996). Since the two Service Fee conditions differed on the monetary benefit to the consumer, it can be argued that it is not the violation or conformity of norms, but something about the monetary aspect of the benefit (or loss) that operated differently in two relationship conditions that may have caused the asymmetric results. One other alternative explanation might also be suggested. It is possible that the exchange participants do not particularly dislike being treated in a communal fashion and hence do not respond negatively to no charge, whereas communal participants immensely dislike being treated in an exchange-like fashion and hence respond strongly to a charge. In other words, there may be something unique about the communal relationship norms that led to the results that were observed.

Experiment 2 is designed to test primarily for the alternative explanation that there is something unique about monetary benefits that led to the results observed in experiment 1, as opposed to the theory about norm violations. As a result, experiment 2 uses both monetary and nonmonetary marketing actions. It is expected that the interaction effect of Relationship Type and the Type of Marketing Action will

be significant when norms are violated/adhered to and that there will be no significant effect of monetary versus nonmonetary actions. Further, experiment 2 also explores if the significant effects are driven primarily by the responses of communal participants or if exchange participants are also sensitive to norm violations. For greater convergent validity, this experiment relies on a different relationship norm than the one tested in experiment 1.

EXPERIMENT 2: COMPARABLE AND NONCOMPARABLE REWARDS FOR HELP

One norm of exchange relationship is that people prefer to receive back benefits that are comparable to those given by them to their relationship partner (Clark 1981). Giving a benefit creates a specific debt and a return benefit that is directly comparable eliminates this debt owed by the exchange partner. However, if the return benefit is not directly comparable, the original benefit cannot be set off against it, and the debt is still outstanding. Hence, people in an exchange relationship prefer receiving comparable benefits to noncomparable benefits. Conversely, in communal relationships, people like to receive back benefits that are not comparable directly to the benefits provided by them (Clark 1981). Since in a communal relationship benefits are given to meet the needs of the partner, noncomparable benefits acknowledge that the partner's needs are unique. Further, prior work on gift giving has shown that one reason why gifts are valued is because they are symbolic gestures of love and commitment (Belk and Coon 1993). Giving gifts that are comparable to the benefits received transforms the relationship into an economic one (Schwartz 1967) and makes the gift appear as a payment for the original benefit. Thus, signaling appreciation and gratitude by giving benefits that are noncomparable to the original benefit preserves the underlying motivations of a communal relationship and hence are preferred to comparable benefits which would transform the relationship into a mere tit for tat interaction.

Experiment 2 tests this difference between comparable and noncomparable benefits. It is expected that relative to exchange participants, communal participants would evaluate the brand more positively when given back a noncomparable benefit than when given a comparable benefit. Since an objective of this experiment is to rule out the alternative explanation suggested earlier about uniqueness of monetary rewards, the scenarios use descriptions of comparable monetary benefits in half the cases and comparable nonmonetary benefits in the other half. Similarly, the noncomparable benefits too use monetary and nonmonetary rewards. If the norm-based hypothesis were to hold, a significant difference between communal and exchange participants would be observed for noncomparable versus comparable benefits averaged over monetary and nonmonetary rewards. However, if uniqueness of money as the alternative explanation were to be valid, a significant effect would be observed for the monetary but not for the nonmonetary reward, irrespective

of whether it was comparable or noncomparable to the original help.

In the experiment, a hypothetical brand of health club requests the consumer to help them develop a Web site on healthy living by responding to a questionnaire that requires about an hour of the consumer's time (nonmonetary) or donating \$15 for it (monetary). In return, the brand promises to give the consumer either a 1-hr.-free coupon (nonmonetary reward) that is comparable to the request for time but noncomparable to the monetary help, or a \$15 discount coupon (monetary reward) that is noncomparable to the request for time but comparable to the monetary help. It is expected that there would be a significant interaction between the type of relationship and the type of return benefit. The hypotheses are formally stated as follows:

- H2a:** Relative to participants in an exchange relationship, those in a communal relationship will evaluate the brand's action negatively when offered a comparable than when offered a noncomparable benefit for providing help.
- H2b:** Relative to participants in an exchange relationship, those in a communal relationship will evaluate the brand negatively when offered a comparable benefit for providing help than when offered a noncomparable benefit.
- H2c:** Participants in communal and exchange relationships would evaluate the brand and its action no differently when offered a monetary benefit for providing help.

Design and Participants

The experiment was a 2×2 design with Relationship Type (communal, exchange) and Type of Benefit (comparable, noncomparable) as the between-participants conditions. Ninety-four undergraduate management students from a large North American university volunteered for the experiment and received bonus course credit for their participation.

Stimuli and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two relationship conditions and were first presented with a brief description of their relationship with a fictitious brand, in this case Jim's Health Club, designed to trigger either communal or exchange relationship norms. Next they responded to the manipulation check questionnaire after having read the descriptions. Participants were then presented with the request for help scenario and offered the comparable or noncomparable reward for the help and then administered the main dependent variables.

Dependent Variables

Manipulation checks and control measures to assess quality perceptions were the same as in experiment 1. As before, the participants also rated the likelihood of the brand to be a businessperson, a merchant, a family member, and a close friend. In addition, participants responded to a question designed to tap into their affect for the brand (positive, though not necessarily, warm feelings). Again, all these questions were measured on a seven-point scale.

After reading the request for help scenario and the offer of reward, the participants responded to three questions, on a nine-point scale, about the brand's request for help (agree to help, enthusiastic about helping, support such programs in future). These three questions were combined to form a Reactions to Marketing Action score, aimed at testing hypothesis 2a. Participants then responded to the same three brand evaluation measures as in experiment 1 (dislike-like, dissatisfied-satisfied, unfavorable-favorable) aimed at testing hypothesis 2b.

Results

Manipulation Check. Participants in the communal condition had a higher Net Commuality Score than those in the exchange condition ($M_{Comm.} = 4.00$, $M_{Exch.} = 3.52$; $F(1, 91) = 13.07$, $p < .001$) and were more likely to perceive the brand as a friend or family member ($M_{Comm.} = 4.46$, $M_{Exch.} = 3.62$; $F(1, 91) = 6.96$, $p < .01$) and less likely to perceive it as a businessperson or a merchant ($M_{Comm.} = 4.61$, $M_{Exch.} = 5.60$; $F(1, 91) = 16.04$, $p < .01$). As anticipated, the two-item measure of perceived quality was not different across the two relationship conditions ($M_{Comm.} = 6.10$, $M_{Exch.} = 6.23$; $F(1, 91) = 1.26$, $p > .10$), nor was the positive affect for the brand ($M_{Comm.} = 6.14$, $M_{Exch.} = 6.00$; $F(1, 91) < 1$).

Reactions to Marketing Action. An ANOVA conducted on the combined Reactions to Marketing Action score (Cronbach's alpha = .85) revealed no significant main effects for Relationship Type ($M_{Comm.} = 5.85$, $M_{Exch.} = 5.91$; $F(1, 90) < 1$) or for Type of Benefit ($M_{NonComp.} = 5.84$, $M_{Comp.} = 5.91$; $F(1, 90) < 1$). However, consistent with hypothesis 2a, there was a significant Relationship Type \times Type of Benefit interaction ($F(1, 90) = 4.89$, $p < .05$), with the participants responding differently to the brand's request for help depending upon whether they were offered a comparable or a noncomparable benefit in return (see table 3). Contrast analysis did not reveal any significant differences. However, relative to the communal participants, exchange participants evaluated the action positively when given a comparable reward, but this difference was only marginally significant ($F(1, 90) = 2.95$, $p = .09$). Even though the means were in the right direction, the participants did not differ in their evaluations when given a noncomparable reward ($F(1, 90) = 1.98$, $p > .10$). The other set of contrasts showed a similar result. Exchange participants' evaluation of the action was more positive when given a comparable rather than

TABLE 3

MEAN RATINGS OF COMMUNAL AND EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS ON REACTIONS TO MARKETING ACTION AND OVERALL EVALUATION: EXPERIMENT 2

	Comparable		Noncomparable	
	Communal	Exchange	Communal	Exchange
Reactions to marketing action* (3-items)	5.57	6.38	6.20	5.53
Overall evaluation* (3-items)	6.67	7.37	6.34	5.60
N	27	22	20	25

*Interaction effect is significant at $p < .05$ level.

a noncomparable reward, but this difference was only marginally significant ($F(1, 90) = 3.09, p = .08$). Further, although the means were in the right direction, communal participants did not evaluate the action differently when given a comparable or a noncomparable reward ($F(1, 90) = 1.85, p > .10$). Thus, contrast analysis results suggest that all the differences contributed to the significant interaction that was observed.

Brand Evaluation. An ANOVA conducted on the three item Overall Evaluation score (Cronbach's alpha = .95) revealed no significant main effects for Relationship Type ($M_{Comm.} = 6.90, M_{Exch.} = 7.08; F(1, 86) < 1$) or for Type of Benefit ($M_{NonComp.} = 7.10, M_{Comp.} = 6.86; F(1, 86) < 1$). However, as predicted by hypothesis 2b, there was a significant Relationship Type \times Type of Benefit interaction ($F(1, 86) = 4.31, p < .05$; see table 3). Again, even though all the means were directionally as expected, none of the specific contrasts were significant. Thus, when offered a noncomparable reward for the help, communal and exchange participants showed no difference in their brand evaluations ($F(1, 86) = 1.43, p > .10$). However, relative to communal participants, exchange participants were more positive in their brand evaluations when given a comparable reward, and this difference was marginally significant ($F(1, 86) = 3.03, p = .08$). The other set of contrasts revealed that the exchange participants did not differ in their brand evaluations when offered comparable or noncomparable reward ($F(1, 86) = 1.19, p > .10$). However, the communal participants' brand evaluation was more positive when given a noncomparable rather than a comparable reward, but this difference was only marginally significant ($F(1, 86) = 3.54, p = .06$). Again, the nonsignificant contrasts suggest that all the differences contributed to the significant interaction effect that was observed.

In order to test for hypothesis 2c, the participants' responses were analyzed again, but this time recategorized for monetary and nonmonetary rewards. Results showed that communal and exchange participants' Reactions to Marketing Action were no different whether offered monetary or nonmonetary reward. The main effect of Money was not significant ($F(1, 90) < 1$), nor was the Relationship Type \times Money interaction ($F(1, 90) < 1$). Similarly, on the three-item Overall Evaluation score, the main effect of Money was not significant ($F(1, 86) < 1$), nor was the interaction effect of Relationship

Type \times Money ($F(1, 86) < 1$). Thus, consistent with hypothesis 2c, uniqueness of money as the alternative explanation for the differences observed across the two relationships is not supported.

Discussion

Overall, this experiment replicates the results of experiment 1 and provides additional support for the theory about the influence of relationship norms on brand evaluations. In this experiment a different relationship norm was tested than the one in experiment 1. Results suggest that exchange-oriented consumers give benefits to each other with an expectation of getting comparable benefits in return, and any such offer, in cash or otherwise, is in keeping with the relationship norms. However, a benefit that is not comparable to the original help cannot wipe out the debt, thereby violating the norms of exchange relationship. Conversely, in a communal relationship, help is given to show concern for the partner's needs, and a noncomparable benefit appropriately recognizes the unique needs of the partner. However, a benefit comparable to the help provided by the consumer suggests a tit for tat action and violates the norms of this relationship. Thus, there is support for the overall premise that a brand's action elicits different consumer evaluations depending upon what relationship norms are salient and whether the brand's actions violate or conform to these norms. Results also show that communal and exchange participants do not necessarily respond to monetary or nonmonetary benefits differently. Thus, the premise about uniqueness of monetary benefits as the alternative explanation for the results observed in experiment 1 is not supported. Further, contrast analysis shows that the significant interactions were driven both by communal and by exchange participants' reactions. Unlike experiment 1 where all the effects were driven mainly by the communal consumers' responses, this experiment finds that exchange consumers too contributed to the overall interaction effects. Thus, the results of this experiment further rule out the alternative theory that there is something unique about communal norms that caused the effects that were observed in experiment 1.

One limitation of the two experiments is that there is no direct evidence that the brand's actions, in fact, violated and/or conformed to the relationship norms, which in turn

influenced consumer responses. In other words, no independent assessment of norm violation/conformity experienced by the participants is taken that establishes its influence on brand evaluations. Experiment 3 is designed to more closely examine the mediating role of relationship norms.

EXPERIMENT 3: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF NORMS—TIMING OF RETURN REQUEST FOR HELP

The objective of this experiment is to provide more direct support for the theory that it is the violation and/or conformity to the norms of relationships that leads to differences in consumer evaluations. For this purpose, a direct measure of participants' perceived norm violation is taken, and a mediation analysis is done to explore if the brand evaluations are in fact influenced by the degree of norm violation experienced by the participants. Once again, for greater convergent validity of the norm-violation theory, this experiment tests a different relationship norm: length of delay between giving and receiving of benefits.

This experiment examines if the length of time gap between help given and help sought causes participants in different relationships to respond differently. The experiment describes a situation in which the brand makes a request for help in response to a request for help from the consumer either immediately following the consumer's request or after some time gap. The thinking behind this approach follows from the norms of the two relationships. If a request for help by a partner is immediately countered with a return request, the debt created by the original help is paid off right away. The return request being seen as a *quid pro quo* would be in keeping with the norms of exchange relationship. However, return request that is delayed in time, being less likely to be connected to the original request, would be seen as a way to extract free help by the partner and hence be in violation of the exchange norms. Thus, exchange-oriented consumers would prefer return requests made immediately afterward rather than those that are delayed in time. On the other hand, an immediate return request is likely to be seen as a repayment for the original help and would thus be in violation of communal norms (Clark 1981). Conversely, a delayed return request, being unconnected to the original request, is likely to be seen as an expression of a genuine need of the partner and hence be in keeping with the communal relationship norms. Thus, communally oriented consumers should prefer requests that are delayed in time over those made immediately following an original request. However, since communal partners respond positively to a request for help *per se* (Clark et al. 1987), the negative response of communal participants to an immediate return request is likely to be somewhat muted. The specific hypotheses below predict that consumer evaluations of immediate versus delayed return request, as also of the brand, would depend on the type of relationship.

H3a: Relative to participants in a communal relationship, those in an exchange relationship will eval-

uate the brand's return request for help negatively when it is delayed compared to when it is made immediately following the original request.

H3b: Relative to participants in a communal relationship, those in an exchange relationship will evaluate the brand negatively when the return request is made with a delay than when it is made immediately after the original request.

Since a key objective of experiment 3 is to get direct evidence of the role of relationship norms, the experimental materials included questions intended to specifically assess the level of norm violation and norm conformity perceived by the participants. Hypothesis 3c below predicts that perceived norm violations as a result of the marketing action would depend on the relationship type. Thus, the participants' perceived norm violations would reflect that a delayed return request is in keeping with communal but not exchange norms, whereas an immediate return request is in keeping with exchange but not communal norms. Hence the hypothesis is as below:

H3c: Relative to participants in a communal relationship, those in an exchange relationship will perceive greater norm violation when the return request is made with a delay than when it is made immediately after the original request.

The basic premise of the theory is that it is the perceived level of norm violations that leads to the differences in consumers' assessment of the brand and its actions. Thus, it is expected that perceived norm violation would mediate consumers' responses to the brand's action as well as their overall brand evaluations. Hence the following hypothesis:

H3d: Perceived norm violation will mediate the effects predicted in H3a and H3b.

Design and Participants

The experiment is a 2 × 2 design with Relationship Type (Communal, Exchange) and Timing of Request (Immediate, Delayed) as the between-participants factors. Ninety-five students from a mid-sized university in the midwestern United States were paid \$5.00 for their participation in a 20-min. set of studies. This experiment took about 10 min. The students were randomly assigned to the different conditions.

Stimuli and Procedure

The procedure was similar to experiment 2, except that in this case a fictitious brand of coffee shop was used. As before, after reading the relationship description, participants responded to the manipulation check questionnaire. They were then presented with the request for help scenario and administered the dependent variables.

Dependent Variables

The manipulation check questions as well as all the control questions were the same as in experiment 2. Participants' reaction to the request was assessed by their likelihood to agree to the request. This question was aimed at testing hypothesis 3a. To test hypothesis 3b, participants' brand evaluations were assessed by the same three questions as in experiments 1 and 2. Finally, three questions assessed participants' perceived violation of relationship norms (felt cornered, felt irritated, felt exploited), and three questions assessed their perception of norm conformity (care about them, happy to help, request was appropriate). These last three were reverse scored and combined with the first three to form an aggregate Norm Violation score, aimed at testing hypotheses 3c and 3d.

Results

Manipulation Check. As in experiments 1 and 2, participants in the communal condition had a higher Net Communitarity Score than those in the exchange condition ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 5.55$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 3.35$; $F(1, 91) = 28.14$, $p < .001$), perceived the brand significantly more as a friend or family member ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 4.78$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 3.81$; $F(1, 93) = 8.88$, $p < .01$) and significantly less as a businessperson or a merchant ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 3.55$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 4.63$; $F(1, 92) = 12.04$, $p < .001$). Further, perceived quality was no different across the two relationship conditions ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 5.97$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 6.07$; $F(1, 93) < 1$), nor was positive affect for the brand ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 6.34$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 6.12$; $F(1, 93) = 1.63$, $p > .10$).

Reactions to Marketing Action. An ANOVA conducted on participants' likelihood to agree to help the brand revealed no significant main effects of Relationship Type ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 5.98$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 5.60$; $F(1, 91) = 1.60$, $p > .10$) or for Timing of Request ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 5.98$, $M_{\text{Delay.}} = 5.61$; $F(1, 91) = 1.64$, $p > .10$). However, consistent with hypothesis 3a, there was a significant Relationship Type \times Timing of Request interaction effect on the participants' likelihood to help the brand ($F(1, 91) = 4.19$, $p < .05$; see table 4). Specific contrasts revealed that the exchange participants were less likely than communal participants to help the brand

when the return request was delayed ($F(1, 91) = 5.67$, $p < .05$) but no different when the return request was immediate ($F(1, 91) < 1$). The other pair of contrasts showed that exchange participants were less likely to help the brand when the return request was delayed than when it was immediate ($F(1, 91) = 5.59$, $p < .05$). However, the communal participants did not differ in their likelihood to help the brand when the return request was delayed from when it was immediate ($F(1, 91) < 1$).

Brand Evaluation. An ANOVA conducted on the combined Overall Evaluation score (Cronbach's alpha = .89) showed that the main effect of Relationship Type was not significant ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 6.12$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 5.82$; $F(1, 91) = 2.39$, $p = .10$), nor was the main effect of Timing of Request ($M_{\text{Immed.}} = 5.98$, $M_{\text{Delay.}} = 5.83$; $F(1, 91) = 2.28$, $p > .10$). However, consistent with hypothesis 3b, there was a significant Relationship Type \times Timing of Request interaction ($F(1, 91) = 4.10$, $p < .05$; see table 4). Contrasts analysis revealed that when the request was delayed, exchange participants evaluated the brand negatively compared to communal participants ($F(1, 91) = 6.58$, $p < .05$) but no differently when the request was immediate ($F(1, 91) < 1$). Further contrasts showed that exchange participants evaluated the brand negatively when the request was delayed than when it was immediate ($F(1, 91) = 6.31$, $p < .05$) but the communal participants evaluated the brand no differently whether the request was delayed or immediate ($F(1, 91) < 1$).

Norm Violation. An ANOVA conducted on the six-item Norm Violation score (Cronbach's alpha = 0.76) revealed that the main effect of Relationship Type was not significant ($M_{\text{Comm.}} = 3.26$, $M_{\text{Exch.}} = 3.33$; $F(1, 91) < 1$), nor was the main effect of Timing of Request ($M_{\text{Immed.}} = 3.26$, $M_{\text{Delay.}} = 3.34$; $F(1, 91) < 1$). Again, consistent with hypothesis 3c, there was a significant Relationship Type \times Timing of Request interaction effect ($F(1, 91) = 9.05$, $p < .01$; see table 4). Specific contrasts showed that when the return request was delayed, exchange participants perceived a greater violation of norms than communal participants ($F(1, 91) = 5.38$, $p < .05$), and when the return request was immediate the communal participants perceived a greater violation of norms than exchange participants ($F(1, 91) =$

TABLE 4

MEAN RATINGS OF COMMUNAL AND EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS ON REACTIONS TO MARKETING ACTION, OVERALL EVALUATION, AND NORM VIOLATION: EXPERIMENT 3

	Immediate		Delayed	
	Communal	Exchange	Communal	Exchange
Reactions to marketing action* (1-item: Likely to Agree)	5.87	6.09	6.08	5.16
Overall evaluation* (3-items)	6.07	6.16	6.17	5.51
Norm violation** (6-items)	3.53	2.98	3.00	3.65
N	23	23	24	25

*Interaction effect is significant at $p < .05$ level.

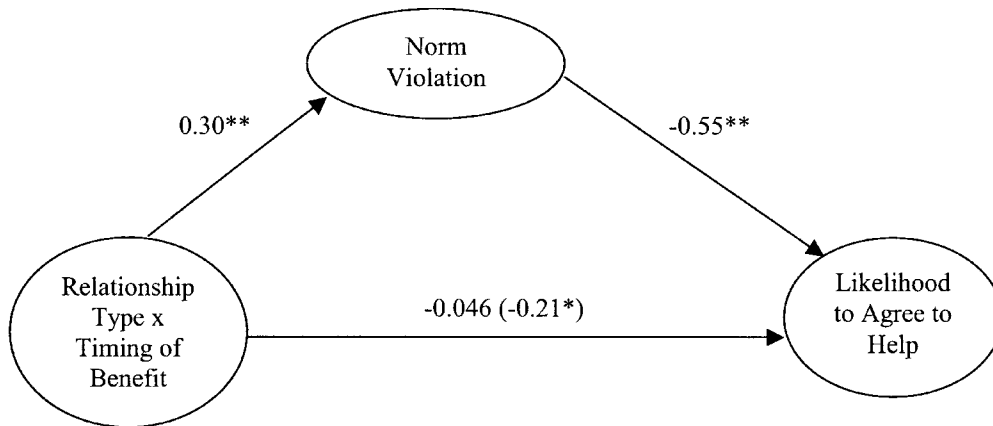
**Interaction effect is significant at $p < .01$ level.

FIGURE 2

MEDIATION ANALYSIS: EXPERIMENT 3

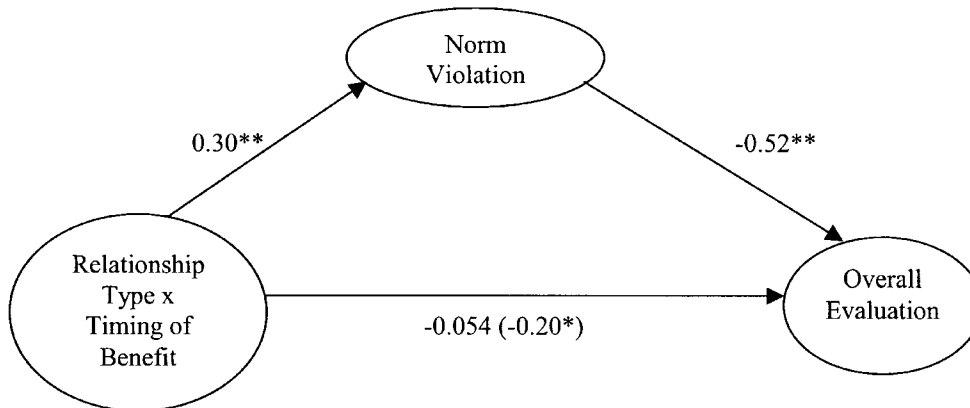
A. MEDIATING ROLE OF NORM VIOLATION ON THE EFFECT OF RELATIONSHIP

TYPE X TIMING OF BENEFIT: LIKELIHOOD TO AGREE TO HELP



B. MEDIATING ROLE OF NORM VIOLATION ON THE EFFECT OF RELATIONSHIP

TYPE X TIMING OF BENEFIT: OVERALL EVALUATION



NOTE.—Numbers on paths are beta-values. The total effect between the predictor and the criterion (i.e., before controlling for the mediator) is given in parentheses; the direct effect (i.e., after controlling for the mediator) is given outside the parentheses. * = significant at $p < .05$ level; ** = significant at $p < .01$ level.

3.76, $p = .05$). Considered alternately, exchange participants perceived greater norm violation when the return request was delayed than when it was immediate ($F(1, 91) = 5.74$, $p < .05$), and communal participants perceived greater norm violation when the return request was immediate than when it was delayed but only marginally so ($F(1, 91) = 3.46$, $p = .07$). This last contrast is consistent with the assertion that norm violation perceived by communal participants would be somewhat muted, possibly due to the genuine concern that

partners have for each other, and provide help whenever needed—including immediately after receiving some help.

Mediation Analysis. To test hypothesis 3d, mediation analyses of perceived norm violation were conducted on Reactions to Marketing Action and Brand Evaluation. Using the methods of Baron and Kenny (1986), we find that Norm Violation mediates the effect of the Relationship Type \times Timing of Benefit interaction on Likelihood to Help and

the interaction's effect on Overall Evaluation providing strong evidence for the mediating role of norm violation in consumers' response to the marketing action as well as their overall brand evaluations under different relationship types (see fig. 2). Thus, hypothesis 3d is supported.

Discussion

The results of experiment 3 replicate the findings of the first two experiments that consumer responses depend on the type of relationship norms that are salient at the time of brand interaction. Specifically, the results of this experiment show that since a delay in the request for a return favor is likely to be seen as an attempt to get something free from the partner, it violates exchange norms leading to a poorer evaluation by exchange participants relative to communal participants. Results also show that when the request for a return favor is immediate, the evaluation of the communal and exchange participants is not significantly different. Although an immediate return request is in keeping with the norms of exchange relationship and in violation of communal norms, the effect of the violation of communal norms is weak. As was noted earlier, it is likely that an immediate request for help is seen as an expression of a genuine need of the partner thereby reducing the effect of norm violation. Furthermore, an important objective of experiment 3 was to investigate the role of relationship norms more directly and to find out if the results that are observed are in fact guided by the violation of and conformity to these norms. The findings of the mediation analyses provide strong evidence about the role of norms in participants' responses to the brand's actions.

A possible limitation of the experiment is that the Overall Evaluation score and Norm Violation score were highly correlated (correlation coefficient = $-.52$), suggesting the need for a possibly different dependent variable that could more convincingly establish the effect of norm violation on brand assessments. Future research may examine this by using such measures, like brand commitment or future purchase intention.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The overall objective of this research was to test the theory that the type of consumer-brand relationship influences the evaluations consumers make about the brand and its actions. The conceptual model specifically proposed the role of relationship norms and the influence of norm violation/conformity on consumer evaluations. Three different experiments tested three different relationship norms. The results of all three experiments provide converging support for the theory that an action that is in violation of a relationship norm leads to a poorer evaluation by the consumers relative to an action that is in conformity with the relationship norm. Specifically, results of experiment 1 show that, relative to participants in an exchange relationship, those in a communal relationship evaluate the brand and its actions more positively when the action is in keeping with com-

munal norms but in violation of exchange norms (no fee charged for the special service) than when the action is in violation of the communal norms but in keeping with the exchange norms (fee was charged). Experiment 2 finds that, relative to participants in an exchange relationship, those in a communal relationship evaluate the brand and its actions more positively when given a noncomparable benefit in return for help provided than when given a comparable benefit in return. Finally, experiment 3 finds that, relative to exchange participants, communal participants' evaluations are more positive when a request for help by the brand is delayed compared to when it is made immediately following a request for help by the consumer. Further, the results of this experiment also find that the perceived level of norm violation completely mediates the effects on consumers' assessment of brand and its actions. A notable finding of the research is that the participants' responses were not limited to the specific action of the brand but extended to their overall brand evaluations as well.

Overall, results of all three experiments support the theory that a violation of or adherence to norms of relationships influences consumers' brand attitudes and behavior. The three experiments ruled out a few explanations that could legitimately be proposed as alternatives. Notable among these were the uniqueness of monetary benefits, perceived level of positive affect, and differences in quality perceptions across the two relationships. The results of the three experiments give us confidence that communal and exchange relationships, and more specifically the norms of behavior that guide these relationships, provide an insightful tool to study consumer behavior. These results add greatly to our understanding of consumer behavior by proposing and testing a new theoretical model to examine consumer-brand interactions. Overall, this research provides a new conceptual framework to further explore an increasingly important and growing area of interest—consumer-brand relationships.

The results of the three experiments also find that the social relationship framework, although insightful, is not exactly paralleled in the brand context. There are instances when the social relationship norms do not completely account for the consumer responses, for example, in experiment 1 the responses of exchange consumers were somewhat muted. It might be interesting to explore the point beyond which the exchange-oriented consumers are sensitive to such norms violations. One issue that needs to be kept in mind is that since a consumer-brand context almost always involves a price tag for the products/services, it has an inherently strong element of exchange. As a result the relationship norms in a commercial context are likely to be somewhat moderated by this underpinning of exchange-ness even in a communal relationship. In other words, it is likely that the commercial context creates its own norms of behavior that lay on top of the social relationship norms that ultimately determine consumers' attitudes and behavior. Other norms like "the customer is king" that are pervasive in a commercial context may also make the relationship

somewhat asymmetric. Future research should study the boundaries of extending the social relationship framework to a commercial context, as well as studying the exact nature of this interplay between social relationship norms and commercial norms.

The results of the three experiments have some important implications for managers. As highlighted by experiment 1, establishing a communal relationship with consumers is not free and has some potential cost implications. In particular, the ability of communally perceived brands to charge incrementally for extra services might be severely limited, and an insistence on doing so may even risk weakening the entire relationship. Experiment 2 highlights that money is not always the best way to reward customers. Although monetary incentives work well sometimes, there are times when other incentives might be better (and cheaper too). Finally, experiment 3 demonstrates that even when the final action is exactly the same, very subtle differences in the actual delivery of the action can make all that critical difference in consumer evaluations.

In sum, the relationship metaphor offers a great opportunity to explore the complex but fascinating world of consumer-brand interactions. While there are vast aspects of consumer-brand relationships still unexplored, this research offers a theoretical model for understanding why some consumers who apparently digress from the utilitarian price-based model of consumer behavior may not necessarily be behaving "irrationally." As we gather greater knowledge about how consumers relate to brands, we can only just begin to comprehend what one owner of Volkswagen Beetle had in mind when she said this about her car: "Beetle is a member of the family who just happens to live in the garage."

[Dawn Iacobucci served as editor for this article.]

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