

Consumer behavior in close relationships

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This article provides an orientation to how relationships have been studied in consumer behavior and discusses four ways in which close relationships shape consumption. First, close relationships influence *individual choices* through social and mating motives. Second, close relationships impact *choices made for others*, such as gift-giving and resource sharing. Third, close others regularly are involved in *joint consumption* (e.g., within couples or families). Fourth, reminding individuals of close relationships they have or do not have shapes their perceptions and choices. Additional research is needed to investigate different types of close relationships, to determine how close relationships influence more diverse behaviors across consumption domains, and to reconcile potentially competing psychological processes tied to close relationships.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2016, 10:101–106

This review comes from a themed issue on **Consumer behavior**

Edited by **Jeff Joireman** and **Kristina Durante**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.11.004>

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Introduction

Close relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners are a primary source of meaning in consumers' lives, and these relationships both directly and indirectly influence consumers in innumerable ways. Whether deciding what to eat, what to watch, what to wear, or what to buy, close others frequently influence consumer perceptions, decisions, and behaviors. Close relationships not only influence thoughts and feelings but also the choices consumers make *for themselves*, choices they make *for others*, and choices they make *with close others*, such as where to invest or where to live and whether to get married or have children. Despite the wealth of ways in which close relationships shape consumption, the topic of close relationships is surprisingly understudied within the consumer behavior literature.

This article focuses on consumer behavior in the context of close relationships between individuals who share an emotional bond. Close relationships are distinct from

more socially distant relationships, looser social ties, exchange relationships, or the social influence of strangers or general social comparison referents [1,2]. However, because social groups can include individuals with whom consumers share close relationships, some recent work on social influence is also discussed.

The relationship metaphor in consumer behavior

Marketing researchers have long recognized the importance and value of relationships. Much of this work has treated close relationships as a *metaphor* for more market-minded pursuits, rather than focusing on close relationships between consumers. Emphasis has generally been placed on business-based relationships, such as consumers' brand relationships [3], consumer to salesperson relationships [4], business–buyer relationships, and customer relationship marketing [5]. As noted below, this work reveals intriguing findings regarding the importance of relationships in marketing and how consumers relate to companies and brands [3,6,7,8–11] and offers an important starting point for understanding consumer behavior in the context of close relationships; see Fournier (this issue).

Relationship norms as guides. To begin, consumers appear to use interpersonal relationship norms in responding to possessions and brands [12,13] in certain circumstances [14]. For instance, brand actions that violate relationship norms are judged more negatively [15], and communal (vs. exchange) relationships alter consumers' information processing strategies [16]. When faced with the loss of possessions [17] or end of a favorite television series [18], consumers experience emotional responses consistent with those of lost relationships.

Relationship surrogates. Extending the relationships metaphor, consumer researchers have also suggested that brands and product experiences may serve as surrogates for close relationships. In the absence of close others, consumers have been shown to cope with fear by seeking affiliation with an available brand [19] and to prefer mood-congruent aesthetic experiences (e.g., listening to sad songs when feeling sad) owing to a desire for shared experiences such as those found in empathic interpersonal relationships [20]. Thus, brands and products may function to provide emotional support and fulfill interpersonal psychological needs typically filled by close relationship partners.

In summary, the majority of research in marketing has focused on relationships with brands, products, and

salespeople rather than the corporeal, close relationships that comprise the social fabric of consumers' lives. Although the field generally has emphasized the close relationships metaphor, some researchers have focused on close relationships more directly, as I review next.

Individual choices influenced by close others

As social beings, we are regularly influenced by the prospect, presence, and opinions of others, particularly those with whom we share a personal or close relationship. Recently, researchers have highlighted various ways in which social and mating-based relationship motives influence consumers' variety-seeking, indulgence, and sharing behaviors.

Social motives. Consumers' desire to distinguish themselves from or affiliate with social others has been shown to guide many consumption decisions [21–25] based on needs to create desired impressions, feel a sense of belonging, or garner esteem from others. Close relationships, however, may also shift consumers' attention and motivations. For instance, focusing on close friends while browsing social networks reduces subsequent self-control [26], but communicating with one close friend (vs. multiple friends) increases other-focus and likelihood of sharing useful content [27].

Mating motives. Beyond the influence of platonic relationships, recent findings suggest that evolutionary-based mating motives also guide many contemporary consumer decisions [28,29,30•,31,32]; see Durante and Griskevicius (this issue). Sexual desire, ovulation, mating mindsets, and mate guarding have been linked to consumer behaviors, ranging from advertising and brand evaluations to spending decisions and variety-seeking with sex-specific responses. For instance, gratuitous use of sex in advertising produces more negative spontaneous responses in women than men unless the ad can be interpreted in terms of relationship commitment [29]. In addition, near ovulation, women are more likely to seek variety in consumption because a desire for variety in men triggers a generalized variety-seeking mindset [30•]. Inducing mating goals also increases men's willingness to spend on conspicuous luxuries and women's public helping as a means to signal desirable mate qualities [31].

Choices made for close others

Additional research has examined choices made for close others, such as choosing a gift or spending money on others. Spending money on others has been shown to make consumers happier [33] (see Mogilner and Norton, this issue) and may be used to improve well-being, thus motivating consumers to buy products for close others.

Gift-giving. Most consumer research on choices made for others has focused on gift-giving. Researchers have

examined both how relationships influence gift choices [34–36] and how gifts chosen for others may influence relationships [37,38]. For instance, choosing a desired but identity-contrary gift for a close friend who is integral to the self can cause an identity threat for givers [39].

Resource sharing. Recent work has identified how different emotions and economic conditions influence with whom resources are shared (see also Lamberton, this issue). For instance, poor economic conditions bias parents to favor spending resources on daughters (vs. sons) in an effort to manage risk [40]. In addition, different positive emotions (love, hope, pride) cause consumers to give different amounts of money to close versus distant others [41•]. For instance, whereas positive emotions similarly increase giving to close others, only love increases giving to distant others.

Joint choices and consumption with close others

Although most decision-making research has traditionally viewed decisions as reflecting one's 'own personal attitudes, beliefs, and preferences' [42] (p. 304), many major consumption decisions are made with close others. For example, many financial decisions, such as buying insurance, an automobile, or a home [43], involve close others. Similarly, most leisure decisions, such as deciding how to spend time, where to vacation, or how to celebrate holidays [44], are made with others. For an excellent review of decision making within relationships as well as a useful dyadic framework, see Simpson *et al.* [42]. Early calls for research on joint decision making within marketing [45] have yielded insights about how married couples and families make joint decisions about how to spend their time and money as well as how they make joint consumption decisions.

Married couples. Prior joint decision-making research has focused largely on married couples, with an emphasis on financial decisions and conflict-avoiding strategies [43]. Such strategies may be necessary when consumers select spouses with an opposite financial orientation (i.e., tightwads marry spendthrifts) leading to conflicts over money and diminished marital well-being [46]. Couples, however, may also benefit from debate and manage shared debt more optimally [47].

Family. Although earlier research focused on family decision making [48], more recent research has emphasized how *family identity* shapes consumption practices. For instance, recent research has highlighted the importance of studying co-constructed relational goals and different identity bundles (individual, relational, and collective) that shape family experiences [49]; the role of technology in creating and maintaining valued family practices across geographic distances [50•]; and the factors influencing how parents of young children and adult children with

aging parents navigate caregiving and outsourcing decisions [51**,52]. These findings are provocative and present interesting opportunities for additional research.

Affiliation motivations. More recently, researchers have examined how consumers' relationship needs and affiliation motivations affect joint decisions and joint consumption in the domains of enjoyment, self-control, and variety-seeking. Interpersonal agreement and shared reactions enhance *enjoyment* of experiences [53–55]. In addition, close others can serve as either a disinhibiting or inhibiting force when it comes to indulgent food choices or spending decisions. For instance, pro-relationship motivations trump *self-control* preferences such that pairs indulge more in order to affiliate [56**]. Additionally, consumers may bond over matched self-control decisions made in parallel, choosing co-indulgence or co-abstinence based on whichever produces the greatest affiliation [57]. Within committed close relationships, perceiving more (vs. less) future time ahead in the relationship increases the amount of *variety* chosen for joint consumption owing to valuing excitement in the relationship [58].

As these papers suggest, parallel and joint decisions are not merely additive processes but rather synergistic and malleable based on the characteristics of the relationship partners, the relationship context, and the domain of consumption behavior. To date, most joint consumption research entails *individuals* making choices with the intention of jointly consuming choice outcomes. Very little research has examined *actual joint consumption* typical of shared experiences. Given that many consumption activities (e.g., conversations, meals, movies, vacations) are shared with close others, more research is needed to explore joint consumption in shared experiences [59].

Reminders of close relationships

Sharing experiences and possessing a relational identity indicates the presence of a valued close relationship in one's life. A major theme within the relationships literature is that humans enjoy and seek social connection with others. Having close relationships with friends, family, and romantic others contributes to one's sense of connectedness, belongingness, and confers worth. These socially valued dyadic relationships are frequently featured in marketing (e.g., advertising, in-store displays, and conversations with sales associates) and celebrated in media, personal conversations, and events (e.g., holidays, celebrations); however, not all individuals have these close relationships. In light of their ubiquity, it is important to consider how reminders of close relationships that one has (vs. does not have or no longer has) influence consumers.

Recent work has identified how reminders of close relationships influence consumers' choices. For example, Cavanaugh recently demonstrated that when consumers are reminded of close relationships they do not have, they

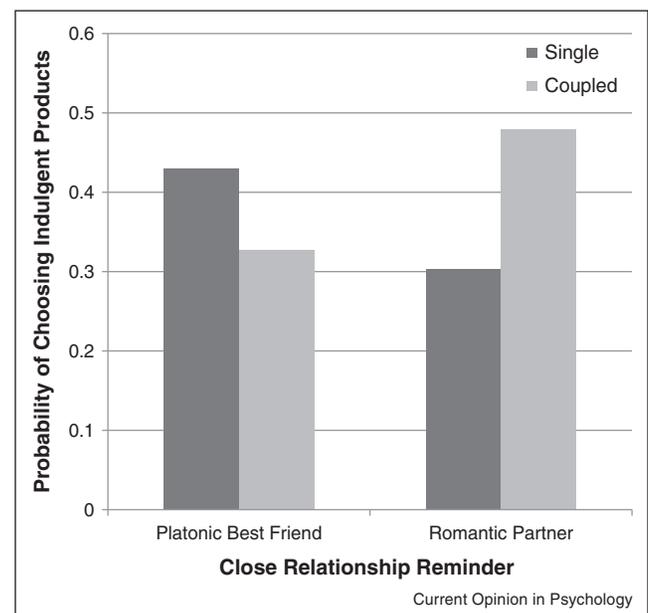
restrict their *indulgence* [60**]. This reduced indulgence occurs because consumers do not feel they deserve to treat themselves to higher cost products and higher calorie foods (Figures 1 and 2). In fact, consumers often feel inhibited from engaging in hedonic activities alone, particularly when these activities are observable by others [61*]. Additionally, Cavanaugh and Lee have found that reminders of not having certain close relationships dull consumers' *sensory perceptions* and *enjoyment* [62].

Future directions

Close relationships are central to consumers' emotions and identities; however, research on these consumer topics within the realm of close relationships has been relatively scarce. Consumer research on *emotion* has more frequently emphasized sexual desire [28] or sympathy [63] rather than the companionate love [41*] characteristic of most close relationships. Similarly, research on *identity* typically has emphasized individual or group identities rather than relational identities with close others. In this section, I review four promising directions for future research.

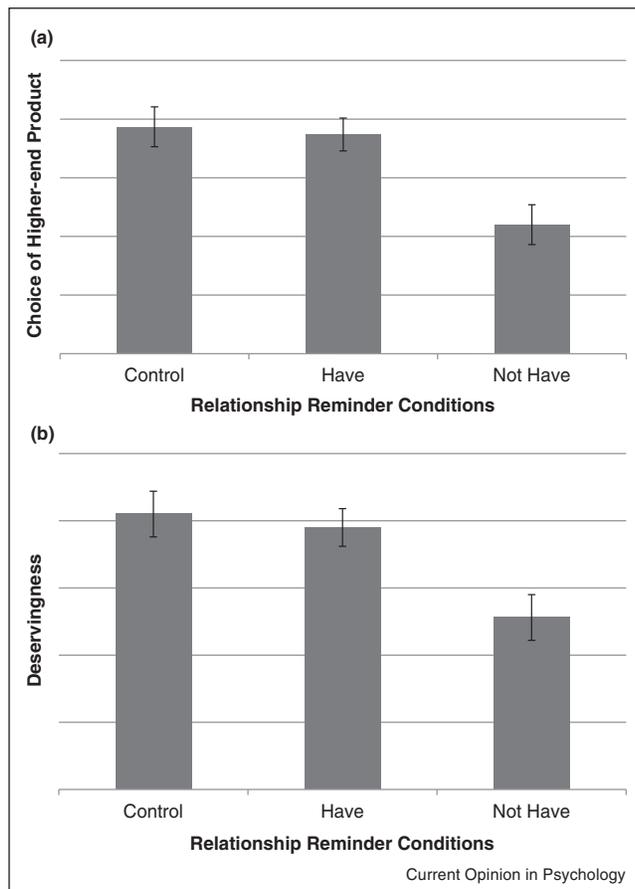
Benefits and costs. To date, investigations have emphasized positive portrayals of togetherness, that is, benefits of having relationships. However, close relationships can also carry substantial costs. How might reminders of *unhappy relationships* with close others (e.g., an estranged mother–daughter relationship or an ex-spouse) influence consumption? To what extent do marketing and media

Figure 1



Results for the relationship reminder \times relationship status interaction on probability of consumers choosing indulgent products during a shopping trip for multiple items [60**], study 1.

Figure 2



Pattern of data illustrating consumers choice of higher-end products and perceptions of deservingness after reminders of close relationships ([60^{••}], studies 2–5). Results combined across four studies for romantic (study 2) and platonic (3–5) reminders of relationships consumers have versus do not have or no longer have relative to control condition.

influence consumers' valuation of and motivation to have certain close relationships (e.g., getting married or having children)?

Different domains. Investigations have focused largely on hedonic consumption, that is, whether consumers choose desirable products or engage in enjoyable activities [60^{••},61[•]]. Yet, there are numerous other decisions and experiences that may be influenced by relationship reminders. For instance, how might relationship reminders influence the *brands* to which consumers feel connected, willingness to take *risks*, or *negative consumption experiences*?

Different types of close relationships. Although different relationships (romantic, platonic) may similarly influence consumers in some circumstances [60^{••}], in other circumstances different relationship types will have distinct

effects [64,65]. Virtually all consumers are part of multiple dyadic close relationships (e.g., as a parent, sibling, child, romantic partner, best friend, pet parent/owner, among others). Consumers not only vary on whether they have or do not have these various close relationships but also in terms of the quality of these relationships. For instance, how do digitally mediated communications with close others [50[•],66,67] influence choices and the nature of those relationships?

Different psychological processes. Recent findings underscore the importance of studying the unique qualities and consequences of close relationships in consumer behavior. They also highlight different (and at times competing) psychological processes that may drive various behaviors. For instance, under what circumstances will mating versus affiliative motives guide consumption? In the realm of indulgence, under what circumstances will perceived deservingness decrease spending [60^{••}] rather than a need to belong increase spending [24]? Considerable research is needed to devise a more comprehensive framework of when, how, and why close relationships influence consumption behavior.

Conclusion

Psychologists have made important strides in enhancing understanding of close relationships. Within psychology, much of the relationships literature has focused on dyadic relationship formation, dynamics, and satisfaction. Rather than focusing on interpersonal close relationships, marketing and consumer researchers have historically placed an emphasis on companies' efforts to form relationships with consumers (i.e., 'relationship marketing') and consumers' relationships with brands (i.e., 'brand relationships' [3]). Recent work [30^{••},56^{••},58,60^{••}] highlights important new avenues for future research at the intersection of close relationships and consumer behavior. In summary, owing to the importance and prominence of close relationships in consumers' daily lives, investigations of how such close relationships influence consumers' perceptions, decisions, and behaviors are greatly needed. Investigating close relationships and consumption offers a rich and fruitful avenue for future research.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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