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Navigating Relationship Norms: An Exploration of How Content Strategies Improve Brand Valuation over Time

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ABSTRACT

Advertising both builds upon and benefits from the relationship between consumers and brands. In three longitudinal studies this research explores the cultivation and effects of this relationship and demonstrates that, when consumers are in an exchange relationship with a brand, ownership duration leads to higher self–brand connection, which subsequently translates into heightened brand valuation. In contrast, this effect is not observed for consumers in a communal brand relationship (Study 1). Further, results show that brand singularization, operationalized as content strategies that engage consumers to provide product reviews (Study 2) or to create consumer-generated advertisements (Study 3), enhances the effect of brand relationship norms, especially when the norm is exchange in nature. Our findings provide important insights to help advertisers design advertising campaigns that use brand relationship norms and singularization to engage consumers and subsequently increase brand valuation.

There is little disagreement that brands play a very important role in consumers' lives. There is even less doubt that marketing communications in general and advertising in particular are instrumental in shaping relationships between consumers and brands (Kumar and Gupta 2016). During this relationship-building process, the role of ad content remains crucial, as it is identified by prior research as one of the most important moderators when examining advertising effectiveness (see Gavilanes, Flatten, and Brettel 2018; Lothia, Donthu, and Hershberger 2003). Most established brands regularly update their content strategies in an attempt to maintain or reshape their relationship with customers. Consider Pepsi's recent campaign, "That's What I Like," debuting on January 2, 2020, which marks a drastic departure from the brand's previous taglines, such as "Taste of a New Generation." This content strategy denotes the brand's efforts to build a stronger relationship with its customers by encouraging them to do what they enjoy unapologetically, despite potential judgments. As stated by Todd Kaplan, vice president of marketing at Pepsi, "We created this campaign to pay homage to this unapologetic mindset embraced by our most loyal fans" (Deabler 2020).

In recent years, consumer–brand relationship formulation and development has become a focus of modern advertising and branding theory (e.g., Fournier 1998; Bagozzi 1995; Peterson 1995; Breivik and Thorbjørnsen 2008), and this focus is further fueled by relationship marketing, which prompts advertisers to pursue creative ways to foster mutually beneficial relationships with consumers (Mitchell and Orwig 2002). Prior research has summarized two types of norms that companies follow when establishing brand–consumer relationships: communal versus exchange relationship norms (Aggarwal 2004). Both types of norms are frequently utilized in ad designs or campaigns. For instance, consider the British Airways "To Fly. To Serve" ad, versus the Malaysia Airlines "Feel right at home on our A380" commercial. While the first ad promotes an exchange norm, the second

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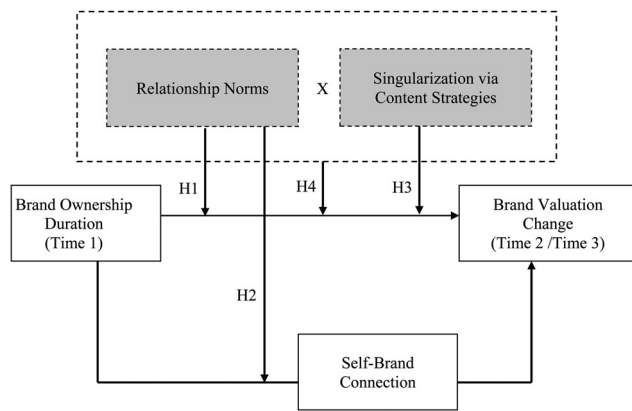
Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

emphasizes a communal relationship. Advertisers' efforts in communicating these two distinct norms can also be found in everyday consumer products, such as McCafe's "Power Up Your Day" ad (exchange norm), versus Tchibo Espresso's "Your Wake Up Kiss" commercial (communal norm).

On the surface, communal relationship norms may triumph over exchange norms, given that connecting with consumers as friends and/or family aligns more with the popular brand relationship concepts (e.g., Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Fournier 1998; Mazodier and Merunka 2012). However, recent research tempers this enthusiasm by pointing out that loyal consumers might not always lead to profitability (Evanschitzky et al. 2012; Reinartz and Kumar 2002), especially when consumer loyalty is merely driven by expectations of great deals (Keiningham et al. 2009) and based on an exchange norm. This observation, coupled with the recent suggestion that consumers are becoming less likely to form long-lasting relationships with brands (e.g., Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), has led many companies to question whether their advertising investment has received an adequate return when spent on building brand relationships. In the current research, we attempt to address these brand relationship controversies by examining how the nature of the consumer–brand relationship can impact consumer valuation for the brand. Despite the important implications to advertising theory and practice, scant quantitative research to date has focused on the dynamics of consumer–brand interactions following product purchase. Prior studies on this topic are either qualitative (e.g., Epp and Price 2010) or predominantly focused on postpurchase brand attitudes (e.g., Haugtvedt et al. 1994; He, Chen, and Alden 2016; Krishnan and Smith 1998). Addressing these theoretical and empirical gaps, this research

longitudinally and quantitatively explores the effectiveness of brand relationship norms in contributing to a brand's ability to demand a price premium (i.e., brand valuation).

In addition, as limited research has examined the boundary conditions of postpurchase brand valuation, we identify *brand singularization* as the most germane intervention that advertisers can employ to help strengthen self–brand connection and elevate brand valuation over time. Brand singularization refers to ways that consumers personalize and integrate brands into their lives (Epp and Price 2010). This construct has been qualitatively examined by a large body of research as the processes consumers use to employ market resources in constructing narratives of identity (Coupland 2005; Diamond et al. 2009; Epp and Price 2010; Muniz and Schau 2005). In this research, brand singularization is operationalized as content strategies which encourage consumers to actively participate in ad content generation and which are intended to promote meaningful consumption episodes. When asked to predict the future of advertising, Schultz (2016) points out that a growing emphasis will be on the use of shared value in the business relationship model. As such, it is imperative to examine brand singularization, given the changing role of the advertising audience when it becomes "the driving force in marketing communication going forward" (Schultz 2016, p. 280).

We pursue our research inquiries through three longitudinal studies examining brand valuation change, following consumers' actual brand purchases in their daily lives. The theoretical framework guiding the current research is presented in Figure 1. The conceptual and operational definitions of the main constructs in this research are described in Table 1. In the following section, we discuss the relevant theories that help inform our conceptualization.

Theory and Hypotheses

Brand Valuation

Brand valuation refers to the overarching way of describing the value estimation of a given brand. Prior studies have described a variety of definitions and operationalizations of brand valuation (i.e., Damodaran 2006; Fernández 2015; Salinas and Ambler 2009), which can be categorized into three principal areas: market based, cost based, and income based (ISO 2010; Salinas and Ambler 2009). Crimmins (2000) argues that, for a consumer-based conceptualization of brand value, price premium should be used to define brand valuation (see also Macias and Rodriguez 2018). Others point out that brand valuation

Table 1. Definitions and operationalizations of branding constructs.

Construct	Definition	Operationalization
Brand relationship norms (Aggarwal 2004)	When consumers form a particular relationship with a brand, the brand is assessed in much the same manner as are other members of the society, according to the norms of social behavior. As a result, when consumers engage in transactional or nontransactional activities with brands, their actions more or less conform to the norms of the brand relationship, either exchange or communal.	To manipulate the brand relationship norm, participants are told to recall a recent brand purchase that they do not anticipate repeating within a month, and that the recalled brand should fit the brief description of either an exchange or communal relationship norm.
Brand signalization (Epp and Price 2010; He, Chen, and Alden 2016)	Brand singularization is conceptualized based on the cultural biography concept and the processes of objective movement and network transformation. It refers to the consumption episodes and processes through which consumers form meaningful bonds with brands, i.e., the ways that consumers personalize and integrate goods and services into their lives.	Brand singularization is operationalized as content strategies that engage consumers to provide product reviews (Study 2) or to create consumer-generated advertisements (Study 3).
Brand valuation (Steenkamp et al. 2010; Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden 2003)	Brand valuation refers to the overarching way of describing the value estimation of a given brand.	Brand valuation is measured by the percentage price premium that consumers are willing to pay in comparison to a generic brand.
Self-brand connection (Aaker, Fournier, and Adam Brasel 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2003)	The self–brand connection is defined as the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept. Self-brand connection is one of the four independent dimensions of brand relationship strength.	1. Brand X reflects who I am. 2. I think brand X could help me become the type of person I want to be. 3. I feel a personal connection to Brand X. 4. I (can) use Brand X to communicate who I am to other people. 5. I think Brand X (could) help(s) me become the type of person I want to be. 6. I consider Brand X to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others). 7. Brand X suits me well. (1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree)

should be assessed by the price premium it generates, compared to a similar but unbranded product or service. While there are many ways to conceptualize price premium, given the longitudinal nature of this research, we use the price premium that consumers are willing to pay in comparison to a generic brand (Steenkamp et al. 2010; see also Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden 2003 on brand value).

The brand valuation literature demonstrates that, contrary to standard economic theory, which assumes that ownership does not affect valuation, consumers tend to become attached to an object almost instantly (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1990). This effect is the result of a type of self-referent cognitive bias, due to mere ownership of an object (e.g., Chatterjee, Irmak, and Rose 2013; Dommer and Swaminathan 2013; Morewedge et al. 2009). In other words, simply owning an object can activate an automatic association between the possession and the self. Because of this intrinsic tendency to enhance the self, the self-possession connection subsequently boosts the object's perceived value. Supporting this, Morewedge et al. (2009) argue that brand valuation increases with ownership, "because people are motivated to justify their choices, and in part because owning an item creates an association between the item and the self" (p. 948).

Similarly, Strahilevitz and Loewenstein's (1998) studies have found that an individual's perceived value of a current possession increases with the duration of ownership. Further, self–brand connection is defined as the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept and is considered as one of the four independent dimensions of brand relationship strength (Aaker, Fournier, and Adam Brasel 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2003). Thus, we argue that owning a brand can also connect consumers to the brand (Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges 1999), and this self–brand connection will subsequently bump up brand valuation with the increased duration of brand ownership. However, with the countereffects from adaptation (i.e., brand habituation; see Coupland 2005; He, Chen, and Alden 2016) and habitual consumption (Lafley and Martin 2017), the effect of brand ownership on brand valuation has largely remained inconclusive. Given the increasing importance of using brand efforts to help increase brand value (e.g., Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden 2003), the current research aims to contribute to this literature by empirically documenting the effects of ownership duration on brand valuation by tracking consumers' actual purchases longitudinally and investigating boundary conditions that could help enhance brand

valuation over time. We propose brand relationship norm and singularization as two independent yet interactive constructs that help shape advertising audiences' relationship building with a brand, even after the purchase. These two constructs are particularly important, as the former is a dispositional state regarding the nature of the relationship between a consumer and a brand, whereas the latter is a process that advertisers can utilize to influence postpurchase brand valuation.

Exchange versus Communal Relationship Norm

When consumers form a particular relationship with a brand, the brand is assessed in much the same manner as are other members of the society—according to the norms of social behavior (Aggarwal 2004). As a result, when consumers engage in transactional or nontransactional activities with brands, their actions more or less conform to the norms of the brand relationship. That is, they use relationship norms as a lens to process brand information, evaluate brands, and guide their brand-related behaviors and reactions (Aggarwal 2004; Aggarwal and Law 2005; Aggarwal and Zhang 2006; Wan, Hui, and Wyer 2011). Hence, the nature of the relationship—in other words, the norms governing these consumer–brand relationships—is found to critically determine how consumers respond to companies' branding efforts (e.g., Aggarwal 2004; Aggarwal and Law 2005; Aggarwal and Zhang 2006), especially when communicated through advertising.

Given the importance of relationship norms in influencing consumer–brand interactions, our conceptualization regarding its role as the boundary conditions of the ownership duration effect on brand valuation is guided by the distinction between exchange versus communal consumer–brand relationship norms (Aggarwal 2004; Clark and Mills 1993). Exchange relationships are usually impersonal and characterized by consumers tracking the balance of perceived value relative to what they pay, or quid pro quo. They are similar to relationships with strangers and individuals who interact for business purposes (Aggarwal 2004). That is, benefits are given "with the expectation of receiving a comparable benefit in return or as repayment for a benefit received previously" (Clark and Mills 1993, 684). In contrast, communal relationships are those in which people do not look for immediate gains or quid pro quo in brand relationships and are more likely to have genuine feelings for the brand. In such brand relationships (e.g., similar to relationships with friends and family

members), consumers take a perspective that transcends an emphasis on self-interest alone (Aggarwal 2004; Aggarwal and Law 2005). "In [these] relationships, the receipt of a benefit does not change the recipient's obligation to respond to the other's needs" (Clark and Mills 1993, 684). Although people involved in a communal relationship may reciprocate the benefits that they receive, their reciprocation is normally motivated by feelings of appreciation rather than by feelings of obligation.

We then examine whether consumers' behavioral tendency manifested in the ownership duration effect varies, depending on brand relationship norms. As noted earlier, brand valuation may or may not accrue with ownership duration due to competing mechanisms from both self–brand connection (which promotes brand valuation over time) and brand habituation (which dampens brand valuation over time). We argue that because brand valuation primarily signifies the exchange value of a brand, which is transactional in nature and therefore more consistent with exchange rather than communal relationship norms, brand valuation should increase for consumers in an exchange (versus communal) relationship. To illustrate, exchange consumers feel obligated to reward the brand with higher brand valuation when receiving benefits manifested in daily use of the brand that they own, as they are more concerned with keeping track of the benefits received from a partner and giving comparable benefits in return (Aggarwal 2004). In contrast, communal consumers do not feel obligated to reward a brand immediately with monetary benefit upon receiving a benefit, as the quid pro quo mindset violates communal norms. Supporting this conjecture, Aggarwal (2004) has found that consumers perceive the receipt of monetary payment for their help rendered to a brand to be in conformity with exchange norms (quid pro quo) but in violation of communal norms (since help is given out of concern for the relationship partner, not for expectation of repayment). Conversely, when the brand does not charge any fee for the service provided to its consumers, it is perceived to be in conformity with communal norms and in violation of exchange norms. We, therefore, argue that when consumers are in an exchange relationship with a brand, self–brand connections accrued with duration of brand ownership will naturally boost brand valuation in the form of the perceived monetary value of the brand. However, the same increase in self–brand connection may not directly translate into higher brand valuation for consumers in a communal relationship. Formally, we hypothesize:

H1: Postpurchase brand valuation increases (declines) over the duration of ownership for consumers in an exchange (communal) brand relationship.

H2: Postpurchase brand valuation change over the duration of ownership is mediated (not mediated) by the self–brand connection increase for consumers in an exchange (communal) relationship.

Brand Singularization Via Content Strategy

To date, paralleling the upsurge of brand relationship management is the rise of technology and media usage in advertising (Muniz and Schau 2007). Advertising is experiencing exciting transformations, given that modern audiences have become increasingly more active, willing, and capable contributors to brand promotion content (Cappo 2003; Garfield 2005). This trend presents unique challenges, as well as opportunities, to today's businesses (Muniz and Schau 2007), especially to those that still practice "firm-initiated, passive engagement" content strategies (Hoffman and Fodor 2010). Embracing this trend, many companies today have started to seek consumer involvement in the generation of advertising messages (Thompson and Malaviya 2013) through co-creation activities that facilitate a brand singularization episode into consumers' daily lives. As mentioned, brand singularization is conceptualized based on the cultural biography concept (Kopytoff 1986) and the processes of objective movement and network transformation (Epp and Price 2010). It refers to the consumption episodes and processes through which consumers form meaningful bonds with brands, in other words, the ways that consumers personalize and integrate goods and services into their lives (Epp and Price 2010; Miller 1987). That is, brand singularization is the process and strategies that consumers utilize to integrate brand identity into their self-identity (Arnould and Thompson 2005). This is because, from a social identity perspective (Escalas 2004), a consumer tends to create powerful relationships with brands that help express and enhance personal identity, which plays a crucial role in a consumer's life (McEwen 2005).

In this process, consumers appropriate brand meanings in ways that make a brand meaningful to themselves, which is manifested in brand decommoditization rituals (Coupland 2005) and consumer identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Consumer culture theorists posit that consumers, as identity seekers and makers, employ rich marketplace resources, for example, commodities and brands, in constructing their self-narratives (Arnould and Thompson 2005). In doing so, consumers often internalize brand narratives (Muniz and Schau 2005) and communicate their self-concepts to others through

their brand choices (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Fournier 1998). Through this means, consumers form profound associations between brands and their self-concepts (Escalas and Bettman 2003). When consumers singularize brands into their self-identities, brand ownership and use tend to escalate into meaningful consumer–brand encounters that help consumers to reinforce their emotional, psychological, or physical investment with a brand (Chaffey 2007; Yoon et al. 2018). As such, brand valuation will likely increase with duration of ownership when consumers engage in brand singularization. Formally, we hypothesize:

H3: Brand valuation increases over duration of ownership when consumers engage in brand singularization.

Further, in this research, brand singularization is operationalized as content strategies intended to promote meaningful consumption episodes. This operationalization maintains the process and episodic focus of brand singularization, while allowing advertisers to strategically contribute to its development. To this end, prior research on content strategies suggests that different content elements could induce different consumer reactions and consequently determine which advertising effort will succeed (e.g., Lamberton and Stephen 2016). The present research defines content strategies in the form of brand singularization processes as either autonomous or affiliative (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007). While autonomous singularization addresses ways that people define themselves as unique individuals, affiliative singularization reflects ways that people connect to others (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995). In other words, autonomous identity establishes the self as unique and different from others, whereas affiliative identity is important for situating the self within the social world and for communicating shared identity with targeted social groups. A large body of consumer culture theory literature has provided ample evidence supporting the proposition that consumers use brands and their narratives to construct both autonomous and affiliative identities. For example, consumers communicate their autonomous self-identities through individualized messages on custom-engraved rivets in the Harley-Davidson Museum (Fournier and Lee 2009). As a contrasting example, Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign brought women together worldwide in a collective mission to fight industry-imposed beauty ideals. This mission helps create global camaraderie and affiliative bonds among these consumers (Fournier and Lee 2009).

Brand singularization provides abundant opportunities for advertisers to facilitate meaningful consumption episodes through content strategies that encourage consumers to interact with the brand. This is especially important

because, as mentioned, with the rise of social media, companies find it is increasingly challenging to manage the newly empowered advertising audience. Indeed, with the recognition of the changing role of ad audiences from content receivers to content creators, many businesses have started to rely heavily on social media advertising in managing branded content (e.g., Park, Rodgers, and Stemmle 2011). Recent research has identified seven content categories from prior studies on social media advertising (Gavilanes, Flatten, and Brettel 2018). Among them, customer feedback stands out as the one that will most likely create the desired synergic effect between consumers' new role as content creators and the brand singularization process to benefit the advertiser. Customer feedback is defined as asking "customers to provide input such as rating, ranking, feedback on product or issues, user-generated content etc." (Gavilanes, Flatten, and Brettel 2018, p. 7; Men and Sunny Tsai 2012; Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012).

Following the noted theoretical and operational definition of brand singularization, we focus on two forms of content strategies in this research that aim to promote meaningful consumption episodes by altering the nature of customer feedback, or consumer-generated content tasks. First, we utilize a product feedback task in Study 2 to simulate consumers' use of social media to share or comment on products, which is one of the fastest-growing categories of product endorsements today (Chen, Fay, and Wang 2011). We then implement a consumer-generated ad task in Study 3, as including consumers in the ad creation and development process will help businesses uncover valuable insights while enhancing consumers' engagement with the brand (Thompson and Malaviya 2013).

It is important to note that these content strategies can emphasize either autonomous or affiliative brand singularization and that these two types of brand singularization further moderate the effect of brand relationship norms on brand valuation change over time. However, because autonomous singularization is more aligned with the exchange relationship norm and affiliative singularization with the communal relationship norm, we predict that the brand valuation change will be more positive when consumers engage in autonomous brand singularization. Here, we further predict that this effect is particularly pronounced for consumers in exchange relationship norms. In contrast, engaging in affiliative brand singularization will not change consumers' brand valuation, regardless of the relationship norms. Based on the preceding, we formally hypothesize:

H4: The type of brand singularization moderates the effect of brand relationship norms on brand valuation

change in that **(a)** the effect is strengthened for consumers who are in exchange relationship norms and engage in autonomous brand singularization and **(b)** regardless of the brand relationship norms they are in, there will be no effect for consumers who engage in affiliative brand singularization.

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested our hypotheses that the brand relationship norm moderates the effect of ownership duration on brand valuation (Hypothesis 1) and that self–brand connection mediates the brand valuation increase when consumers are in an exchange relationship (Hypothesis 2). In this research, we documented the brand ownership duration effect by measuring consumers' brand valuation over time, following actual brand purchases in their daily lives. This longitudinal technique, common among studies that examine how individuals' responses to life events change over time (e.g., He, Chen, and Alden 2016; Lucas 2007), greatly enhanced the validity and generalizability of our research inquiries. In Study 1, 80 undergraduate students were invited to participate in this research, in exchange for extra credit. In total 54 students (52% female; 90% between the ages of 20 and 25) completed the initial and follow-up surveys, yielding an attrition rate of 32.5%.

Design and Procedure

Study 1 featured a 2 (exchange versus communal brand relationship norm) × 2 (postpurchase Time 1 versus Time 2) mixed factorial design. Brand relationship norm is a between-subjects factor, while time after purchase is a within-subjects factor. At Time 1, participants were asked to recall a recent brand purchase that they did not anticipate repeating within a month. To manipulate the brand relationship norm, consumers were told that the recalled brand should fit the brief description of either an exchange or communal relationship norm (Aggarwal 2004).

The exchange relationship description read as follows:

You have purchased from this brand extensively and have been very happy with the quality of its products. This brand also periodically makes some offers to you that appear to be of great value. You have communicated with their customer service representatives before, and the representatives seem to be quite well trained and smart. Overall your experience with this brand has been excellent. When you think of your relationship with this brand, it reminds you of your relationship with a business partner.

Table 2. Products/brands summary (Study 1).

Product Category	Sample Products	Sample Brands	Communal	Exchange	n
Apparel and jewelry	Watch, shirt, jacket, dress, bracelet, bra, board shorts, shoes	Swatch, Forever 21, Adidas, Express, Pandora, Victoria's Secret, Hurley, Nike	8	6	14
Electronics	Camera, cell phone, laptop, mouse, gaming console, digital O^2 sensor controller	GoPro, Nokia, Apple, Razer, Sony, Innovate Motorsports	10	6	16
Grocery	Milk, tea, shampoo, rotisserie chicken, coffee, marshmallows	Taste Tea, Head & Shoulders, Kirkland, Starbucks, Kraft	5	6	11
Health and beauty	Body cream, coconut oil, shaving razor, contact lenses, facial mask, electric toothbrush	Victoria's Secret, Bareans, Gillette, Acuvue, Lush, Philips	7	4	11
Sports and fitness	Spike ball, foam roller	KTCC, TriggerPoint	1	1	2
Total			31	23	54

The communal relationship description read as follows:

> You have purchased from this brand extensively and have been very happy with the quality of its products. You still remember how thrilled you were when you made your first purchase from this brand. You have communicated with their customer service representatives before, and you have had very pleasant and warm interactions with the representatives. Overall your experience with this brand has been memorable. When you think of your relationship with this brand, it reminds you of your relationship with a close friend/family member.

A variety of major product categories were recalled, including apparel and jewelry, electronics, grocery, health and beauty, and sports and fitness (see Table 2). Participants then completed brand valuation measures by indicating the percentage price premium that they were willing to pay over other brands for the brand that they had recalled. The rationale underlying this percentage measure is that consumers consider percentage price differences, rather than absolute differences (Monroe 1973; Steenkamp et al. 2010). This measure is also found to be comparable across consumers, product categories, and countries and is easy for respondents to interpret (e.g., Steenkamp et al. 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, and Whan Park 2005). Participants then answered the seven-item self–brand connection scale, developed by Escalas and Bettman (2003), which includes items such as "X reflects who I am" and "I think X could help me become the type of person I want to be" (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; α = .90).

One month later (Time 2) participants received another e-mail, inviting them to complete a follow-up survey. In this survey, brand valuation and self–brand connection (α = .91) were again measured. To ensure that the relationship manipulations actually persisted, participants were asked to imagine the brand coming alive and becoming a person. They then rated the extent to which the brand was like a close friend, a family member, a businessperson or a merchant. High (low) ratings on the brand as a friend or a family member and low (high) ratings of the brand as a businessperson or a merchant would be consistent with communal (exchange) norms. To ensure that the relationship manipulations did not result in recall of brands that were different in quality perceptions, participants also responded to measures on perceived product and service quality. Given that our study uses a longitudinal design and that the manipulation check was performed one month later, and given also that the manipulation check is directional in nature, one-tailed tests are employed for all manipulation checks (e.g., Amos and Spears 2010).

Results

Tests for Random Condition Assignment

The random assignment method in experimental design "helps to distribute the idiosyncratic characteristics of participants over the treatment levels so that they do not selectively bias the outcome of the experiment" (Kirk 2012, p. 24). To assure random assignment, subjects in each experimental group should not differ significantly in terms of demographic characteristics or other random factors (Atkinson and Rosenthal 2014). We conducted chi-square tests for both conditions to evaluate differences among groups on product category, age, and gender. Results showed that the groups did not differ significantly with respect to product category, age, or gender ($p > .31$).

Manipulation Check

Confirming the efficacy of the relationship norm manipulation, communal (versus exchange) participants were more likely to see the brand as a friend or family member ($M_{comm} = 4.48$ and $M_{exch} = 3.52$; $t(52) = -2.37$, $p = .01$, one tailed, Cohen's $d = .66$) and less likely to see it as a businessperson or a merchant ($M_{comm} = 4.04$ and $M_{exch} = 4.94$; $t(52) = 1.92$, $p = .03$, one tailed, Cohen's $d = .53$). In addition, there were no differences across the two relationship conditions on perceived service/product quality ($p = .41$).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables and mediator (Study 1).

Measures	Exchange (n = 31)		Communal (n = 23)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Brand valuation (Percentage price premium)				
Time 1	17%	14%	20%	16%
Time 2	23%	20%	17%	12%
Self–brand connection				
Time 1	3.39	1.61	4.09	1.62
Time 2	3.94	1.46	3.87	1.46

Brand Valuation

To evaluate Hypothesis 1, we performed a 2 brand relationship norm × 2 postpurchase time mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) on brand valuation (percentage price premium change over Time 1 and Time 2). The main effect of postpurchase time on brand valuation was nonsignificant (Wilks's λ: $F(1, 52) = .49$, $p > .48$), supporting our earlier proposition that the effect of brand ownership duration on brand valuation can be canceled out due to underlying competing forces. The analysis further revealed a significant two-way interaction effect involving relationship norms and postpurchase time (Wilks's λ: $F(1, 52) = 5.24$, $p = .02$), lending support to the moderating effect of relationship norms on brand valuation change. No other effect was significant ($p > .48$).

Further planned contrasts revealed that, for consumers in an exchange brand relationship, the percentage price premiums that they were willing to pay in Time 2 significantly increased from those in Time 1 ($M_{time1} = 17\%$; $M_{time2} = 23\%$, $t(30) = -2.11$, $p = .04$, Cohen's $d = .35$; see Table 3 and Figure 2); for consumers in a communal brand relationship, the brand valuation change was nonsignificant ($M_{time1} = 20\%$; $M_{time2} = 17\%$, $t(22) = 1.20$, $p > .24$, Cohen's $d = .21$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Mediation Analysis

Following Hypothesis 2, we examined the prediction that brand valuation change from Time 1 to Time 2 was driven by self–brand connection change for consumers in an exchange brand relationship. Employing the mediation analysis MEMORE procedure for within-subjects design recommended by Montoya and Hayes (2017), the bootstrap method revealed significant indirect effects ($B = .03$; 95% CI $= .002, .057$). In addition, the direct effect of ownership duration on brand valuation change was nonsignificant ($B = .031$, $p > .27$), suggesting an "indirect-only mediation" (Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010), which indicates that our hypothesized framework is theoretically sound.

In addition, a more in-depth analysis revealed that, for consumers in an exchange brand relationship,

their self–brand connection significantly increased over the duration of ownership ($M_{time1} = 3.39$; $M_{time2} = 3.94$; $t(52) = 2.24$, $p = .03$, Cohen's $d = .36$); whereas, for those in a communal brand relationship, their self–brand connection remained the same over time ($M_{time1} = 4.09$; $M_{time2} = 3.87$; $p > .44$, Cohen's $d = .14$). As such, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Discussion

These results support our prediction that the brand relationship norm moderates the effect of ownership duration on brand valuation change. In particular, brand valuation increases with the duration of ownership for consumers in an exchange brand relationship but not for those in a communal relationship. In addition, the results show that self–brand connection is the mechanism that explains the brand ownership duration effect in exchange brand relationships. These results provide strong support to the premise that the nature of brand relationships (exchange versus communal) has a profound impact on how consumers valuate a brand over time.

It is reasonable, however, to speculate that plateauing of brand valuation for consumers in the communal brand relationship is probably due to the fact that consumers in such a relationship have already started with a high brand valuation level that might display a ceiling effect, if no other interventions from the advertisers are implemented to break through the ceiling. This interesting observation sheds light on our understanding of the challenges in managing brand relationships, in general, and in translating the brand relationship into brand valuation, so as to inform companies' financial performance, in particular.

Now we turn to the question of what kind of intervention advertisers can use to help raise brand valuation for consumers in communal as well as in exchange relationships so that the brand's financial viability can ultimately be enhanced over time. As proposed, brand singularization, operationalized as content strategies that aim to promote meaningful consumption episodes, might be such a promising intervention. Studies 2 and 3 are designed to introduce two such content strategies:
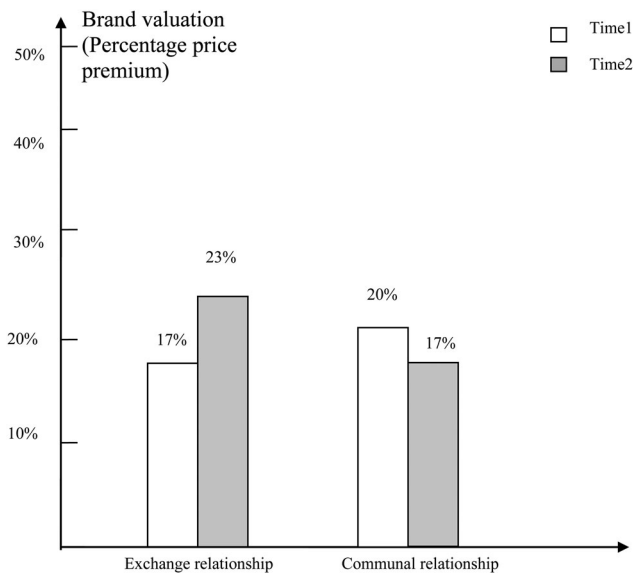
Figure 2. Brand valuation change across two conditions (Study 1). For individuals in an exchange relationship, the difference is significant ($p \leq .05$); for individuals in a communal relationship, the difference is nonsignificant ($p > .24$).

Brand singularization is operationalized through a consumer product feedback task in Study 2 and a consumer-generated advertisement task in Study 3.

Study 2

Method

In Study 2, a longitudinal experiment was conducted using a 2 (exchange versus communal brand relationship norm) × 2 (autonomous versus affiliative brand singularization) × 3 (postpurchase Time 1, Time 2, versus Time 3) mixed factorial design. Brand singularization and relationship norm were between-subjects factors, while time after purchase was a within-subjects factor. In this study, 160 undergraduate students from a large American university received the invitation to participate in a longitudinal field experiment in exchange for extra credit. In total, 101 students completed all questionnaires, administered at three different times (response rate = 63%; 52% female; 80% within the age range of 20 to 25).

Procedures and Measures

At Time 1, as in Study 1, participants were asked to recall a brand purchase that would fit into a description of either an exchange or communal relationship norm (Aggarwal 2004; see Table 4). Brand valuation was measured using the same scale as in Study 1. At Time 2 (two weeks after Time 1), participants were invited by e-mail to complete a follow-up survey.

Similar to the brand singularization manipulations used in He, Chen, and Alden (2016), participants randomly received the following instructions to engage in autonomous (affiliative) brand singularization to provide product feedback. Please note that "X" is the brand the participant identified at Time 1:

> The company that manufactures X would like to invite its customers to provide feedback on the brand, X. The company would like your feedback on how X helps its customers express themselves (feel in touch with others). In other words, how X makes them feel unique, not like everyone else (in touch with others). With this purpose in mind, please use the following text box to provide your detailed feedback. You may use personal experience to illustrate your point if needed. Keep in mind that the company would like to know how X helps its customers express themselves and make them feel different from everyone else (feel in touch with others).

At Time 3 (one month after Time 1), as in Study 1, brand valuation, produce/service quality measures, and relationship and singularization manipulation checks were administered. The participants were then thanked and debriefed.

Results

Tests for Random Condition Assignment

As with Study 1, we conducted chi-square tests for all four conditions to evaluate differences among groups on product category, age, and gender. Results showed that the groups did not differ significantly with respect to product category, age, or gender ($p > .25$). As such, Study 2 also passed the tests for random condition assignment.

Manipulation Check

Supporting the effectiveness of the relationship norm manipulation, compared with exchange participants, communal participants were more likely to view the brand as a friend or family member ($M_{\text{comm}} = 5.31$; $M_{\text{exch}} = 3.74$; $t (98) = -5.12$, $p < .001$, one tailed, Cohen's $d = 1.03$) and less likely to consider it as a businessperson or a merchant ($M_{\text{comm}} = 4.58$; $M_{\text{exch}} = 5.26$; $t (98) = 2.00$, $p < .05$, one tailed, Cohen's $d = .41$). There were no differences across the two relationship conditions on perceived service/product quality ($p > .20$). As desired, in the autonomous condition, consumers reported that the experience of providing customer feedback made them feel more unique, not like everyone else, than those in the affiliative condition ($M_{\text{autonomous}} = 5.65$; $M_{\text{affiliative}} = 3.22$; $t (98) = -13.57$, $p < .001$, one tailed, Cohen's

Table 4. Products/brand summary (Study 2).

Product Category	Sample Products	Sample Brands	Communal	Exchange	n
Apparel and jewelry	Watch, skirt, sunglasses, shoes, handbag, ring, jeans	Emporio Armani, Banana Republic, VonZipper, Vans, Samantha Thavasa, Cartier, American Eagle	17	19	36
Electronics	Laptop, cell phone, earphone, flash drive, cell phone charger	Toshiba, Apple, Bose, SanDisk, Verizon Wireless	19	10	29
Grocery	Toilet paper, toothpaste, coffee	Charmin, Sensodyne, Starbucks	5	4	9
Health and beauty	Lipstick, cleanser, moisturizer, eyeliner, nail polish, hand sanitizer	MAC, Kiehl's, Shiseido, Stila, Sally Hansen, Bath & Body Works	8	7	15
Sports and fitness	Activity tracker, protein powder, water bottle	Jawbone, JYM, Hydro Flask	3	2	5
Travel and leisure	Tsum Tsum, flute, Nekroz of Valkyrus, video game	Disney, Burkart, Yu-Gi-Oh!, Xseed	1	6	7
Total			53	48	101

$d = 2.70$). On the other hand, consumers in the affiliative condition indicated that the same experience made them feel more in touch with others than those in the autonomous condition ($M_{autonomous} = 3.67$; $M_{affiliative} = 5.62$; $t(98) = 7.50$, $p < .001$, one tailed, Cohen's $d = 1.49$).

Relationship Norm
Replicating our findings from Study 1, the results showed that the moderating effect of the relationship norm on brand valuation change remained robust when consumers engaged in singularization activities. To illustrate, the percentage price premium that consumers were willing to pay increased from Time 1 to Time 3 for the exchange relationship condition ($M_{time1} = 15\%$; $M_{time3} = 22\%$, $t(52) = -3.50$, $p = .001$, Cohen's $d = .39$; see Table 5 and Figure 3) but not for the communal relationship condition ($M_{time1} = 25\%$; $M_{time3} = 23\%$, $p > .48$, Cohen's $d = .11$).

Brand Valuation
A 2 relationship norm × 2 brand singularization × 2 postpurchase time mixed-design ANOVA was performed on brand valuation. The analysis revealed a main effect of postpurchase time on brand valuation (Wilks's λ: $F(1, 97) = 4.01$, $p = .05$); however, this main effect was qualified by a significant two-way interaction effect involving relationship norm and postpurchase time (Wilks's λ: $F(1, 97) = 6.80$, $p = .01$), as well as an interaction effect involving brand singularization and postpurchase time (Wilks's λ: $F(1, 97) = 4.39$, $p = .04$). No other effect was significant ($p > .10$). We then examined these significant effects to test our hypotheses.

Brand Singularization
Hypothesis 3 predicts that brand valuation will be boosted with the duration of ownership when consumers engage in brand singularization. Although our results showed a slight increase in the percentage price premium that consumers were willing to pay in Time 3 versus Time 1, this increase was not significant and, as such, Hypothesis 3 is not supported ($M_{time1} = 20\%$; $M_{time3} = 22\%$; $t(100) = 1.70$, $p = .10$, Cohen's $d = .11$). Further analysis showed that the type of brand singularization might moderate such brand valuation change, in that the effect will be enhanced for consumers who engage in autonomous (versus affiliative) brand singularization. Confirming this prediction, the increase in the percentage price premium from Time 1 to Time 3 was significantly more notable for consumers who participated in the autonomous brand singularization exercise than for those who participated in the affiliative exercise ($\Delta M_{autonomous} = 6\%$; $\Delta M_{affiliative} = 3\%$; $t(99) = 1.97$, $p = .05$, Cohen's $d = .38$).

A more in-depth analysis revealed that, for consumers in an exchange brand relationship, brand valuation significantly increased over the duration of ownership for those who engaged in autonomous brand singularization ($M_{time1} = 13\%$; $M_{time3} = 22\%$; $t(19) = 5.31$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .75$) but not for those who engaged in affiliative brand singularization ($M_{time1} = 17\%$; $M_{time3} = 22\%$; $t(32) = 1.83$, $p = .08$, Cohen's $d = .24$). By comparison, for consumers in a communal brand relationship, brand valuation remained flat over the duration of ownership for both those engaged in autonomous brand singularization ($M_{time1} = 24\%$; $M_{time3} = 27\%$; $t(19) = .94$, $p > .36$, Cohen's $d = .13$) and those engaged in affiliative brand singularization ($M_{time1} = 25\%$; $M_{time3} = 20\%$; $t(27) = -1.24$, $p = .08$, Cohen's $d = .29$). Hence, Hypothesis 4 was supported. These findings revealed that brand singularization, especially that which was autonomous in nature, in the form of product feedback, was a promising intervention in enhancing brand valuation, especially for those consumers in an exchange brand relationship. However, because all participants in Study 2 engaged in brand singularization, it was difficult to tease out the singularization

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables and mediator (Study 2).

Measures	Exchange				Communal			
	Autonomous		Affiliative		Autonomous		Affiliative	
	(n = 20)		(n = 33)		(n = 20)		(n = 28)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Brand valuation (percentage price premium)								
Time 1	13%	11%	17%	20%	24%	23%	25%	19%
Time 3	22%	13%	22%	22%	27%	22%	20%	15%
Brand valuation increase	9%	7%	5%	16%	3%	17%	−5%	15%
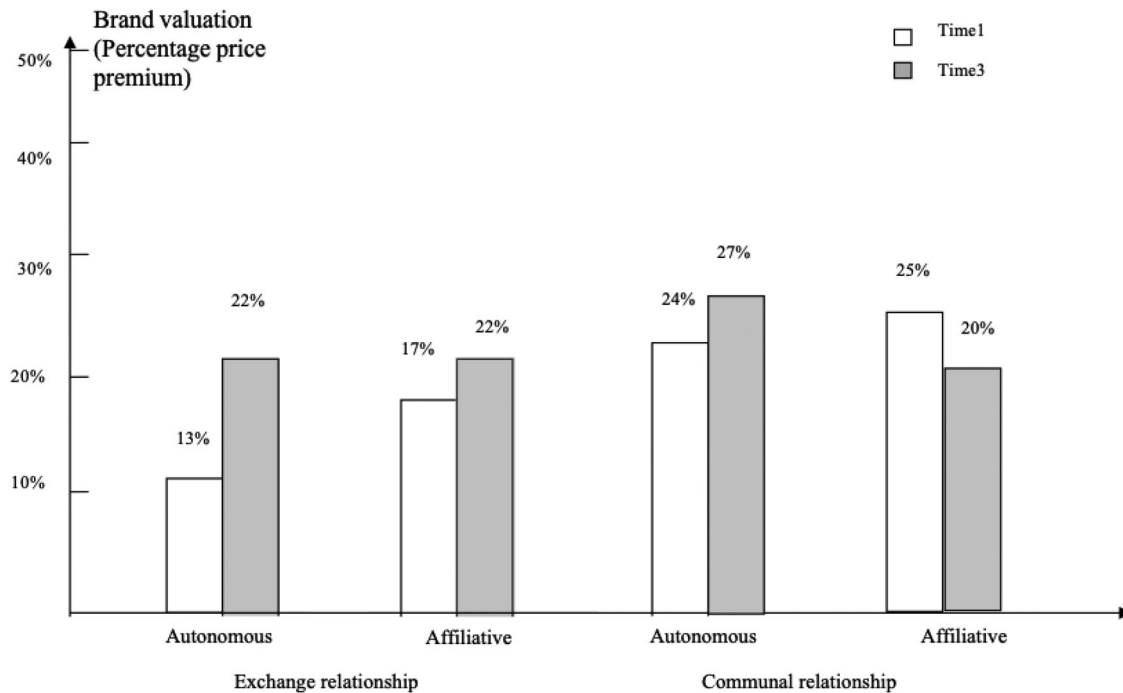
Figure 3. Brand valuation change across four conditions (Study 2).

effect from the ownership duration effect. We therefore retested Hypothesis 3 and 4 using a large-scale longitudinal field experiment in Study 3.

Study 3

The purpose of Study 3 is five-fold. First, with the addition of a control condition, it serves as a comprehensive examination of our conceptual model, especially with a direct empirical test of the brand singularization effect on brand valuation change. Second, we aim to replicate our investigation using a larger sample that also resembles the general population and, in so doing, ensure the generalizability and rigor of our findings. Third, it tests the viability of singularization over a different time lapse (compared to Studies 1 and 2) to show that brand singularization can happen at any stage of brand ownership duration. Fourth, this study focuses our investigation on a single and personally

relevant product category to eliminate potential confounds in our earlier studies from the variability of product categories, as such variability might have led to a higher initial level valuation for brands recalled in a communal relationship. Fifth, we operationalize brand singularization through another content strategy—a consumer-generated ad task—to better inform advertising practitioners.

Method

In Study 3, similar to previous studies, a longitudinal experiment was conducted using a 2 (exchange versus communal brand relationship norm) × 2 (autonomous versus affiliative brand singularization) × 2 (postpurchase Time 1 versus Time 2) mixed factorial design. Brand singularization and relationship norm were between-subject factors, while time after purchase was a within-subjects factor. In addition, to further tease out the main effect of brand singularization

Table 6. Products/brand summary (Study 3).

Product Category	Sample Products	Sample Brands	n
Personal electronics	Laptop, cell phone, tablet, game console, e-reader, fitness tracker, headphones, TV, smart home device	Apple, Samsung, Lenovo, Amazon, Sony, Dell, Google, Nintendo, Microsoft, LG	434

on brand valuation over time, we employed a control condition without brand singularization, which was also measured at both Time 1 and Time 2. For this study, 500 American participants recruited online received the invitation to participate in a longitudinal field experiment in exchange for monetary compensation. A total of 311 individuals completed all questionnaires, administered at two different times (response rate = 62%; 48% female; 80% within the age range of 24 to 56). Thus, the current study aims to validate (the) results in Study 2 with a larger sample, with higher statistical power, and from a different sample source—a more general population, instead of a student-based population.

Procedures and Measures

At Time 1, as in Studies 1 and 2, participants were asked to recall a brand purchase that would fit into a description of either an exchange or communal relationship norm (Aggarwal 2004) (see Table 6). However, to ensure that the brand purchases that participants recalled were meaningful purchases that they connected with and used often, we modified the recall task to center around a "branded personal electronics product" that they had purchased in the recent past. Also, to make sure that the variation of the prior ownership length did not confound our hypothesis testing, we added a measure to ask participants about their purchase date (i.e., "How many weeks ago did you purchase this product?"). Brand valuation was measured using the same scale as in Studies 1 and 2. Participants were then randomly administered the following instructions to engage in autonomous (affiliative) brand singularization—in other words, a consumer-generated ad task. Please note that "X" is the brand the participant identified at Time 1:

> The company that manufactures X would like you to create an advertisement slogan with a focus on how X helps its customers express themselves (feel in touch with others). In other words, how X makes them feel unique, not like everyone else (in touch with others). With this purpose in mind, please use your creativity and your experience with the brand to provide your original advertising slogan in the box below. Keep in mind that the company would like to know how X helps its customers express themselves and make them feel different from everyone else (feel in touch with others). Your advertising slogan may be viewed

by the brand or later used as an inspiration for actual slogans or advertising material.

For the control condition, participants were also asked to freely recall a branded personal electronics product and to answer subsequent measures identical to the treatment conditions. However, they did not participate in the brand singularization task. Instead, they received a filler task to generate a topical message that was unrelated to the branded product. After completing measures on brand valuation, we added an additional dependent variable on participants' willingness to participate in future consumer-generated advertisement tasks (i.e., "How likely will you participate if asked by the brand to take part in an advertising co-creation campaign?"; 1= *Not at all likely*, 7 = *Very likely*). We hypothesize that, as brand valuation increases over time, participants' willingness to participate in advertising co-creation campaigns will also increase due to their increased engagement with the brand.

At Time 2 (five days after Time 1), participants were invited by e-mail to complete a follow-up survey. Brand valuation, advertising co-creation participation likelihood, produce/service quality measures, and manipulation checks were administered. The participants were then thanked and debriefed.

Results

Tests for Random Condition Assignment

As with Studies 1 and 2, we conducted chi-square tests for all four conditions to evaluate differences among groups on age, gender, and prior ownership length. Results showed that our experimental groups did not differ significantly with respect to age, gender, or prior ownership length ($p > .27$). As such, Study 3 passed the tests for random condition assignment.

Manipulation Check

Because Study 3 featured a modified relationship norm manipulation and also used a more general population, a manipulation check was again performed, and the results partly confirmed the efficacy of our manipulation in that, compared with exchange participants, communal participants were more likely

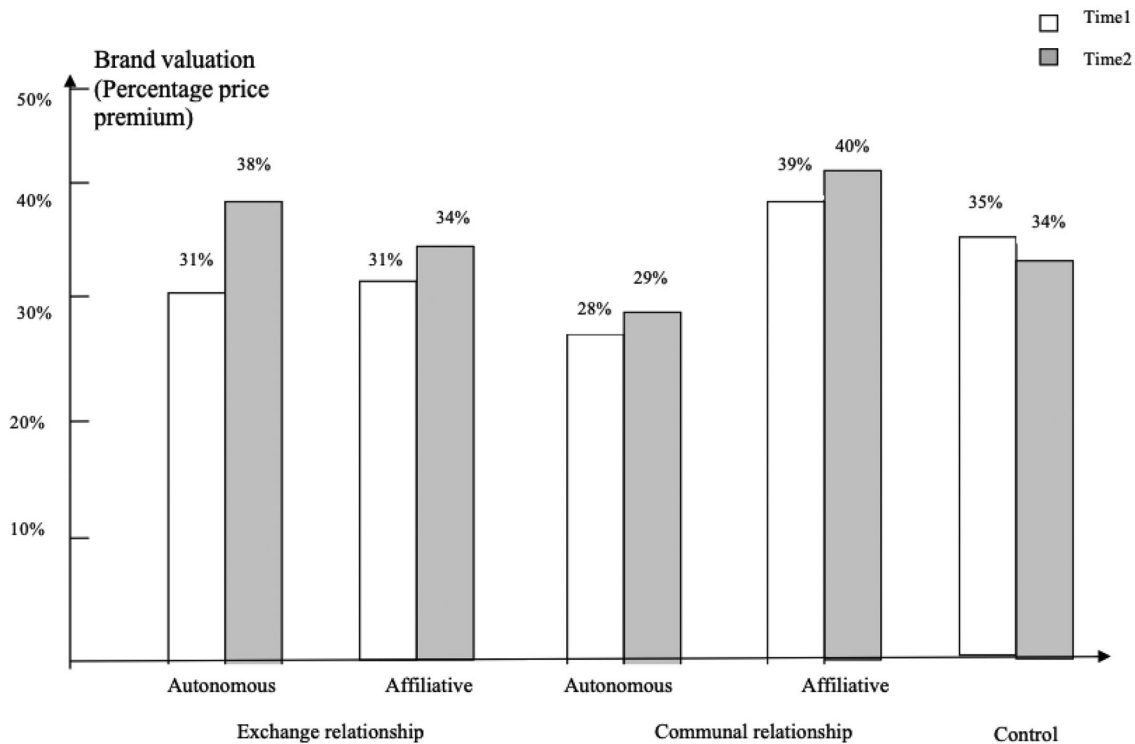**Figure 4.** Brand valuation change across all conditions (Study 3).

to view the brand as a friend or family member ($p <$ .01); however, this difference was not observed in exchange participants ($p > .05$). The discrepancy was probably due to the fact that, during our field experiment, the decay of our manipulation potency over time made participants more likely to see brands as representing/belonging to a business by default. There were no differences across the two relationship conditions on perceived service/product quality ($p > .39$).

To ensure the effectiveness of our manipulations of relationship norms, we conducted a separate test with participants in the same population as those in Study 3 ($N = 183$). This method is frequently used in marketing and advertising research (e.g., Rucker, Hu, and Galinsky 2014; Shen and Chen 2007), and having multiple ways of performing manipulation checks is often encouraged (Hauser, Ellsworth, and Gonzalez 2018). Validating our modified brand relationship norm manipulation, in the separate data collection, compared with exchange participants, communal participants were more likely to view the brand as a friend or family member ($M_{comm} = 5.21$; $M_{exch} = 4.73$; $t (181) = -2.06, p = .04$, Cohen's $d = .30$) and, in contrast, significantly less likely to consider it as a businessperson or a merchant ($M_{comm} = 4.57$; $M_{exch} = 5.33$; $t (181) = 3.11, p = .002$, Cohen's $d = .46$).

Relationship Norm
Replicating our findings from Studies 1 and 2, the results showed that the moderating effect of the relationship

norm on brand valuation change remained robust. To illustrate, the percentage price premium that consumers were willing to pay increased from Time 1 to Time 2 for the exchange relationship condition ($M_{time1} = 31\%$; $M_{time2} = 36\%, t (126) = 2.61, p = .001$, Cohen's $d = .15$; see Figure 4 and Table 7) but not for the communal relationship condition ($M_{time1} = 33\%$; $M_{time2} = 34\%, t (126) = .793, p = .43$, Cohen's $d = .03$), rendering additional support to the central proposition of this research.

Brand Singularization
Hypothesis 3 predicts that brand valuation will be enhanced with the duration of ownership when consumers engage in brand singularization. Supporting this hypothesis, the percentage price premium that consumers were willing to pay increased from Time 1 to Time 2 in brand singularization conditions ($M_{time1} = 32\%$; $M_{time2} = 35\%$; $t (253) = 2.59, p = .01$, Cohen's $d = .09$) but remained unchanged in the control condition ($M_{time1} = 35\%$; $M_{time2} = 34\%$; $t (56) = .54, p = .594$, Cohen's $d = .07$). As such, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Brand Valuation
A 2 relationship norm × 2 brand singularization × 2 postpurchase time mixed-design ANOVA was performed on brand valuation. The analysis revealed a main effect of postpurchase time on brand valuation (Wilks's λ: $F (1, 250) = 6.67, p = .01$). No other effect was significant ($p >$

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables (Study 3).

	Exchange				Communal Control					
	Autonomous ($n = 65$)		Affiliative ($n = 62$)		Autonomous ($n = 67$)		Affiliative ($n = 60$)		($n = 57$)	
Measures	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Brand valuation (percentage price premium)										
Time 1	31%	27%	31%	29%	28%	23%	39%	31%	35%	29%
Time 2	38%	31%	34%	31%	29%	24%	40%	32%	34%	31%
Brand valuation increase	7%	4%	3%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	−1%	2%

.20). When prior ownership length was entered into the model as a covariate, its effect was not significant ($p > .38$), while other hypothesis-relevant effects showed similar results, compared with the model without the addition of this covariate, suggesting that prior ownership length of the product did not change our predicted results. We then further performed specific comparisons to test our hypotheses.

A more in-depth analysis revealed that, for consumers in an exchange brand relationship, brand valuation significantly increased over the duration of ownership for those who engaged in autonomous brand singularization ($M_{time1} = 31\%$; $M_{time2} = 38\%$; $t (64) = 2.99$, $p = .004$, Cohen's $d = .21$) but not for those who engaged in affiliative brand singularization ($M_{time1} = 31\%$; $M_{time2} = 34\%$; $t (61) = .887$, $p = .38$, Cohen's $d = .08$). By comparison, for consumers in a communal brand relationship, as with Study 2, brand valuation again remained flat over the duration of ownership for both those who engaged in autonomous brand singularization ($M_{time1} = 28\%$; $M_{time3} = 29\%$; $t (66) = .240$, $p = .81$, Cohen's $d = .02$) and those who engaged in affiliative brand singularization ($M_{time1} = 39\%$; $M_{time3} = 40\%$; $t (59) = 1.165$, $p = .25$, Cohen's $d = .05$). These results rendered support to Hypothesis 4.

General Discussion

Findings from our three longitudinal studies provide interesting implications for advertising theory and practice. To start, this research makes important theoretical contributions by bridging two important streams of research: brand valuation and brand relationship norms. Our research extends research inquiries on brand relationship norms (e.g., Aggarwal 2004) and suggests that it is not always in the best interests of advertisers for consumers to view their owned brands as a friend, as such a nontransactional mindset may serve as an impediment when it comes to postpurchase brand valuation. Consequently, although companies may think that they have become "friends" with loyal customers, in actuality, as Lafley and Martin (2017) report, their "loyal consumption"

may be a mere act of habitual buying, at best. Today, many brands strive to redefine their image in the form of a friend or a companion, departing from the traditional transactional role. Take, for example, United Airlines' effort to bring back its most iconic ad campaign with the "Fly the Friendly Skies" tagline (Lazare 2014), which highlights the communal relationship that United wishes to build with its passengers (contrasting American Airlines' exchange-focused "The World's Greatest Flyers Fly American" slogan). Contrary to their intent, communal norms can potentially set up businesses for failure, when consumers believe that the businesses have deviated from and violated such norms. Findings from this research therefore caution businesses to carefully consider the specific type of relationship norms they should employ in an era where companies shift their definition of brand from the first three waves as object, idea, and experience to the fourth wave, relationship (Bonchek and France 2016). Understanding the subtle differences between brand relationship norms (i.e., communal versus exchange) and their distinctive associations with brand valuation can therefore help advertisers develop more effective communication messages to maximize the returns on their advertising campaigns.

In addition, our findings also contribute to future advertising practice by systematically demonstrating the effectiveness of operationalizing brand singularization as content strategies to encourage meaningful consumption episodes. Echoing the prediction of future advertising made by Deuze (2016), which calls for seizing the opportunity when consumers invite brands to participate in their daily lives, this research has proposed and tested two content strategies that future advertising practitioners can employ to facilitate brand singularization, in other words, through product review and through consumer-generated advertisements. Although not formally hypothesized, we performed additional analyses to examine the effect of brand singularization on the willingness to participate in future advertising co-creation. Our

preliminary results showed that, for participants who engaged in brand singularization, regardless of the type, the increase in their willingness to participate in future advertising co-creation over time was greater (M_{time1} = 4.67; M_{time2} = 5.40; t (253) = 6.77, $p <$ .001, Cohen's d = .44), compared to those who did not engage in any form of brand singularization (M_{time1} = 4.58; M_{time2} = 5.07; t (56) = 3.25, p = .002, Cohen's d = .26). These findings intimate that advertising practitioners can extrapolate the principle of brand singularization to their future design of content strategies if the goal of the marketing communication is to maintain brand valuation or engage consumers in other brand content co-creation.

Findings from our research should be appreciated in light of several limitations. First, to monitor post-purchase brand valuation change in a realistic setting, participants were asked to recall their brand purchases. While this approach is appropriate, given the theoretical objectives of the studies, further research that examines the brand valuation change under a relatively more controlled laboratory environment is necessary before broader generalizations can be made. Future research could also adopt survey research methods to measure (as opposed to manipulate) constructs such as brand relationship norms and singularization to further establish the discriminant validity of these constructs to inform the measurement practices (Bergkvist and Langner 2017; Voorhees et al. 2016). In addition to the experimental control used in this research, researchers using a survey method might also want to measure and control for the brand relationship duration in their analysis, as brand relationship may start before brand ownership. Future advertising research may also seek to examine the interactions between brand valuation and other branding strategies (e.g., brand extension and portfolio management; Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges 1999; Morgan and Rego 2009). In sum, despite the large body of research on brand valuation, there is still much to learn about this construct, and continuous work in this area is warranted.

Conclusion

As Kumar and Gupta (2016) contend in envisioning the evolution and future of advertising, "Advertising has an ability to move markets and minds, products and perceptions. It interests, intrigues, entices, entertains, and creates lifestyles. It builds a relationship between customers and brands" (p. 302). In recent years, a rising concern that challenges the validity of modern advertising is the phenomenon that consumers increasingly view marketing communications with suspicion and distrust (O'Hern and Rindfleisch 2010). Such distrust could range from more passive ad skepticism (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998, p. 160) to active resistance, such as anti-corporate blogging and culture jamming (Klein, Smith, and John 2004; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). One proposed solution is for companies to take steps to actively involve customers in their strategic planning and execution (Seybold 2006). The findings from our research lend support to the viability of one such step: engaging consumers in companies' content strategies as a form of brand singularization. Indeed, consumer-generated content has become ubiquitous, as companies adjust their communication strategies to be "more interactive with their consumers and to provide them an experience that goes beyond product services" (Kumar and Gupta 2016, p. 306). When engaging in co-creation with consumers, companies are found to become more transparent and authentic, and they are able to identify more creative ways of converting consumers into brand ambassadors. Our research findings on brand singularization, operationalized as content strategies that aim to promote meaningful consumption episodes, in conjunction with those on brand relationship norms, could help guide advertising practitioners in recalibrating their content strategies and interacting and building fruitful relationship with consumers, as they become a driving force of future marketing communication (Schultz 2016).

Funding

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