Do relational norms matter in consumer-brand relationships?☆

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ABSTRACT

Researchers criticize current research of consumer-brand relationships (CBR) and research of relational norms because they draw on the interpersonal relationship literature. This paper responds to such remarks in two ways. First, the paper develops a conceptual framework that highlights the mediating role of relational norms in CBR, their effect on brand-relationship quality (BRQ) and their linkage between the characteristics of the dyad and consumer behavior. Second, this article offers an alternative conceptualization and operationalization of BRQ and relational norms. Contrary to prior work, this work draws on the business-to-business relationship literature instead of the interpersonal relationship metaphor. The research provides evidence for a second-order structure of relational norms and BRQ. The results suggest that relational norms and BRQ significantly mediate brand relationships.

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1. Introduction

Consumer–brand relationships (CBR) are important for the profitability of companies (Reichheld, Markey, & Hopton, 2000) and enhancing the understanding of CBR is of great interest to researchers (e.g. Fournier, 1994). Despite the relevance of CBR in practice and theory, academics often criticize that CBR research originates from the interpersonal relationship literature. Nevertheless, several findings support the notion that brand relationship quality (BRQ) is a significant indicator for the strength and depth of consumers’ relational behavior towards consumer goods brands (e.g. Fournier, 1994; Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007).

Despite this interest in CBR, research which assesses mediating variables when investigating the relationship between consumers and consumer goods brands is scarce. One study (Kressmann, Sirgy, Herrmann, Huber, Huber, and Lee, 2006) finds that BRQ mediates CBR. However, no previous work examines the mediating role of relational norms even though several authors support the idea of norms intervening in brand relationships. Using a longitudinal experiment, Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004) argue that relationship-specific expectations influence a service brand and brand perception. Aggarwal (2004) applies a social relationship framework (Clark & Mills, 1993) to examine whether distinct motivations – referred to as norms – exist in brand relationships. He finds support for the theory that an action which violates a relationship norm leads to a less favorable evaluation by the consumer than of an action that conforms with the relationship norm.

Although both studies analyze the impact of certain elements on service brands, the role of norms in the context of consumer goods brands is still unclear. Moreover, Aggarwal’s study could not verify whether Clark and Mills’ interpersonal relationship framework is applicable to the brand context. An even more important conceptual issue arises from the fact that Aggarwal does not measure actual brand relationships but confronts participants with hypothetical descriptions of relationships in an experimental setting. Therefore, Johar’s key question “Is there a norm attached to brand behavior” (Johar, 2005, p. 26) remains open. Responding to this question is especially important for brand managers as the answer provides information on the key drivers of successful brand relationship management. This insight represents a departure from traditional CBR research.

This research addresses the gaps in two ways. First, this paper provides an operationalization of BRQ and relational norms that stems from business rather than interpersonal relationships. The alternative operationalization neither stretches the interpersonal relationship metaphor too far nor changes the original understanding of the relationship metaphor. Second, the present framework explores the link between brand loyalty and brand characteristics, consumer characteristics as well as brand relationship characteristics. This paper emphasizes the mediating role of relational norms and BRQ. If a link exists, measures of relational norms and BRQ provide enriching insight into CBR for both researchers and brand managers.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the extant literature on CBR and evaluates different approaches to operationalize relationship quality. The subsequent section summarizes the current knowledge on relational norms. Section 4 develops a multidimensional conceptualization of brand relationship quality and relational norms and identifies relevant antecedents and outcomes of brand relationships. Section 5 presents the empirical study, and Section 6
reports the findings. The concluding section discusses implications and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Relationship quality research

The relationship metaphor goes back to the concept of relational exchange (see Berry, 1983). This understanding represents a paradigm shift from a purely transaction-oriented to a relationship-oriented marketing perspective (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

In business-to-business marketing, researchers disagree about the constructs that best mediate relationships. Analyzing key indicators for successful relationships still constitutes a widespread challenge. While Morgan and Hunt (1994) propose that trust and commitment are relevant for predicting exchange performance, Crosby and his colleagues are the first to introduce the notion of relationship quality (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). They define relationship quality as an overall assessment of the strength and depth of a relationship that provides insight into the exchange performance (Crosby et al., 1990; Johnson, 1999; Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995). Relationship quality is generally a multidimensional construct that comprises commitment, trust and satisfaction (Crosby et al., 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001; Kumar et al., 1995).

On the other hand, in business-to-consumer marketing, a variety of theoretical approaches, such as the concept of animism, the increasing tendency to personify brands (e.g. Belk, 1988; Levy, 1985) and the theory of love applied to consumer–object relations (Shimp & Madden, 1988), inspire CBR research. Fournier (1994, 1998) introduces the CBR and BRQ concepts in 1994. According to her, BRQ is a multi-faceted construct that comprises seven dimensions. Six subsequent quantitative studies successfully utilize Fournier’s BRQ scale (e.g. Hayes, Alford, Silver, & York, 2006; Park & Kim, 2001; Park, Kim, & Kim, 2002; Smit et al., 2007). Reviewing these works reveals that even though all researchers adjust the original scale, Fournier’s facet ‘partner quality’ attracts the most interest among scientists. Two studies detect additional CBR dimensions. Park and Kim (2001) discover the satisfaction and brand knowledge dimensions. A later study identifies the new dimensions labelled ‘nostalgia’ and ‘trust’ (Park et al., 2002). Also inspired by the interpersonal relationship literature, Veloutsou (2007, p. 15) argues that “relationships could be described by two broad dimensions, the communication and emotional content”. Based on the relationship marketing literature, she mainly derives scale items from Harker (1999) and finds support for this assumption.

In summary, much discrepancy exists in the literature regarding the operationalization of BRQ. While drawing on interpersonal theories enriches the knowledge of CBR, several researchers criticize this approach for overstretched the interpersonal relationship metaphor (Bengtsson, 2003; Patterson & O’Malley, 2006). In order to avoid the complex issues of operationalization that extant works encounter, this paper applies an alternative conceptualization.

Relying on knowledge from the business-to-business context, this study conceptualizes BRQ as a higher-order construct that consists of the dimensions relationship commitment, brand trust and relationship satisfaction (Crosby et al., 1990). This BRQ conceptualization is consistent with Blackston (1992) who states that customers’ trust in and satisfaction with the brand are key components of a successful positive brand relationship. Moreover, this conceptualization addresses the criticism mentioned by Bengtsson (2003) because the approach avoids terms such as love that make associations with interpersonal relationships.

3. Relational norms research

3.1. Relational exchange theory

The extensive body of research on norms in business relationships demonstrates the pivotal role that norms play in exchange relationships. Relational norms lie at the core of relational exchange theory (Macneil, 1980) that gains strong interest among researchers of business-to-business relationships. For Macneil, including the content of exchange transactions and ensuring compliance with them by writing explicit contracts is nearly impossible (Macneil, 1974). Rather, soft governance mechanisms, so-called implicit agreements or relational norms, guide exchange relationships. Researchers define relational norms as expectations about behavior that at least the exchange partners share (Artz & Brush, 2000; Heide & John, 1992; Joshi & Arnold, 1997; Macneil, 1980; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Even though relational norms evolve over the interaction episodes (see e.g. Ivens & Blois, 2004), they are relatively stable over time (Opp, 1979). In addition to their ex ante role as expectations (Heide & John, 1992) or guidelines for appropriate behavior (Macneil, 1980), norms serve ex post as reference points to evaluate the behavior an individual actually displays in a given situation. Hence, they permit to judge the conformity of a party’s actions with the established standards.

Several reasons exist to argue for the applicability of relational exchange theory to the brand context. First, unlike business relationships, CBR signify repeated exchanges between two parties known to each other (Fournier, 1998). Innovative relationship marketing tools such as direct mailings, customer clubs, and blogs facilitate these repeated interactions between brands and their customers. Brands communicate individualized offers to their customers, customers can provide feedback and brands, in turn, can respond to that input. Second, brands resemble virtual contracts. Through their existence on the market over time, they become a quasi contract that binds both parties (Kapferer, 2007). The brand must keep its identity and stay loyal to itself and its values to retain its market position. Consumers automatically expect a certain degree of reliability and consistency from an established brand. For instance, a strong brand transmits a sign of quality. Even though no written contract explicitly states that each product must be of high quality, consumers develop rather implicit expectations that the brand has to meet in order to prevent the brand relationship from being dissolved. Against this background, brand relationships are more similar to business relationships than to interpersonal relationships. From the brand managers’ perspective, a successful relationship means receiving money in exchange for goods. That is why the relational exchange theory introduced by Macneil (1980) provides an appropriate framework to gain deeper insight into CBR.

3.2. Norms that govern consumer–brand relationships

Macneil develops a set of nine to ten relational norms or “principles of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable behavior” (Macneil, 1980, p. 38). As the literature provides evidence for limited discriminant validity among all relational norms (e.g. Heide & John, 1992; Ivens, 2006), this study applies a limited set of four norms that are particularly relevant for CBR: solidarity, reciprocity, flexibility, and information exchange.

3.2.1. Solidarity

The relational norm of solidarity determines as how important the involved parties perceive the relationship (Kauffmann & Stern, 1988). Solidarity manifests in behaviors which contribute directly to relationship maintenance (Heide & John, 1992; Macneil, 1980). When one partner is in a predicament, solidarity plays a decisive role in preserving the relationship (Achrol, 1996; Dan & Schul, 1992; Kaufmann & Stern, 1988). For instance, a customer may express solidarity towards a brand when the desired brand is temporarily not available. He would then search for the brand in another shop or wait until the desired brand becomes available again instead of buying an alternative brand or product. The brand can express solidarity as well by providing special payment options for customers with limited liquidity or by assisting product users when problems arise.
3.2.2. Reciprocity

Reciprocity captures the belief that realizing one’s own success emerges from the partners’ common success (Macneil, 1980). Reciprocity does not demand equality in every single exchange, but the benefits for both partners should follow an even distribution in the long run (Kauffman & Dant, 1992; Kauffman & Stern, 1988). This attitude prevents the parties from maximizing their individual relationship benefits at the expense of the exchange partner. Benefits can be monetary (e.g. higher earnings and lower costs) or immaterial (e.g. information access and psychological benefits). Regarding CBR, a consumer might be willing to pay more for the brand because the purchase enhances the customer’s self-esteem. Factors like mutual dependence and a highly competitive market situation reinforce the emergence of reciprocity as a norm. In other words, the more the customer depends on the brand and the more competitors the brand has, the more both parties are willing to make allowances for the partner. As the consumer goods market is highly competitive, reciprocity presumably is a salient norm in CBR.

3.2.3. Flexibility

Environmental conditions are not static, but change over time. Therefore, adaptations of the initial agreements become necessary. Scholars call the willingness to adjust the initial expectations to new environmental conditions ‘flexibility’ (Heide & John, 1992; Kauffman & Dant, 1992; Noordewier, John, & Nevin, 1990). According to relational exchange theory, the impact of flexibility increases with the relationships’ time horizon (Macneil, 1981). The consumer goods market in particular is highly volatile and uncertain. For instance, new legal restrictions for industries such as tobacco and food may require flexibility from both partners in the consumer–brand dyad. For brands, which are interested in retaining their customers over a long period of time, flexibility is a crucial norm. Hence, flexibility plays a significant role in CBR.

3.2.4. Information exchange

The norm of information exchange denotes the “bilateral expectation that parties will proactively provide information useful to the partner” (Heide & John, 1992, p. 35; Lusch & Brown, 1996; Noordewier et al., 1990). Information exchange represents a safeguard for the brand because the consumer could provide unforeseen information that may affect the brand’s operations. If the company usually delivers the product to the home, the consumer should inform the company in case of relocation. The brand, in turn, should provide relevant information such as delivery delays or quality problems in order to prevent the customer from getting frustrated and from dissolving the CBR prematurely. As communication is necessary for relationship building (Veloutsou, 2007), information exchange is presumably salient both in establishing and maintaining CBR.

3.3. Relational norms as a second-order construct

Although solidarity, reciprocity, flexibility and information exchange are conceptually different norms, evidence from previous studies suggests that the norms are actually interrelated dimensions of the second-order construct relational norm (Heide & John, 1992) or relationalism (Noordewier et al., 1990). Noordewier et al. (1990) state that an underlying syndrome or higher-order construct exists because the individual elements tend to support each other. Furthermore, empirical results of a confirmatory analysis show that the three norms flexibility, information exchange and solidarity compose a single factor due to high second-order factor loadings (Heide & John, 1992). When analyzing the dimensions underlying Macneil’s ten relational norms, Ivens (2006) detects two underlying groups: value-creating norms and value-claiming norms. The four relational norms that are relevant for the purpose of this study belong to the group of value-creating norms. Hence, this article suggests that they constitute a higher-order construct in the brand context as well. Therefore, the norms solidarity, reciprocity, flexibility and information exchange compose a second-order construct called relational norm.

4. Model development

Although analyzing CBR is of wide interest among academics (e.g. Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Dalli, Romani, & Gistri, 2006; Escalas, 2004; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Pichert & Hemetsberger, 2007; Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004; Thomson, Maclnnis, & Park, 2005), little research focuses on truly bidirectional CBR in the context of consumer brands. Reviewing the extant work reveals that the tested models are partial rather than holistic. Empirical studies widely investigate antecedents and effects of CBR. Scholars tend to concentrate on consumer characteristics (e.g. demographics (Monga, 2002)) or brand-related variables (e.g. brand attractiveness (Hayes et al., 2006); brand personality (Smit et al., 2007)). However, no extant study examines relationship-related characteristics either as antecedents or as mediators of the CBR. Therefore, this article extends the current knowledge by developing a comprehensive framework. This framework includes brand relationship characteristics as a source of BRQ and relational norms as mediating variables in the dyad (see Fig. 1).

The model consists of three main groups of CBR antecedents that represent the two exchange partners and their relationship. The first group focuses on consumer characteristics, such as for instance product category involvement. They presumably impact the perceived BRQ and relational norms. According to Mittal (1995), the product category involvement is a personality trait that conveys how important an individual perceives a product category based on the individual inherent needs, values and interests. High involvement in the product category should lead to high expectations towards the brand. Thus, the model suggests in line with Christy, Gordon, and Joe (1996) that a consumer’s high product category involvement provides a strong basis for a successful relationship. Besides, product category involvement should positively affect BRQ as previous studies find evidence that higher product involvement lead to higher perceived BRQ (Kressmann et al., 2006). The model not only suggests an indirect link between product category involvement and brand loyalty via the mediators, but also a direct effect. Hence, product category involvement positively affects brand loyalty (see also Quester & Lim, 2003) (H1–H3).

The second group centers on brand characteristics and their presumable impact on CBR. One potential brand characteristic is brand perception. If a customer perceives the brand as extremely warm or competent, (s)he may develop higher brand expectations than a customer who perceives the brand as less warm or competent. Similarly, the model suggests that brand perception affects BRQ. This hypothesis corresponds with findings by Hayes et al. (2006) who show that brand personality influences BRQ. Besides, extant literature states that brand perception in terms of brand personality has a direct effect on brand loyalty (e.g. Kumar, Luthra, & Datta, 2006) (H4–H6).

![Fig. 1. Conceptual model.](image-url)
The third group encompasses brand relationship characteristics that may affect the mediators and final outcomes of the consumer-brand dyad. The variable brand dependence specifies the brand relationship. In line with the definition by Joshi and Arnold (1997), who investigate the buyer’s dependence on the supplier in the business-to-business context, brand dependence refers to the costs for the consumer when terminating the brand relationship and switching to an alternative brand. This leads to the assumption that brand dependence directly and indirectly influences brand loyalty (H7-H9).

As discussed in the previous section, recent research indicates that norms may play two important roles in CBR. First, norms lead to displaying certain behavior in business relationships (Kauffman & Stern, 1988; Lusch & Brown, 1996; Macneil, 1980). Regarding brands, Kaltcheva and Weitz (1999) find that customers who have unpleasant experiences with a service brand remain less loyal than those who perceive their brand experiences as pleasant. The non-conformity to relational norms developed with the brand in the past could result in the customer dissolving the brand relationship. The higher the customer’s expectations towards the brand, the more difficult customer retention becomes. Hence, this model suggests that norms are a mediating variable with a direct effect on behavior (H10).

Second, as relational norms serve as reference points, they influence behavior indirectly through the perceived BRQ. More precisely, the present model assumes that norm conformity positively impacts the consumer’s perception of relationship commitment, brand trust and brand relationship satisfaction. Kauffman and Stern (1988, p. 539) state that, in business-to-business relationships “with highly relational norms of solidarity, the parties are likely to develop strong reputations for trustworthiness”. However, no study investigates whether consumer goods brands need to conform to relational norms in order for consumers to be willing to build brand trust, commitment and relationship satisfaction (H11).

BRQ plays a pivotal role in CBR (e.g. Kressmann et al., 2006). Several empirical studies indicate that the more favorable the BRQ perception, the more willing the customer is to stay loyal to the brand. Morgan and Hunt (1994) find empirical support for a negative effect of commitment on the customers’ propensity to leave the relationship. Scholars also detect a positive impact of the satisfaction with the relationship partner on the loyalty to this partner. Furthermore, Lau and Lee (1999) reveal that brand trust leads to brand loyalty. In the present study, loyalty refers to behavioral loyalty and thus to the customer’s repurchase intention. This model proposes that BRQ mediates the consumer-brand dyad that influences brand loyalty (H12). With the above hypotheses, this study suggests the comprehensive model shown in Fig. 1. The model takes consumer characteristics, brand characteristics as well as brand relationship characteristics into account and describes their link to relational norms, BRQ and brand loyalty.

5. Empirical study

As the research objective is to examine the role of norms in consumers’ relationships with consumer goods brands, this study focuses on a set of nine brands from three different product categories: clothing (Zara, H&M, Nike), toothpaste (Colgate, Signal, Elmex) and soft drinks (Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Nestea). The sample contains a range of product categories, both symbolic and instrumental, in order to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Respondents refer to one randomly assigned brand when completing the written questionnaire. The data collection takes place in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. To ensure the survey’s comprehensibility as well as the equivalence of the original English scales, a back-translation approach is applied after translating them into French (Brislin, 1970). French native speakers check and pre-test the French version. For the main study, questionnaires are distributed using a snowball system. Each student fills in one questionnaire and is asked to collect 15 additional questionnaires. The study is part of a group assignment for a marketing course. Students obtain extra credits for handing in the correct number of questionnaires.

In sum, the following analysis bases upon a sample of 510 completely filled in questionnaires. As the data collection took place at a university, students constitute a large part of the sample (71.2%) and 63.7% of the informants are 24 years old or younger. Nevertheless, the sample is appropriate given the nature of the brands evaluated (see e.g. Homburg, Koschat, & Hoyer, 2005). All brands are well-known among students and affordable for them. The nine brands are equally distributed across the sample.

The study applies reflective multi-item scales for all constructs. In order to identify the role of relational norms in CBR, the objective is to collect data from informants who are familiar with the brand. Thus, an introductory question verifies that all respondents are brand users, before information regarding the participants’ product category involvement is gathered (De Wulf et al., 2001). The respondents answer a series of questions that map onto brand dependence (adapted from Joshi & Arnold, 1997) and brand perception (warmth and competence; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007). Next, items regarding the relational norms are assessed (adapted from Gassenheimer, Calantone, & Scully, 1995; Heide & John, 1992; Kauffman & Dant, 1992; Lusch & Brown, 1996). The scales of the different BRQ facets are modified from reliable and valid existing scales in order to fit the brand context (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Alemán Jose, & Yagüe-Guil léen, 2003; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Lau & Lee, 1999). After a four-item scale captured behavioral loyalty (Quester & Lim, 2003), the questionnaire concludes with sociodemographic questions. All items are measured using seven point Likert-type scales.

6. Results

6.1. Measure validation procedure

Since extant research does not apply the scales to operationalize BRQ and the relational norms to the consumer goods context, this study implements a detailed validation procedure. The results show that all coefficient alpha values and composite reliabilities exceed the recommended thresholds (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Peterson, 1994), thus indicating sufficient reliabilities of construct operationalizations. Subsequently, this study employs a confirmatory factor analysis to verify the hypothesized factor structure of the BRQ items and the relational norm items. The BRQ items show a three-factor structure with commitment, trust and relationship satisfaction forming the higher-order construct BRQ. This structure corresponds to a factor model in which the observed items and the three first-order factors result from a second-order factor. The BRQ second-order construct fits the data well ($\chi^2 (32) = 95.54$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .98). While the relational norm items form the four factors reciprocity, flexibility, solidarity, and information exchange, all four constructs originate from the same second-order factor: relational norm. The proposed relational norm construct fits well ($\chi^2 (61) = 173.75$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .97). Furthermore, assessing convergent validity of the measures reveals that all factor loadings are statistically significant (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991). The appendix presents the final measures.

6.2. Hypotheses testing

This study applies structural equation modeling (AMOS 17.1) for testing the model and hypotheses. Table 1 provides an overview of the results. The fit statistics indicate a good overall fit for the model: $\chi^2 (601) = 1549.62$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .93.

As proposed in hypothesis 1, product category involvement represents a consumer characteristic with a significant positive influence on relational norms. However, product category involvement does not significantly impact BRQ (H2). Although the sign is in
the expected direction, the data does not support hypothesis 3 that predicts an effect of product category involvement on brand loyalty.

The brand perception construct encompasses two dimensions: warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2007). Even though the results confirm both hypotheses 4a and 4b, relational norms rely more on the degree to which a brand is perceived as warm than on the perception of brand competence. Regarding the second mediating variable, the results offer only partial support for hypothesis 5. While warmth has no significant impact on BRQ (H5a), the perception of competence significantly affects the BRQ construct (H5b). Brand perception has not only an indirect influence on the characteristics of the dyad, but also a direct influence on brand loyalty (H6). However, this is only true for the competence dimension (H6b). Surprisingly, this influence is negative.

Against expectation, the brand relationship characteristic does not have a significant influence on relational norms (H7) despite the fact that the path from brand dependence to BRQ (H8) is highly significant. Another direct positive link exists between the brand relationship characteristic and the outcome variable brand loyalty (H9).

Although the results do not support hypothesis 10, which proposes a negative relationship between relational norms and brand loyalty, the sign of the path is in the expected direction. As argued in hypothesis 11, relational norms have a significant influence on BRQ. This shows that relational norms, beside brand relationship characteristics, are one of the most important determining factors of perceived BRQ. Likewise, hypothesis 12 predicting the BRQ’s positive impact on brand loyalty is strongly supported. The findings suggest that BRQ predicts brand loyalty better than relational norms. However, relational norms are a crucial driver for BRQ and, thus, have an indirect effect on brand loyalty.

Overall, the proposed model explains 75% of the variance of the consumer’s intention to repurchase the brand. The model provides relevant insight into CBR and explains the variance of the relational mediators very well. The drivers of the consumer-brand dyad account for 55% of the relational norm construct and for 86% of brand relationship quality. Therefore, consumer, brand and brand relationship characteristics seem to be appropriate antecedent variables.

As mentioned above, one main objective of this study is to assess the mediating role of relational norms in CBR. Thus, this study compares the previous model to an alternative model that ignores the role of relational norms as a mediator of the dyad (see Fig. 2).

The following fit statistics demonstrate a worse model fit for the alternative model than for the model that includes relation norms: \( \chi^2(234) = 829.50, \) RMSEA = .07, CFI = .93. Hence, the specified model that considers the intervening role of both brand relationship quality and relational norm serves as a useful source of information when explaining CBR.

7. Discussion

The following discussion comprises three components. After considering the study’s academic contributions, the second section assesses practical implications for brand management. A critical evaluation of the study outlines its limitations and suggests avenues for future research.

7.1. Research implications

Although researchers show interest in CBR, prior contributions do not provide a BRQ operationalization that is independent from interpersonal relationships. Studies examining the role of relational norms in CBR are scarce. The first contribution of this study is to propose a different conceptualization of the BRQ construct. Reviewing the extant literature of BRQ in the consumer goods context reveals that a more differentiated view of CBR is needed. Criticism on previous works mostly originates from their reliance on the interpersonal relationship literature (Bengtsson, 2003). This research bases upon a conceptual framework from the business-to-business marketing literature and includes the dimensions relationship commitment, trust, and relationship satisfaction for the BRQ construct. Transferring current knowledge from the business-to-business context to brands enables a more general view of relationships. This approach has two main strengths. Its conceptualization draws on an empirically supported theory base and this approach is free from associations with the interpersonal relationship context.

Second, this study contributes to current research as this work is the first to apply the relational exchange theory (Macneil, 1980) to consumer goods brands. Empirical studies on norms in CBR are scarce and the existing works have several limitations. The present study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesized path</th>
<th>Standardized path coefficient</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: product category involvement → relational norm</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: product category involvement → brand relationship quality</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>Not Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: product category involvement → brand loyalty</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4a: brand perception (warmth) → relational norm</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4b: brand perception (competence) → relational norm</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5a: brand perception (warmth) → brand relationship quality</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5b: brand perception (competence) → brand relationship quality</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>Not Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6a: brand perception (warmth) → brand loyalty</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>Not Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6b: Brand perception (competence) → brand loyalty</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7: brand uniqueness → relational norm</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>Not Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H8: brand uniqueness → brand relationship quality</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H9: brand uniqueness → brand loyalty</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H10: relational norm → brand loyalty</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H11: relational norm → brand relationship quality</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H12: brand relationship quality → brand loyalty</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2. Alternative model.
contributes to research on norms in CBR by addressing these issues. All respondents are actual brand users who have a relationship with the brand. This study approaches the norm concept from an alternative perspective by building the bridge between a relationship marketing framework and CBR research. Relational norms compose a second-order model that reflects four dimensions: solidarity, reciprocity, flexibility, and information exchange.

Third, this study advances the current knowledge of CBR by empirically testing a comprehensive CBR framework. The findings indicate that consumer characteristics exclusively relate to relational norms and that brand relationship characteristics influence the degree of perceived BRQ and brand loyalty. Brand characteristics have linkages to both mediators as well as to the outcome variable brand loyalty.

Finally, this work empirically demonstrates the role of relational norms in consumer-brand dyads and answers Johar’s (2005) question about the relation between norms and brand behavior. Norms are attached to brand behavior. Even though no direct link exists, the findings reveal that relational norms are an important driver of BRQ and that they indirectly affect consumer behavior through BRQ. The finding is also in line with Bennett (1996) who argues that the relational norm of reciprocity is an important element in brand relationships.

7.2. Managerial implications

Building and maintaining strong CBR are a key factor of business’ success. Hence, the research adds to practical marketing management by providing a new perspective on the drivers of successful brand relationships. The perspective is conducive for several reasons. First, the study’s results reveal that BRQ is the strongest driver of brand loyalty. Brand managers should focus especially on enhancing the BRQ dimensions brand trust, relationship satisfaction and commitment in order to increase customer loyalty. Second, the study investigates the drivers of BRQ with the intent to provide managers with information on how to improve the BRQ. Even though brand characteristics influence the BRQ to some extent, brand relationship characteristics are key drivers of BRQ followed by relational norms. This insight helps marketing managers to justify expenditures on the fulfillment of relational norms in an attempt to improve the perceived BRQ and, ultimately, to enhance brand loyalty.

The framework developed for this research further supports brand managers in their decisions on how to influence customer expectations. As stated before, relational norms mostly rely on brand characteristics. The more customers perceive a brand as warm, the higher the relational norms and the more brand managers should invest to fulfill the customer expectations. As the findings suggest that relational norms play a decisive role in consumer-brand interactions, brand managers should include measures of relational norms to get deeper insight into the relationships with their customers.

7.3. Limitations and future research

Notwithstanding the contributions of this paper, certain limitations remain that future research should seek to overcome. First, the analysis bases upon a limited sample of brands. Even though they cover a wide range of product categories, future research might extend the brand choice given the limited knowledge of the role that relational norms have in the exchange with other consumer goods brands. Second, data collection for the study takes place only in one country. All brands in this survey have a strong position on the Swiss market. However, intercultural differences may lead to different relationship expectations and are a worthwhile aspect to investigate in future. Third, this study focuses exclusively on the maintenance phase. Yet, brand relationships evolve over time and through different phases. Researchers should examine in longitudinal analyses for each phase which relational norms are salient and whether the intervening role of norms increases or decreases over time.

Appendix A

Brand dependence scale ($\alpha = .71$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is difficult for you to find a suitable replacement for......</td>
<td>It is important part of my life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\ldots$ is unique.</td>
<td>$\ldots$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relation norm scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Norm-Solidarity ($\alpha = .89$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If I incur problems (e.g. with the usage of the product), I assume that $\ldots$ tries to help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I assume that $\ldots$ share the problems that arise in the course of our dealing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I assume that $\ldots$ is committed to improvements that may benefit our relationship as a whole and not only itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norm-Flexibility ($\alpha = .83$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I assume that $\ldots$ timely responses to request for assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I assume that $\ldots$ reacts to complaints related to the product’s performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I assume that $\ldots$ will make adjustments in dealing with me to cope with circumstances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norm-Reciprocity ($\alpha = .92$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I assume that over the long run both $\ldots$ as well as I benefit from our relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I assume that $\ldots$ interested in my well-being in the same way as I am interested in its economic well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the long run I assume that mutual benefits will even out in my relationship with $\ldots$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I assume that mutual benefits are characteristic for my dealing with $\ldots$.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BRQ scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand relationship quality-Trust ($\alpha = .89$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I trust this band.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\ldots$ is a brand that meets my expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel confidence in $\ldots$ brand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\ldots$ is a brand that never disappoints me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand relationship quality-Relationship Satisfaction ($\alpha = .86$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleased-displeased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad-happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contented-disgusted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied-satisfied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brand relationship quality-Relationship Commitment ($\alpha = .84$)

I feel a sense of belonging to this brand.
I care about the long-term success of this brand.
I feel loyal towards this brand.

Behavioral loyalty ($\alpha = .92$).

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is very important for me to buy $\ldots$ over (an)other brand(s).</td>
<td>$\ldots$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although another brand was on sale, I would still buy $\ldots$</td>
<td>$\ldots$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I always find myself consistently buying $\ldots$ over the other brand(s).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If $\ldots$ was not available at the store, I would rather not buy at all if I have to choose another brand.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


