

CLAUDIO ALVAREZ

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MARKETING CLAUDIO ALVAREZ IDENTIFIES “RELATIONAL TENSIONS” BETWEEN CONSUMERS AND THE BRANDS THEY HOLD DEAR.

We think about the relationships with the people in our lives, but what about the brands? The pull the consumer feels to the products they purchase keeps them coming back—solve that problem and it’s potentially a billion-dollar solution.

Claudio Alvarez, assistant professor of Marketing at the Hankamer School of Business, explored this phenomenon in the study, “Doing Relationship Work: A Theory of Change in Consumer-Brand Relationships.” The research, co-authored by Danielle J. Brick at University of New Hampshire and Susan Fournier at Boston University, entailed interviewing consumers to reveal relational tensions with brands and their responses to them. The team found results that unlock part of the mystery that has long haunted the consumer marketplace.

Comparing brand relationships to friends, Alvarez noted that even though you cherish your friend, that doesn’t mean you want to be with them every second.

“There is this tension between connection and autonomy,” Alvarez said. “We found that consumers want a relationship with their brands and grocery services. But at the same time, they want at least the sense that there are competitors they could choose from.”

This was the first of the four relational tensions identified in the paper that consumers are grappling with: Connection-Separation. The other three relational tensions identified were Affect-Instrumentality, Ideal-Real and New-Known.

There was also a fine line between what was and was not a valuable personal relationship. At Cheers, everybody knows your name, but are you always glad you came? Alvarez mentioned a startup in the paper where a consumer went to the location and the owner repeatedly took the time to know them and engage them. That gives a feeling of connectedness.

“It is interesting how similar that is to actual human relationships. It does take work to make relationships last.”

“But, on the other side, sometimes you may need to buy your product and go, and this owner didn’t necessarily always recognize that the consumer didn’t have time for a back and forth,” Alvarez said. “The personal service kind of reduced the benefit.”

This hit on Affect-Instrumentality. This consumer wants an emotional connection but sometimes doesn’t have time.

The third relational tension, Ideal-Real, involves measuring your ideals and expectations for a product against the reality you experience in using it, often with quite a gulf. Finally, the fourth, New-Known, consists of the feeling of familiarity (seeing the Golden Arches ahead) versus the excitement of something new.

How consumers navigated these issues was by doing relationship work, Alvarez said.

A compelling example of this in the paper was a consumer buying from an online grocery service. Over four interviews, the team saw the peaks and valleys of the consumer-brand relationship. The relationship work was done—the relationship is “saved” but modified.

Alvarez and the co-researchers observed that brands could create tentative solutions to paradoxical consumer relationships and encourage the adoption of enabling or disabling actions. They see these as two areas for future exploration.

“Because we were focusing on only one brand, we were not able to look at the flip side: ‘What is the relationship work that brands do?’” Alvarez said. “There were still moments where it felt like the brand was trying to resolve the tension for the consumer, and it was kind of counterproductive.”

Ideally, the relationships find balance, Alvarez said. But occasionally, consumers might have to call it quits.

“Sometimes, that is the best outcome for all,” he said. “It is interesting how similar that is to actual human relationships. It does take work to make relationships last.”

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Love a Brand? It Can Be *a Tense* Relationship

BY / ERIC BUTTERMAN