

THE BRAND, ME, AND THE OTHER: THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL  
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ON CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Business Administration in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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**Abstract****THE BRAND, ME, AND THE OTHER: THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL  
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by

**MARINA CARNEVALE**

Adviser: Professor Lauren Block

Research suggests that people form relationships with brands in the same way they do with each other. Despite the contextual nature of relationships, the effects of external interpersonal relationships (e.g., significant others) on consumer-brand relationships remain unexplored. In the current research, I develop and test a theoretical model that explains how external interpersonal relationship dynamics impact consumer-brand relationships. Three studies show that when a product symbolizes an external relationship (e.g., through a gift scenario), changes in that relationship, such as episodes of dissolution (e.g., a break up) or reinforcement (e.g., becoming exclusive), influence the relationship that consumers have with the brand that identifies the product. Specifically, my results show that episodes of dissolution (vs. reinforcement) impact the extent to which individuals feel connected to the brand and, consequently, a series of brand-related behaviors, such as less (more) favorable attitudes, purchase intentions, and recommendation ratings. In the third study, I replicate these effects while ruling out mood as an alternative explanation. Importantly, my findings indicate that implications of interpersonal relationship episodes stretch beyond the original product to any product in a brand's portfolio. Thus, results demonstrate that consumer-brand relationships do not solely mirror human relationships - they also are affected by them. Findings also have

important implications for managers promoting and positioning their brands as means of reinforcing desirable social relationships.

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## INTRODUCTION

“*A Diamond is Forever-*” De Beers’ advertising campaign, 1947-current.

The idea of associating a brand with romance is brilliantly captured by the DeBeers advertising campaign, which through its various nuances, such as “*Say it with Diamonds,*” has been supporting the brand positioning for over half a century. Just like DeBeers, numerous brands are positioned or promoted as means to reinforce desirable social relationships. But what are the consequences of doing so? In other words, what happens when consumers associate the brand with a particular interpersonal relationship and changes occur in that relationship? A consistent stream of research suggests that people create and maintain relationships with brands in much the same way they do with each other. On this premise, not only have brands been compared to relationship partners (Fournier 1998), but also consumer-brand relationship dynamics have been explained in light of human relationship dynamics (e.g., Johnson, Matear, and Thompson 2011). Moreover, considerable work has shown that brand relationships might influence interpersonal relationships, for example, through gift giving (Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999). Interestingly, despite these well-established connections between interpersonal and consumer-brand relationships, the extensive literature on brand relationships does not account for the effects of interpersonal relationship dynamics on consumer-brand relationship ones. In the current manuscript, I develop and test a theoretical model that illustrates how changes in interpersonal relationships impact consumer-brand relationships.

Research on the evolution of consumer-brand relationships has typically focused on actions initiated by the brand, as, for example, when a brand fails to deliver on a promise (e.g., Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009). However, a relationship with a brand might also change

through processes that alter the appraisal of the brand (Fournier 2009). Consistently, recent research shows that the dissolution of a consumer-brand relationship might occur because of an experience of harm to a person's self-concept, rather than of critical accidents (Johnson *et al.* 2011). Building on these premises and on those of relationship theory (Fournier 1998), as well as of research on interpersonal relationships (e.g., Aron, Aron, and Norman 2003), I argue that relationships that consumers have with brands change over time according to contextual changes that are independent of brand-initiated behavior. Rather, these changes are initiated by events that alter a consumer's interpersonal environment. In these cases, the brand is actually "innocent," yet, a favorable or unfavorable effect on the consumer-brand relationship occurs.

I therefore propose and test a theoretical model to explain whether and how changes in interpersonal relationships impact consumer-brand relationships. More specifically, I argue that when a product symbolizes an external interpersonal relationship (e.g., it was a gift) changes in that relationship, such as episodes of dissolution (e.g., a break up) or reinforcement (e.g., becoming exclusive), influence the relationship that consumers have with the brand that identifies the product. Three completed studies support the model by showing that Self-Brand connections and resulting brand-related behaviors can be altered by a change in the consumer's external interpersonal relationship when a product is associated with that relationship. Study 1 shows that changes in an external interpersonal relationship, such as episodes of dissolutions (e.g. break-up) or reinforcement (e.g., becoming exclusive), significantly impact feelings of Self-Brand Connection. Studies 2 and 3 replicate and extend study 1 findings by showing that these changes in Self-Brand Connection ultimately explain consistent changes in a series of brand-related behaviors, such as attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions, and recommendation ratings. Importantly, findings show that the effects of changes in an external relationship go

beyond those of the product associated with that relationship; rather, they spillover to the brand (studies 2-3) and to any product in the brand's portfolio (study 2). Notably, these effects do not spread to brands that aren't associated with the interpersonal relationship (study 3). Also, an alternative explanation of the effects of relationship episodes on brand-related behaviors, based on mood, is rejected (study 3).

While past research has looked at the appropriation of brand associations derived from the usage of these brands by reference groups (Escalas and Bettman 2005), the current manuscript opens a new area of inquiry in understanding how, when brands are associated with an external party, the external interpersonal relationship dynamics may influence consumer-brand relationship ones.

In the next session I provide a more detailed exposition of the theoretical model underlying the proposed effects. I then present three experiments that test the proposed model. Finally, I discuss the implications of the findings and provide some directions for future research.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Brand Relationships and their Human Side

People form relationships with brands in much the same way they do with each other. In this light, brands have been described as active relationship partners (Fournier 1998). Such metaphor has inspired a vast stream of research attempting to unfold reasons why, as well as ways in which consumers create, value, and maintain relationships with brands. Consumers are not reluctant to see brands as humans (e.g., Aggarwal and McGill 2007) and perceive their personality traits (Aaker 1997; Keller 2002), or even souls (Gilmore 1919). Thus, for example, just like people, brands afford opportunities for consumers to not only expand their sense of self (Reimann and Aaron 2009) but also to add meanings to their lives (e.g., Escalas and Bettman 2007). Similarly, just as consumers have norms that guide human relationships, they also have norms that guide brand relationships (i.e., transactional vs. communal; Aggarwal 2004). If interpersonal relationships help individuals satisfy different goals and needs (Sheldon et al. 2001), so do consumer-brand ones; for example, consumers may purchase brands for reasons that range from merely solving consumption problems (Park, Jaworski, MacInnis 1986) to serving goals of self-expression and identity construction (Thompson and Hisschman 1995; Johnson et al. 2011). Moreover, consumers' attachment to brands (Priester et al. 2009), or even love towards them (e.g., Ahuvia 2005) may mirror the analogous psychological constructs underlying interpersonal relationships.

The parallels between interpersonal and consumer-brand relationships are not limited to the creation and maintenance side of these relationships. Rather, they extend to aspects of their

dissolutions. For example, disappointed consumers might even hate “once loved” brands, and display revengeful behaviors against them (Grégoire, Tripp, Legoux 2009). Similarly, some recent research suggests that just like in so-called “no-fault” divorces, brand relationship dissolutions might occur because of an experience of harm to the self-concept, rather than a critical accident (Johnson et al. 2011).

Brand relationships thus resemble interpersonal relationships in a variety of contexts: they involve reciprocal exchanges between relationship partners; they are purposive, in that they help create meanings in consumers’ lives and satisfy goals. Moreover, brand relationships are multifaceted phenomena, varying across different dimensions and relying on different attachment styles. Most importantly, brand relationships are process phenomena, evolving and changing in response to a number of contextual interactions (Fournier 1998). Most recently, Galli and Gorn (2011) suggest that the meaning that consumers attribute to brands depends on other, competing brands. Thus, the authors show that even a product attribute- and therefore the brand- will be perceived more or less favorably depending on consumers’ prior expositions to other products and brands.

Despite the well-established contextual nature of consumer-brand relationships, to date literature has assumed that they are independent of interpersonal relationships dynamics. In the next session, I develop the hypotheses on whether and how interpersonal relationships may influence consumer-brand relationships.

Brands, the Self, and the Other

Individuals are intrinsically motivated to expand themselves to ultimately acquire resources and identities instrumental in accomplishing goals (Aaron, Aaron, and Norman 2003; Aron, Norman, and Aron 1998; Aron et al. 2000). One of the most important ways in which people expand themselves is by including others in themselves, through close relationships (Aaron and Aaron 1986; Reimann and Aaron 2009). Simply put, individuals seek to expand themselves and that they do so by including close others in their self. In such cases, the “other’s” resources, perspectives, and identities are experienced as one’s own, so that in close relationships the very structure of the self changes. This explains why developing (dissolving) a new relationship expands (contracts) the self and, the more expansion provided by a relationship before its dissolution, the greater the contraction of the self after its dissolution (Reinmann and Aaron 2009; Lewandowski et al. 2006).

Interestingly, individuals use brands to expand their selves, too (e.g., Escalas and Bettman 2003, Reimann and Aaron 2009). People use possessions to create, reinforce, and express their sense of self (e.g., Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995). Consistently, consumers purchase brands to construct and build their self concept and personal identities (Richins 1994; McCracken 1989; Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2005); in other words, brands become means for consumers to communicate their actual and ideal selves (Belk 1988). In the process of using brands to construct and expand the self, consumers develop self-brand connections, which represent the extent to which consumers have incorporated the brand into their self-concepts (Escalas 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2009).

One way in which consumers construct their self-concept thus creating self-brand connections is by forming associations between brands and other people (Escalas and Bettman 2005; McCracken 1998). Thus, consumers transfer these meanings from brands to the self by

selecting brands that represent a relevant aspect of their current or ideal self. Self-Brand connections therefore capture a fundamental aspect of consumers' construction of the self in that the closer the brand is linked to the self, the more meaningful brand associations can be (Escalas and Bettman 2003).

I argue that when the brand is associated with an external party, such as a romantic partner, the dynamics that accompany that external (to consumer-brand) interpersonal relationship may directly influence the extent to which consumers have incorporated the brand into their self-concepts. Specifically, I posit that interpersonal relationship episodes, such as of dissolution, will influence the extent to which consumers feel connected to the brand, so that individuals experiencing a dissolution relationship episode will distance their selves from the brand associated with that external party, thus displaying significantly lower levels of self-brand connection than those experiencing a reinforcement relationship episode. More formally:

**H1a:** External relationships directly influence the extent to which individuals feel connected to the brand, such that episodes of dissolution result in significantly lower levels of Self-brand Connections (SBC).

**H1b:** External interpersonal relationship episodes directly influence the extent to which individuals feel connected to the brand, such that episodes of reinforcement result in significantly higher levels of Self-brand Connections (SBC).

Research on interpersonal relationships suggests that reinforcement and dissolution episodes of close, interpersonal relationships are typically accompanied by high levels of affect. Thus,

when forming a new romantic relationship, for example, high levels of positive affect, such as excitement, are experienced. Similarly, when there is a potential loss of perceived efficacy (e.g., because the other interrupts the relationship), intense negative affect will occur (Carver and Sheier 1999; Reimann and Aaron 2009). Moreover, research suggests that if a relationship partner's behavior induces negative emotions, such as anger, then a behavioral response that punishes or distances the partner is more likely to be selected (Collins and Read 1994). Thus, it is expected that following a dissolution relationship episode with an external party, individuals will choose to distance their selves from the brand associated with that external party because of the negative affect felt toward the same external party.

If external relationships directly impact consumers' feelings of SBC, what are the consequences of these effects? Research suggests that SBC is positively related to brand evaluations and purchase intentions. Specifically, brands that are connected to a consumer's sense of self are regarded more favorably and are more likely to be purchased (Escalas 2004). Building on these findings, I propose that changes that occur in Self-Brand Connection following a relationship episode ultimately explain the effects of relationship episode on a series of brand-related behaviors, such as attitude towards the brand, purchase intentions, and recommendation ratings. I therefore hypothesize that SBC mediates the effects of relationship episode on attitude towards the brand, purchase intentions, and recommendation ratings (a summary of the theoretical model is depicted in figure 1).

**H2a:** Self-Brand Connection mediates the effects of relationship episode on purchase intentions.

**H2b:** Self-Brand Connection mediates the effects of relationship episode on attitude toward the brand.

**H2c:** Self-Brand Connection mediates the effects of relationship episode on recommendation ratings.

Three studies find support for hypotheses 1a and 1b. In addition, studies 2-3 confirm hypotheses 2a and 2b, and 2c, thus validating my theoretical model. Study 3 also rules out an alternative explanation, based on mood, of the effects of relationship episode on brand-related behaviors.

## STUDY 1

The major goal of study 1 was to test our first set of hypotheses. Thus, the objective of study 1 was to show that changes in an external relationship (e.g., with a significant other), such as episodes of dissolution or reinforcement, impact feelings of Self-Brand Connection (SBC). Further, I expected affect associated with the external party to explain such effects.

### Method

Study 1 was composed of a pretest and a two-part longitudinal study. In the pretest, the stimulus brand to be used in the main study was selected. Forty-nine undergraduate students at a Northeastern University participated in the first part of the study; however, 80% of them completed the second part of the study, thus leaving us with a final sample of thirty-nine. Participants were offered class credit in exchange for their participation.

*Pretest of the stimuli.* The objective of the pretest was to select a brand that participants were familiar with, and toward which feelings of SBC prior to the relationship episode manipulation (implemented in the main study) were not skewed to higher or lower levels of the distribution. SBC was therefore measured for several brands representing the product category of electronics (e.g., Siemens, Sony, and Apple). Forty-one undergraduate students at a major Northeastern University participated in the pretest in exchange for class credit. SBC was measured using seven, ten-point items (anchored by 0= strongly disagree, 10 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = .95$ , adapted from Escalas and Bettman 2003). Examples of items of this scale include the following: “This brand reflects who I am,” “I feel a personal connection to this brand,” and “I

use this brand to communicate who I am to other people.” Consistent with our selection criteria, the brand Sony was chosen ( $N= 41$ ,  $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD= 1.46$ ). Table 1 illustrates the statistics for SBC, measured for all the pretested brands.

*Procedure and Measures.* As previously mentioned, the goal of the first part of study 1 was to measure participants’ Self-Brand Connection prior to the relationship episode manipulation that would have been implemented in the second part of study 1 (for simplicity of exposure, I will refer to such measure as ‘prior SBC’). Thus, prior SBC was measured for a number of brands, including the stimuli brand (i.e., Sony). This measure allowed controlling for prior SBC when analyzing the hypothesized effects on SBC (Escalas 2004). Prior SBC was measured using the same scale implemented in the pretest ( $\alpha= .94$ ; Escalas and Bettman 2003). Few unrelated, filler tasks followed. Finally, demographic information (i.e., age, gender, nationality) was collected.

After three weeks, the second part of the study was administered. Here, participants were asked to imagine themselves in a relationship story. As part of the story, they were told that their date had surprised them with a new Sony camera. The case of gifts offers a valid context of study in that gifts are symbols of the relationship that exists between the gift giver and the receiver (Belk 1979). Consumers use gifts as part of a symbolic interaction with the recipient to develop a relationship with that recipient to a next stage (e.g., Ruth, Otnes, Brunel 1999). As a result, the relationship with the gift might reflect the associations that the gift receiver attributes to the relationship/donor. I therefore used gifts because they offered a clean way to experimentally create an association between the product and the external party.

The relationship story was further developed (Appendix A). Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (Relationship scenario: Dissolution vs. Reinforcement). Participants in the *dissolution* condition then read the following scenario:

“It’s the first day of spring and your date wants to talk to you. He/she *tells you that he/she doesn’t want to see you anymore*. You are now very *disappointed* with him/her. *It’s over*. You go back home, *shut* the door of your room and look at all the pictures that you have of the two of you- they are still on your camera. You are *devastated*.”

Individuals in the *reinforcement* condition, instead, read the following scenario:

“It’s the first day of spring and your date wants to talk to you. He/she *asks you to be exclusive*. You are now very *happy to be in an official relationship* with him/her. You go back home, *close* the door of your room and look at all the pictures that you have of the two of you- they are still on your camera. You are *ecstatic*.”

Participants’ affect towards the external party was then measured by adapting Watson, Clark, and Tellegen’s negative and positive affect scale (1988). Participants were asked to indicate how they would feel towards the external party in the described scenario. Specifically, they were asked to what extent they agreed with a series of statements indicating their “feelings towards the date.” The scale was composed of fourteen, seven-point items (anchored by 1= strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Positively valenced items (i.e., happy, excited, enthusiast, cheerful, joyful, pleased, proud) were averaged to form a measure of positive affect towards the external party ( $\alpha=.98$ ). Similarly, negatively valenced items (i.e., sad, angry, upset, annoyed, nervous, irritable, depressed) were averaged to form a measure of negative affect towards the external party ( $\alpha=.93$ ). Following some filler tasks, participants’ SBC towards Sony was measured using the same scale implemented in the pretest and in the first part of the study ( $\alpha=.94$ ; Escalas and Bettman 2003).

To check whether the manipulation worked as intended, participants were told that researchers wanted to make sure that the end of the story was clear to everyone; therefore, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (anchored by 1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree) with the following statements about the described relationship story: “My date and I ended up becoming a real couple” and “My date and I ended up breaking up.”

Stories are shown to persuade via narrative transportation, a sort of “immersion into a text,” which leads to reduced negative cognitive responses and realism of experience (Green and Brock 2000). I wanted therefore to verify that narrative transportation did not vary significantly across conditions. Consistently, I measured narrative transportation using a three, seven-point items scale (i.e., “I was mentally involved in the story,” “While thinking about the story, I could easily picture the events in it taking place,” and “I could picture myself in the story”), anchored by 1=Not at all, 7=Very much so ( $\alpha=.89$ , adapted from Green and Brock 2000; Escalas 2004). I also controlled for self-referencing, which is shown to increase persuasion through transportation (Escalas 2007) by using a two, seven-point items scale (i.e., “The story related to me personally” and “The thoughts that I had focused on me personally”), anchored by 1=Not at all, 7=Very much so ( $\alpha=.79$ , adapted from Burnkrant and Unnava 1995; Escalas 2007). Further, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they thought that the relationship story they read was realistic (1= very unrealistic, 7=very realistic). Finally, demographic information was collected.

## Results and Discussion

*Manipulation Checks.* Findings show that the manipulation worked successfully. Participants in the reinforcement condition agreed that in the described scenario they “ended up becoming a real couple” significantly more than those in the dissolution condition ( $M_R = 5.48$  vs.

$M_D = 1.72$ ;  $F(1, 38) = 52.18$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, participants in the dissolution condition agreed that in the described scenario they “ended up breaking up” significantly more than those in the reinforcement condition ( $M_D = 6.33$  vs.  $M_R = 2.33$ ;  $F(1, 38) = 50.93$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

*Dependent Variable.* I conducted an analysis of variance on SBC, including prior SBC as a covariate. As expected, relationship condition had a significant effect on SBC; specifically, those in the dissolution condition displayed significantly lower levels of SBC than those in the reinforcement condition ( $M_D = 2.86$  vs.  $M_R = 4.40$ ;  $F(1, 37) = 5.25$ ;  $p < .05$ ), thus supporting hypotheses 1a and 1b. Thus, when a brand is associated with an external (to the consumer-brand) party, a negative episode with the same external party, such as a break-up, will directly impact the extent to which consumers feel connected to that brand. Moreover, prior SBC was a significant covariate on SBC ( $F(1, 37) = 13.97$ ;  $p = .001$ ), such that individuals with higher (lower) levels of prior SBC tended to have higher (lower) levels of SBC. This suggests that it is important to control for prior relationships with brands in order to study the effects of relationship episode on self-brand connection.

*Other measures.* Narrative processing did not vary significantly across conditions ( $M_D = 5.13$  vs.  $M_R = 4.92$ ;  $F < 1$ ). A similar pattern emerged for self-referencing ( $M_D = 3.08$  vs.  $M_R = 3.62$ ;  $F < 1$ ), as well as for participants’ perceptions of how realistic the relationship story was ( $M_D = 5.11$  vs.  $M_R = 4.45$ ;  $F < 1$ ). These findings rule out the possibility that narrative transportation, self-referencing, and perceptions of realism of the story varied significantly across relationship episodes conditions.

*Mediation Processes.* As expected, relationship episode had a significant effect on positive ( $M_D = 1.94$  vs.  $M_R = 5.79$ ;  $F(1, 38) = 137.9$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and negative ( $M_D = 4.48$  vs.  $M_R = 1.81$ ;  $F(1, 38) = 41.12$ ;  $p < .001$ ) affect towards the external party. Thus, for example,

participants in the dissolution condition were more upset, sad, angry, annoyed toward the external party than those in the reinforcement condition. Conversely, those in the reinforcement condition were happier, more pleased, excited with their date.

To explore the processes underlying the observed effects, I tested whether affect towards the external party mediated the impact of the relationship episode on self-brand connection. Following Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010), I performed a bootstrap test of mediation, which has been shown to perform better than the Sobel test (Preacher and Hayes 2004, 2008; Zhao et al. 2010). In the analysis I used 5,000 bootstrap resamples and a bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval as recommended (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007) and implemented a cross-sectional mediation analysis. By allowing controlling for prior SBC, cross-sectional mediation analysis is an appropriate mediation model for longitudinal data (Preacher and Hayes 2004, 2008).

I did not have a specific hypothesis on the valence of affect that would mediate such effects. Therefore, I tested for both positive and negative affect as possible mediators. Results show that negative affect is a significant mediator of the effects of relationship episode condition on SBC. Specifically, findings show that the mean indirect effect of relationship episode on self-brand connection is negative ( $a \times b = -0.80$ ) and significant, with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (-1.89 to -.01). However, the direct effect is also significant ( $c = 2.10$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Since both the mediated effect and the direct effects are significant and their product is negative, competitive mediation is established (Zhao et al., 2010). This type of mediation suggests that there might be an omitted mediator that, in addition to negative affect toward the external party, explains the effects of relationship episode on self-brand connection. This does not present a problem for our hypotheses. Rather, it suggests that not all the variance in self-brand connection

can be explained through negative affect toward the date. There might be other variables (not examined in this study) that influence self-brand connection. In conclusion, negative affect toward the external party mediates the effects of changes in relationships with that external party on the level to which individuals feel connected to a brand associated with that external party.

I performed the same analysis to test for positive affect as a mediator. Results showed that positive affect is not a significant mediator of the effects of relationship condition on SBC. Specifically, I found that the mean indirect effect of relationship episode on SBC is not significant, with a 95% confidence interval including zero (-1.73 to 2.11). In conclusion, results show that negative, rather than positive, affect toward the external party explain the effects of changes in external relationships on self-brand connection.

*Discussion.* Study 1 suggests that changes in an external relationship (e.g., with a significant other) impact feelings of Self-Brand Connection (SBC) because of the affect associated with the external party, thus supporting the first part of our theoretical model (hypotheses 1). Specifically, results show that relationship episodes have a significant effect on feelings of self-brand connection, even when controlling for prior feelings of self-brand connection. Importantly, findings suggest that changes in external interpersonal relationships may worsen consumers' feelings of SBC consistently with what happens in that external relationship. Thus, results imply that if indeed a consumer follows DeBeers marketers' advice and "declares his love with diamonds" then the relationship between the consumer who receives the diamond and DeBeers will become vulnerable to variables out of marketers' control, that is-relationship dynamics between the gift giver and gift receiver.

Further, findings show that these effects are explained by the negative, rather than positive, affect associated with the external party. Research on information processing suggests

that negative (vs. positive) information has a stronger impact on consumer's evaluations and judgment (e.g., Ito, Larsen, Smith, and Cacioppo 1998; Laczniak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami 2001; Mizerski 1982; Skowronski and Carlston 1989). Similarly, in this case negative affect might be driving the observed effects, such that the significant difference among levels of SBC between individuals in the dissolution (vs. reinforcement) condition is largely explained by the negative affect manifested in the dissolution condition.

Thus, findings suggest that positioning a brand as a social relationship enabler might have backfire effects if the consumer's interpersonal relationship fails, as it will impact the extent to which consumers feel connected to the brand in a consistent way. This is particularly interesting considering the enduring nature of the Self-Brand Connection construct (Escalas 2005). In study 2 I replicate study 1 and further expand my theoretical model by investigating how changes in self-brand connection due to changes in interpersonal relationships further explain changes in a series of managerially relevant variables, such as recommendation ratings, purchase intentions, and overall attitude towards the brand. Study 2 also further investigates the process underlying the effects. Moreover, by using fictitious brands, in study 2 I replicate study 1's findings isolating the effects of changes in interpersonal relationships from existing consumer-brand relationships.

## STUDY 2

With several additions and changes, I replicate and build on study 1, further validating hypotheses 1 and extending it to test hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c. Thus, in study 2 I expect that changes in an external relationship with a significant other- such as episodes of dissolution- impact feelings of Self-Brand Connection (SBC). Further, I test whether the resulting significantly lower feelings of SBC explain less favorable recommendation ratings, purchase intentions, and overall attitude toward the brand. Moreover, I investigate additional behavioral responses that individuals engage into following changes in interpersonal relationships and further explore the processes underlying the effects.

### Method

*Procedure and Measures.* One hundred seventeen students at a Northeastern University participated in the study in exchange for class credit. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (Relationship episode: Reinforcement vs. Dissolution). The manipulation was the same as the one used in the second part of study 1 except for the stimuli brand used, as well as the product category (the stimuli brand was fictitious, namely “City”; product category was cell-phones). The procedure was the same as that for the second part of study 1. Thus, participants were asked to imagine themselves in a relationship story and to experience and identify with the feelings provoked by it. As part of the story, they were told that their date had surprised them with a new cell phone (Appendix B). Then, all participants were presented with an ad that introduced the “City” brand and the cell phone received as a gift (Appendix C). Relationship episode manipulation followed. Participants were then asked to share the thoughts

that they would have while looking at the pictures and reading the text and email messages exchanged with their “date.” They were also told that these thoughts could be about their date, the text/email messages and pictures, or anything related to them.

The same measures of negative and positive affect towards the external party used in study 1 followed; reliability scores were all acceptable ( $\alpha > .93$ ). I then measured the extent to which participants associated the product received as a gift, as well as the brand that represented the gift, to the external party. In an exploratory perspective, it was important to distinguish between associations to the product and associations to the brand. To measure associations with the product, I used a six, seven-point items scale (anchored by 1= strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The items used were the following: “I would associate the cell phone received with my date,” “Anytime I take pictures with the cell phone I would think about my date,” “The cell phone would remind me of my date,” “The cell phone would remind me of the time spent with my date,” “Anytime I send email messages with the cell phone I would think about my date,” and “Anytime I send text messages with the cell phone I would think about my date.” Items were averaged ( $\alpha = .85$ ). To measure associations between the brand and the external party, I used a seven, seven-point items scale (anchored by 1=strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). The items used and then averaged were the following: “I would associate the brand ‘City’ with my date,” “The brand ‘City’ would remind me of the time spent with my date,” “Anytime I walked in a ‘City’ store I would think about my date,” “Anytime I see the brand name ‘City’ I will be reminded about my date,” “Next time I see a ‘City’ product, it will remind me of my date,” “Anytime I used ‘City’ products I would think about my date,” and “If I were to purchase ‘City’ products again, I couldn’t help but think about my date” ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

Following some filler tasks, SBC was measured using the same scale as in study 1 ( $\alpha=.94$ ; Escalas and Bettman 2003). Subjects then reported their attitudes toward the brand using ten, seven-point semantic differential items (i.e., bad-good, unfavorable-favorable, negative-positive, dislike-like, poor quality-high quality, dislike very much-like very much, inferior-superior; unattractive-attractive; unpleasant-pleasant, boring-interesting; Gibson 2008). Items were averaged to form an attitude toward the brand measure ( $\alpha=.96$ ). Participants then rated on a ten-point scale (anchored by 1=very unlikely, 10= very likely) the likelihood that in the described scenario they would purchase the stimuli brand for five product categories, such as cameras, tv's and home entertainment, cell-phones, digital readers, MP3's and portable electronics ( $\alpha=.80$ ).

In addition, to explore additional behavioral responses that might follow an external relationship episode, I measured desires of avoidance toward both the gifted product and the brand that represented the product. Desire of product avoidance was measured using an eighteen, seven-point items scale (anchored by 1= strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). Examples of these items include the following “I would avoid using the cell phone that I received for a while,” “I would put the cell phone that I received out of my sight,” and “I would avoid sending text messages with the cell phone that I received for a while” (see Appendix D for a complete list of items). Items were reverse-scored when appropriate and averaged ( $\alpha= .95$ ). To measure desire of avoidance toward the brand, I used two, seven-point items (1=strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree): “I would avoid visiting a ‘City’ store” and “If I walked in a ‘City’ store, I would avoid any purchase”;  $\alpha= .93$ ). Following, participants were asked to imagine that their friend had asked them to post a product review on his “product reviews and reports” website and were encouraged to use the cell phone received as a gift as subject of the review. Thus, they were asked to indicate

their overall recommendation rating on a seven-point semantic differential scale (1=Not at all recommend, 7=Strongly recommend). Manipulation checks followed, as well as measures of narrative transportation, self-referencing, and of participants' perceptions of how realistic the relationship story was. For these items, I implemented the same measures used in study 1. Also, I wanted to control for levels of expertise with the product category of cell phones. Therefore, I measured expertise by asking participants to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent to which they agreed with the following statement: "I am an expert at buying cell phones" (anchored by "not at all" and "very much so;" adapted from Escalas and Bettman 2003). Participants were then asked to indicate what they thought the purpose of the study was. Lastly, demographic information was collected.

## Results and Discussion

*Manipulation Checks.* As in study 1, results show that the manipulation worked successfully. Participants in the reinforcement condition agreed that in the described scenario they "ended up becoming a real couple" significantly more than those in the dissolution condition ( $M_R = 6.12$  vs.  $M_D = 2.34$ ;  $F(1, 115) = 157.02$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, participants in the dissolution condition agreed that in the described scenario they "ended up breaking up" significantly more than those in the reinforcement condition ( $M_D = 6.4$  vs.  $M_R = 1.95$ ;  $F(1, 116) = 315.5$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

Consistently, content analysis of the thoughts participants shared right after the manipulation revealed that their valence varied significantly across conditions. Specifically, individuals in the dissolution condition displayed a significantly higher number of negative thoughts about their "date" than those in the reinforcement condition ( $M_D = 2.54$  vs.  $M_R = 0.11$ ;

$F(1, 116) = 71.27; p < .001$ ), whereas participants in the reinforcement condition displayed a significantly higher number of positive thoughts about their “date” than those in the dissolution condition ( $M_R = 3.34$  vs.  $M_D = .73; F(1, 116) = 109.08; p < .001$ ). The total number of thoughts, however, was similar across conditions ( $M_D = 4.25$  vs.  $M_R = 4.03; F(1, 116) < 1$ ), thus indicating that information processing did not vary significantly across conditions.

*Dependent Variables.* As in study 1, relationship episode had a significant effect on SBC, such that those in the dissolution condition displayed significantly lower feelings of SBC than those in the reinforcement condition ( $M_D = 3.51$  vs.  $M_R = 5.00; F(1, 116) = 11.86; p = .001$ ), further validating hypotheses 1a and 1b. Moreover, relationship condition had a significant effect on attitude toward the brand ( $M_D = 3.98$  vs.  $M_R = 5.25; F(1, 116) = 28.70; p < .001$ ), purchase intentions ( $M_D = 4.7$  vs.  $M_R = 5.99; F(1, 116) = 14.68; p < .001$ ), and recommendation ratings ( $M_D = 4.78$  vs.  $M_R = 5.76; F(1, 116) = 10.93; p = .001$ ). Specifically, individuals in the dissolution condition displayed significantly lower attitude toward the brand and purchase intentions than those in the reinforcement condition. This is particularly important as it indicates that implications of a relationship episode stretch beyond the original product (i.e., cell phone) to any product in a brand’s portfolio (i.e., camera, tv and home entertainment, cell-phones, digital reader, MP3 and portable electronics). Consistently, results show that following relationship episodes of dissolution, individuals assigned significantly lower ratings when recommending the product than those who experienced an episode of reinforcement with the external party.

*Other measures.* Relationship condition had a significant effect on desires of avoidance, not only toward the gifted product ( $M_D = 4.11$  vs.  $M_R = 2.04; F(1, 113) = 99.94; p < .001$ ), but also toward the brand ( $M_D = 3.52$  vs.  $M_R = 1.95; F(1, 113) = 23.97; p < .001$ ). Specifically, those in the dissolution condition expressed significantly higher desires of avoiding both the product

(received as a gift) and the brand that represented the product. This is important because it further reinforces our findings that the effects of changes in external relationships go beyond those on the gifted product; rather, they spillover to the brand.

As in study 1, narrative processing did not vary significantly across conditions ( $M_D = 5.04$  vs.  $M_R = 5.19$ ;  $F(1, 116) = .32$ ;  $p > .1$ ) and neither did self-referencing ( $M_D = 4.49$  vs.  $M_R = 4.65$ ;  $F(1, 116) = .28$ ;  $p > .1$ ), nor perceptions of how realistic the relationship story was ( $M_D = 4.73$  vs.  $M_R = 4.98$ ;  $F(1, 116) = .79$ ;  $p > .1$ ). I also analyzed the main measures of interest by including expertise as a covariate. Results showed that expertise did not interact significantly with the dependent variables (all  $ps > .1$ ).

*Process measures.* The extent to which individuals associated the product received as a gift with the external party did not vary significantly across conditions ( $M_D = 4.52 = M_R$ ;  $p > .1$ ). A similar pattern emerges for the brand that represented the gift ( $M_D = 4.15$  vs.  $M_R = 4.33$ ;  $p > .1$ ). This is important because it suggests that individuals highly associated the external party with both the product and the brand, regardless of the type of relationship episode.

Consistent with study 1, relationship condition had a significant main effect on positive ( $M_D = 1.78$  vs.  $M_R = 5.98$ ;  $F(1, 116) = 588.84$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and negative ( $M_D = 5.13$  vs.  $M_R = 1.84$ ;  $F(1, 115) = 347.48$ ;  $p < .001$ ) affect toward the external party. In this case as well, following a reinforcement relationship episode, individuals were happier, more pleased, and excited with their date whereas following a dissolution episode individuals were angrier, more upset, and nervous with the external party.

*Mediation Analysis.* In order to test the whole theoretical model, I performed a bootstrap test of sequential mediation, which tested the indirect effects of relationship episode on brand-related behaviors, via changes in affect toward the external party and subsequent changes in Self-

Brand Connection. I performed such test for each brand-related behavior (i.e., purchase intentions, recommendation ratings, and attitude toward the brand). Findings showed that, consistent with study 1, negative affect toward the external party significantly mediates the effects of relationship episode on Self-Brand Connection. Importantly, the resulting feelings of self-brand connection in turn explain the effects of relationship episode on each brand related behavior, thus supporting the second set of hypotheses. To illustrate, consider purchase intentions. Results show that the indirect effect of relationship episode on purchase intentions through negative affect toward the external party and then self-brand connection is negative (-.58) and significant, with a 95% confident interval excluding zero (-1.35; -.01). The direct effect  $c$ , instead, is not significant ( $p > .10$ ). Hence, indirect-only mediation, or full mediation, is established (Zhao et al. 2010), thus supporting hypothesis 2a. Therefore, changes in external interpersonal relationships impact negative affect toward the external party and consequently Self-Brand Connection, which ultimately explains the effects on purchase intentions. To further validate the proposed theoretical model, it's worth pointing out that the indirect effect of relationship episode on purchase intentions via negative affect toward the external party independent of Self-Brand Connection is not significant, with a 95% confidence interval including zero (-2.05; 1.31). This is important because it shows that Self-Brand Connection is a fundamental construct to explain the effects of relationship episode on purchase intention via affect toward the external party, thus further validating the proposed theoretical model.

The same pattern emerges for attitude toward the brand. Results show that the indirect effect of relationship episode on attitude toward the brand through negative affect toward the external party and then self-brand connection is negative (-.35) and significant, with a 95% confident interval excluding zero (-.71; -.01). The direct effect  $c$ , instead, is not significant ( $p >$

.10). Hence, indirect-only mediation, or full mediation, is established (Zhao et al. 2010), thus supporting hypothesis 2b. In this case as well, the indirect effect of relationship episode on attitude toward the brand independent of self-brand connection is not significant (C.I.: -.47; 1.04). Thus, relationship episodes will impact the extent to which individuals feel connected to a brand and subsequently their overall attitude toward the brand, supporting hypothesis 2b.

Analogously, the indirect effect of relationship episode on recommendation ratings via negative affect toward the external party and subsequent changes in self-brand connection is negative (-.22) and significant (C.I.: -.52; -.01). Moreover, the direct effect is not significant ( $p > .1$ ); thus, indirect only or full mediation is established, thus supporting hypothesis 2c. In addition, the indirect effect of relationship episode on recommendation ratings through negative affect- this time independent of self-brand connection- is not significant (C.I.: -.9; 1.81), thus further validating my theoretical model.

I also tested for positive affect toward the external party as the first possible mediator of the indirect effects of relationship episode on brand-related behaviors via self-brand connection. Results showed that, consistent with study 1, positive affect is not a significant mediator of the effects of relationship episode on purchase intentions (C.I.: -.40; 1.61), attitude toward the brand (C.I.: -.19; .93), and recommendation ratings (C.I.: -.08; .65). In sum, mediation analyses replicate and further extend study 1's findings by showing that the effect of interpersonal relationship episodes on brand-related behaviors occur through changes in affect toward the external party and subsequent changes in self-brand connection.

*Discussion.* Thus, study 2 supports the proposed theoretical model by showing that self-brand connections and resulting brand-related behaviors can be altered by a change in the consumer's external interpersonal relationship when a product is associated with that

relationship. Consistent with study 1, results show that changes in an external interpersonal relationship, such as episodes of dissolution (e.g., a break-up) or reinforcement (e.g., becoming exclusive), impact feelings of Self-Brand Connection (SBC), because of the affect associated with the external party. Further, in study 2 I extend study 1 findings by showing that the resulting changes in Self-Brand Connection ultimately explain changes in a series of brand-related behaviors, such as attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions, and recommendation ratings. Moreover, the indirect effect of relationship episode on brand-related behaviors via affect toward the external party and independent of self-brand connection is shown to be not significant, thus further validating the proposed theoretical model.

Furthermore, interpersonal relationship episodes significantly affect individuals' desires of avoidance, not only toward the gifted product but also toward the brand. Consistently, consumers' purchase intentions are affected toward any product in the brand's portfolio. Thus, the effects of changes in an external relationship go beyond those on the product associated with that relationship; they spillover to the brand and to any product in a brand's portfolio.

*Alternative Explanation.* According to my theorizing, changes in consumers' external interpersonal relationships might alter consumers' self-brand connections and resulting brand-related behaviors when a product is associated with that relationship. However, interpersonal relationship episodes may also impact individuals' mood, such that following episodes of dissolution (vs. reinforcement) individuals are primed with a worse (vs. better) mood. Consumer research has found that, in general, people in positive moods have strong tendencies to provide positive evaluations while individuals in negative moods tend to do the opposite (e.g., Barone, Miniard, and Romeo 2000; Clark and Isen 1982; Howard and Barry 1994; Miniard, Bhatla, and Sirdeshmukh 1992). Therefore, it is possible that brand-related behaviors could be influenced by

the frustration, experienced in a break-up episode, versus the enjoyment, caused by a reinforcement episode. In other words, participants in the dissolution condition might be primed with a worse mood than those in the reinforcement condition and for this reason, rather than for interpersonal relationship dynamics, they might tend to evaluate the brand worse. Study 3 tests this alternative explanation while replicating study 1 and study 2 findings.

### STUDY 3

The objective of study 3 was threefold: the first goal, as mentioned, was to rule out mood as an alternative explanation. To this end, mood was introduced as an independent manipulated variable. If the effects of relationship episode occur independently of individuals' mood, then I can reject the alternative explanation that mood, rather than relationship episodes, causes the observed effects on brand-related behaviors.

The second objective was to introduce a control condition. In the previous studies, I examined the difference between individuals in the reinforcement and dissolution conditions. However, the introduction of a control group might be crucial to understand whether the differences in reactions to changes in interpersonal relationships are due to the impact of reinforcement episodes, dissolution episodes, or both. I therefore introduced a control condition within the relationship episodes.

The third and last objective of study 3 was to include a slightly revised measure of purchase intentions. Specifically, I wanted to measure individuals' buying intentions not only toward the brand associated with the external party, but also toward other brands. With this regard, I expect interpersonal relationship episodes to have a significant effect on purchase intentions toward the brand associated with the external party but not toward any other brand. Such effects would reinforce my theoretical model in that interpersonal relationship episodes significantly impact the relationship between the consumer and the brand that is specifically associated with the interpersonal relationship.

Method

*Procedure and Measures.* Two hundred seventy-seven students at a Northeastern University participated in the study in exchange for class credit. The study was a 3 (Relationship episode: Reinforcement vs. Dissolution vs. Control) x 2 (Mood: Positive vs. Negative) between subject design and participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. The procedure was similar to that of study 2 except for two major changes, which included the mood manipulation and the control condition.

As per the mood manipulation, the latter was introduced as part of the relationship story. Thus, consistent with study 2, participants were asked to imagine themselves in a relationship story and to experience and identify with the feelings provoked by it. As part of the story, they were told that their date had surprised them with a new cell phone and they were then exposed to an ad that introduced the City brand and the cell phone received as a gift (same stimuli of study 2, Appendices B and C). Then, individuals were told that a couple of weeks had gone by and that he/she and his/her date had decided to go to the movies. Mood manipulation followed (adapted by Williams and Aaker, 2002). Participants in the *positive* mood condition read the following about the movie they had supposedly watched with their date:

‘The movie, entitled “A STORY OF *FUN AND MORE FUN*”, is the story of a group of *friends* in their twenties who *decide to move to a metropolitan city together*. They have been *looking forward* to this moment *for a long time*. And just as a *new* chapter in their lives *opens*, many- *fun adventures* involve the main characters... The future is *full of exciting possibilities* for them; *the new neighborhood* and *new* friends also make it such a *happy* and *exhilarating* time!

Individuals in the *negative* mood condition, instead, read the following:

‘The movie, entitled “A STORY OF *SORROWNESS*,” is about a group of *people* in their twenties who *have to leave their hometowns*. They have been *dreading this moment*, but *it has finally arrived*. And, just as a chapter in their lives *ends*, many – *sad misfortunes* involve the main characters... The future is *still uncertain* for them; *they miss their* neighborhoods and the friends *they had made*- this also makes it such a *sad* and *nostalgic* time.”

Then, attitude toward the movie was measured using three, seven-point semantic differential items (dislike- like, boring-interesting, poor quality-high quality;  $\alpha = .93$ ). Mood manipulation checks followed. Specifically, all participants were asked to rate their mood on a five, seven-point semantic differential items (depressed-cheerful, sad-joyful, unhappy-happy, in a bad mood-in a good mood, annoyed-pleased;  $\alpha = .96$ , adapted by Swinyard 1993).

Relationship episode manipulation followed. Thus, consistent with previous studies, individuals in the *dissolution* [reinforcement] condition read the following scenario:

“It’s the first day of spring and your date wants to talk to you. He/she *tells you that he/she doesn’t want to see you anymore* [asks you to be exclusive]. You are now very *disappointed* [happy to be in an official relationship] with him/her. *It’s over*. You go back home, *shut* [close] the door of your room and look at all the text, email messages and pictures that you have of the two of you- they are still on your cell-phone. You are *devastated* [ecstatic].”

Participants in the control condition only read a reduced version of the scenario, without any mention to the evolution of the romantic relationship story. More precisely, they read:

“It’s the first day of spring and you are in your room, looking at all the text, email messages and pictures that you have of the two of you- they are still on your cell phone.”

The same measures of negative and positive affect towards the external party used in previous studies followed; reliability scores were all acceptable ( $\alpha > .91$ ). I then measured the extent to which participants associated the product received as a gift ( $\alpha = .87$ ), as well as the brand that represented the gift ( $\alpha = .95$ ), with the external party, using the same measures of study 2. To compensate the increased length of the experiment due to the mood manipulation and to warrant its effects throughout the experiment, I reduced the number of filler tasks preceding the main dependent variables compared to previous experiments. This is important as it helps explain some of the mediation results discussed in the following session of the paper.

Using the same scales implemented in the previous studies, SBC was then measured ( $\alpha = .94$ ; Escalas and Bettman 2003), as well as attitude toward the brand ( $\alpha = .97$ ; Gibson 2008).

Participants then rated on a ten-point scale (anchored by 1=very unlikely, 10= very likely) the likelihood that, had they have to purchase a cell-phone, they would purchase the stimuli brand (i.e., City), as well as other five brands (i.e., Sony, Apple, Nokia, Blackberry, Samsung).

Next, consistent with the same procedure and measures of study 2, desires of avoidance toward both the gifted product ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and the brand that represented the product ( $\alpha = .91$ ) were measured; items were reverse scored when appropriate and averaged. Participants were then asked to indicate the recommendation ratings for the cell-phone received as a gift. Relationship episode manipulation checks followed, as well as measures of narrative transportation, self-referencing, and of participants' perceptions of how realistic the relationship story was. Next, participants were asked to indicate what they thought the purpose of the study was. Lastly, demographic information was collected.

## Results and Discussion

*Manipulation Checks.* Consistent with study 1 and 2, relationship episode had a significant effect on the extent to which participants agreed that in the described scenario they “ended up becoming a real couple” ( $M_R = 5.38, M_C = 4.93, M_D = 2.27$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 66.88$ ;  $p < .001$ ). However, a series of independent sample t-tests revealed that while those in the dissolution condition significantly differed from those in the reinforcement ( $t(1, 171) = 11.01, p < .001$ ) and control ( $t(1, 179) = 9.92, p < .001$ ) conditions, participants in the control and reinforcement conditions had similar perceptions ( $t(1, 198) = -1.79, p > .05$ ). Likewise, relationship episode had a significant effect on the extent to which participants agreed that in the described scenario they “ended up breaking up” ( $M_R = 2.47, M_C = 3.21, M_D = 5.83$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 76.36$ ;  $p < .001$ ). However, such levels of agreement were significantly different between

individuals in the reinforcement and dissolution conditions ( $t(1, 171) = -12.62, p < .001$ ), as well as between those in the dissolution and control conditions ( $t(1, 179) = -9.73, p < .001$ ), but not between individuals in the reinforcement and control conditions ( $t(1, 198) = 1.82, p > .05$ ). These findings suggest that while individuals in the dissolution condition significantly differed from those in the reinforcement and control conditions, those in the latter assumed a similar relationship development scenario to participants in the reinforcement group. I therefore analyzed the data both including the three relationship episode conditions and excluding the control condition. Since the results replicate across all dependent variables and measures of interest, I discuss those including the control condition for sake of completeness and accuracy of the report.

Mood manipulation checks confirmed that the manipulation worked successfully. Participants primed with positive mood felt significantly more cheerful, joyful, pleased, in a better mood, and happier than those primed with negative mood ( $M_P = 5.35; M_N = 3.12; F(1, 273) = 188.81; p < .001$ ). Also, they displayed significantly more favorable attitude toward the movie ( $M_P = 4.64; M_N = 3.74; F(1, 273) = 19.86; p < .001$ ). This is consistent with literature suggesting that positive (vs. negative) mood might improve (worsen) product evaluations (e.g., Clark and Isen 1982).

*Dependent Variables.* As in study 1 and study 2, relationship episode had a significant effect on SBC, such that those in the dissolution condition displayed significantly lower feelings of SBC than those in the reinforcement and control conditions ( $M_D = 4.06$  vs.  $M_R = 5.43$  and  $M_C = 5.64; F(1, 273) = 9.97; p < .001$ ), further validating the first hypothesis. Moreover, while individuals primed with positive mood displayed directionally higher levels of self-brand connection than those primed with negative mood, the effect was not significant ( $M_P = 5.32; M_N =$

=4.96;  $F(1, 273) < 1$ ). Importantly, and as expected, the interaction between mood and relationship episode was not significant ( $F(1, 273) = 1.12$ ;  $p > .1$ ). Thus, following a “break up” episode with an external party, individuals distance themselves from the brand they associate with that external party, independently of the mood they are primed with ( $M_{DP} = 4.49$ ;  $M_{DN} = 3.80$ ;  $M_{RP} = 5.26$ ;  $M_{RN} = 5.59$   $M_{CP} = 5.81$ ;  $M_{CN} = 5.44$ ).

A similar pattern emerged for attitude toward the brand and recommendation ratings. Specifically, relationship episode had a significant effect on attitude toward the brand ( $M_D = 3.86$  vs.  $M_c = 4.88$  vs.  $M_{R_i} = 5.00$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 19.86$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and recommendation ratings ( $M_D = 3.86$  vs.  $M_{R_i} = 5.00$  vs.  $M_c = 4.88$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 4.87$ ;  $p = .008$ ). The effect of mood, instead, was not significant, neither on attitude toward the brand ( $M_P = 4.78$ ;  $M_{N_i} = 4.51$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 2.08$ ;  $p > .1$ ), nor on recommendation ratings ( $M_P = 5.00$ ;  $M_{N_i} = 4.79$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 1.27$ ;  $p > .1$ ). Notably, the interaction between mood and relationship episode was not significant, neither on attitude toward the brand ( $F(1, 273) = 2.01$ ;  $p > .1$ ), nor on recommendation ratings ( $F(1, 273) = 1.35$   $p > .2$ ). Thus, no matter the mood individuals are primed with, following a dissolution relationship episode with an external party, they display significantly less favorable recommendation ratings ( $M_{DP} = 4.79$ ;  $M_{DN} = 4.23$ ;  $M_{RP_i} = 5.02$ ;  $M_{RN} = 4.92$ ;  $M_{CP} = 5.09$ ;  $M_{CN} = 5.20$ ) and attitude ( $M_{DP} = 4.26$ ;  $M_{DN} = 3.63$ ;  $M_{RP_i} = 4.98$ ;  $M_{RN} = 5.01$   $M_{CP} = 4.89$ ;  $M_{CN} = 4.88$ ) toward the brand they associate with that external party than those in a reinforcement or control relationship development scenarios.

As for purchase intentions, relationship episode had a significant effect on intentions to buy the “City” brand ( $M_D = 3.45$  vs.  $M_{R_i} = 4.83$  vs.  $M_c = 4.39$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 4.99$ ;  $p = .007$ ) but not on any other brand ( $M_D = 6.34$  vs.  $M_c = 5.99$  vs.  $M_{R_i} = 6.35$ ;  $F(1, 273) = p > .1$ ). Mood did not have a significant effect on buying intentions, neither toward the City brand ( $M_P = 4.50$ ;  $M_{N_i} = 4.10$ ;  $F$

(1, 273) = 1.68;  $p > .1$ ), nor toward any other brand ( $M_P=6.38$ ;  $M_N=6.07$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 2.68$ ;  $p > .1$ ). Interactions were also not significant (on City purchase intentions:  $F(1, 273) = 2.20$ ;  $p > .1$ ); on all other brands purchase intentions:  $F(1, 273) < 1$ ). Thus, those in the dissolution condition displayed significantly lower purchase intentions to buy the brand associated with the external party than those in the reinforcement and control conditions. Importantly, such effects didn't vary depending on the mood individuals were primed with and did not spread to any other brand that wasn't associated with the external party.

*Other measures.* Consistent with the previous study, relationship condition had a significant effect on desires of avoiding the brand associated with the external party, such that those in the dissolution condition expressed significantly higher desires of avoiding the City brand than those in the reinforcement and control conditions ( $M_D=3.22$  vs.  $M_R=2.33$  vs.  $M_C=2.62$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 7.80$ ;  $p = .001$ ), whereas mood didn't ( $M_P=2.74$ ;  $M_N=2.64$ ;  $F(1, 273) < 1$ ). Importantly, the interaction was not significant ( $F(1, 273) < 1$ ).

As per desires of avoidance toward the gifted product, relationship episode also had a significant effect ( $M_D=4.16$  vs.  $M_R=2.61$  vs.  $M_C=2.83$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 53.34$ ;  $p < .001$ ) while mood didn't ( $M_P=3.14$ ;  $M_N=3.12$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 1.99$ ;  $p > .1$ ). Interestingly, the interaction was marginally significant ( $F(1, 273) = 2.86$ ;  $p = .058$ ), such that relationship episode had a significant effect on desires of avoiding the product associated with the external party, for both individuals in the negative mood condition ( $M_{DN}=3.80$   $M_{RN} = 5.59$   $M_{CN} = 5.44$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 22.57$   $p < .001$ ) and in the positive one ( $M_{DP} = 4.50$ ;  $M_{RP} = 2.50$ ;  $M_{CP} = 2.93$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 35.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, mood significantly impacted desires of avoiding the product for those in a dissolution condition ( $F(1, 273) = 5.24$ ;  $p = .023$ ), but not for those in the reinforcement ( $F(1, 273) = 1.00$ ;  $p > .1$ ) or control ( $F(1, 273) < 1$ ) conditions. Thus, while relationship episode

significantly affected desires of avoidance toward both the gifted product and the brand, mood helped decreasing or increasing such desires only for the product, but not the brand. This is consistent with my argument that changes that occur in interpersonal relationships affect those between the consumer and the brand, not merely the product. Further, it suggests that while the relationship with the specific product associated with the external party might be more easily influenced by circumstantial factors, such as mood, the same does not happen for the relationship between the consumer and the brand associated with the external party.

As in the previous studies, narrative processing did not vary significantly across relationship episode conditions ( $M_D=4.59$  vs.  $M_R=4.72$  vs.  $M_c=4.52$ ;  $F(1, 273) < 1$ ) and neither did self-referencing ( $M_D=3.98$  vs.  $M_R=4.30$  vs.  $M_c=4.07$ ;  $F(1, 273) < 1$ ), nor perceptions of how realistic the relationship story was ( $M_D=4.58$  vs.  $M_R=4.40$  vs.  $M_c=4.42$ ;  $F(1, 273) < 1$ ). I also analyzed our main dependent variables by including expertise as a covariate. Results showed that expertise did was not a significant covariate (all  $ps > .1$ ).

*Process measures.* The extent to which individuals associated the product received as a gift with the external party did not vary significantly across relationship episode conditions ( $M_D=4.28$  vs.  $M_R=4.48$  vs.  $M_c=4.62$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 1.38$ ;  $p < 1$ ). A similar pattern emerges for the brand that represented the gift ( $M_D=4.00$  vs.  $M_R=4.12$  vs.  $M_c=4.21$ ;  $F(1, 273) < 1$ ). Thus, as in study 2, individuals highly associated the external party with both the product and the brand, regardless of the type of relationship episode.

Consistent with studies 1 and 2, relationship condition had a significant main effect on positive ( $M_D = 2.09$  vs.  $M_R = 5.72$  vs.  $M_c = 5.45$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 230.90$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and negative ( $M_D = 4.88$  vs.  $M_R = 2.09$  vs.  $M_c = 4.62$ ;  $F(1, 273) = 173.10$ ;  $p < .001$ ) affect toward the external party. In this case as well, following a reinforcement or control relationship episode, individuals

were happier, more pleased, and excited with their date whereas following a dissolution episode individuals were angrier, more upset, and nervous with the external party. It is important to point out that mood did not have a significant effect, neither on positive affect toward the date ( $M_P = 4.79$  vs.  $M_N = 4.45$ ;  $F(1, 273) < 1$ ), nor on negative affect toward the date ( $M_P = 3.06$  vs.  $M_N = 2.78$ ;  $F(1, 273) < 1$ ), thus confirming the validity of the relationship episode manipulation, as well as of the mood one.

*Mediation Analyses.* To test my theoretical model, I performed a bootstrap test of mediation, which tested the indirect effects of relationship episode on brand-related behaviors, via changes in Self-Brand Connection. Also, I expected negative affect toward the external party to be a significant preceding mediator to Self-Brand connection and therefore tested for sequential mediation. I performed such test for each brand-related behavior (i.e., purchase intentions, recommendation ratings, and attitude toward the brand).

To explore the mediation processes underlying the effects of a three-level independent variable (i.e., relationship episode), I created two dummy variables. This allowed testing the indirect effects for each category (i.e., reinforcement and dissolution) relative to the reference category (i.e., control; Hayes 2012). Findings showed that, for those in the dissolution condition, the indirect effects of relationship episode are fully mediated by self-brand connection on purchase intentions (-.87, C.I.: -.1.38; -.49;  $c=.08$ ,  $p > .1$ ), attitude toward the brand (-.48, C.I.: -.70; -.26;  $c=-.28$ ,  $p > .1$ ), and recommendation ratings (-.43, C.I.: -.73; -.25;  $c=-.16$ ,  $p > .1$ ). Interestingly, the model including negative affect as a preceding mediator to self-brand connection was instead not significant, on neither of the brand-related behaviors (all intervals including zero).

Moreover, indirect effects of the reinforcement condition via self-brand connection, with and without negative affect toward the external party as a preceding mediator are not significant on any of the brand-related behaviors (all intervals including zero). The lack of significance for the indirect effects of reinforcement on brand-related behaviors is likely due to the fact that individuals in the reinforcement and control conditions did not significantly differ neither in their relationship development perceptions (as the manipulation check attests), nor with regards to the main dependent variables.

This is further supported by a second set of mediation analysis, performed by combining reinforcement and control into one condition. Such analysis attests the validity of the model including Self-Brand connection as a significant mediator of the effects of relationship episode on brand-related behaviors. Specifically, results show that the indirect effect of relationship episode on purchase intentions through self-brand connection is positive (.42) and significant, with a 95% confident interval excluding zero (.24; .69). The direct effect  $c$ , instead, is not significant ( $p > .10$ ). Hence, indirect-only mediation, or full mediation, is established (Zhao et al. 2010), thus further supporting hypothesis 2a. Likewise, results show that the indirect effect of relationship episode on attitude toward the brand via self-brand connection is positive (.23) and significant, with a 95% confident interval excluding zero (.13; .34). In this case as well, the direct effect is not significant ( $p > .10$ ). Hence, indirect-only mediation, or full mediation, is established, thus further supporting hypothesis 2b. A similar pattern emerges for recommendation ratings as the indirect effect of relationship episode through self-Brand connection is significant (.22; C.I.: .12; .34). The direct effect is not significant ( $p > .10$ ), therefore establishing full mediation and further validating hypothesis 2c. It's worth to point out that, within this set of mediation analysis as well, the model including negative affect toward the

date as a preceding mediator to self-brand connection is instead not significant on any of the brand-related behaviors (all intervals including zero). Nonetheless, mediation analyses support our theoretical model in that self-brand connection significantly mediates the effects of relationship episode on brand-related behaviors, thus further validating the second set of hypotheses.

*Discussion.* Taken together, findings further validate the proposed theoretical model while ruling out mood as an alternative explanation. Specifically, results show that following a dissolution episode with an external party, individuals distance themselves from the brand they associate with that external party, independently of the mood they are primed with. Consistently, they also display significantly less favorable recommendation ratings and attitude toward the brand. Moreover, findings suggest that while relationship episode significantly affects desires of avoidance toward both the gifted product and the brand, mood enhances or diminishes such desires only for the product, but not the brand. This further supports my argument that changes that occur in interpersonal relationships affect those between the consumer and the brand, not merely the product. It also suggests that while the relationship with the specific product associated with the external party might be more easily influenced by circumstantial factors, such as mood, the same does not happen for the relationship between the consumer and the brand associated with the external party. In the same light, purchase intentions toward the brand associated with the external party didn't vary depending on the mood individuals were primed with and did not spread to any other brand.

While the lack of the interaction between mood and relationship episodes on the main measures of interest reinforces my theoretical argument, the lack of a significant main effect of mood on the same measures might appear as contradicting to existing literature. However,

despite the general, well established effects of mood on product evaluations (e.g., Clark and Isen 1982), research further suggests that individuals rely on affect when forming their evaluations only when such affect is believed to be representative of the target (Pham 1998). This is consistent with study 3 results in that positive (negative) mood caused significantly higher (vs. lower) evaluations for the movie - through which the manipulation was implemented- but not for other, unrelated targets. In other words, the mood generated by the manipulation was perceived as a genuine affective response to the target of evaluation (i.e., the movie) and therefore individuals relied on it in when forming their perceptions. In the same light, when evaluating the brand associated with the external party, dynamics with that external party, rather than mood, were perceived as representative of the target brand and therefore influenced individuals' behavior consistently.

Another important finding of study 3 relates to the introduction of a control condition. Results show that while individuals in the dissolution condition significantly differed from those in the reinforcement and control conditions, those in the reinforcement and control conditions assumed a similar relationship development scenario and behaved consistently. This suggests that the differences in reactions to changes in interpersonal relationships might be driven by the impact of dissolution episodes. This is particularly important considering the number of brands positioned as social relationship enablers, as it suggests that the consequences from negative interpersonal relationship dynamics might overcome the positive effects of reinforcement dynamics.

In terms of processes underlying the observed effects, two sets of mediation analysis were run: the first, accounting for three relationship episode conditions; the second, combining reinforcement and control into one condition. Taken together, results support the proposed

theoretical model in that self-brand connection significantly mediates the effects of relationship episode on brand-related behaviors, consistent with study 2. However, findings also suggest that the model including negative affect toward the external party as a preceding mediator to self-brand connection is not significant. This is inconsistent with the previous studies and can be explained both statistically and empirically. Statistically, the reason has to do with the fact that negative affect toward the external party and self-brand connection were too highly correlated to allow for mediation ( $p \leq .-73$ ; Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger 1998). Empirically, this might be an artifact of the reduced number of filler tasks that were introduced in the experiment (compared to the previous studies). However, this does not present a problem to my hypotheses, as findings support our theoretical arguments that changes in interpersonal relationships influence consumer-brand relationships because of feelings of self-brand connection.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this manuscript, I propose and test a theoretical model of how interpersonal relationship dynamics may impact consumer-brand relationships. Taken together, results support my theoretical model by showing that self-brand connections and resulting brand-related behaviors can be altered by a change in the consumer's external interpersonal relationship when a product is associated with that relationship. Study 1 shows that changes in an external interpersonal relationship, such as episodes of dissolutions (e.g. break-up) or reinforcement (e.g., becoming exclusive), impact feelings of Self-Brand Connection (SBC). Studies 2 and 3 replicate and extend study 1 findings by showing that these effects in Self-Brand Connection ultimately explain consistent changes in a series of brand-related behaviors, such as attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions, and recommendation ratings. Importantly, findings show that the effects of changes in an external relationship go beyond those on the product associated with that relationship; rather, they spillover to the brand (studies 2-3) and to any product in the brand's portfolio (study 2). Notably, these effects do not spread to brands which aren't associated with the interpersonal relationship (study 3). Moreover, an alternative explanation of the effects of relationship episodes on brand-related behaviors, based on mood, is rejected (study 3). Lastly, results show that differences in reactions to changes in interpersonal relationships might be driven by dissolution type episodes. This suggests that a brand might be more harmed by negative interpersonal relationship dynamics than helped by positive ones when positioned as a social relationship enabler.

In sum, consumer-brand relationships are not, in fact, shielded from changes in personal relationships that were previously presumed independent of the brand. Thus, the current research

fills in the gap in the existing literature on consumer-brand relationships by introducing the influence of external interpersonal relationships on consumer-brand relationships.

Particularly, since Fournier's (1998) breakthrough article, much consumer research has been built on relationship theory; specifically, on the assumption of brands representing relationship partners (e.g., Priester et al. 2009), and of brand relationships as mirroring those among humans (e.g., Aggarwal 2004). This research represents a first attempt to show that consumer-brand relationships don't just mirror human relationships; they are affected by them and by their dynamics. Moreover, the contextual and dynamic nature of consumer-brand relationships has been highlighted across a variety of settings (e.g., Ashworth, Dacin, Thompson 2009). The current research sheds some light on a very important aspect of the contextual nature of these relationships, that is-other, interpersonal relationships, thus paving new avenues for future research.

In addition, the present manuscript also contributes to research on gift exchange. The latter traditionally focuses on the impact of gift-exchange experience on the creation and maintenance of relationships between the gift giver and the recipient (e.g., Sherry 1983; Ruth et al. 1999). By examining how the dynamics of the relationship between the gift giver and the recipient may influence the dynamics of the relationship between the gift recipient and the gifted brand, our study explores new aspects of the dynamics underlying the gift experience. Finally, by showing that changes in self-brand connection mediate consumer's attitude towards the brand and purchase intention this paper contributes to literature on the influence of self-brand connection, which has not examined such effects to date.

The current research also carries significant managerial implications since many products are positioned as social relationship enablers. I caution against the overreliance of social relationship positioning, as it might backfire if the consumer's interpersonal relationship fails. Instead, I suggest a balanced portfolio of communication platforms that positions the brand both as a desirable social product, as well as one that satisfies independent, self-oriented goals. For example, in 2004, De Beers launched the successful "Right-Hand Ring" campaign, which encouraged women to buy diamonds as presents for themselves and generated 15% sales increase as well as nearly 40% awareness in the year following its introduction (Jacobsen 2011). In addition to promotion and positioning strategies, managers might also consider influencing the post-purchase phases of consumer behavior by creating and/or reinforcing an independent relationship with the consumer. For example, in 2009 candy maker Godiva Chocolatier launched its first loyalty program. This free reward membership gives access to a series of benefits, including free monthly chocolate.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

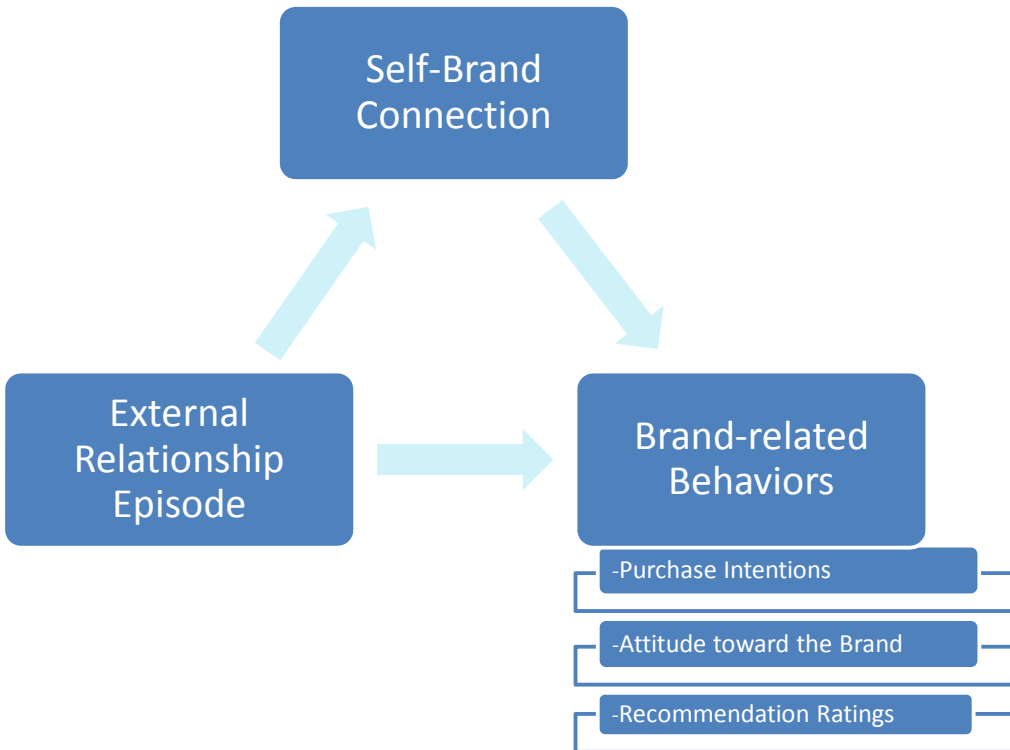
Despite the contributions of the current research, there are few limitations that offer inspirational cues for future studies.

This paper examined how interpersonal relationship dynamics impact consumer-brand relationships within a certain time frame. It might be interesting to explore how these effects evolve over time. For instance, in the long run, emotions such as nostalgia might come into play. Nostalgia has been defined as a “bittersweet” emotion, in that it contains both pleasant and unpleasant components. Importantly, nostalgia draws on biased or selective memory for past experiences referring back to an earlier period of an individual's life (Havlena and Holak 1991). Thus, over time, individuals might selectively recall interpersonal relationship dynamics and this might ultimately affect the relationship with the brand associated with the external party in a novel way.

Moreover, the current manuscript focused on studying the effects of episodes of dissolution, such as break-ups, within interpersonal romantic relationships on consumer-brand relationships. However, research suggests that in other instances of dissolution episodes, such as of death, the observed effects on self-brand connection and consequently on brand-related behaviors might be reversed. For example, Belk (1998) suggests that mourning for dead loved ones may be interpreted as grieving for a loss of self. In this perspective, “possessions of the deceased can be powerful remains of the dead person extended self” (p. 144). Thus, the relationship between an individual and a brand associated with a deceased one might be reinforced by such type of episode.

Furthermore, in study 3, individuals in the control and reinforcement conditions did not significantly differ neither in their relationship development perceptions (as the manipulation check attests), nor with regards to the main dependent measures. While on one hand this suggests that the observed effects of relationship episode are driven by dissolution dynamics, it could also be the result of the genuine difficulty in experimentally reproducing a reinforcement relationship episode scenario. Additional research methods, such as interviews, might help exploring the effects of positive interpersonal relationship dynamics.

Another area where further research is possible relates to the moderating role that individual characteristics might have on the effects of interpersonal relationships. One such characteristic is the propensity that individuals have to include brands as part of how they view themselves. Consumers who are generally more engaged with brands tend to be more loyal and less time sensitive regarding their favorite brands (Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg 2009). Thus, these consumers might also be less susceptible to the influence of dissolution relationship episodes than consumers with lower tendencies to include brands as part of their self-concepts.

**Figure 1- Theoretical Model**

**Table 1- Pretest, Self-Brand Connection Statistics**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Siemens	1.69	1.32
Asus	1.93	1.58
Acer	2.18	1.16
Compaq	2.3	1.3
Toshiba	2.37	1.21
Samsung	2.92	1.49
Sony	3.65	1.46
HP	3.65	1.53
Dell	3.78	1.44
Apple	4.63	1.44

## APPENDIX A

### Stimulus study 1, Relationship story development

Imagine that during the holidays you met someone special. Soon after meeting, you started dating.

Right from the very first moment, you were both into each other very much. In fact, it seemed love at first sight...



You have many interests in common and come from the same hometown, which made the connection between you arise very quickly.

Page 1



It's Valentine's Day and you have been dating each other for a little while now.

To celebrate, you both decide to go out for dinner...

Page 2

As a gift, your date surprises you with a Sony camera.



You take pictures of each other and have a lot of fun together using the new Sony camera.

A few weeks go by and you have been really enjoying documenting your relationship!

Page 3

## APPENDIX B

### Stimuli studies 2 and 3, relationship story development

Imagine that during the holidays you met someone special. Soon after meeting, you started dating.

Right from the very first moment, you were both into each other very much. In fact, it seemed love at first sight...



You have many interests in common and come from the same hometown, which made the connection between you arise very quickly.

Page 1



It's Valentine's Day and you have been dating each other for a little while now.

To celebrate, you both decide to go out for dinner...

Page 2

As a gift, your date surprises you with a new cell phone.



You send text and email messages to each other, as well as pictures, and have a lot of fun together using the new City cell phone.

A few weeks go by and you have been really enjoying communicating with each other and documenting your relationship!

Page 3

## APPENDIX C

### Studies 2 and 3, Stimuli Brand Presentation

You are reading your favorite magazine and find the following ad about City cell phone, the same cell phone that your date gave you. Please look carefully at the ad and answer the following question. There are no right or wrong answers; we are interested in your opinions only.



Introducing City cell phone. This cell phone is remarkably light. It weighs only 4.6 oz.

City cell phone has 800x400 display resolution and 5.0 MP digital camera to share with friends an incredible amount of pictures and files at very high levels of quality.

And if this wasn't enough, there are up to 420 minutes of battery life to never interrupt conversations.

City cell phone improves the quality and fun of staying connected.



**APPENDIX D**

## Studies 2 and 3, Product Avoidance Scale\*

- I would always have the cell phone that I received with me (R)
- I would take good care of the cell phone that I received (R)
- I would sell the cell phone that I received on Ebay
- I would buy a new cell phone as soon as I can
- I would hide the cell phone that I received in a drawer
- I would put the cell phone that I received in a place that is out of my sight
- I would avoid using the cell phone that I received for a while
- I would buy accessories for the cell phone that I received (R)
- I would switch to using the cell phone that I previously had
- I would avoid taking pictures with the cell phone that I received for a while
- I would take many pictures with the cell phone that I received (R)
- I would use the cell phone that I received to communicate to any important person of my life (R)
- I would carry the cell phone that I received around wherever I go (R)
- I would keep the cell phone that I received in a drawer
- I would avoid using the cell phone to communicate to the most important people of my life
- I would give away the cell phone that I received to some friend
- I would avoid sending text messages with the cell phone that I received for a while
- I would avoid sending email messages with the cell phone that I received for a while

(\*R indicates reverse items)

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