



Relationship norms and media gratification in relational brand communication



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ABSTRACT

Brands are increasingly engaging in relational communications, which are personalized or privative messages sent to regular customers as part of a company's relationship marketing strategies. However, little is known regarding the underlying processes governing the creation of targeted relational outcomes. Drawing on the social theory of relationship norms, this study shows that by influencing the nature of media gratification, contextual communal norms rather than exchange norms have a stronger effect on how gratification contributes to attitudes toward the media and brand gratitude as significant media-related antecedents of brand commitment. Of particular interest, this study reveals that communal media gratification (in contrast to exchange media gratification) contributes the most to gratitude outcomes, whereas it only slightly influences media attitudes. The implications of these findings are significant for brand communication researchers and managers.

1. Introduction

The current marketing environment is characterized by a surge in multichannel shopping and a parallel growth in advertising channels (Dinner, van Heerde, & Neslin, 2014). In an attempt to create valuable relationships in this context, companies are increasingly engaging in relational brand communication, that is, personalized or privative messages sent to regular customers or even brand communities that include informational and brand image-enhancing content that goes beyond basic promotional appeals (Godfrey, Seiders, & Voss, 2011; Koch & Benlian, 2015; Mimouni-Chaabane & Volle, 2010). Most notably, traditional direct marketing has tended toward this form of communications (Gázquez-Abad, De Cannière, & Martínez-López, 2011).

Following this communications approach initiated by companies, some research has explored how relational brand communications, depending on its content or multichannel nature, can improve brand profitability by increasing purchase intentions and behavioral loyalty (e.g., Danaher & Dagger, 2013; Gázquez-Abad et al., 2011; Godfrey et al., 2011; Thomas, Feng, & Krishnan, 2015). However, investigations into the more effective aspects of relationships that are shaped by a brand's relational communications are lacking. In particular, the reinforcement of consumers' brand commitment as a key precursor to the attainment of profitable outcomes, such as future intentions (Bansal, Irving, & Taylor, 2004), is still not well understood in the area of relational communications.

Building on the “uses and gratifications” approach, which is drawn from the field of communication studies (see Rubin, 2009), a well-established stream of research has studied how consumers, by extrapolating various consumption values from their brands' mediated communications, form attitudes toward the communication channels used by these brands (e.g., Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001; Tran & Stratton, 2013). In turn, media attitudes have been found to modify brand attitudes and purchase intentions (e.g., Choi, Kim, & McMillan, 2009; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Huang, Su, Zhou, & Liu, 2013). Despite providing noteworthy insights on the contribution of media gratification to brand-related attitude constructs, these studies generally ignore important parts of relational dimensions specifically pertaining to media gratification. The social benefits derived from the use of a given brand communication channel are well identified in terms of interactions with other consumers (e.g., Bronner & Neijens, 2006; Calder et al., 2009; Nambisan & Watt, 2011). In contrast, the parasocial gratification involving a brand's agency is generally overlooked; one reason for this being that brand is not mentioned as a social source in the original “uses and gratifications” framework (Ruggiero, 2000).

Similarly, the issue of relationship norms (Clark & Mills, 1993) – which can be oriented toward either a quid pro quo relational mode (exchange norm) or a more socially integrative one (communal norm) – stands out as another blind spot in the literature on media gratification in terms of brand relationships. Recent research in the marketing field indicates that consumer attitudes and behavioral responses to a brand's

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actions are affected by the type of brand relationship norms salient at the time of the interactions (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). More generally, consumers seem to use relationship norms to guide their interactions with brands, select brand information during these interactions, and assess the brand's conduct (e.g., Aggarwal & Law, 2005; Wan, Hui, & Wyer, 2011). Given that brand communications can be regarded as a form of relational investment (DeWulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001) that activates social appraisals and brand information processing on the part of consumers, the benefits that consumers derive from consuming brand communications are likely to be influenced by relationship norms. We therefore posit that the nature of media gratification and the way it contributes to brand commitment might depend on the type of contextual brand relationship norms prevailing at the time of media use. Such a proposition not only challenges a common view of media gratification, which is fundamentally a-relational in that it tends to ignore the communication source as a social agent, but also sheds light on the nature of contextual determinants at work in the brand-related outcomes that companies pursue through relational communication. Specifically, we investigate two questions: How can the description of media gratification be associated with brand relationship norms? What are the underlying mechanisms that mediate the influence of contextual brand relationship norms as reflected by the corresponding media gratification on brand commitment?

In answering these questions, our research makes significant contributions to the literature on brand communication. First, it provides two formative scales, that is, exchange gratification versus communal gratification, to measure the media gratification that reflects the type of brand relationship norms salient at the time of the brand interaction. Second, it demonstrates that the influence of both types of media gratification on brand commitment is conveyed by two distinct routes relying on a customer's attitude toward the media and a customer's feelings of gratitude, respectively, as media-driven mediating variables. Third, and at the heart of this research, our findings outline the contrasting contributions of media gratification, depending on the relevant brand relationship norms, to each of the two mediating routes; that is, communal gratification contributes significantly more than exchange gratification to consumers' gratitude responses; whereas exchange gratification more strongly influences attitudes toward the media. Finally, by informing marketers of how to perform relational brand communications with consideration for customer relationship norms, this study offers new insights for driving brand gratitude through the development of communal forms of media gratification.

The rest of the paper presents the theoretical background for our research and develops hypotheses regarding media gratification in light of relationship norms. Further, we report on a two-study investigation that assesses the nature of media gratification depending on relationship norms and then validates the investigated mediating routes with a field survey. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Consumption values derived from brand communication channels

As one of the more developed theories in communication, the “uses and gratifications” approach is rooted in the investigation of political information-seeking motivations (Blumler & McQuail, 1969). Specifically addressing entertainment media, the “uses and gratifications” school developed a theoretical framework of individual motivations for information acquisition via media that relates social and psychological needs to the formation of expectations regarding media (Ruggiero, 2000). In turn, these expectations lead to different patterns of media use and ultimate gratification (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Consistent with such assumptions, empirical studies have not only described a large array of media gratification but also provided

converging evidence that the gratification received is a good predictor of continued media use (e.g., Rubin, 2009). However, suggesting a potential a-relational bias in the early “uses and gratifications” research, gratification theories tend to ignore the social agency related to communication sources.

Drawing on the “uses and gratifications” framework, a substantial body of literature on how consumers derive benefits from the use of brand communication channels has flourished in the marketing field over the past 20 years (e.g., Bronner & Neijens, 2006; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Mathwick et al., 2001; Tran & Strutton, 2013). This stream of research is generally consistent with the view of consumer value creation ingrained in usage and socially constructed through experiences (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). To the extent that they emphasize the multidimensional nature of media experience, these studies provide conceptualizations of consumer media gratification that may vary by context and type of media. These variations notwithstanding, a common minimum structure of media gratification has emerged that includes dimensions related to consumer information, personal identification, social facilitation, and diversion values (see Calder et al., 2009).

More recently, building on the literature on brand relationships that has noted process similarities across brand and human relational spaces (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012), the research on media gratification has emphasized a brand's parasocial role. On the premise that a brand is likely to intervene as an appreciable communications partner in the relational exchange mediated by a given brand communicational device, themes of media consumption values have been found to relate to brand emotional bonding involving a sense of brand intimacy and companionship (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Labrecque, 2014; Simon & Andrews, 2015).

2.2. Relationship norms and types of media gratification

Researchers have noted that consumers differ in how they relate to brands (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998). This stream of research has suggested that people sometimes form relationships with brands in a way similar to how they form human relationships in a social context. Therefore, the distinction between communal and exchange norms (Clark & Mills, 1993) is useful for understanding the nature of brand-consumer relationships (Aggarwal, 2004; Wan et al., 2011). In communal relationships, people expect partners to have a real concern for the other's welfare and not be motivated by reciprocity or profit maximization. Although the people involved in a communal relationship often reciprocate the benefits that they receive, their reciprocity is normally motivated by feelings of appreciation rather than of obligation (Wan et al., 2011). Most family relationships, romantic relationships, and friendships fall into this category (Aggarwal, 2004). In contrast, the exchange relationship norm implies quid pro quo and a request for prompt repayment for received benefits. Relationships between people who interact for business purposes are typical exchange relationships (Aggarwal, 2004).

As outlined by Wan et al. (2011), the norms that govern an exchange relationship are most likely to apply when a consumer and a company are unacquainted. When individuals are regular customers of a given brand, they may have a communal relationship with the brand as well as an exchange relationship. In this case, the norms and expectations that govern their reactions to the brand's behavior can depend on which relationship happens to be dominant in the current situation (Wan et al., 2011). In particular, it can be influenced by the consumer's motivational orientation, which can be either one of exchange, meaning that the consumer is preparing or implementing a buying plan, or communal, meaning that the consumer is primarily seeking psychological proximity and attention in the on-going brand relationship (Yim, Tse, & Chan, 2008).

Because brand-consumer relationship norms situationally vary according to consumer motivational orientation, it is expected that

the nature of the gratification derived from the use of a brand's communicational device will reflect the relational norms salient at the time of the interaction. Consumers primed with norms of an exchange relationship will be more concerned with media gratification that allows them to evaluate in detail the brand's commercial offer or to prepare for shopping (Aggarwal & Law, 2005). Such gratification is hereafter referred to as “exchange media gratification.” In contrast, the norms of a communal relationship make consumers more sensitive to media gratification that goes beyond transactional considerations, favors a certain level of intimacy with the brand, and creates a sense of mutual attention; hereafter referred to as “communal media gratification.”

Additionally, because the gratification that consumers derive from the use of a brand's communicational device may include social facilitation with other people in addition to strict brand-consumer interactions (e.g., Calder et al., 2009), the distinction between exchange and communal gratification can possibly extend to the type of gratification, depending on the nature of the social interactions permitted by the media. That is, social gratification can be considered exchange based if the interactions between people prompted by the brand's communicational device are directed toward a buying plan that would be collectively analyzed, prepared, or decided. Research about online experiences shows growing evidence of this social value, namely, people sharing knowledge and experiences about products by socializing within brand customer communities (Brodie et al., 2013; Calder et al., 2009). Conversely, if the interactions tend to maintain the relationship between people through the brand's agency but do not focus on the evaluation of the brand's offering – that is, brand information is used as a trigger for familiar interactions (Lin, 1993) – the resulting social gratification is deemed to be communal based. Fig. 1 describes the conceptual model of the exchange versus communal types of gratification.

2.3. Attitude and gratitude responses to media

2.3.1. Attitude responses

In mass-media literature, attitudes toward an ad are presented as a critical mediator of advertising effects on consumer outcomes, such as brand attitude and purchase intention (e.g., Brown & Stayman, 1992; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986), or more specifically consumer approach behavior toward the advertiser (Dennis, Brakus, Gupta, & Alamanos, 2014). Accordingly, considering more interactive media, such as websites, email, and virtual social networks, that contain multiple items of brand information, many researchers argue that the consumer's attitude toward the media itself is a variable of interest for understanding the formation of consumer responses in such contexts and how these responses affect not only brand attitude but also purchase intention and loyalty (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Huang et al., 2013; Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005). Interestingly, both latter variables are considered to be major behavioral manifestations of brand commitment as the “essential ingredient for successful long-term

relationships” (Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995, p. 78). Defined as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship that reflects a consumer's long-term attitudinal disposition toward a brand (e.g., Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013), brand commitment is a key variable for achieving valuable outcomes including brand loyalty (e.g., Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). In accordance with the above-mentioned studies relating attitude toward the media to the behavioral manifestations of brand commitment, the perceived quality of brand communication, which includes dimensions pertaining to the communications channel itself, was found to be an effective antecedent of brand commitment, most notably by helping consumers discover rewards and new value-creating opportunities and by enhancing predictions of the brand's behavior (e.g., Hsiao, Shen, & Chao, 2015; Palmatier et al., 2006). Against this background, we can expect that the attitude toward a given brand's communications channel is likely to reinforce brand commitment.

Additionally, it appears that the causal link between media gratification and attitude toward the media has been consistently supported by the “uses and gratifications” literature, whatever the utilitarian, social, or hedonic nature of the gratification (e.g., Calder et al., 2009; Chen, Clifford, & Wells, 2002; Choi et al., 2009; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Mazaheri, Richard, & Laroche, 2011). Thus, it is expected that both exchange and communal media gratification will contribute to attitudes toward the media.

However, issues can be raised regarding the contribution of both types of media gratification to media attitudes because of their potentially unequal level of typicality in relation to the category of media gratification. When people are called upon to make a judgment about an entity, they seldom use all the knowledge they have acquired about that entity. Instead, many judgments are made using the first relevant criterion that comes to mind (Jin & Lutz, 2013). Regarding the attitude toward given media, it is reasonable to think that exchange media gratification is more typical of media gratification in general than communal gratification because of its higher frequency of instantiation. In categorization research, the frequency of instantiation, which refers to the perceived frequency with which an item appears as an instance of a certain category, is deemed to predict the item's typicality (Loken & Ward, 1990). In that regard, conventional wisdom suggests that companies generally refer to their communication channels by highlighting the explicit exchange benefits they convey. The nature of such benefits can be informational, monetary, or even game related with the development of virtual games and contests (Hodis, Sriramachandramurthy, & Sashittal, 2015) that mirror the traditional lotteries and sweepstakes communicated via direct mail (Wilcox & Woodside, 2012).

While exchange media gratification tends to be frequently promoted, more subtle gratification, such as communal media gratification, is less commonly discussed, thereby reducing its frequency of instantiation. Because of its lower frequency of instantiation, communal media gratification is likely to be less typical than exchange media gratification. As a consequence, exchange media gratification is

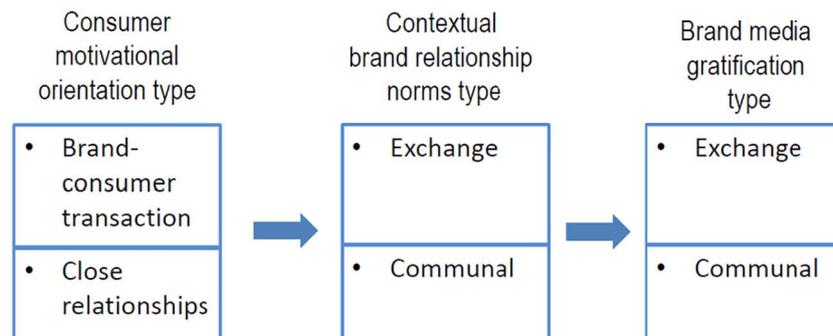


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of exchange versus communal media gratification type.

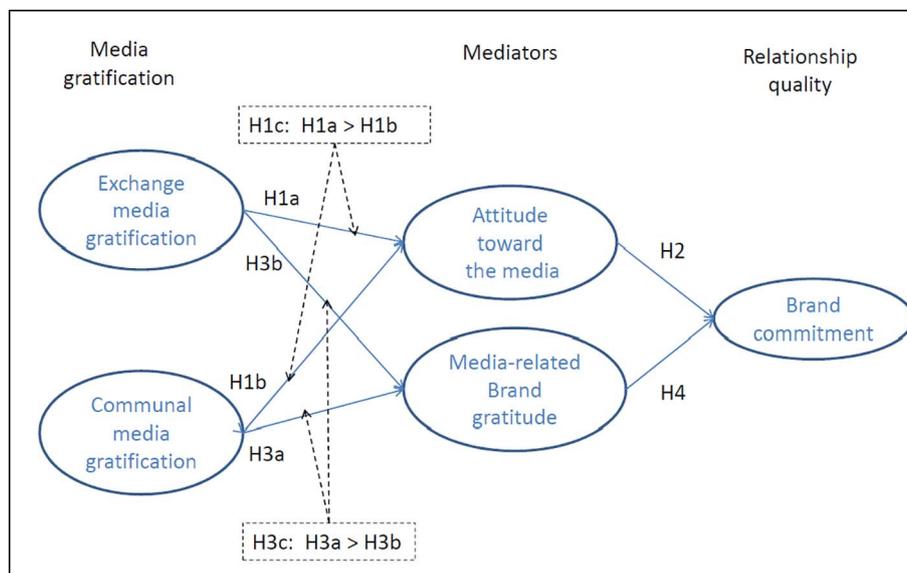


Fig. 2. Theoretical model.

assumed to be more accessible and more easily activated when the attitude toward a given communication channel is being measured (Loken & Ward, 1990). Stated differently, consumers exhibit a stronger propensity to refer to exchange media gratification than communal media gratification when attitudes toward media are being assessed. Therefore, the causal link relating media gratification to attitudes toward media is likely to be stronger for exchange media gratification than for communal media gratification. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. (a) Exchange media gratification and (b) communal media gratification positively influence attitude toward the media, (c) with exchange media gratification having a stronger influence than communal media gratification.

H2. Attitude toward the media positively influences brand commitment.

2.3.2. Gratitude responses

In addition to the evaluative perspective associated with the classical media attitude- framework, the impact of relational brand communications can also be tackled through a more relational approach that likens media gratification to forms of brand relationship investments. Proposed by DeWulf et al. (2001), the notion of relationship investment refers to investments of time, attention, and other irrecoverable resources that a brand provides to its regular customers to create psychological ties that motivate parties to maintain the relationship and reciprocate. Among several relationship marketing tactics, personalized mediated communication has been identified as an important type of relationship investment (DeWulf et al., 2001; Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechhoff, & Kardes, 2009).

Given that reciprocity is at the core of the psychological processes involved in the perception of a brand relationship investment, researchers have further investigated the extent to which perceived relationship investment can trigger customer gratitude (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2009; Xia & Kukar-Kinney, 2014). Gratitude is an outcome of human interaction that provides an emotional basis for reciprocal behavior. As an emotion having a positive valence, gratitude arises when an individual perceives that another person or source has intentionally acted to improve his or her wellbeing (Fredrickson, 2004). The cognitive trigger of gratitude relies on the perception that one has obtained a benefit and that an external agent is responsible for it (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Accordingly, it can be assumed that the

gratification that consumers derive from the use of a brand's communicational device is likely to translate into perceived benefits that consumers will relate to the brand's efforts to inform them and remain in contact (DeWulf et al., 2001). As a consequence, both exchange and communal media gratification may generate feelings of gratitude in customers of relational brand communications.

In addition, people are more likely to experience gratitude when they perceive that a favor is given without regards to role-based obligations and at the risk of being costly to the benefactor (Morales, 2005; Palmatier et al., 2009; Tsang, 2006). This could be the case for communal media gratification, where the benefits that consumers derive from a brand's communicational device do not match the company's anticipated outcome of the commercial offering. Instead, companies incorporate subtle benefits, such as psychological proximity or personal recognition of the consumer through message personalization (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013; Koch & Benlian, 2015), all forms of gratification that do not result from explicit role-based company marketing. Additionally, whenever consumers experience communal media gratification, they may perceive that the company's investment in such communication is not guaranteed to be profitable because this type of value does not relate to buying. Conversely, exchange media gratification is expected to be more strongly perceived as related to commercial quid pro quo relationships by consumers. Therefore, we postulate that communal media gratification will lead to a higher level of brand gratitude than exchange media gratification.

In accordance with psychological literature, relationship marketing has demonstrated that consumer gratitude leads to a variety of positive behavioral consequences oriented toward the brand as the initial benefactor including higher purchase intention and brand commitment (Palmatier et al., 2009; Steinhoff & Palmatier, 2016). Therefore, it is expected that media-related brand gratitude will reinforce brand commitment.

H3. (a) Communal media gratification and (b) exchange media gratification positively influence media-related brand gratitude, (c) with communal media gratification having a stronger influence than exchange media gratification.

H4. Media-related brand gratitude positively influences brand commitment.

The theoretical model showing the hypothesized relationships is depicted in Fig. 2.

3. Methodology

This research follows a two-study sequential design for media gratification classification and model testing. We use the context of direct mail to investigate the relevance of our model because this is recognized as central to relational brand communications (Danaher & Dagger, 2013; Godfrey et al., 2011). In the first study, a choice analysis is conducted to classify a set of gratification themes arising from the consumption of direct mail into our exchange versus communal media gratification framework. In the second study, we collect new data and use partial least squares structural equation modeling to validate exchange and communal media gratification scales that are formatively designed from the set of gratification themes previously assessed and to estimate the proposed structural model.

3.1. Study One

The objective of Study One is to classify media gratification themes arising in the context of direct mail into our two-type value framework. We use the direct mail consumer value scale proposed by Simon and Andrews (2015), which consists of 15 valid first-order scales, to illustrate the variety of media gratification. Twenty-three graduate students in marketing and consumer behavior studies were administered a questionnaire that proposed literal definitions of exchange and communal media gratification and then presented the 15 psychometric scales from Simon and Andrews (2015). Participants were asked to classify each first-order scale into one of the three following classes depending on the gratification type: communal gratification, exchange gratification, and neither communal nor exchange gratification. The 15 first-order scales are listed in Table 1.

Because our data sample was limited, we ran a bootstrap estimation of class choice and examined the 95% confidence intervals surrounding the frequency estimates of class choice (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993). Most of the 15 value scales appear to have been predominantly assigned to one of the three classes with the corresponding 95% confidence interval included within the acceptable [0.5; 1], the exception being the “Product-oriented daydreaming” value. This value was classified in the “Exchange gratification” class or the “Neither communal nor exchange gratification” class. After two marketing faculty members were asked to evaluate this particular gratification theme, they suggested considering it exchange gratification, arguing it was an intrinsic imagery-based gratification directly resulting from the appre-

Table 1
Classification of direct mail gratification.

Direct mail gratification themes	Gratification type		
	Communal	Exchange	Neither communal, nor exchange
1. Brand individual recognition	X		
2. Brand intimacy	X		
3. Brand companionship	X		
4. Familiar social sharing	X		
5. Brand community belonging	X		
6. Novelty surveillance		X	
7. Monetary savings		X	
8. Offers comparison		X	
9. Shopping planning		X	
10. Product-oriented daydreaming		X	
11. Directed social sharing		X	
12. Intimate accommodation			X
13. Escapism			X
14. Pastime			X
15. Functional diversion			X

ciation of a brand's products.

Against this background, five value themes were selected as communal: 1) brand individual recognition, 2) brand intimacy, 3) brand companionship, 4) familiar social sharing, and 5) brand community belonging. Six additional themes were classified under the exchange gratification class: 1) novelty surveillance, 2) monetary savings, 3) offer comparison, 4) shopping planning, 5) product-oriented daydreaming, and 6) directed social sharing. Table 1 shows the classification of the 15 initial gratification themes, and Appendix A describes the 11 selected media gratification scales.

3.2. Study Two

3.2.1. Analytical approach

The properties of the theoretical model shown in Fig. 2 are assessed following a two-step measurement and structural approach. We use partial least squares structural modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 3.0 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015) to estimate the measurement and structural models. When using formative scales, such as the exchange and communal media gratification scales, PLS-SEM is advantageous compared to the covariance-based structural equation, which has some limitations when modeling in the formative mode (Chin, 1998; Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). Bootstrap percentile confidence intervals are constructed to assess whether the relationships in our model are statistically significant. Following Preacher and Hayes (2008), the number of bootstrap samples was set equal to 5000, with each bootstrap sample containing the same number of observations as the original sample.

3.2.2. Data collection and sample

A convenience sampling approach was applied in that all participants were recruited on a referral basis by the undergraduate students. Strict guidelines were given to ensure a diverse sample of respondents with respect to age, gender, and education level. The final sample (N = 440) consisted of 268 women (60.9%) and 172 men (39.1%). Of the respondents, 107 were under the age of 30 (24.3%), 128 were 30–40 (29.1%), 121 were 41–50 (27.5%), 52 were 51–60 (11.8%), and 32 were over the age of 60 (7.3%). The distribution of level of education was as follows: 1.5% elementary education, 16% apprenticeship/technical school, 11.6% high school, 36.6% university degree, and 34.3% post-graduate degree. Additionally, 79.1% were currently employed, 5% were unemployed, 4.8% were students, and 11.1% were retired.

Respondents were asked to choose direct mailings that they received from a single brand or retailer and to think about those mailings when responding to the survey. Respondents were reminded of the definition of a direct mailing, that is, printed advertising material found in their mailbox that is sent in an envelope bearing their address. The results show that respondents mainly selected brands or retailers from the following sectors: clothing (27.3%), beauty (18.6%), sports and leisure (15.4%), food (12.3%), services (9.7%), and furniture and household appliances (6.1%).

3.2.3. Measures

All scales were derived from prior studies. The media gratification constructs, drawn from Simon and Andrews (2015), were selected from Study 1, provided they were classified as either communal or exchange. The attitude toward the media is measured with the attitude toward the ad scale proposed by Ha (1996). To measure media-related brand gratitude, we used the feelings of gratitude scale from Xia and Kukar-Kinney (2014). Finally, brand commitment was assessed from the measure developed by Adjei, Noble, and Noble (2010). All scales were measured using a seven-point Likert scale with end points of 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. All items appear in Appendix A.

Table 2
Internal consistency and convergent validity of reflective constructs.

Construct	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite reliability	Cronbach alpha
1. Brand individual recognition	0,94	0,98	0,97
2. Brand intimacy	0,90	0,97	0,95
3. Brand companionship	0,95	0,98	0,97
4. Familiar social sharing	0,85	0,94	0,91
5. Brand community belonging	0,91	0,97	0,95
6. Novelty surveillance	0,88	0,96	0,93
7. Monetary savings	0,89	0,96	0,94
8. Offers comparison	0,91	0,97	0,95
9. Shopping planning	0,90	0,97	0,95
10. Product-oriented daydreaming	0,92	0,97	0,96
11. Directed social sharing	0,88	0,96	0,93
12. Attitude toward the media	0,81	0,95	0,92
13. Media-related brand gratitude	0,91	0,97	0,95
14. Brand commitment	0,81	0,93	0,88

3.2.4. Test of the measurement model

In evaluating the psychometric properties of the investigated scales, it is important to distinguish between formative and reflective scales because their unique characteristics affect the type of properties that are required and the methods by which these properties are to be assessed (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012).

3.2.5. Assessment of reflective scales

As shown in Appendix A, all reflective indicators were significantly associated with their respective constructs ($p < 0.01$), and all loadings were well above the critical threshold of 0.7, indicating high indicator reliability (Götz, Liehr-Gobbers, & Krafft, 2010). We assessed the measurement properties of the reflective constructs in the model using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As illustrated in Table 2, all reflective latent constructs far exceeded the recommended thresholds, thereby supporting convergent validity. As can be inferred from the inter-construct correlation matrix shown in Appendix B, all constructs used in this study fulfilled the requirement, which calls for a construct's AVE to be larger than the square of its largest correlation with any construct, thereby confirming the discriminant validity. Detailed descriptive statistics for the reflective scales are provided in Appendix B.

3.2.6. Assessment of formative scales

Following Jarvis, Mackenzie, and Podsakoff (2003), we conceptualized exchange and communal media gratification as Type II multidimensional second-order indices (reflective-formative type). Both constructs were specified in PLS-SEM through the repeated use of the manifest variables (i.e., indicators) of the underlying first-order reflective constructs (Wetzels, Odekerken-Schroder, & Van Oppen, 2009).

Because formative indicators are items that cause variance in the construct under scrutiny, statistics for assessing internal consistency are inappropriate (Hair et al., 2012). Instead, multicollinearity is the major concern in assessing the quality of formative constructs because multiple indicators jointly predict a latent construct analogously to variables in multiple regression (Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001). The analysis revealed that multicollinearity did not play a role in the formative measurement models because all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below the recommended cut-off level of five suggested by Hair et al. (2012). More precisely, the maximum VIF values were 2.74 and 2.37 for communal media gratification and exchange media gratification, respectively (see Table 3).

Table 3
Assessment of formative constructs.

Construct	First-order scale	Weight	t-Value	VIF
Communal media gratification	1. Brand individual recognition	0,26	23,63	1,40
	2. Brand intimacy	0,28	31,85	2,74
	3. Brand companionship	0,25	26,56	1,92
	4. Familiar social sharing	0,23	25,22	1,72
	5. Brand community belonging	0,25	29,03	2,40
Exchange media gratification	6. Novelty surveillance	0,23	23,62	1,69
	7. Monetary savings	0,24	21,42	1,64
	8. Offers comparison	0,20	17,27	1,44
	9. Shopping planning	0,26	28,96	2,37
	10. Product-oriented daydreaming	0,21	17,36	1,30
	11. Directed social sharing	0,23	25,69	1,70

To evaluate the performance of formative measures, the indicator weights and their statistical significance are of interest (Hair et al., 2012). From the figures presented in Table 3, we can conclude that our formative measurement models performed well, each of the first-order value types being a highly significant contributor ($p < 0.01$) to its associated second-order aggregate (i.e., communal media gratification or exchange media gratification). Overall, our findings provide evidence of the validity of both types of media gratification constructs.

3.2.7. Test of the structural model

The results from the PLS analysis of the structural model, including path coefficients and their statistical significance, are reported in Table 4. To assess the quality of our structural model, we evaluated VIF at the structural level (Götz et al., 2010) and the coefficient of determination (R^2) (Chin, 1998). Because the VIF values are well below five, they did not raise concerns about multicollinearity. The observed values for R^2 can be characterized as substantial in the consumer behavior discipline (Hair et al., 2012). Thus, both formative scales explained $> 45\%$ of the explained variance for brand gratitude ($R^2 = 0.46$), and $> 35\%$ for attitude toward the media ($R^2 = 0.37$). Overall, our model explained a significant amount of variance in brand commitment ($R^2 = 0.30$).

All hypotheses were supported (see Table 4). Thus, both exchange and communal media gratification exert positive and significant effects ($p < 0.01$) on attitude toward the media and media-related brand gratitude. Each of the two explained variables, in turn, exerted a positive and significant effect ($p < 0.01$) on brand commitment, with brand gratitude ($\beta = 0,42$) contributing to a higher extent than attitude ($\beta = 0,20$). When considering the relative impact of exchange and communal media gratification, the beta coefficients may be examined to measure the relative influence of each variable on the outcome of interest, given that collinearity concerns are minimal (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Compared to those of exchange media gratification, the beta coefficients of communal media gratification were lower for the attitude outcome and higher for the gratitude outcome. Similarly, the effect sizes regarding the relationships under scrutiny followed an analogous pattern (see Table 4), thereby supporting hypotheses H1c and H3c.

To interpret the moderating effect of media gratification depending on communal versus exchange type, and to inspect its particular form, we plotted the predicted outcome values for different levels of the moderating variable (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). We fixed high, medium, and low values as one standard deviation above the mean, equal to the mean, and one standard deviation below the mean, respectively. The regression lines showing the moderating nature of media gratification type on each outcome are depicted in Fig. 3. Overall, the regression plots revealed that the moderating effect of the type of media gratification was particularly potent under acute

Table 4
Path coefficients and respective t-values of hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	Effect size f^2	t-Value	Status
H1a	Exchange media gratification → attitude toward the media	0,52	0,28	10,07	Accepted
H1b	Communal media gratification → attitude toward the media	0,13	0,02	2,57	Accepted
H1c	H1a > H1b				Accepted
H2	Attitude toward the media → brand commitment	0,20	0,05	4,63	Accepted
H3a	Communal media gratification → media-related brand gratitude	0,59	0,42	14,06	Accepted
H3b	Exchange media gratification → media-related brand gratitude	0,13	0,02	2,49	Accepted
H3c	H3a > H3b				Accepted
H4	Media-related brand gratitude → brand commitment	0,42	0,20	9,39	Accepted

levels of media gratification.

4. Discussion and implications

As many companies today are systematically engaging in relational brand communications, this study explores how media gratification reflects consumers' contextual brand relationship norms and thereby distinctively contributes to brand commitment through the double mediation of attitude toward the media and media-related brand gratitude. Our findings in the context of direct mail show that communal gratification contributes significantly more than exchange gratification to consumers' gratitude responses, which are found to be of paramount importance in the formation of brand commitment. In contrast, exchange gratification strongly influences the attitude toward the media, with a higher contribution than communal gratification. Altogether, these findings demonstrate the differentiated ability of communal versus exchange media gratification in eliciting consumer responses and predicting brand outcomes. This result provides a significant contribution to marketing research on brand communication.

In accordance with the premises of branding research (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012), this study highlights the fact that consumers may be situationally in demand of and experience communal relationships when consuming personalized communication from their brands. As illustrated by the formative structure of the communal media gratification scale, gratification in terms of brand intimacy and brand individual recognition constitute significant dimensions of the construct together with other parasocial gratification such as brand companionship and brand community belonging. As outlined by Koch and Benlian (2015), addressing customers by their names in online messages makes it possible to build more personal interactions and helps consumers perceive themselves as the intentional recipients of caring communications. Our findings are also consistent with the recent

investigation of audience parasocial experience, which highlights a sense of mutual awareness and attention (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Labrecque, 2014). Additionally, it should be noted that such parasocial gratification is likely to emerge even if the level of interactivity is scant, as is the case for print direct mail compared to email or virtual social media.

While our findings call for a greater recognition of brand parasocial interactions embedded in relational brand communications, which have received limited attention in the marketing literature to date, they also shed light on the nature of social media gratification involving interactions between consumers. Because such values are increasingly important for investigating vis-à-vis virtual contexts (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013; Schau, Muñoz, & Arnould, 2009), this study suggests that they should be carefully distinguished according to their communal versus exchange nature because their effects on brand outcomes are likely to be significantly differentiated.

Consistent with DeWulf et al. (2001), who provide evidence of the positive effect of direct mail on perceived relationship investment, media gratification, most notably communal gratification, is found to nourish brand gratitude. This result presents some inconsistency with a recent study from Huang (2015), who finds a lack of influence of direct mail on customers' gratitude-based reciprocal behaviors in the context of a department store. In contrast, our findings are in accordance with the study from Koch and Benlian (2015), who establish the positive effect of personalized messages on customers' feelings of gratitude toward the brand. In sum, the fact that communal gratification, more than exchange gratification, highly contributes to brand gratitude validates our central assumption that contextual relationship norms should be taken into account to assess the entirety of the gratitude effects of relational brand communication.

Finally, even if it is not large in amplitude, the contribution of attitude toward the media in the formation of brand commitment is significant, in accordance with the notion advanced by Godfrey et al.

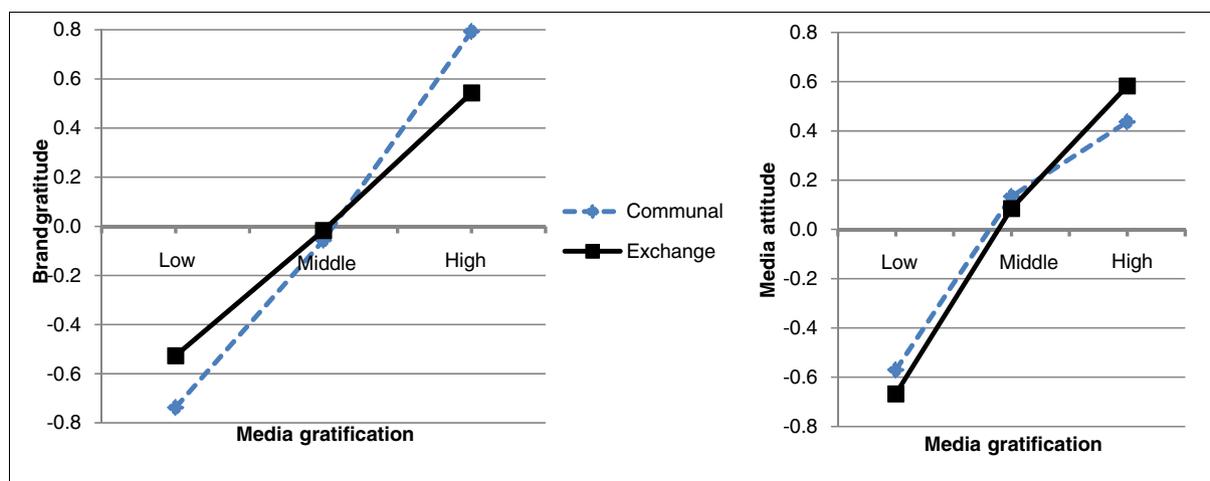


Fig. 3. The moderating effect of type of media gratification.

(2011) that media preferences constitute substantial drivers of the impact of relational communications on brand loyalty. As hypothesized, communal gratification explains media attitude only slightly. Because our assumption is that this type of media gratification lacks typicality due to its privative and rarely publicly mentioned nature, the use of implicit measures of attitude toward the media could allow for a better assessment of this construct. Indeed, implicit indices are likely to perform better than explicit indices when attitudes are based on thoughts that are not easily expressed verbally, people being unable to recall their thoughts directly (Huang & Hutchinson, 2008). Implicit measures tend to be increasingly utilized by researchers studying media-related outcomes (Blanton & Jaccard, 2015), but they could also be applied to the assessment of media preferences in themselves by uncovering the communal part of attitudes toward the media.

From a managerial point of view, this study helps marketers better understand the underlying processes governing the efficiency of relational brand communications. Most notably, by uncovering the role of contextual relationship norms, it suggests ways to build on the nourishment of communal expectations by consumers at the time of brand interaction to manage opportunities for brand gratitude creation. Because the gratitude consumers experience when receiving a privative communication is a strong factor in brand commitment, driving brand gratitude should become a full communications objective pursued by brand managers. In this regard, the creation of strong parasocial gratification for a brand could occur by specifically improving consumers' perception of sharing intimacy with brands (e.g., Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013; Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2012) and of being individually recognized as a valuable customer, for instance, by providing them with personal greetings (Koch & Benlian, 2015). Customers' perceptions of brand intimacy should be maintained through regular and sufficiently frequent relational brand communications, as

advocated by the literature on attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). In doing so, marketers should be careful in aligning channels with customer preferences to avoid reactive responses that would deter brand commitment (Godfrey et al., 2011). Additionally, our research shows that belonging to a brand community could also be leveraged to reinforce brand gratitude. Therefore, marketers could include in their relational communications testimonials about how customers perceive their brand in terms of global image, social significance, and lifestyle, rather than on the mere product level, thereby infusing a sense of community for customers sharing the same values.

5. Limitations and future research

Although the current research contributes to the understanding of how relational brand communications affect relational outcomes, this research has a number of limitations that can be improved upon in future studies. The most significant of these limitations results from the focus on a specific channel, that is, direct mail, to establish the validity of the proposed model. It is necessary to evaluate the generalizability of our framework of communal versus exchange values across other communication channels. In particular, because direct mail is less interactive than electronic media, it is possible that the role of communal gratification may be deflated in the case of direct mail compared to brand channels involving virtual communities (Labrecque, 2014). Additionally, future research should investigate the interplay of individual factors and types of media gratification on the elaboration of brand gratitude. Most notably, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent an individual propensity to adopt communal versus exchange relationship norms (Aggarwal, 2004) affects the formation of communal versus exchange types of media gratification and possibly moderates their influence on gratitude outcomes.

Appendix A. Origins of scales, identification of items, and factor loadings

Reflectively designed constructs and items	Loading
1. Brand individual recognition (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
..., I'm treated better than if I did not receive it.	0,97
..., I'm treated with more consideration than if I did not receive it.	0,96
..., I feel I am more distinguished than if I did not receive it.	0,97
2. Brand intimacy (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
..., I feel closer to this brand.	0,95
..., I experience a form of connection between this brand and me.	0,96
..., I feel there is more intimacy between this brand and me.	0,94
3. Brand companionship (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
..., I won't have to be alone.	0,98
..., I feel like there is someone else to talk or to be with.	0,99
..., it makes me feel less lonely.	0,96
4. Familiar social sharing (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
..., I have some familiar sharing time with people who share my life.	0,91
..., I find something quite interesting to talk to my family about.	0,92
..., I find something to use in starting a conversation with my relatives.	0,93
5. Brand community belonging (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
..., I feel like I belong to a community of people who share the same values as me.	0,95
..., I feel like I almost belong to a club with other users of this brand.	0,94
..., I feel a sort of connection with others who use this brand.	0,93
6. Novelty surveillance (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
..., I can keep up with the trends.	0,96
..., I can keep up with the new fashions.	0,95

...., I can see what new products are available.	0,90
7. Monetary savings (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
...., I shop at a lower financial cost.	0,95
...., I spend less.	0,94
...., I save money.	0,94
8. Offers comparison (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
...., I compare its products and prices with those of its competitors.	0,93
...., I can choose the best offer for me by comparing with ads from its competitors.	0,97
...., I make comparisons with ads from competitors to find the best price.	0,96
9. Shopping planning (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
...., I can prepare my purchases more effectively.	0,96
...., I plan my shopping better.	0,95
...., I can select the products I want to buy more effectively.	0,94
10. Product-oriented daydreaming (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
...., I find myself daydreaming about the featured products.	0,96
...., the mental images that come to mind form a series of events in my mind in which I am a part of.	0,96
...., I could easily construct a story about myself and the featured products based on the mental images that come to mind.	0,95
11. Directed social sharing (Simon & Andrews, 2015)	
Thanks to the direct mail from this brand,	
...., I discuss its contents with my relatives or friends to prepare purchases.	0,93
...., I show it to my relatives or friends to share the “good deals” or promotions.	0,94
...., I discuss its contents with my relatives or friends to get additional advice on offers.	0,92
12. Attitude toward the media (Ha, 1996)	
The direct mail from this brand is pleasant.	0,90
The direct mail from this brand is useful.	0,90
The direct mail from this brand is interesting.	0,91
I like the direct mail from this brand.	0,90
13. Media-related brand gratitude (Xia & Kukar-Kinney, 2014).	
When I receive a direct mail from this brand,	
...., I feel grateful to this brand.	0,95
...., I feel thankful to this brand.	0,96
...., I feel appreciative toward this brand.	0,95
20. Brand commitment (three items from Adjei et al., 2010)	
The relationship that I have with this brand:	
.... is very important to me.	0,90
.... is something I intend to maintain indefinitely.	0,91
.... is something I really care about.	0,89

Notes: Measurement based on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 7 = “Strongly Agree”. All factor loadings significant (p < 0.001)

Appendix B. Descriptives and inter-construct correlation matrix

Constructs	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1 Brand individual recognition	3,30	1,71	0,97													
2 Brand intimacy	2,53	1,57	0,54	0,95												
3 Brand companionship	1,74	1,18	0,39	0,61	0,98											
4 Familiar social sharing	2,30	1,43	0,39	0,56	0,64	0,92										
5 Brand community belonging	2,41	1,50	0,43	0,78	0,59	0,54	0,95									
6 Novelty surveillance	4,35	1,77	0,29	0,32	0,25	0,39	0,38	0,94								
7 Monetary savings	4,01	1,76	0,32	0,32	0,33	0,41	0,24	0,39	0,94							
8 Offers comparison	3,85	1,90	0,23	0,19	0,27	0,41	0,22	0,44	0,40	0,95						
9 Shopping planning	4,04	1,75	0,34	0,32	0,33	0,48	0,34	0,63	0,64	0,51	0,95					
10 Product-oriented daydreaming	2,41	1,57	0,38	0,56	0,51	0,56	0,50	0,42	0,28	0,31	0,37	0,96				
11 Directed social sharing	3,41	1,86	0,31	0,38	0,36	0,77	0,37	0,49	0,47	0,48	0,60	0,44	0,94			
12 Attitude toward the media	4,71	1,41	0,44	0,43	0,27	0,39	0,31	0,55	0,56	0,28	0,53	0,35	0,48	0,90		
13 Media-related brand gratitude	2,76	1,49	0,62	0,59	0,51	0,53	0,52	0,31	0,38	0,31	0,37	0,50	0,36	0,49	0,95	
14 Brand commitment	2,55	1,35	0,43	0,58	0,50	0,56	0,53	0,32	0,23	0,24	0,30	0,37	0,43	0,43	0,56	0,90

Note: Square root of the Average Variance Extracted reported on the diagonal.

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